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MEDLEY

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MEDLEY

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ABSTRACT

MEDLEY

by Sharron Elizabeth Sypult

Post-modernism, metafiction, anti-fiction--whatever it may be called--is the offspring of a turbulent time (the sixties) when language and literature seemed "exhausted" and fictional possibilities seemed limited. Such fiction has had to be radical to survive in the face of an intimidating past, bankrupt literary forms, and constricting literary conventions. In Medley I set out to investigate and examine this fictive phenomenon and present my findings in a fictional demonstration. By way of introduction, I first discuss what I call "Brand X" fiction and its modus operandi; parody as a creative/critical mode and its prominence in this fiction; and my own use of parody and its critical implications.

The rest of this work consists of six parodies, six stylistic impersonations of established American writers whose distinctive styles make possible my illustrations of traditional aspects of fiction. "Alpha and Omega" parodies John Barth and introduces the story while underscoring setting and exposition. Various characters address the reader in my parody of William Faulkner, "Yawpatucka," thereby emphasizing point of view and characterization. Complications and thematic concerns abound in "Publish-or-Perish House," a parody of Kurt Vonnegut. The Woody Allen parody, "Featherless," is filled with hopelessness and absurdity, reenforcing the atmosphere. Dialogue and

action predominate in the parody of Ernest Hemingway, "The Sun Always Rises." The anticipated point is finally reached in my parody of Joseph Heller, "The System," thus resolving the story and focusing attention on climax and resolution. Not only are formal concerns of fiction writing illustrated along the way, but the stylistic juxtapositions make artistic comparisons possible throughout. Additionally, the replay of such well-known styles is like a medley of old songs, familiar yet novel.

Medley, like "Brand X" fiction, meshes the critical and creative, fact and fiction, serious and comic, demanding much of the reader, but incorporating the old to produce the new.

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Prelude

My intentions from the start have been honorable, I assure you. As a student of literature, I simply sought to understand the late collaboration of criticism and fiction and found myself quite taken by a thing that threatens to run off with me at every bend. As a consequence, I am hard pressed not to give this upstart, half-breed fellow free rein, but in the interest of traditional scholarship and in hopes of gaining some favor for this new wave of fiction, or at least good will, I will restrict myself (with as few lapses as possible) to explaining an enterprise which was scholarly and at the same time creative.

To begin: that which is new is generally more or less strange. The new brand of fiction emerging in the last quarter-century is radically different from its predecessors and thereby more strange, granted. Unfortunately, this strange creature has been pinioned with even stranger-sounding names: "metafiction," "anti-fiction," "new fiction," "fabulation," "paraphysics," "paracriticism," and "post-modernism," the latter anticlimatic term being most in vogue. Little wonder that readers are put off by such tags and left to ponder when modern times became post, and post, post, and what constitutes new, modern, past, epigonic, and so on. So, for simplicity and the reputation of this odd, fictive fellow, I have settled upon "Brand X" as an appropriate net--curious, tenable, not odious.

It seems altogether fitting to lump this fiction together under one

heading because similarities abound: it refuses to be pinned down by convention, formula, and until now, name; it demands much more of the reader (begging for conscious participation); it is experimental, critical, subjective, ironic, and intellectual (but not elitist in the manner of T. S. Eliot or Wallace Stevens); and, most importantly, it shares disenchantment, direction (toward something else), invention, complexity, and comic inclination. Further, the story is often symbolic; the form, symptomatic; the medium, the message; the technique, the major interest. Needless to say, this Brand X fiction stands out in the crowd, a breed apart. By the by and in passing, not only is there uncertainty about the name of this fiction, there is some disagreement as to what it is, of all things.

Whatever this odd, fictive animal is, it actually is, and it is not about to run away. Indeed, it has grown in size and stature and, though suspect, needs to be looked at seriously, whether the general reader or academician likes it or not. I happen to like it, on the record, and feel that Brand X would be more welcome if it were better understood. Naturally! I also feel that it is what writer/sage John Barth urges writers to get on with, "the next best thing" ("Replenishment" 71).

There will absolutely and genuinely be another "best thing" after this Brand X creature and then another and another and so on. For "forms live and die, in all the realms of art and in all periods they have had to be continually renewed" (Robbe-Grillet 135). This renewal comes about as a natural consequence, more or less: that is, the world is constantly changing, and its literature accommodates those changes with new forms capable of representing the times. In reflecting contemporary life, literature, in effect, replenishes itself.

During the past twenty-five odd years, change has been the thing to capture the imagination of the literary world in a more critical sense than has been imagined. At the beginning of this period, writing something new and original seemed difficult, to say the least, and creative possibilities seemed restricted. Everything had been so well done and said already. All the approaches, situations, stories, metaphors, even word combinations had been used, and the traditional novel as an art form was exhausted, bankrupt, defunct.

It goes without saying, but must be said all the same, that Barth's 1967 essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," was a shot heard round the literary world, seminal in effect, and taken as the novel's death certificate more than once. This is ironic, since Barth was reputedly talking about birth, not death. The essay was much "misread" and "mistook," says Barth. "The simple burden of my essay was that the forms and modes of art live in human history and are therefore subject to used-upness . . . [and] that artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work" ("Replenishment" 71). It is no wonder such writing did not clear the whole business up. What sounds like pretentious gobbledygook, though, is really the heart and soul of Brand X fiction. Used-up conventions can be reworked into something alive and dynamic by advancing to something else, not necessarily in doing better: that's "in addition to" what went before, not "instead of."

In case there is any doubt, I want to say clearly that the times were desperate, paradoxical, Barthian (for the fiction writer anyway), and experimentation seemed most attractive. Some novelists fell

backward to tried-but-tired formulas (thesis, character, and historic novels, for instance). Some fell forward, experimenting with language and form, embracing a parodic mode consciously or subconsciously, giving old rules and traditions new meanings, exploring, inventing. In the forward fall, a resurrection of sorts came about: a more lively, witty literature evolved. And the novel, surprise! surprise! regenerated itself once again with something new and curious: an unbridled creature of questionable character. Nonetheless, the newborn reared its wobbly head and snorted, very much alive and artistically contemporary.

What is especially curious to me is how Brand X fiction renews itself through that which has caused its purported death. That is, it incorporates the supposedly apocalyptic condition of the novelist. Using themes of limitation and the "used-upness" of language and literary forms, the novel paradoxically rejuvenates itself, no little achievement. It breaks from past writers and history yet incorporates and celebrates them through parody and irony, for the most part. It consciously repeats past styles, techniques, conventions, and stories, elaborating and extending; and this repetition and recycling, oddly enough, along with the playfulness in which it is done, imbues Brand X fiction with vitality, plain and simple. It is the repetition and artifice, and the consequent defictionalization, that rejuvenates and provides a sense of play at the same time.

Such artifice also casts a forbidding intellectual and metaphysical cloud over Brand X fiction, as might be expected. In varying degrees, writers are experimenting by making their own creative difficulties fictional themes, exposing contrivances of fiction-making, and putting into question the role of narrator, narrative devices, and the

relationship between art and fiction. It is what critic/artist Ihab Hassan has called "the literary act in quest and question of itself" (Paracriticisms 46). It is a fiction about itself that new-novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet finds "far from sterilizing creation" and close to the "driving force" (12). But it is not a fiction for fiction's sake, although it's been reproached as such. "Art for art's sake" is as silly a notion as "hamburger for hamburger's sake"--both are meant for public consumption ("Lloyd" 6). As with any experiment, sometimes Brand X succeeds and sometimes not. At least it succeeds in expanding the body of fiction, also an achievement, considering.

In drawing attention to itself, Brand X "flaunts its own condition of artifice and in so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality" (Alter x). More and more, it explores itself and its processes, using subjective time schemes, and exposing its contrivance and illusion of verisimilitude, which fiction long attempted to hide. As a natural consequence, the real and imagined come together, fact and fiction fuse, the author is his own narrator at last, and a self-conscious, autobiographic element is part of the fiction. Paradoxically, "the raw material for art becomes in itself, the event" (Hassan, Dismemberment 254). The critical preoccupations become an element of realism, and the imaginative world becomes a real one. Now, I ask, what could be more novel?

Consider the role of the reader. It is certainly more participatory and unsettling. No longer is the reader allowed to rest in the spectator's seat. He is made to watch art being made, its contrivances explored, and theory and technique examined. He's invited "to active participation in pondering the status of fictional things"

(Alter 224), as the worlds of the reader and book collide. If he "sometimes has difficulty getting his bearings . . . it is in the same way that he sometimes loses them in the very world where he lives, when everything in the old structure and the old norms around him is giving way" (Robbe-Grillet 137).

It should be noted that, however demanding the text, the reader needs no special training or background to appreciate Brand X fiction. "The rule is that everything the reader needs to know must be right there in the text at hand" (Reilly 9). The piece should be entertaining in itself even though all the complexities are not fully understood. In theory, the more resonance detected by the reader, the more satisfaction gained. It's like a carnival: just being there is fun, but the pleasure increases with each new ride.

What seemed like a dead end for the novel, then, was actually just a crook in the road that twisted and turned in directions often surprising, offbeat, and complex. The fact that many thought the novel dead did not make it dead in fact. The departure from old paths by Brand X writers did, however, make one thing clear: the forms of the past have passed and are no longer suitable vehicles for existing conditions. Frankly, we don't need another The Old Man and the Sea or The Red Badge of Courage. Or as Barth put it: "There's no going back to Tolstoy and Dickens & Co. except on nostalgia trips" ("Replenishment" 70).

Many do go back to traditional reading tastes and touchstones, nevertheless, for Brand X is not popular with the mass audience. As Anais Nin pointed out in 1968: "It is a curious anomaly, that we listen to jazz, we look at modern paintings, we live in modern houses of modern

design, we travel in jet planes, yet we continue to read novels written in a tempo and style which is not of our time and not related to any of these influences" (qtd. in Spencer xiii).

There is another curious anomaly/perversity even more untoward: "It seems that it is indeed by reference to the past that the present is judged" (Robbe-Grillet 145). Obviously, it is wrongheaded, even meaningless, to measure Brand X with old calipers, let alone condemn it because it is not like old fictions. Yet there is a tendency to do both in the name of standards. "As long as we expect a nectarine to taste like a peach or a plum we are bound to be disappointed. But once we assimilate this new category--nectarine [Brand X]--we begin to know what we are dealing with and how to react to it. We can judge and appreciate" (Scholes, Fabulators 14).

I'm attempting examination of Brand X fiction in hopes of some assimilation, judgment, and appreciation. I'm also recommending that the reader put aside literary preconceptions and consider some new appreciations to accommodate the new category and new fictional skills of the writer: to wit, wit, invention, liveliness, artistic dexterity, and old packages in new wrappings. It is my opinion that Brand X fiction is neither decadent, unhealthy, nor "the end of a period of achievement and decline" (Alter 177). On the contrary, it is witty and exciting and could very well be the beginning of a new literary period. For, as Hassan might argue, "There is freedom in intellectual risk, excitement, perhaps originality" (Paracriticisms xiv). At the very least, Brand X writers are risk-takers.

I must warn you, dear reader, that this fiction is positively fraught with curiosities, convolutions, a strong comic bent, and the

ever-popular paradox: old becomes new; repetition, rejuvenation; technique, subject; fiction, fact; artifice, art; author, character; creativity, criticism; parody, novelty; and the comic, serious. There was a time when the "serious writer" did not use the comic mode or techniques with any seriousness. That has changed dramatically. Now writers don't want to look serious, even though they are. Now the anti-hero, black humor, absurdism, irony, parody, and the comic of all description color our most serious concerns. Now comedy is a serious literary endeavor, and parody a principal mode of modernity.

Parody's primacy in Brand X fiction, its versatility, and service are of especial interest to me. By nature, parody is particularly well suited to mixing the comic and serious and as capable of madcap frivolity as sophisticated criticism. Obviously it's a very obliging sort which is one reason for its prominence in Brand X fiction. The other is its utility which is enormous--it "mocks, mourns, celebrates, and recaptures all at once" (Frosch 391)--and gives rise to much enthusiasm. Parody is "able to serve in a way no other mode can," notes Robert Alter, "as an agency of renewal and transformation of jejeune literary forms" (158). It enables the writer to transform the past "into a source of imaginative energy," says William Van O'Connor, and "is a way of both killing the monster and stealing his gold" (381). The writer can create something original, Thomas R. Frosch explains, "not satellites of an original but wholly new and independent creations" (373). So, parody celebrates the original but seeks its own originality, and time and again the imitation surpasses that imitated.

How does parody accomplish all this, you ask? Parody, of course, imitates a work of art in a seriocomic manner, exacting humor,

criticism, and praise along the way. It combines "a coolly critical spirit with detached playfulness" (Alter 177) and effectively ridicules hallowed objects, even when light and good-natured. Bear in mind that parody's principal purpose is to amuse, and amuse it does variously, often, and in conjunction. Humorous elements interlock, overlap, and contribute to an overall feeling of delight, and the design of the piece and its inherent artistry delight even more so.

Much of the comic effect sought after in parody is found in the imitation itself: its duality, object of ridicule, and playful nature. The reader experiences a form of pleasure when the doubleness of imitation is realized, that is, the association and discovery of the replay: when Philip Roth's The Breast is associated with Franz Kafka's Metamorphosis. Then there's a catharsis of sorts when objects of respect are ridiculed and/or treated humorously. The more pretentious, lofty, or exalted, the more open for attack and satisfying for the reader. Nothing is sacred, it seems, and everything is ripe for ridicule: from innocence (Terry Southern's Candy) to humanism (Rabelais' Gargantua and Pantagruel); from fairy tales (Donald Barthelme's Snow White) to Hamlet (Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead). All the while, the playfulness of presentation (exaggeration, extension, distortion, and juxtaposition of the old, new, and odd) exacts humor from the original. Cervantes' Don Quixote, for example, is an exaggeration of a knight-errant whose romantic ideals are extended to the absurd and chivalrous action reduced to battles with windmills and sheep. Of course, parody employs other conventional methods of evoking humor (surprise, non sequiturs, incongruities, narrative disruption) that come in quick succession and contribute to

the overall joy of the piece as well.

Similarly, the design and designer render certain satisfactions in what the father of fabulation, Robert Scholes, describes as a "kind of delight in formal and verbal dexterity" (Fabulation 169). The form itself delights the reader in its ingenuity as an authorial construct, as do the artistic and verbal prowess of the author. In particular, the artist should be cunning in his parody, not obvious or unnatural. By that I mean he should temper his imitation with subtlety and taste. The story should be fluid; the presentation, smooth; the artifice cleverly tendered; and the obvious avoided in deference to sophistication and wit. As a consequence, the parodist's facility and virtuosity evoke admiration and delight, and deservedly so. After all, this fiction is not so easy to write (or write about) and merits consideration when done well.

To be sure, parody has a special character, charm, and vitality, and may be "the central expression of our times" as journalist/editor Dwight MacDonald says it is (xv). Its literary prominence is quite remarkable considering its purpose and comic thrust. Then again, lest we forget, comedy cloaks the most serious concerns even when an end in itself. The parodist, for example, masks his disenchantment with the well-worn world in self-irony and mockery. He calls attention to fictional mechanisms in hopes of regaining "some sense of primacy over his conventions" (Frosch 383), of transcending their limitations, and of escaping his desperate position. Moreover, he tries "to affirm the integrity of his work . . . by directing attention to the strategies of art" (Alter 149). That's as serious as any fiction can get. Yet this self-irony and transcendence are couched in humor and carried off with a

certain ease and light touch.

In truth and fiction, parody has proven to be an extremely capable and effective mode of expression. It is at once "symptomatic and remedial" (Frosch 392), creative and critical, sophisticated and provincial, serious and fun. If it's not fun, it's usually dead. It chronicles the "complexity of our attitudes toward history" (Frosch 381); brings an awareness to the reading public of the literary conditions of being; mocks while paying homage; and reorchestrates the old into something new--and all in the spirit of play. Who could ask for anything more?

The director of my doctoral committee is who. So for his sake and mine, I'll proceed. So far, I've discussed what Brand X fiction is and how it works; now I'll try to explain what I've done, even though what I've done speaks for itself. I'm making no claims about its worth. It is what it is, a novel of parody and example of Brand X fiction. Art "expresses nothing but itself. It creates its own equilibrium and its own meaning. It stands by itself, like the zebra, or else it falls" (Robbe-Grillet 45).

I have chosen this avenue rather than the more usual manner of literary criticism because I am quite taken by parody, its powers, and prominence in the literary world, as you may have guessed, and do not feel that imitation negates or invalidates art. "Picasso steals everywhere," and "his parodic talent amounts to genius" (MacDonald xv).

Parody is a remarkable literary vehicle indeed and far and away the best forum for the critic/artist like Barth, Hassan, and Robbe-Grillet. Its flexible nature has allowed me to combine the creative and critical in one piece, to explore, examine, and invent at once, serving my

academic function admirably. To be specific, I've been able to synthesize my course work, prior research, and study of Brand X fiction in a fictional demonstration that I call Medley.

What I have done does not match my original plan; but I didn't know as much about the creative/critical mode then. Then, too, "in art, nothing is ever known in advance" (Robbe-Grillet 141), as the act of writing is in itself discovery. I have come to know Brand X fiction through study and exercise and found exercise the best teacher by far. What better way to know this fiction than through actual practice, trial and error? I have also come to appreciate the fundamental role intuition plays in all writing: it guides the writer in constructing and the reader in understanding. The writer makes choices he knows somehow to be right, and the reader perceives isolated elements and relates them to other elements. Parody works along similar lines in that it is "an intuitive kind of literary criticism, shorthand for what 'serious' critics must write out at length" (MacDonald xiii). It wraps the serious in play and lets the writer talk art and make art at the same time. Although it's oftentimes elusive when it comes to explanation, intuition is always an integral part of parody, writing, and reader appreciation.

I may not be able to explain everything I did or why, but I will try as best I can: Medley is a novel about a literature student named Andrea Reed who has undergone a critical/analytical education and the absurdities attending such. She is nearing the end of five years of graduate school, years of academic tightrope walking, game playing, hard work, and deprivation. And for what? Her excellence is unrewarded, college teaching positions are rarer than a unicorn, the publishing

world seems impenetrable, and her personal life and marriage are all but forgotten.

I tell Andrea's story in six sections, each imitative of a gifted American writer whose work is also marked by novelty and whose writing style is distinct, recognizable, and well-known--a personal trademark. I imitate American authors because Andrea is an American scholar and creative writer; I parody first or earlier works of these writers because Medley is Andrea's first novel. While conventional novels are representations of real life, Medley is a representation of real authors, styles, and even novels--those studied and admired by the fictional author and real author as well. The parody, it seems to me, is especially apt for a graduate student of literature: namely, the student/author imitates the role of author by imitating the styles of real authors. Though somewhat confusing for the reader, it is quite a setup in that the artifice is underscored, the parody doubled, and writing styles set side by side for comparison.

Indeed, artistic variations in approach, technique, and emphasis are clearly demonstrated in this stylistic juxtaposition. For one thing, short, lucid sentences in one section contrast sharply with the convoluted prose in the next--the first impersonates Ernest Hemingway; the second, William Faulkner. For another, funny words, neuroses, and daily frustrations are used for comic effect in one chapter, while key words juxtapose scenes in another, and the concerns enlarge to institutional illogic and societal madness--the former parodies humorist Woody Allen; the latter, black-humorist Joseph Heller. All six sections illustrate various points of view, too: first-person, third, authorial, observer, participant, omniscient. As the same subject is handled in

six very different ways, the possibilities for comparisons among the authors are many, and as such, Medley becomes a study in technique. At the same time, the interplay of old styles is somewhat entertaining for the reader and writer alike. The imitations reorchestrate "old conventions and old melodies" (Reilly 11), hence the name Medley. They transpose in a different key and tempo, therein making new music, familiar yet different.

There is a more subtle undercurrent at work beneath the play, though, a critical consciousness that goes beyond stylistic comparison. The reader is made aware of mechanical manipulations by my choice and diversity of parody. The formal considerations of fiction writing and the relationship of numerous fictional elements become apparent in presentation. For each parodied author seems particularly well-suited to illustrate fictive concerns: John Barth, setting and exposition; William Faulkner, character and point of view; Kurt Vonnegut, complication and theme; Woody Allen, atmosphere; Ernest Hemingway, action and dialogue; and Joseph Heller, climax and resolution. In effect, the concerns of conventional fiction are put on display, their apparatus and boundaries exposed to scrutiny. It is an indirect form of instruction meant to make the reader curious about these authors, their fictional skills, and the dynamics of writing. If the function of art is "to bring into the world certain interrogations," as Robbe-Grillet says it is (14), then Medley satisfies this function. It questions through subtle demonstration.

Finally, Medley is a novel and as such tells a story which accretes around a single character. The disparate parts are brought together through a pattern of images and associations as well as repetition: I

insist on a consistency of time, place, character, action, and the like so as not to confuse the reader unduly. Each of the six sections is largely self-contained, except for the first which merely presents traditional introductory material in a non-traditional way--Barthian, if you will. All the rest compose a sequence and contribute to an overall story in temporal progression, plot amplification, or development of character, theme, or conflict. Consequently, the repetition, progression, and sequential perceptions weave the parts together, move toward a resolution, and result in a cumulative effect that is as much sensed by the reader as comprehended. At least, that's how I think it all works.

Clearly, Medley and Brand X fiction differ from past models in perspective, technique, and design. It is my view that Brand X is equally serious and affecting as traditional narrative fiction and a lot more fun. It is also my view that "we are not at the end of the fictional world but simply at a turning point in the history of the narrative" (Scholes, Fabulation 212).

Thus and so, although my study has taken longer than anyone wanted, I have come to know what this strange Brand X creature is: it's a zebra that has given me quite a ride.

Chapter I
ALPHA AND OMEGA

Once upon a time in the land of once upon a time, a story began once upon a time . . . and ended that way too. It seemed altogether fitting and as good a way as any. Actually the author who slept two hours in three days was too weary to worry about a new beginning; so, knowing all too well that originals are unparalleled and wanting to be technically contemporary, she chose a conventional way to begin. Moreover, it made no sense to court more frustration in search of novelty--especially with that far-flung notion circulating about literature being exhausted, along with everything else. Then, too, there's Jorge Luis Borges and his claim that "no one has claim to originality in literature; all writers are more or less faithful amanuenses of the human spirit, translators and annotators of preexisting archetypes" (qtd. in Barth, "Exhaustion" 277).

All the same, a story once begun is launched, and I for one would just as soon drink the champagne and switch to first person--after all, it is my story and not as awkward as third person, no matter what some English teacher says. So here's to my story and to the land of studentdom, egodom, and couples copulating before, during, and after whatever, regardless of how exhausted, exhausting, or inspired. [Good form necessitates a drink to romantic irony, too. You know, that's when seemingly unrelated matters, and unseemly ones as well, intrude upon a narrative like unexpected guests. Cheers!]

Ah, me. Carrying on, I can see, is quite important in this

business of storytelling.

Now where was I? Carrying on: for someone like myself whose principal activity for the past five yearsyearsyears has been the study and critical analysis of great literature (or rather what the textbooks and academic world consider great), the hardest thing about the thing at hand--viz., the explanation of a day in 1978--is the doing it, as in most matters. I've never tried to write a book before but know I can do it just as I know that once the target is circled (which mine is), it's just a matter of positioning the arrow and pulling the bowstring. The hard part is the pulling, not to mention hitting the bull's-eye. Of course, no one in our English department has much faith in another's creative efforts or aim, especially a student archer's, for it's rarer than a William Tell that anyone splits an apple, let alone makes a living at it.

"No, your dissertation can't be any imaginative production. No poems, no dramas, no novels."

As a matter of fact, the only published people (as in imaginative) I've met or seen even are those handful of visiting celebrities who alight on campus for a day or less from some never-never land. They usually appear at one class to answer questions and one reading for the general public (often a handful) and then ascend from whence they came as if they'd never been. Poof.

"No, the dissertation can't be a creative work of fiction. There are an infinite number of possibilities from which to choose that are research-oriented. You're perfectly free to do as you like, Andrea, as long as you abide by the rules." Poof!

Great Muse! How does anyone get on with this business of writing a

novel, especially now when there are no rules? Every time I put a thought down, another one pops up like toast to be buttered or flag to be saluted or arrows to be shot or. See my point? But I do have my quiver full and bow strung, such as it is. Granted, we're a ways from the actual story, but moving in that direction and will no doubt arrive anon.

It's precisely this feeling, I might add, of arriving some time or other (hopefully at greener pastures and before midday) that keeps most yawning graduate students with drooping eyelids going, myself included. However that may be, it's not the departing or arriving of this novel that interests me so much; it's the going. The walk's the thing--the labyrinth, not its perimeters--and I see no need to hurry along. You see, I'm against the jostling that some writers give: shoving the reader into the middle of things in the name of in medias res before his shoes are even on. Not the case here, friend. This is an after-dinner walk, not a jog or race, and I don't intend to jar your appetite with too much exercise too soon. I just mean to ramble along and sing you some old songs in new garb as we go.

But first I'm going to relieve you of any felt or unfelt tension about the alpha and omega of this tale. Simply stated: it all began more or less when I was drawn into the folds of graduate school (the alpha), along with a number of other rather rutsome English majors, a number which dwindles every semester--for the student condition is certainly an absurd one, and one either drops out or succumbs to temporary absurdity and sheepdom.

"Your prospects of teaching at a great college or university are slim to none, no matter how good your record, performance behind the

lectern, or behind and its performance."

The gates closed and introduced us to fields of reading (some Elysian), some learned and not so learned goatherds, bloodshot eyes, grass, and occasional debauchery (mostly oral, written, or imagined [ironic understatement])--the middle portion for those purists out there.

MEMO

Hey, nonnie-nnonnie! The annual Christmas party is upon us (held this year at John Boy Honeycutt's, but don't let him keep you away) and needs little more explanation. However, there are always a few matters to bleat, especially for the first-semester kids.

1) Dress: Not required. There are those amongst us who have no desire to disrobe in public or for that matter in private due to some personal inhibition, aberration, or embarrassing tattoo. Whereat, dress is acceptable, angora and chains preferred. If you must wear underwear, consider the crotchless and edible, so as to be in keeping with the spirit of things.

2) Eatables and Drinkables: Two beer kegs with beer and various chips and dips (endive and dive-in) will be provided for your revelries. Other than that, it's take pot luck at the party or bring your own pot, luck, bottle, nuts, whipping cream, whip, furburger, or whatever's needed to appease your tastes.

3) Diversions: There will be a multitude of indulgent activities--the only limitation being imagination or lack thereof. Some coveted amusements from seasons past are taffy pulling, tongue licking, fart lighting, cat splatting, cock fighting, boondoggling, drinking to distraction, group showers, promiscuity, humping whomever, buggery, and telling a teacher to take a hike (or some comparable effusion). All activities, quite naturally, are subject to the consent of the participants.

4) Religious Observance (nondenominational): Worship, prayer, and penitence for previous unseemliness will be observed the morning after and penicillin shots available for interested parties.

It's a passage of sorts from innocence to experience, ignorance to knowledge, obedience to defiance, and so on and so forth. It winds up or down (a matter of perspective and condition) at my comprehensive examination on that day of days, April 17, 1978--the omega. Incidentally, no heroes or climaxes, at least not of the traditional

kind, appear in this "great American novel."

"Isn't that a contradiction in terms?" quips Dr. Hardee, a romantic scholar who takes liquid lunches in his mirror-lined office and any sweet young thing and otherwise who's willing.

"A lot you know about it, Hardee. Go back to your meadows and Byron cripple," returns Meg Ramseur, a second-year MA student who, though worn-out like everyone else and worn thin by Hardee, hasn't succumbed to him or his rhetoric.

Some barbs, mind you, come off better than others, but they're all part of the fare and fair in this department, as are casseroles and wooziness. The classicists chide the moderns about being shallow and coarse; the moderns, the classicists about being stale and hoary. The English literature people poke fun at American imitation; and the Am lit folks get red faces and peevish with their students. But Dr. Giles, who teaches Chaucer and lyric poetry, is the barb extraordinarius and rises above them all--also why many switch to medieval studies. Nothing is sacred, except tenure, of course. And one must not barb too deeply, especially in regard to professors. After all, grades and futures to some extent are subject to the whims of these people, and egos aren't safe enough for skating.

Ergo. Hark and let's hark back to the matter at hand, the viz. mentioned earlier. I must warn you from the outset that it's impossible to tell everything about that day in 1978. There's such an endless number of desirable events and arrangements from which to choose in the telling. Some matters will have to go by the wayside (alack and alas), including my tale of the wimp and parody that outparodies parodies. ["The imitation . . . is something new and may be quite serious and

passionate despite its farcical aspect," quoth John Barth, evermore ("Exhaustion" 275).]

Many well-meaning people, I should note, have warned me about certain potholes in the road. For instance, they say the traditional novel has died as a major art form and passed into history along with the epic and minuet. If it be so, so be it. There's also the feeling that nothing is more tiresome in fiction than a story about the academia.

Case in point: Siegfried Wruck begins yet another harangue at yet another hapless student: "You really didn't mean 'anxious.' 'Anxious' has to do with 'apprehension'. . . ." [Ironically, "anxious" was the exact word needed--my prerogative.] Suggestion: Nobody likes a pedant--except maybe another pedant.

Case out of point: A sober Becky B_____ leans Pisa-Tower-like against the wall outside her office door, which happens to be parallel to mine. She told me confidentially one night, at a dinner party and after several drinks, that she was still a virgin, at twenty-seven. Wellaway! The only thing that came to mind was what I said, "I'm sorry." I don't think this was the sought-after response, but her alleged restraint was a surprise, considering, and what would she have me do about it anyway?

At any rate, Becky is looking fetchingly and not at all celibately at a standing Mark A_____, a single faculty member of good standing and reputation. "I've been taking belly dancing lessons lately, you know, and they've been helping me in so many ways. [Becky is not in her Scheherazade dress at the moment.] Now I can move my hips like a blender," she says without wincing or blending.

"That sounds like fun," says Mark, not at all unnerved.

"There's only one way to find out," Becky says as she measures him with her eyes and hips. Etcetcetcetcetcetc.

I'm assured by these same wet blankets, the well-meaning ones, notwithstanding (who know of what they speak), that professors, classes, academic circles and affairs, etc., are humdrum and libelous. Libelous?

"How many books are there about the academic world?" asks Dr. Hutton. "Can you name one? All right, hem and haw, name six. Ahem. Surely that must tell you something. Ahem. The real is really a drag and of very little interest to anyone but those involved." Dr. Hutton is of very little interest although he weighs three hundred pounds and is consequently given much respect [a contrast between what is stated and what is meant--a verbal irony this time. We're positively mired in irony of one sort or other, you may have noticed].

Now what was I about? Potholes? A rambling walk (beside a meandering stream, no less)? Or old tunes in new frocks? Everything, I'm afraid, has the air of importance and is of little consequence. I assure you that this storytelling will get easier as we go along, and I'll go off the beaten path less often. So bear with me, dear reader, and my digression here and there, and I'll lead you by the hand and ever so gently through these ivied walls and hallowed halls. My plan is plainly to introduce myself and explain the title of this book. Watch how quickly I can move when I want to.

My name is Andrea Reed, a name nearly symbolic of my penchant for reading. I'm twenty-nine and five-foot-six. When fifty, I suspect people will still ask me what college I attend because of a certain perpetual and involuntary facial sweetness. At present, Linda Ronstadt,

the singer, and I could pass for sisters (a fact mentioned for purposes of description, not self-praise). I wear my hair in wash-and-wear styles and shave my legs only when I feel like it. Like most other penniless graduate students, I teach a few college classes each semester to eat regularly or thereabouts--we're called teaching assistants or TAs, among other things, not because we assist anyone (which we don't) but because the term makes us seem subordinate. I don't plan my life around meals, and I can't make a pot roast or stomach insurance men. Bores leave me cold, and bars leave me warm but in the gutter.

My origins are mostly German and native American, and my family was taken unawares, to say the least, by my choice to stay in school so long. Somewhat unaware myself, I did the Pollyanna bit for them (that's what nice girls did then) before college. During my rose-colored undergraduate days (when glasses weren't as thick as they are now), I donned Don Quixote trappings and revolted against everything because everything was revolting. That passed. In graduate school, I mellowed (or was beaten down) as serious student and English instructor which left time for little else. So. It's been a series of rules and succession of roles to deal with those roles. And I haven't the foggiest idea what new mask I'll wear or what nebulous body will employ me if and when I finally get this terminal and interminable degree.

Did I mention I have a husband and a dog? At least I did the last time I checked, which was Thursday. I rarely see either of them, and neither will figure prominently here, but they can't be ignored either. Dung is a frisky miniature schnauzer who jumps on me whenever I go home; Scott greets me in much the same way. I plod from the library to home. He's there waiting with outstretched arms: I fill them with

books, papers, me. We talk until. Scott's tanned, athletic, macho, and moral, a man who wants me to feel fulfilled and knows that motherhood is not the filler. Sooner usually than later we wind up wound up in bed and blankets and his imagination that effervesces at times like these. He plays tennis and drinks beer; I don't. He reads whatever suits him; I can't. He thinks I've made him more aware and sensitive; I agree. He always wantswantswants to try something new. New. New. NEW! Megalomania and margarine! Everything's been tried already. Why must it be new to be good? We have a good time together, and he likes women as people. Need I say more?

There is one thing more--the title. Why Medley? I could go on and on, which I won't, and never completely explain why. I suppose it's relevant that we owned a stereo for quite some time before a television set in our midst: music makes for easier studying, and I'd rather listen to good music than watch the tube, with few exceptions. Well, on occasion, I've had the good fortune to come across a musical composition that's novel and yet terribly familiar: tunes and strains from songs long since worn-out in the playing, yet lodged somewhere in the subconscious, come together and blend into each other, taking on a freshness. Ballad meets Broadway musical meets opera (floating and not) meets whippoorwill and what you will and merge in theme, mood, or some sameness. What I'm talking about is a pastiche of old melodies and lyrics that give pleasure in their familiarity and their novelty, as far as I can tell. It's like meeting old friends with face lifts.

So it always seemed to me, particularly in this age of imitation, a fine idea to devise my own medley of favorites to tell a story. I needn't explain that that's precisely what this book is, friend, an

assortment of pieces plucked from several strains and wrought with variation for your benefit. Then again, maybe I do need to explain. Quite frankly, Medley imitates the style of others and mixes bits and passages from oldies but goodies. My intentions are honorable, I assure you. I merely want to share this rhapsody, and maybe a dish or two filled with mixed fruits, while pure instinct carries us along willy-nilly, for music is not a thing to be reasoned into being or appreciation.

The short of it is that this is my funhouse, and as operator of the Victrola, I'll play those old songs you loved so well. It's up to you to recognize their fresh faces as they appear here and there in my rambling prose.

Chapter II

YAWPATUCKA

Andrea

We sit outdoors sprawled in the green morning among camellia and cherry blossoms, a volunteer reading "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," a draftee reading "The Nymph's Reply." They listen, cross-legged, on elbows and palms, casting anxious eyes at birds overhead, squashing intruders in the dust, waiting for the hour to pass so they can do whatever they do instead of read about it.

"You have gum stuck to your shoe, Miz Reed," Buddy Compson says, bearing an even row of big white teeth.

"Do I now, Mr. Compson? Well, you saw it first. It's yours," I say, extending a foot in his direction more in fun than meanness.

Buddy's lips close, and he looks away from the hole in my shoe that resembles a blotch of chewing gum. He flips the edges of a textbook, his dark eyes settling on a girl beside him, a breeze rippling her skirt revealing a slender thigh.

I let my foot drop and begin again, the class most attentive, thanks to Buddy. I talk about art, convention, and the poetic rendering of life, rationally examining passions and physical urges foremost on their minds, their lusts on hold temporarily, youth a time to learn and do and later to understand.

The discussion is slow in coming, but coming, like the elevator in Yawpatucka Hall that arrives in its own good time unless stuck on hold or temporarily not working, yet coming usually and just a matter of pressing the right buttons and waiting.

I press them to think about the carefree love proposed by the Shepherd and rejected by the Nymph. They wrestle with vague notions and find themselves involved and opinionated about the man and woman in the poems and thus the poems, as sex transports them into an exciting world they know and care about that's somehow related to the frail page of print.

Ideas begin to come together and take shape, giggles and shyness subsiding, thoughts popping inside their young heads like heated kernels in a popper, the mystery lifting from the warthog of literature known as poetry, a thing curious, foreign, fearsome. In and out of each poem I guide them, weaving questions, comments, technique into the discussion, making it seem as if they're directing the whole operation until the piece produced resembles my design.

The insects buzz, and the distant mower mows under a glorious sun. The hour passes, the campanile gonging the end of class, and they spray in all directions, dissolving into the tidy brick buildings and clumps of color, their bodies once again engaging in life's processes, nature giving them what they need to know, art a pale comparison.

There were times I remember (and not so long ago either) of undeniable rushes, heedless moments, times secret, instinctive, irrevocable of touching fumbling sweat smells bodies blindly coming together gasping slobbering throbbing welding ineluctably--luct--luct--luct

A warm wind lifts me to my feet and toward my windowless office on the third floor of Yawpatucka, the elevator doors standing open waiting for me. I pass a young Adonis asleep under a tree, his head on a folded jacket, an open book resting on his chest, oblivious to the

self-perpetuating forces in motion all about him or perhaps dreaming of them rushing toward inevitable junctures and collisions.

Emily

He shouldn't have done it. He just shouldn't have is all. He had no right. No right at all. The first time I'd ever gone to his place. just to get some books he said maybe a drink We'd worked all afternoon on a report about Virginia Woolf and that paper for Hleblschuk so many things to do deadlines to meet. I hadn't rested since Christmas and the library was closing in on me and it was so hot and half-past-five always half-past-five

Mylan seemed decent enough, hard-working like my father and it's not that we were strangers or anything. We'd been to the Union together the Loading House then there was that party where he drank too much fell asleep in my lap encircling me with his arms.

I was attracted to him somehow he always had some power over me a certain presence that was more than the power he has over most people just from the way he looks and talks and handles himself. It was that too but more than that. It was his steely eyes staring at me or something that made me freeze and squirm at the same time the way he seemed to see inside me somehow penetrating what I was what I thought.

I couldn't help myself. I knew it was just a matter of the right time and place our coming together time the only space between and I wouldn't stop him or anything even if I could have and he knew it too. But I never expected anything like this to happen. I never expected him to hurt me and get so worked up about it.

Andrea

"Hey," Georgia says, clattering into our office on high heels with an armload of books dropping with a thud on her desk and knocking over a nameplate that's immediately set back in place.

"Hey, yourself," I say, the room filled with her Love's Baby Soft perfume, the quiet shattered.

"Did jew haf to write a paper on Joyce's Ulysses?" she asks, winded and hurried, tucking a creamy low-cut blouse into a navy skirt while looking over a shoulder at me.

"Why, no," I answer. youll have to write this one without me I align loose sheets of a paper on Pirandello for Hleblschuk's seminar that's about to start, the ends making a chopping sound on my desk, and stand to leave.

Georgia steps forward placing herself between me and the door like a barricade, a look of urgency flooding her face, her blouse heaving, the top button strained and ready to pop off.

"How bout Portrait of an Artist?" she asks, aware of the classes I took and papers I wrote, her dark lashes batting and eyes pleading but looking past me toward the filing cabinet. going through my files over and over always borrowing sucking up my ideas and time taking all she can get helplessness getting her what she needs

"How bout it?"

"Ah jest need to see yer notes and paper, Andrea," Georgia says side-stepping me. "They're probly in the files."

I stop at the door. The hum of voices and padding of feet in the halls have tapered to isolated surges of sound echoing slightly, and I

see Becky Bennett arms akimbo posing as a drill master at her door, ready to lock it when the bell rings and unleash herself and classroom omnipotence on her helpless students.

I turn about-face to Georgia who's already flipping through my files, the drawer yanked out, she drapped over it, a trespass and violation. flipping through five years of my work with the same regard a moth shows fine wool flip flip flip

"Georgia, did it ever occur to you that I might not want you flipping through my files?"

"Whatever do you mean?" Georgia asks, looking up in shock, her lips protruding in a pout. "You needn't get so riled up. Ah won't hurt them, honest. Did jew have a fight with Scott or somethin?"

"This has nothing to do with Scott," I say, wanting to slam the drawer on her fingers. "Don't you see how wrong this is, exploiting everyone and everything?"

She looks at me with blank, dreamlike eyes, inured by habit, some always using and abusing others, given the power or opportunity.

Emily

So we walked down to his place about a block from school with his arm around my waist his eyes fiery but cold while he talked about Miss Bennett and her belly-dancing game. she kept teasing me he said with all that stuff about unused muscles and swiveling hips til I called her bluff one day her back stiffened and she grew wild and panicky I told her there was nothing to be afraid of that physical pleasure isn't dependent on love love is merely a word and words are only sounds puffs of air that fill a hole not a need I told her what she needed was pure sensation without involvement or attachment

I could feel his breath as he talked and we got closer and closer to his place and his arm got tighter and tighter drawing me to him his body frightening and compelling.

We followed a dirt path to the back of a run-down apartment building and it was as if I were watching myself accept whatever Mylan did or said or wanted as if I had no strength except his no direction except his no will except his.

Inside we found Arnie Knox straddling a chair with his head drooping over the back peering into a psychology text on a table of empty beer cans that spilled over on the linoleum, some of them caved in. "Rabelais!" he said to Mylan. "Rabelais!" Mylan didn't answer as he pulled me in behind him.

The walls were bare cracked in need of paint and the kitchen smelled. But it was half-past five and I was tired and with Arnie there I figured we'd have a beer or two and some talk before I'd be on my way. After all Mylan and I had a paper due the next day for Hleblschuk.

Arnie guffawed then emptied another beer can smashing it lengthwise against his forehead. "Rabelais!" he shouted like a crowd at a bullfight.

Andrea

We sit in grown-up chairs with pea-green cushioned seats, our papers about the modernity of some piece of literature heaped in front of Hleblschuk, my Sunday in that heap.

so Andrea lets take some wine out to the lake and get blind and naked

Id like to hon you know that but my Pirandello paper is due tomorrow

so screw Pirandello better yet screw me

"I'll have these back in a week," Hleblschuk says.

right and you're the bald soprano

Hleblschuk clears his throat in a guttural trill, his white beard combed down half his face; hair smoothed straight back to folds at the neck; talk gentle, polite, somnolent.

A smell of cut grass issues through a yawning window into a room heavy with heat, dust, metal bookshelves, and hardbacks, mostly dated and laden with uselessness but stout and dependable, standing upright until borrowed or taken or dumped.

"Your next paper will deal with modern literature that displeases intelligent readers, not just the Philistines," Hleblschuk begins. John Boy Honeycutt chuckles looking like a jellyroll, layer upon layer of vacuous goo and excess.

"Contemporary writers depart from conventional forms and subject matter like red wheelbarrows and plums in the ice box."

wheelbarrows in the ice box?

"And it's this departure, this newness, which frustrates the

general reader . . . which brings me to my manuscript." Hleblschuk opens a faded folder, edges dark with wear, to a typed manuscript of a hundred pages or so.

"I'm going to read to you for a few class periods from my own work about poetry which is not widely accepted by the general reading public."

his work or the poetry?

Candace nudges my knee under the table and rolls her eyes, her lids a powder-blue. Everyone shifts to a comfortable position, but not too comfortable, lest attempts to remain awake would prove futile.

Mylan

Goddam you. Goddam you. Goddam you! Wimping around the goddam halls while I clean up slop to pay for you to read to me to read to me daddy Hleblschuk like a babe too young to know the symbols of letters in need of some adult to unscramble the freaking meanings locked in loops and lines and strange configurations writhing on a page. soft sweet-smelling trembling arms crossed gripping her shoulders eyes wild trapped

please Mylan dont do this I care about you why are you doing this to me because I need to Emily not because I want to because lust and fear and sin are just words used by people who have never lusted or feared or sinned and never will until they forget the words

Damn that milk-faced bastard jacking me around! I spend hours writing papers for that wimp and he gives me C's. C's damn it without telling me why! C's are F's in grad school and he knows it.

I miss work so he can tell me how to please his wimping ass and he doesn't even show. Im sorry Mylan he says lily white as if excusing himself for belching it just slipped my mind

This old man has no mind no life no anything I want. But, damn it, he's got me by the balls!

Candace

Fiddlesticks! That impotent old man going on and on about things he says all semester long every semester as if anyone with any sense could care. Why, you don't take a class in rhetoric, prose, or any other subject from that man. You take Hleblschuk I, Hleblschuk II, and unless you're swimmy-headed, you skip III, IV, and V, if there's a way in hell, in a manner of speaking.

Can you believe this? First we do the research, then we teach it, and now he reads his fifty-year-old dissertation about modern poetry, of all things! Someone needs to remind him that this is a graduate seminar; it must have slipped his mind.

Humph! I know a thing or two I'd rather be doing, and I expect that hunk sitting over there making virile noises is just bored beyond bored and would be only too happy to do some boring of his own. hes probably thinking about my office earlier I never laughed so much in my life I like to die how he almost blew a gasket

Gracious! He certainly helps a girl pass the time of day. For that, sweetie, I'm going to reward you. I'll just slip off my shoe and do a little manipulating . . . all over again.

Henry Harris

Why you luscious little tease! Why do you do things like this, eh? Not that Hleblschuk would ever expect such a thing--so absorbed is he in himself. Hell, you look downright absorbed in him yourself, captivated even, as if he were William Buckley or someone, for Christ's sake. if anyone looks under the table Nobody, positively nobody would believe this and right under Hleblschuk's nose too. Damn! Even I have a hard time believing it.

There's no question that you're as good as he is bad Henry you can call me Candy, and I do like a plucky woman, but what would your husband think? What would the department think? What would the department think? from the feel of things Id say nothing they dont think already

You've impressed me, Candy, there's no doubt about that. You're one impressive lady, a little taller than I am and better dressed, but one hell of a good time. careful now there are limits

yao good God woman this has gone far enough Just undo those toes of yours and get them out of my lap.

Andrea

Hleblschuk reads on, pointing an index finger skyward now and again, lifting a shaggy brow at places he especially likes, words perspiring into each other in an endless stream of plashing sounds signifying nothing. We sit side by side fiddling, doodling, dripping, the same assembled group--where's Emily--recognizing it for the subterfuge it is: a sterile examination of modern poetry, abstract, old, and efficient in eliminating another week of class time and preparation for Hleblschuk.

Only there isn't enough air to go around. Blubbery John Boy Honeycutt, his mouth open and shirttail partly out, fans himself steadily with a legal pad, inadvertently pushing hot air toward Mrs. Whitfield, who leans into it, her forehead damp with perspiration. After a time, Henry Harris wipes the sweat from his face with a forearm sweep, then slouches in his chair.

A fly winds past Hleblschuk, does an aerial dance and alights on his stooped shoulder, a wasted figure hunched over the lectern, his hands behind him, his voice dragging into timelessness. The black speck climbs his starched collar, his hand brushing at the slight presence though his reading never stops plash nor loses its cadence plash plash. The fly hovers then lights plash on Hleblschuk's wobbly head plash and disappears from view plash, Hleblschuk incessant plash, seemingly sweatless in an off-white blazer plash, indifferent to the intoxicating sounds and smells and feel of spring plash.

He drones on mutilating everything, the poetry holding little meaning now, its vibrancy lost on him, we even more so plash. We're

like puppets on a shelf waiting for him to pull our strings plash, all of us with opinions if not passions about the examined poems, screaming to get out. have you lived so long Hleblschuk that youve forgotten everything you ever knew or felt

A sullen Mylan, his face covered with stubble, stares at Hleblschuk, stares with quiet emotion, a soundless fury.

Moving slowly and quietly, Harris shifts in his seat and resettles himself again. I drove a truck for two years after Nam he said it was good money I saw a lot of this country read a lot at night I squeezed a rubber ball while driving to pass the time you know to build up my arms

All at once Harris jerks upright spasmodically like a fish surfacing in a pond, quick and sudden, his eyes wide and somewhat frenzied looking straight at Candace who blinks rapidly and without expression at Hlebleschuk. For a moment there is no sound in the room, no sound anywhere except for a dog barking somewhere in the distance.

"Is anything wrong, Mr. Harris?" Hlebleschuk asks midstream, looking with squinty eyes to his right, semiconscious of some movement, all eyes peering at Harris.

"No," Harris says. His nostrils twitch and ears turn red, his face rigid, rugged, inscrutable, silence replacing the plashing for the moment.

"Shall we continue then?" Hlebleschuk asks.

"Yes sir," Harris answers, erect in his seat, shooting Candace a queer, enveloping look. She coughs delicately, flushed, regal, forever attentive, but she doesn't look toward Harris, not even once.

It was as though by some telepathic message we all knew that Candace had done something to Harris, something impossible to deny and

wholly responsible for the grin passing from face to face, skipping Harris and stopping at Hlebleschuk. Hlebleschuk grimaces and rereads his last sentence, annoyed but suspended in his own research ripping wings off butterflies, isolated from any reality beyond the subtleties of his paper, his scholarly preoccupation his life and sphere of happiness. were you ever young

Emily

After awhile the room grew less hot and a transistor screamed hard rock and things seemed slower somehow and meshed together as if there were no tomorrow and the partially finished paper for Hleblschuk that was so important earlier didn't matter much. Darkness swallowed the light and rain knocked on the windows wanting to get in thunder threatening in the distance.

I half sat half lay on a worn sofa my feet resting on a marred chest Mylan beside them on the floor his head tilted back in my lap his face drawn tight and mouth slightly gaped revealing small pointed teeth.

"Rabelais!" Arnie said aluminum crunching somewhere then banging to the floor.

Mylan began talking quietly about everyone using everyone the emptiness of words the absurdity of papers and degrees. He said he didn't want to think any more and he didn't want me to think either only to feel for feeling was real. I put everyone and everything out of my mind and listened to the rain pelting the house. Mylan drapped an arm over my knee and began running a finger up one calf and down another until he came upon a reddened spot of skin a razor nick from the day before.

He circled it with his little finger then with a jagged nail tickling behind my knees circling and talking in a low slow way about real things like pain and pleasure and the relationship between a man and woman moisture beading his forehead his steely eyes shining in the room of music and beer cans and Arnie. the core of life is the love man shares with a woman daddy said nothing else compares

"Nothing else matters" Mylan said "nothing but sensations and needs

and gratification" his fingers running over my legs taking my shoes off the razor nick on the hump of my anklebone Arnie looking on with blank eyes of a statue occasionally shouting "Rabalais!" and smashing his forehead with aluminum. He stood up belching loudly propping himself on the chair its legs scraping the bare floor.

I whispered "Why don't you ask Arnie to leave?" which I figured he would do but he said "Why should I?" and went on circling and stroking without limit his hands hot his eyes unsettling hungry holding me so I couldn't move or anything which I wouldn't have if it had only been Mylan.

I wouldn't have fought Mylan but the two of them. Arnie was not supposed to be in this picture. When they both held me down my arm and shoulder twisted under me I felt like a child being spanked fighting for respect and dignity that's stripped away wailing hopelessly. Then Mylan got up and came back panting and excited with a razor in his hand. I didn't know why and I thought I'm not here! This isn't me! It was as if I were watching the whole thing through a picture window but from high above somewhere it wasn't me they pinioned it was someone else being abused someone else being shaved ankles legs and all kicking and pleading while they laughed hoarse laughs, another girl they took turns banging on and banging on, and I, I smelled the grieving rain and listened to the wind beating the trees and thought about Hlebleschuk and my unfinished paper my unfinished paper, isolated, suspended in a sanctuary of research and ordered sentences.

Chapter III
PUBLISH-OR-PERISH HOUSE
OR
HANG FIVE

BY
A GERMAN-INDIAN AMERICAN
NOW LIVING IN NORTH CAROLINA
(AND GUM CHEWING TOO MUCH)
WHO, AS A STUDENT OF LITERATURE,
SPENT FIVE YEARS
IN GRADUATE SCHOOL
SOME TIME AGO
AND SURVIVED TO TELL THE TALE.

THIS IS A NOVEL
IN THE PARODIC, SCHIZOPHRENIC
MODE OF TALES
OF THE PLANET EARTH
AND ITS INHABITANTS
AROUND THE YEAR
1978.
SALAAM.

One

All this is true or nearly so. The academic parts roughly happened anyhow. A man I knew really did get a PhD in bats. A woman I knew really was shaved from her ankles up and then gangbanged. Life is like that. I've used different names, of course.

I really did go back to school in 1973 to learn how to write. Or maybe it was to find out why I kept getting rejection notices from publishers. They looked the same, read the same, made me feel the same. Two lines of black blocks centered on white space saying, "We don't want your writing, only your reading." I was a cuckoo clock that cuckooed wrong. And all that.

So I went to graduate school to learn how to cuckoo properly. But there were no classes in personal clockwork, only in clocks of another chime--like Chaucer and Milton and Shakespeare, real confidence builders.

After my Master's, I sort of fell into the doctoral program at a bad time. The humanities and social sciences were producing eleven thousand doctors annually, about eight times more than the available faculty positions. Imagine that.

Enrollments were dwindling. English departments were overtenured. I was not attending a "prestigious" school. And three years of study and esoterica looked me in the face and said, "Cuckoo. Cuckoo?"

"What is it?" a professor friend wanted to know. "Why go on? Are you bored? Nothing else to do?"

What could I say? My short stories never got off the ground or into print, and I had no connections.

We both knew I didn't have a pissant's chance of teaching at the University. The department didn't hire its own graduates, at least not for the last three years. It feared intellectual inbreeding. The faculty was mostly alumni and Vanderbilt grads already. And so on.

Funny thing. The athletic department selected two head football coaches in the five years I was there. Both were former graduates, and that distinction was their big draw and ace in the hole.

I can't tell you what those two degrees cost me in time and life's blood. I learned to write, all right, impressively and scholarly. I came to know a lot about things most people don't care to know. I learned more and more about less and less. And the more I learned, the less it seemed I knew. I shared what I knew with my students and played the gadfly. But there was no future in it for me. I was like tits on the academic boarhog.

That reminds me of a secretary named Betty and a joke she told my husband. Betty blew kisses at the men. She had a reputation for doing other things with them, too, and was bandied about in general. After twenty-five years at the same job, doing the same things, Betty never received so much as a cake from anyone for services rendered. That's life.

Anyway, Betty's joke went like this: What did the hurricane say to the coconut tree? Answer: Hold on to your nuts cause this is going to be one hell of a blow job.

I'm reminded too of a song that was also well-circulated. It goes:

My name is Dan Dandy,
My degree is from Vandy,
I'm one of the minds hereabout.

I'm kind to inferiors,
I kiss no posteriors,
While wielding my prestige and clout.

My certification
May be education
So what if I barely squeaked by?

What matters is
My name is Dan Dandy,
My degree is from Vandy . . .

And so on ad infinitum.

My brother Barry is a gastroenterologist in Buffalo, New York. He is left-handed but crooks his right arm like a question mark to write. When Barry was six, his teachers cracked his knuckles with a ruler until he learned to write with his right hand.

Writing is a funny business.

I once met a military man who was on campus to do a story about ROTC students. I was in an outer office typing a paper about black humor and absurdity. My own Royal skipped spaces and letters, stuck at various points, and was contrary in general. That left me at the mercy of the department and forever in search of a typewriter. So the electric IBM Selectric II at my fingertips was like a concert grand piano, only green.

I was clacking away when this fubsy man with underarm circles entered and sat in one of the two empty chairs. A woman strapped with equipment and a camera followed and sat in the other. She was his

lapdog, well-trained, obedient. It was just the three of us and a typewriter in an office the size of a trailer bedroom.

I was hard pressed to finish a paper, as always, and not looking for conversation at the moment. Still, I nodded in good faith, probably showing some teeth as is my way.

He wasn't too talkative, I thought, and she wasn't at all, which suited me fine.

"Clack, clack, clack, clack," my typewriter said.

I finished page six and was winding in seven when this man said, "I'm a writer."

He said it as casually as "I'm fine. How are you." Imagine that.

I don't know why he said it. Maybe it was the typewriter. Maybe he thought I was a writer.

"Oh?" was my witty response.

He was thirty or so, took himself very seriously, and wore a superior air.

He was there to write an article for an Air Force bulletin--propaganda, I learned. He wasn't about to include anything that would alarm the brass, I also learned. Nothing more.

There are writers, and then there are writers.

While in college, I met a gentle man named John Frost who wrote for the local newspaper. He did this story about Donald Woodward and me because we were married students in a college of singles. We also made the dean's list. But the three words "students sandwich studies" are as responsible for that story as Hitler is for WW II. "Students sandwich studies" was used in the interview, in the story, and as the headline.

It was like the punch line of a dirty joke, and we were its setup.

After college, I interviewed for a newspaper job. The managing editor wanted me to write a weekly column featuring women behind successful men in the community. I suggested writing about men behind successful women. He said there weren't enough women like that. That ended that.

In graduate school, I taught a young man who actually got money for writing news stories. He was not one of my best composition students. His papers were ungrammatical and faulty in diction. So were his stories. But The Nashville Banner kept buying them and printing them too. Hold onto your nuts cause this is going to be one hell of a blow job.

I tried writing feature stories for awhile. I wrote a story about two female coal miners in West by God Virginia. One looked like a fair queen; the other, a wrestler. They were the first women workers in their mines. All they wanted was to make a decent living. So they somehow did the "male" labor, strange or not, facilities or no. The queen got a divorce along the way; the wrestler married her boss. Nobody bought it.

Every year, each state holds a Little Miss Contest for girls around age five and their mothers, no age limit. Little girls with eye shadow, lipstick, and painted nails parade on stage. They walk stiff-necked for fear of mussing their plastered hair. They look like wind-up Kewpie

dolls on sticks. I wrote about them too. Still no go.

In Nashville, Tennessee, an entertainer named Heaven Lee parades on stage in heavy makeup. She parades three and four times daily before locals and tourists alike. Some even come from New York. Imagine that.

She is nearing forty. They look like Baptists on a picnic. Men in white shoes and floral shirts stand beside ladies digging in oversized bags for the three-dollar cover charge.

A dark-suited, father-son set sit in a front row for the noon show. Here and there are winos in low-cut dresses, mustached men in their thirties, and cock-eyed boys with red cheeks. Waitresses in black tights and mean faces bully customers into buying drinks and tipping. A rummy-looking man with a cratered face and shoulder-length gray hair switches on strobe lights. Eyes and seats rivet center-stage. Drum rolls, music, show time.

Heaven Lee does a crinkum-crankum dance. She sings too. She sings like Claudine Longet, Andy Williams' wife who shot her lover Spider Sabich on March 21, 1977. He was a great skier. So it goes.

Heaven Lee must sing and take off her clothes to make a living. She puts whipped cream on her body in three places and a cherry on each nipple like a deluxe sundae. She invites men on stage and dances around them. At her urging the men take off their clothes too and behave like trained dogs. She nods at the crowd and winks as if to say, "Hey, the joke's on them."

One of Mae West's famous lines could be used as part of Heaven

Lee's act. She could say, "Is that a pickle in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me?"

No one buys this story either.

My experience with publishers is limited--mostly to rejection. That's probably why I like what Calvin Thrilling once said about them. He said, "There's not a total correlation between being wrong and being a publisher, but it's way up there."

I had two MA friends who accepted positions with publishing houses. One friend worked for the publisher of a religious pamphlet. Her duties of editing inspirational verse and stories led her back to graduate school. As for my other friend, a very bright fellow, the last time I heard he was loading and unloading truckloads of books. Ho hum.

Maybe I should have followed the advice of my creative writing teacher. He said the reader would feel more comfortable with familiar stories. He said to borrow plots from the classics, mythology, fairy tales, and the Bible, then adapt them to modern situations. He also said to be wary of cowboys who ride bareback on the rear of a horse.

Good advice. But it's not so easy to adapt stories about gods, Cyclopes, talking animals, and Sodom and Gomorrah. An entire city of wickedness is easy to make credible. It's the destruction of that city by a supernatural being and changing a woman into a pillar of salt that give me trouble. Still, I can see how a familiar story like Lot's could make a reader comfortable.

Lot's story doesn't end there though. Not many know that Lot then lived in a cave with his two virgin daughters. Nor do they know that he had sex with them. Lot didn't know he did either, as the girls got him looped on wine first. He finds out nine months later when each daughter bears him a son. Now that I could adapt. I wonder how comforting such a story might be. I doubt it would make a good Sunday Night at the Movies.

For comic relief, I watch a local news program on weekends. A typical show reported that heavy rains caused the collapse of numerous chicken houses and the death of thousands of inhabitants. So it goes. The pictures of these wet, dead chickens were followed by an advertisement for Holly Farms chicken bologna. Imagine that.

The real draw, though, is this daffy newscaster. She bumbles her way through every story, trying to correct herself as she goes. One night she reported that "Supporters were hard at work pussing for the ERA amendment." No corrections were made that time, only a funny face.

In 1977, a movie about academia called The War Between the Tates was made. In it, a prestigious professor named Tate impregnates one of his students with more than mere ideas. That's when, as one character put it, "the sperm hit the fan."

Tate's wife won't let him return home, and he's stuck with this unconventional girlfriend, like it or not.

All this is related to my case, more or less. I was dallying with dissertation ideas, about to spend six months of my life or longer on a project that would be shelved like all the rest, and not much more.

That's when the sperm hit the fan for me.

That's when I decided to hang five.

"Hang fi-e" is a difficult surfing stunt. It's when a surfer walks his board and hangs five toes over its nose, risking a wipeout.

Writing fiction is not unlike plank walking and toe-over-the-nose dangling. It's what I've been meaning to do all along. It's just taken me awhile to get here.

This novel is short and jumbled because that's the way it has to be. The next one I write is going to be more fun.

This one is fun enough and continues along its merry way hanging five like this:

Hear me:

Andrea Reed can come unglued in place at any time.

It should be accented along the way like this: Cuckoo. Cuckoo?

Two

Hear me:

Andrea Reed can come unglued in place at any time.

Andrea can take a shower in 1978 and towel dry in 1958. She can sleep in her mother's arms and awake in her husband's. She can revisit any moments in between and outside of them too.

She says.

Andrea says that reality is mental and only thinking makes a thing so. But her mind doesn't always take her places she wants to go. Her mind just drifts off, sometimes with no warning, she says. She calls it wappooling.

Andrea was born in Colorado Springs, Colorado, the second child of a hotel owner. She was a sensitive child who became a sensitive youth--impressionable and fine like a meerschaum pipe. Andrea graduated from North High School with honors and from Colorado State first in her class.

She taught high school English in the Tennessee public school system for the next two years. The students didn't want to be there. The principal didn't want anyone to make waves. She was expected to keep the students in check and to pick up her check. Nothing more.

During her second year, she met and married a State Farm insurance agent named Scott. It was his job to talk to people about accidents, injuries, and death. Pleasant job.

Scott told Andrea she was burying herself. He knew a lot about that business. She traded in her seat behind the desk for one in front

of it.

Andrea's father left the family in debt. He turned yellow and died of alcoholism when she was a teen.

So it goes.

Her mother suffered a mental breakdown and was given shock treatments like Sylvia Plath. Sylvia Plath wrote a fictional account of her own breakdown and suicide attempt in The Bell Jar. Her second attempt on February 11, 1963, was a success. So it goes.

Sylvia Plath was one of the confessional poets of the 1960s. For them, writing was a form of survival. They wrote strange poems like "Skunk Hour," "For Masturbation" "Menstruation at Forty," and "The Fury of Cocks." Funny stuff. Many of the confessional poets committed suicide. Not so funny.

When Andrea was a child, she liked making things sound better than they were, her games more fun, her pets more marvelous. She delighted in the multifarious shapes of the clouds and stories told in slightly different form. She loved the world of places and planets of her own making where she felt fluid and happy in the land of Wappool.

Sometimes Andrea fantasized on paper so she could hold on to her imaginary places. She imagined people dealing with problems very much like her own. She made things end the way she wanted them to.

So began her story writing, the creating of something from nothing except for mind stuff. So too did Andrea learn that life is not temporal and time not linear, she said.

What Andrea wanted to do was write stories that would touch people with humanity and courage. She tried writing short stories, but no one would publish them. She tried writing feature stories, but no one would buy them. She was a vendor of things no one wanted. She invested her time in slot machines that never paid off.

Andrea went to graduate school to learn the secrets of good writing. But no one ever taught her to write. No one could ever do that. She learned to research, criticize, and write correctly. But no one could teach her what she knew and felt instinctively.

She read and studied and read and studied some more. She wrote scholarly papers by the peck, but they were not the same. She kept getting further and further away from what she loved. So Andrea came unglued in time and place, marvelously free and lucid in a land beyond fancy and fiction.

Andrea says that she first came unglued when she was five. It was in the afternoon, and her father was mean drunk by then.

He made Andrew sit under a kitchen table for three hours. Instead of eating a dandelion salad, Andrew had stuck it in his pocket, to be flushed away at another time. Andrew got caught with the goods in hand.

Metal legs curved inward caging Andrew in a two-foot circle so he couldn't stretch out or lie down. He was seven. Soft tears slid down his cheeks and onto hands that cradled his face and made it crooked like a fun-house mirror.

It was then that Andrea came free in time. And she took Andrew with her.

She had been playing paper dolls in front of the radio during the

Buster Brown Show. Buster Brown was a boy who looked like a girl and lived in a shoe with his dog Spot. Andrea lay on her front, her face turned sideways resting on hands that bridged one arm to another, her breathing quiet like a fan. She wasn't allowed to talk to Andrew.

Andrew's ears stuck out from his head like jug handles. Her father called him Juggerhead. Her father was singing a song that went "She's got freckles on her, but she's pretty." Sometimes it went "She's got freckles on her butt, she's pretty."

This is when Andrea first came unglued in time. Her being began to sway freely, passing into another dimension. No one was there and no thing. There was just a humming sound. And royal blue lights. Nothing more.

Then Andrea swung to another time and stopped. She was on the back porch with Andrew and his friend Wilbur. They were gathering cottonballs from cottonwood trees to use in their peashooters. The boys promised not to hit Andrea if she'd help them. She picked handfuls of hard, green pellets.

In another week, Wilbur will be hit in the eye and blinded by one of those pellets. So it goes.

It grew dark. Andrew began telling stories about creatures from other planets. He told one story especially for Andrea about giant alley cats that hunted kids at night and gobbled them up. Andrew was a good storyteller.

Andrea had a good imagination. An alley ran behind their house, not far from the swing set. Andrea imagined huge black cats with eyes

that shone in the dark like headlights. She could see them walking upright with bags of kicking children slung over their shoulders.

Andrea shut her eyes, her lids crinkling, and opens them nineteen years later. She is reading a book called Paracriticisms by Ihab Hassan at the Ashley Cooper Library.

Hassan is a critic of contemporary literature who instructs through imitation. That is, he doesn't just talk about craft or literary devices, he demonstrates them. His book is a curious collage that blurs fact and fiction, pretends to be absurd, appears disordered, is playful in nature, and so on.

Someone else is at the circulation desk trying to check out Hassan's book. It is I, the author of this book.

At a nearby table, another graduate student of English pores over an article in a Poetry Explicator. Her name is Gloria Quickie. Funny name. She will marry a gynecologist. Not so funny.

Right now, she's getting a good laugh. The article examines some Emily Dickinson poems from a psychoanalytic standpoint. Gloria is knee-deep in penis envy and sexual interpretation.

"Hello Gloria," says a bearded, barefoot friend.

"Hi babe," she says.

"Hey," she says. "Could we work on that report in about an hour? I have some things I should read first."

"No problem," he says. They arrange to meet later.

Gloria goes back to the critic who claims that Dickinson's "narrow fellow in the grass" is not really a snake at all, but a much longed-for

genital. Imagine that.

Gloria chortles to herself. She's reminded of the largest phallic symbol she's ever seen. It's at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte. It's a tall tower that plays chimelike music and vibrates in the process. Nothing more. Funny thing.

Another figure walks up, a blond fellow named Beers in a cut-off shirt. He massages Gloria's shoulders from behind. She reaches back and pats Beers' bare belly.

"How you doing, babe?" she says. They're fairly familiar. Andrea returns to Hassan who says that literature is "the carrier of humanism" and always has been.

Beers settles at Gloria's table and reads from Marshall McLuhan's The Medium Is the Massage. McLuhan says, "Ours is a brand-new world of allatonceness. 'Time' has ceased, 'space' has vanished. We now live in a global village . . . a simultaneous happening." Television, he says, "involves all the senses simultaneously" and has thus "abolished writing." Imagine that. The Gong Show abolishing libraries--books give real meaning to libraries. So it goes.

Another fellow approaches Gloria. He's from Indianapolis. He pats her back. She calls him "babe" too.

Babe III settles in a chair next to Gloria. She asks him to move across the table to give her more room. He does so willingly. He's not so willing to pay a library fine of \$34.55. He must pay the fine, though, before the University will release his grades or records.

Andrea does a quick study of Gloria. Gloria is plain in appearance

like a blade of grass, no makeup, average face and form, but a good juggler.

Gloria gets up to get another periodical. She is wearing cut-off jeans and a tee-shirt that reads "Go For It" across her breasts. A pendant on a gold chain dangles between them. It looks like this:



It refers to a host of things. So does things.

Gloria returns with yet another babe. They stand and chat about a critic who says Coleridge's "Christabel" is "one of the most obscene, vulgar pornographies in the English language."

"He must have lived a sheltered life," says Gloria.

"He probably didn't read much," says this Babe.

Babe IV is working on a paper about the New Critics' opinions of the Romantic poets. In it, he'll say the New Critics arraigned the

eagle because it had not the dimensions of a swan.

Nice line. Babe didn't invent it, of course.

The New Critics greatly affected the world of criticism. They focused attention on the literary work itself, its technique and texture. They arraigned biographic and period studies of literary works (staples of many an English teacher) and had no regard for poetry using everyday language and objects like daffodils. So much for Whitman, Byron, Shelley, etc.

The New Critics also came to the fore at Vanderbilt in the 1930s. So students of English in Tennessee must pay homage to them, along with the gospel of life, according to Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate. My name is Dan Dandy. My degree is from Vandy. . . .

Andrea looks down again at her reading, only to find herself taking an Old Testament final in college. It's 1970, and she has spent eight hours studying for it. She's memorized a notebook of facts such as: "According to Genesis, Enoch was the father of arts and crafts."

In the Bible men came to know women, women conceived and bore children, and men begat men. Think of that. Enoch begat many children and was begot by Cain. God had no regard for Cain's gardening but did have regard for Abel's flock and fat portions. So Cain slew Abel. Many Biblical people met the same fate, or were stoned, or made human sacrifices. So it goes.

Andrea has just finished discussing King Solomon. Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. Imagine that. It is

the last thirty minutes of class and only six students remain. It is then that the professor leaves the room and Andrea witnesses the most brazen cheating in her life.

One student named Farquhar orchestrates it all. He believes that everyone cheats. He also borrows books from the library without returning them. He is never fined because he never checks them out.

Farquhar stands by the door with his test paper while directing two friends to find answers in their notes, texts, and Bibles. They hurl answers to each other like baseballs. They have no regard for Andrea or the two other students. They never worry that anyone will turn them in. No one ever does. So they cheat shamelessly on a religion final. Of all things.

Farquhar becomes a highly paid executive in the toy industry. His major contribution is marketing a game for children called Abscam. The object of this game is to get away with as much as possible without going to jail. Farquhar is a good player.

Andrea blinks at her written test in 1970 and travels in time to an oral test in 1978 that's of some consequence. She is seated at a long table, along with three English professors. She is on the hot seat and stuck like a flea on flypaper.

Dr. Giles is about to ask her whether the novel has died as an art form. He knows it hasn't since practically everyone is writing one, or planning to do so. He knows Andrea will say it's not dead, it's just different. But he's there to ask questions and she's there to answer them, like it or not.

Andrea is looking at Dr. Giles' high forehead, said to be a sign of

great wisdom. In Giles' case, it is so.

It's also been said the size and shape of a man's nose and woman's mouth correspond to their genitals. Imagine that!

Sigfried Wruck is another professor at Andrea's oral test. He is a flat-nosed turkeyfart.

When Andrea first started graduate school, Dr. Wruck's Spenser seminar was going to be cancelled because only two students registered for it. Wruck's classes were always small, and the word was the only thing worse than Wruck and Spenser together was a Tupperware party.

But Wruck had been around where beards and bikes were big for a long time. He got the department head to ask for volunteers from the other seminars to take the Spenser class. A few new students volunteered under pressure and the seminar made.

The system works in funny ways.

Dr. Bass is the third professor at Andrea's oral exam. He teaches a science fiction seminar, a course many in the department have little regard for. His students read Brave New World, Clockwork Orange, 1984, and so on. He usually begins the semester by saying "Today's world isn't any more civilized . . . it's just more technically advanced."

Bass is a nice man and a better teacher than Wruck, but he doesn't play the game as well. He hasn't published anything of late either. So he didn't get tenure and must look for work elsewhere.

Andrea is thinking about Bass and Wruck, Bass leaving, Wruck staying. She thinks too of something that makes her smile--a fortune cookie that read, "Man who kiss ass is likely to smell like one."

Andrea travels from that table of smells and noses to one surrounded by graduate students. It is mid-summer, 1977. They are ingesting glop and drinking coffee and soft drinks at the student union. No beer or alcoholic beverages are allowed on campus. What a joke.

A doctoral student of biology is discussing his research on bats. He says science can learn a lot about the human reproductive system by studying bats. No joke.

A student named Emily is reading a newspaper story about Joyce McKinney, an ABD (all-but-dissertation). Miss McKinney is charged with kidnapping and raping a six-foot-three, two-hundred-pound Mormon missionary. It says she abducted him and shackled him to the bedposts with her panty hose. Imagine that. He is her fiance. No kidding.

Two Johns, John Boy Honeycutt and John Savonarola, are playing Hearts, a card game. John Boy Honeycutt is a space cadet who walks around campus saying, "Life is a dirty joke. Life is a dirty joke." He's also gay. In 1978, \$2,247,509 is contributed to the Anita Bryant Ministries to stamp out gays and gay rights. Imagine that.

John Savonarola is a doctoral student in education. He has an easy time of it. Most of his classes require little reading and less writing. Usually he must give reports about flow charts, flexible time frames, alternate forms of instruction, and so on. His wife types all of his work, writes most of it too. She is working fairly hard for his degree.

On December 3, 1979, Mr. and Mrs. Savonarola will wait seven hours in line to see a Who concert in Cincinnati. When the doors finally

open, he will lose his keys and get his glasses smashed. She will be trampled and almost killed as the mob jams into the theatre. Seven men and four women will die while trying to get inside. So it goes. John, like many others, never finishes his doctoral work.

Arnie Dalton is talking about a physical education class he took during intersession. There were no papers, no texts, no reading assignments--only daily discussions. It was a sex workshop. Imagine that. Everyone got A's and three credit hours.

Andrea took an intersession class too. It was in lyric poetry. It met three hours every day for three weeks. She studied lyrics from six centuries, gave an oral report, wrote three papers, and took a final exam. She got three credit hours too.

Arnie shares an apartment with an English major named Mylan, and they sometimes share partners, like it or not. "One for all and all for one" is their motto, like the Three Musketeers--only there's two of them.

In March 1978, Mylan and Arnie rape Emily, the girl reading the paper. But first they shave her legs and thighs and snatch. It's quite an emotional wallop. She drops out of graduate school and drinks herself to death in ten years, like Dylan Thomas, even though she's not a Welsh poet. So it goes.

At forty-one, Arnie will suffer a cardiac arrest while rapturously engaged. The Book of Lists says Attila the Hun died the same way, in action.

So it goes.

This book also lists sexual aberrations, celebrities who've had vasectomies, and victims of syphilis--the Marquis de Sade is one; Keats is another, it says. Imagine that. Some book.

John Boy Honeycutt tells one of the Margaret Trudeau jokes circulating in Washington, DC. It is not very funny. It goes like this: When Margaret Trudeau tells Pierre that Teddy Kennedy is escorting her around town, he says, "Good. Why don't you ask him to drive you home?"

Somehow sex and politics go hand in hand.

Arnie Dalton tells another joke. He says, "Did you hear that Linda Ronstadt has had to slow down . . . now that she has a governor on her." And so on.

Andrea and her mildly indecent thoughts zoom forward nine months in time. It's almost the final week of her last semester as a student. She is limp like a wet mop, but calm, at peace. Andrea hasn't had much time to sleep, and when she can sleep, she can't because she is too tired. Everything seems watery and meshed together somehow. It's like the end of a semester when all the isolated pockets of study come together as a piece and are finally seen all at once.

Three

There's been much talk about television evening news programs being extended to an hour. Newsmen want to present more in-depth coverage of the day's events . . . in living color.

February, 1978 - The Sex Pistols, a British rock group, perform in Tennessee and make quite a splash. They play acid rock, punch each other, curse, and spit on the audience. People throng to see them.

March 6, 1978 - During a break in his obscenity trial, Larry Flynt of Hustler magazine is shot by a sniper and paralyzed from the hips down.

March 9, 1978 - David M. Rorvic claims to have seen results of the first cloning of a male child.

April 20, 1978 - Holocaust, a four-night television broadcast, begins its dramatization of the Nazi extermination of Jews. 120 million people watch how millions were killed.

May 8, 1978 - David Berkowitz, alias Son of Sam, gets a twenty-five-year-to-life sentence for killing six people.

May 17, 1978 - Charlie Chaplin's body is recovered. It was stolen two months earlier from a Swiss cemetery.

June 15, 1978 - The New American Library buys the paperback rights of Mario Puzo's Fools Die for a record \$2.2 million.

July, 1978 - The Pentagon reports that the Soviet Union has spent thirty-two percent more than the United States on national defense.

October 23, 1978 - Sid Vicious, the spike-haired bass player of The Sex Pistols, stabs his girlfriend in the stomach with a hunting knife. She bleeds to death while he sleeps.

So it goes.

Somewhere in there a guy is studying bats, a girl is sexually abused, and Andrea Reed is buried in books.

Somewhere in there is springtime, and the BAMAPHD mines will close down for a little while. Andrea will awake to discover the five-year ordeal of reading, writing, and so on is finally over. She'll run outside in the fresh air where birds are talking.

One bird will look right at Andrea Reed and say, "Cuckoo. Cuckoo?"

Chapter IV

FEATHERLESS

(Notes)

The following were plucked from the pages of the until now
secret droppings of a featherless chicken with lips by persons
unknown and uncared for. (The above is called carrying a
metaphor too far. So he can't drive or rollerskate; that's
no excuse.)

Getting through the day is becoming harder and harder. Yesterday I had the uneasy feeling that Dr. Siegfried Wruck was going to talk at me about Pilgrim's Progress or Joyce Carol Oates. But why? I kept seeing the student faces of F's past, and at 3:00 p.m. the sweater on the wallhook resembled Marvin Hamlish in boxer shorts. When I finally did get back to work, I kept having the same hideous daymare of grading freshman compositions forever. Despair.

Idea for a story: A woman wakes up and finds herself transformed into a waxy-floor-buildup scuffed by black heel marks. All the while her heart sings to be a canary of Erica Jong. (Strong submerged theme, but what about the setting?)

A man undresses before a modern novel class because he has no lesson prepared. He has fifty minutes left to give a quiz and the rest of his life to prepare for something else.

While reading the newspaper, I was overcome with morbid thoughts again. Why is it I think about death so much? Maybe it's the rapes, Russians, and comprehensives.

Is old age so terrible? Not if you wear white, get a crew cut, and imitate sheep.

The true test of maturity is not how old a person is, but how he reacts to a D on a twenty-five-page paper.

So Johnny can't read; so, can he write? Better yet, can he divorce Mary and marry Delores while meeting the challenge of the Nestea Plunge? What about the plunger he loaned his neighbor and the nurse who taught him to play doctor while wearing shoes?

Hope is Herbie's sister, called Hilary for short. She wears feathers and asks such penetrating questions as "Hawthorne who?" and "Dickinson said I'm a thing with what?"

If truth is beauty and beauty is truth, why was Thelma so upset when I said her baby looked like Peter Lori?

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Most macho men are almost always peabrains. That's why some people feel there is no God.

Do I believe in God? I did until I realized that most graduate students in English departments are women and most professors are men.

If Morris would only stop trying to claim my bingo prize.

This monk in English 207 writes religious love verse and wants to know how to footnote "How do I love thee? I love thee, Lord, to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach." For this, I needed to know about inner consistency and incremental repetition?

Some students have Elizabethan fruitflies for parents, membership in the Coptic Church, and vacuums where their brains should be. So why must they be in my class?

I expected some sacrifices while going to graduate school. My friend gave up her cleaning lady and sleeping late. I gave up milk and potatoes.

I've been told that I'll never be able to write fiction because I'll know too much about it. It has something to do with graduate school and becoming too cerebral. Maybe I'll just cut my toenails to get a clear perspective.

Often the good writer is not the good speaker, and the good speaker is not the good writer, and the professor knows Norman Mailer personally and can't be bothered.

The most important positions are filled by the least intelligent. That's why so many people drop out of school.

Had coffee with Mylan last week. He talked about shooting X-rated films for fun and fortune. He had difficulty finding a man willing to disrobe and be manipulated by two teenage nymphomaniacs and a moose in tails. But a dwarf volunteered for money and turned the project into a documentary.

Thought: Why does man lust? He lusts for woman and frequently there must be sex.

A woman wakes up and finds herself transformed into Truman Capote in spats and must convince her husband that she is indeed the wonderful woman he wed. Out of disgust, the husband drowns her in cold duck but is filled with remorse because he liked her advances and the way she talked.

Life is divided into the awful and the awkward, but everyone's consumed with jealousy anyhow.

The work is getting heavier. The plays too. All we talk about in Drama 707 is loneliness, hopelessness, meaninglessness, and the inside of a kangaroo pouch. My officemate thinks Donald Duck is existential. Dr. Bohda Ifor Hleblschuk devoted a whole class to "Tableness." A dog keeps howling outside my window in broad daylight. I'm too tired for sex, and I talk to myself and even answer questions on occasion. I notice too that my pencil needs sharpening. Will it ever cease?

Some college students plagiarize, forget assignments, skip classes,

depend entirely on Cliff Notes, and are negative toward their work. A lot of instructors hold these things against you.

Idea for a story: a man* wakes up and finds himself turned into a dangling modifier with no place to hang his sheepskins or horsefeathers. After years of study, he must dangle until that thing on a white horse, euphemistically referred to as a department head, wisks him away to some ivory tower in the boondocks. There, on a \$12,000-a-year instructor's salary, he'll live and die happily ever after of thick glasses, puky complexion, and narcissism. And he's one of the lucky ones.

*Note: Rarely is man representative of both sexes here (or elsewhere).

Am Lit Survey

In response to that often asked question

"What is it you study exactly?"

(A Story)

Ask any graduate student in any English department about America's literary beginnings, and in most cases he'll sigh deeply, inhale more deeply, and start in about a deep sexual abyss and personal problem. With little or no prompting, this same student will tell you more than you care to know about somebody named Adam who's new in town and terribly lonely.

It seems that Adam is a fellow who'd rather play ducks and drakes than go on a date. Apparently he had no father to take him aside or to the garage for a talk about hairy palms, semen,* and holding your breath under water. Also some fair-haired ladies who stood on pedestals (though no one knows why) and sang "I'm a Poor Little Lamb" had something to do with his innocence--one can only suppose these ladies were sexless or refrigerated too long. Moreover, you're told, it's un-American to think of them in such a light, let alone the dark.

At this point, you may inquire about Eve, the tea service in the faculty lounge, or the coed in the corridor with a scarlet A on her leotard. But those are other stories. A priggish graduate assistant who has become casually interested says, "If you want sex, go some place

*A popular male magazine reports this same substance may be an antibiotic as potent as penicillin, though injections and results differ considerably.

place else . . . like a Chaucer seminar, Hardee's office after five, Fanny Hill, or Capitol Hill." She then continues this obviously venerated tale and links the uncorrupted yet self-reliant Adam with a character named Natty Deerslayer Bumpo (whose name clearly illustrates imaginative processes gone afoul with a duck).

It seems that Natty wanders about a place in the West called Eden while practically everyone wonders about his manhood and playing backgammon with fig newtons. He also whittles better than anyone and contemplates posing as a knight in a series of books called The Leatherstocking Tales. The student assures you there's nothing kinky about this title, but then she's not very reliable as she keeps confusing Natty for Adam and vice versa.

Now here comes the sticky part and the cotton candy. Natty, along with his buddies Chingachgook and Uncas, must protect Alice and Cora Munro from Magua and the noble savages, who seem partial to body paint, stake games, scalping, and ravishing (a word more in fashion then than raping)--mayhap one reason for nobility. The real danger for Natty, though, is the women who faint a lot, breathe heavily in his ear, and sing "I Love You Truly."

Lest you worry about his sexuality, western fans, let it be known that Natty is not saving himself for his horse or shrimp dip. Indeed not. He's one with nature and the Boy Scouts, and he's devoted his life to some wild virgin named America--this student also keeps confusing her with Eden and snoods.

A gaunt English major seizes the day (a lesson learned in poetry class) and the floor, but they're too heavy and he suffers a hernia. Someone else starts the ball rolling again, dribbles down his chin, and

shoots a foul shot in the hall. Anything is possible for this unspoiled America, it seems, short of climax--she sounds like something else but is probably another fair-haired lass, surely a fate worse than death. Through hard work and education, a man, but not his wife, can become President, or even a postman if he cares to, they say. It is a new beginning for America, a classless society of Irishmen, Italians, and Jews, with a few slaves and paprika thrown in for good measure. Granted, all this is sketchy and not very exciting but a far cry from the Bay Psalm Book, and reason enough for a good cry as this wild but wonderful woman with the odd name disappears from the conversation and into your coleslaw.

Another graduate student virtually leaps at the chance to discuss sex (and his girlfriend Gloria). Accordingly, somewhere in the nineteenth century, this glorious Adam suffers a fall, while out encountering evil, and breaks his nose. (One can only speculate that apple pie or semen had something to do with it.) This fall, however, is a fortunate one that enables Adam to acquire a handsome nose through plastic surgery, as well as a fanny lift, which in turn allows him to enter manhood, an organization with well over 5,000 members. You see, his fall is an educative experience which brings about his maturity and the rise of dark-haired women--the real reason, you suspect, this whole business is considered fortunate or considered at all.

"Dark hair--a sure sign of full lips, big boobs, and long nights," adds a sweet-faced student who talks with his hands and body. A young man with dimples and ears takes over because the hand-and-body talker is difficult to follow and headed for the john. These dark-haired women, or so the story goes, taint men with their fullnesses and brown magic

markers. To be sure, men are always sorry for their excesses, in books anyway, and for wearing white socks, whereas women always die for their parts in those excesses. In short, it is better to be male or virginal in such cases or a winged soul traveling south for a tan.

By this time, the gathering of English scholars has grown and is fogging up your glasses and blocking the hallway. The sexual abyss discussion has turned to sexual bliss and popcorn, and everyone is trying to get two bits in before the ante's up. Evidently, what marked one century with absences flooded the next with excesses and things that go bump in the night while speaking in hushed tones. Natty was thrown in for Candy and whipped cream, and books were banned in Boston, but nowhere else.

"It was too much of a good thing," says someone in the mob. "Bedding down on one page is OK, but twenty pages of bedding is boring"--and not very comfortable.

"The erotic side of life," says the prig, "has always erroneously thought to be man's"--and erogenous too.

"Playboy has some of the best writing in the country today," says some joker wearing a fez and holding up a centerfold by way of proof.

"The belly dancing lessons, as I was saying, have enabled me to move my hips like a blender," Becky Bennett offers to anyone at hand or with hands.

"The monsoon season is upon us and none too soon," Henry Harris says. "What a great day for a duck!" Anyway that's what you think he said.

"Gloria, if you think I don't love you, feel again," says one graduate student who couldn't care less about this Adam story.

Gloria is quite taken by the discussion and carried kicking and screaming to the corncrib and corncob symbolism in Faulkner.

Not to be outdone, Professor Hutton who loves discussions of every kind interrupts with his own set of cymbals smashing them together with a resounding ringing. "Lawrence women who like loins," he says, "are ahem positive figures and those who fondle heads are negative ones."

Is he talking beef and lettuce? Everyone is silent and still, for when B. S. Hutton rings, people listen. But not for long. Some doctoral student takes particular pleasure in pointing out that Hutton's observation is fine and possibly true, but not American and thus far afield as Fielding.

"Hey! Let's go to the field, any field," someone shouts.

Well, before long the discussion about American literature gets hot, and the animated get animal and randy. And Gloria and Henry and Hall and horizontal

It would be untoward of me to go any further and dangerous for you to query another literature student about that untamed woman America. You'd give up barbells to know more about her, but you won't risk another day of the locust or honeybee. In any case, it all began with a simple question, not from the want of a horseshoe nail, and you're not about to have another go around with it or assertiveness training again.*

*"The Hero in the New World" by R. W. B. Lewis could shoe a horse and lead you to some oasis on this question.

Existentialism 101

One of those laugh-a-minute courses

(An Essay)

Of all the wonders of the twentieth century, existentialism is perhaps the most wondered about, with the possible exception of whether to be a homilist or podiatrist, though both are highly overrated. Existentialism has left its mark on all the writing and thinking of the modern period and dramatically changed the world of art and John Boy Honeycutt (who sleeps with his eyes open while reading Camus--rhymes with tattoo).

People are asking questions about this big word and disappointed that it has nothing to do with sex. Modern literature students want to know why so much emphasis is placed on it and if they can be excused when it's discussed. Others want to know what this thing is that's the tenor of modern life. For that matter, what's the soprano, and how many young boys become eunuchs for their singing careers? And, by the by, and will you buy my lunch, who are those masked men roaming the streets with big E's on their chests?

For fear that people couldn't bear the reality of reality, for nothing is more real than nothing, philosophers have confused the already confusing by cloaking existentialism, and dressing it occasionally, in ten-page treatises--an agreed upon number of the great summit meetings held at Parisian bars and cabarets in the twenties. This is one of the reasons Spenser and Old English as fields of study have become more attractive to graduate students.

The pressure is too great for others, and they become astronauts

only to confront a nothingness in space, whereupon they're racked by anxiety and go back to school to find out why this nothingness is dogging them and barking at all their friends. Nigerian students (who feel a marked superiority over women because in their country women wear hoods and are lost in drum-offs) have even more trouble, especially with female instructors.

These facts are somehow or other germane to this discussion but should be forgotten, along with a few other matters, so we can get a handle on existentialism and a collar too, though we don't know its neck size.

Things to Forget

Forget whether existentialism has its roots in Kierkegaard or branches in a cherry tree that George chopped down. Forget that it can be either atheistic, Presbyterian, or undecided. Forget that it can embrace practically everyone and everything while making love to a toaster. Forget that people are contemplating suicide and abandoning their eyebrows while singing "Enough Is Enough." Forget that there are men, women, and children getting BAs, MAs, and PhDs who think it's a puzzle in the rumpus room. Forget that your committee chairman just said, "Any time you want to drop over to the house, just try and find out where I live." Forget that the novel is dead and you haven't changed your socks in a week. Now you can sleep better.

Condition of Modern Man

It matters little whether the intellectual world owes much to Sartre, or Sartre owes much to Beauvoir, or the coke machine owes me two

bucks. What does matter is the condition of modern man and whether he used a mouthwash and deodorant before lecturing. In this century, man has been collectivized, standardized, and consumed by the masses but found indigestible. He lost his best friend when Thomas Altizer pushed the Big Guy in the sky out a window. He came face to face with life and death and preferred the former, with some reservations. At long last and finally, how lonely he was, and not because he was pigeon-toed, struck him over the head with a bat.

There's nothing for him to believe in any more, nothing but Big Bird and wet tee-shirts. Religion doesn't help, love doesn't, literary pretension doesn't, though some think it does. There's a feeling of helplessness in an inexplicable universe and an Ezra Pound poem. There's despair in a world which has little meaning and no teaching positions. There's a sense of impending doom with the dangers of the atomic age and comprehensive exams. And to think that millions are worrying whether the beer is cold.

Popularity

Despite the fact that few know what it is, existentialism has become as popular as scofflawry and granny bashing. Volumes of critical studies set about to show how every writer of this century and many from the past and future are existential, although they never intended to be or knew what it was. Games called "Make It Existential" and "How to Be Existential without Even Trying" have sold like Harold Robbins. Books and plays focus on nothingness--blank pages and empty stages. One play about fiddling with boots, turnips, and carrots played for sixteen months to packed houses of nippos in Europe (which is little wonder

considering the competition). A disco song entitled "Free from Anonymity" (also its only lyrics) made its way to the number two record in the nation and stayed there for ten years. A television show called Escape Conformity encouraged idiosyncratic behavior, such as tap-dancing to Mozart and cleaning glasses with shoe polish. There was even talk of a motion picture called Existentialism, The Movie.

Yet if we ask the average blue ox on the street, "What is existentialism?" he'll produce a Q-Tip and say, "Oh, horseflesh and chicken gizzards! Everyone knows that's French for 'duck soup.'"

Who Are Those Guys?

The question "How do we recognize these existentialists when we see them?" is always being begged, for a dime or loaf of bread--some people have no pride.

"By their skinny ties and gold lame bibs" is the answer, but no one wins a yak. For the most part, existentialists mostly look the part. When it comes to choosing between a suit and tie or feathers and foam, they'll indubitably and without a doubt opt for the latter. For, you see, their individuality is sacred to them, as is their custard.

Another certain tip-off is their habit of muttering to themselves. One ever-popular mutter is: "Does existence precede essence or essence precede existence?" Another favorite is: "What do I have in common with Howard Cossell and how do I get rid of it?"

The existentialists' habit of agonizing over every decision from "Should I go because Madge wants me to or because I want to?" to "Should I chew Chiclets or Mail Pouch?" is another means of recognition. For them, choice is everything, except a tub with suds. It's the one way to

live authentically and without a blankie. It's the one way to give meaning to life and thickness to gravy. It's also a way to contend with the fear of being chloroformed and turned into a pinto bean.

Chapter V

THE SUN ALWAYS RISES

I

Becky Bennett was once the women's weight-lifting champion at Rutgers. Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a title, but it meant a lot to Bennett. She cared little for weight lifting, in fact she disliked it, but she learned to discipline herself in the gym to have cause to be there. There was a certain inner comfort in being athletic and around athletes, although being rather shy, and a thoroughly decent girl, she never forgot herself in the gym.

In Buffalo, New York, where she grew up, her Uncle Toby ran a health spa and recommended body building for everyone, young, old, arthritic, those with bad backs and hearts. It seemed right for Bennett. She was really very strong and also in need of social intercourse. The only child of a wealthy, older couple, Bennett was frequently left alone, and at boarding school it wasn't that she was alone so much as she had no contact with young men. It's no wonder she visited her Uncle Toby and his gym whenever possible and became his star student.

From the start, he overworked her, making her arms and upper torso muscular and bust firm but flat. This increased Bennett's dislike for weight lifting, but it gave her a strange satisfaction, and the enterprise certainly brought her closer to the opposite sex.

She was a nice girl, a lonely girl, and very shy, and no one had ever made her feel brawny or Jewish, and hence different, until she attended Rutgers. There she was painfully self-conscious and

flat-chested and took it out in weight lifting. She went steady for four years with the first boy who was nice to her, a wrestler, and she settled into a safe but rather dull state of always having a partner to do things with. Just when she made up her mind that he was not her intellectual equal, he left her for a Phi Beta Kappa. As Bennett had been thinking for months about breaking it off and had not done so because she didn't want to hurt him, his desertion was no little shock.

By that time, though, she had other ways to fill her nights. She had been taken in hand by a Thom, as in Thomas, Levine who was much concerned with diagrams and transformational grammar. She threw herself into his work and discovered that she liked the authority of citing rules and parsing sentences. She also liked being the helpmate of a man of letters.

Content upon taking her MA degree, Bennett gave up this protégée status, a status she was sorry to see go, for a teaching position at Lee University in Tennessee. Thom had connections. Arrangements were made, and she went there friendless but soon became just one of the boys, playing pool and drinking beer with them, occasionally sitting with their children. She wanted so to make new friends. As my office was adjacent to hers and there were few women in the department, I became her female friend for a time. So did Meg Ramseur.

II

That winter Bennett read many books, played handball, and took up belly dancing. She seemed fairly content, except that, like most faculty members, she worried about getting tenure. To help her get it, she began work on a PhD at Peabody. In education, not English. In the

spring she taught her regular four classes and took three, a full graduate load and well over the University's limit for full-time instructors. She also started playing tennis with Dr. Brawner, the department chairman who always managed to beat her regardless of how he played.

The whole affair quite changed Bennett. Or maybe that she was one of only five female instructors in the department went to her head. She was as physically active as ever, just not so simple and not so nice, and not so pleasant to have around.

I became increasingly aware of Bennett's perversion as the year wore on. There were little things she did and said that weren't good form. Once she asked to see my Master's thesis to use in a class. I was happy someone, anyone, was reading it who didn't have to, and anticipated feedback.

Two months later Bennett returned it saying, "Andrea, I didn't know you were so scholarly."

"You thought I was here to find a husband?"

She took it personally as she did everything else and shot me one of her persecuted looks. She was just not so easy to joke with anymore about anything, including references to Thom with an h which a lot of people were wont to say. That h was hard to keep silent.

Then, too, Bennett was cordial or cold depending on who was nearby, men and senior faculty members getting deferential treatment. Even when no one else was around and she was trying to be nice, her eyes wandered about the room and you could never be quite sure she heard anything at all.

Another thing was that she took to talking figuratively to the men

about belly dancing, in length and detail. She was discreet enough, if you can be discreet about hip motions and unused muscles. And the men, well, the men behaved differently as might be expected, but were nearly always sympathetic. Bennett had a way of making others feel sorry for her, protective even. What's even more peculiar about all this is Bennett's disclosure that she was still a virgin, as if that were a virtue.

Then there's that other matter, the one thing she didn't take seriously. Her teaching. There's a lot to be said for dedication and hard work. Especially if the work is liked.

"Listen, Andrea." Bennett sat forward in a chair, elbows resting on her knees. She was being confidential.

"Do you ever think about how quickly time is passing and how you're wasting most of it?"

"I try not to," I said.

"No, seriously. Do you realize that we've lived half our lives already?"

"It's occurred to me."

"We'll probably be dead in thirty years or so."

"So what, Becky? So what?"

"Now don't get sore. I'm quite serious."

"That I know."

"You really should think about it."

"I'll put it on my list of things to do."

"Well, I'm just not happy."

"Nobody is," I said. "You just have to make the most of it."

"Well, I want to have a good time. I want to travel and meet

people and do things," she said.

"I thought that's what you were doing. Right here."

"But nothing ever happens to me. I get up, go to class, and come home."

"Don't you feel good about any of that? The people, your students, the literature?"

"It's just routine. And, well, I haven't been doing a good job of it."

So there it was. You either liked teaching or you didn't. Far too many didn't or just weren't doing a good job of it, and they were usually the ones with tenure. I felt sorry for Bennett, but there was nothing I could do about it. She was looking for something else, some kind of excitement she probably read about in a book somewhere.

"I've got to go to the library," I said.

"Must you go?"

"Yes, I have some reading to do."

"Do you mind if I tag along?"

"No, come on."

We walked to the Ashley Cooper Library, the second biggest building on campus, the Cohn Athletic Center being the biggest, and the newest. Ashley was some poor chap who spent most of his life in the library; Cohn was a former athlete, probably named Bubba.

I asked Bennett if she'd been to Printer's Alley in Nashville to see Boots Randolph play or Heaven Lee dance. She looked offended that I would ask. I went to the stacks where a tryst unfolded every Tuesday afternoon at a table near the A section, she to acquisitions.

III

That spring the art department put on an outdoor carnival to showcase student work. Bennett wanted to go but didn't want to go alone. She rarely went anywhere alone. She said I needed to take a break and have some fun, just for awhile. What I needed was to finish reading Tristram Shandy, which was all the fun I could manage for the day. But she was so solicitous, I agreed to meet her there around three o'clock.

I worked steadily in the morning, taught my composition and literature courses, and spent some time in Mr. Ashley Cooper's stacks, finding a Richard Armour piece for a class. Around three I stepped outside. It was a fine March day with the world turning green again and the air warm. It was full of music too and laughter and patches of people in front of the student union. Red, yellow, and orange balloons were tied to folding tables, and clowns and dancers in gay dress bobbed in and out of the people.

A smiling underclassman with "hi" painted on his forehead and a flower on one cheek appeared beside me. "Come along with me," he said, taking my free hand, skipping and humming. He deposited me beside a striped wagon and skittered away. Drawings, pastels, and paintings were propped against steps, walls, chairs, and anything upright that didn't move, and odd metal shapes, pottery, and jewelry lay on tables. Young artists stood about answering questions, talking about their work, full of themselves. It was good.

The carnival record stopped with a scratch and a band of four began playing "The Beer Barrel Polka" and marching about, students falling in behind, singing, skipping, clapping in time. A girl in red suspenders

joined hands with others, forming a small circle that grew bigger and bigger as more and more people were drawn in. They circled and side-stepped and back-stepped and front-stepped and lost some and picked up others and whirled about. In the middle, one of my literature students began to polka, a hop and three steps, a hop and three steps, the left knee of his jeans split and opening with each bounce.

On the other side of the circle stood Dr. Giles, drinking it all in. He was very fine in the classroom, a real teacher, that one. There aren't many. He wasn't trendy like some who taught sports literature and comic strips. Nor worn by studies and students like the ones with their best years behind them. Giles had a genuine affection for his work, he breathed it, and he made his students feel elated. His lectures were smooth, natural, beautiful, the kind you stand and applaud, only that wasn't done any more. When he said a thing, it was so. When he did a thing, it was right.

Giles looked in my direction and sent me a secret smile in the crowd. Smiling was not his habit, but he wasn't against it. He nodded toward a chap riding a six-foot unicycle and wearing an enormous polka-dot bow tie. I laughed and nodded back. It seemed like they were all such good people, and I lost the weary feeling I had had.

Soon after that I saw Bennett, my date, standing nearby. "Hullo, Becky," I said.

Her head turned slightly in my direction. "Oh, hello," she said.

I made my way to her side, declining a place in the polka circle. "This is one hell of an art show."

"Isn't it," she said over her shoulder, one side toward me. She was facing two men in white shirts and bland ties, probably junior

faculty members. One was bearded, the other mustached. Sometimes men grow hair to look distinguished or intellectual, as if a little hair would fool anyone.

I looked to Bennett. She said nothing else. Nor did she introduce me to her bookends. She was a full-time instructor, though remiss and flat-chested, and I but a teaching fellow--a fact she made me feel without saying a word. So much for holding her hand.

She went back to her serious conversation and I to the carnival. I make it a point never to stay where I'm not wanted.

IV

I typed the last paper for Hutton's modern novel class. Notes, books, dishes, and paperwads were strewn about. It reminded me of the laundry room, the hamper stuffed and flowing on the floor and a basket so full of clothes to be ironed you couldn't see it.

My paper was a beauty though, lean and hard with the right words in the right places. I knew when a paper was good and was glad the extra time was spent to make it that way, afterwards.

What time it was, I didn't know, but I'd come to know far too many nights when the sun also rises.

Scott didn't move when I sank into bed beside him, and my body, grateful, didn't move either. My head wouldn't rest though. It kept going over my paper, what I said, what was done, what was due. I lay awake thinking in the dark and quiet, feeling frightfully alone, and I couldn't keep away from it. My mind started jumping around, thinking about the job market and the years spent in graduate school. Then I started to think on my writing and the jumping stopped and the rest of

it went away. Suddenly I began to cry. After awhile it was better, and I watched it grow less dark.

Later, I woke to a weight dropped on my thigh. It was another thigh, Scott's. He pulled me close and kissed my cheek.

"Morning," he said.

"Is that what it is?"

"I didn't hear you come to bed last night. What time was it?"

"Late."

"How late's late?"

"So late it was early."

"You can't keep this up much longer."

"I won't have to," I said.

He held me close pressing his body against mine. I dozed.

"Do you love me, Andrea?"

"Huh?"

"Do you love me?"

"If you're the man I married."

"It's been awhile."

"Let's not talk about it, Scott."

"Now you're talking."

"I just want to sleep," I said.

Scott rolled over me and onto his feet. "Damnation, woman. You don't know what you're missing."

He must have showered and dressed.

"You have another hour to sleep, hon," he said, flipping the alarm.

"An hour is an hour is an hour."

"See you tonight."

"If I live so long."

I heard him leave and then, what seemed like minutes later, the alarm annnned.

V

My mailbox held the usual stuff, some advertisements, a grade distribution sheet of equal import, and a memo about getting tests to secretaries early. There was a letter from Motlow Junior Community College in Tullahoma, about forty miles away, and a few miles from the Jack Daniels' distillery. They offered me an adjunct faculty position, teaching two composition classes in the fall for \$525 a course, \$1050 a semester, a whole \$2100 a year. That's what a doctorate will do for you.

There was also a reminder about a pre-final party on Friday at Dr. Giles' house. Another last. I'd go to get out from under for awhile, and mingle with people I'd probably not see again.

Finals were to begin a week from Wednesday, but they were really here already. The last couple of weeks were always the same.

Papers were due, tests were given, work piled up. Some professors gave exams early, thereby skipping a few teaching days. The atmosphere of order gave way to frenzy and timelessness. Studying increased, sleep decreased, and jeans and tee-shirts became even more common as you could eat, sleep, and run to class without changing. There was a lot of drinking, swearing, and NoDoz and very little difference between night and day except classes met at one time and the library closed at another. Everyone was weary and weary of everyone being weary, and it went on for days.

I left the wooden slots called mailboxes and headed for my office, meeting a few yakkers along the way, yakking. For the most part, people in English departments are short on action and long on talk.

Outside my office a young man sat cross-legged, leaning against Becky Bennett's closed door.

"Do you know when Miss Bennett will be in?" he asked me, getting up. He was big, at least a head taller than I, with a very young face. Students get younger every year.

Her office hours as advertised on the door were from eight to noon every day. It was ten o'clock. Lately she'd been breaking for breakfast after her class at eight.

"She should be here any time," I said. He thanked me and settled on the floor again. Poor chap.

"Hey, Andrea."

"Hey yourself," I said to Georgia Piganelli. We shared an office but were rarely there at the same time--I saw to that. "Aren't you supposed to be teaching a class?"

"Ah jest didn't have tiime to fool with it." Her boyfriend was visiting for two weeks. Poor timing.

"How'd yo paper come out?" she asked a few minutes later.

"It turned out all right."

"Mind if Ah read it? Jest to get ideas."

"It's due today, you know. Isn't yours done?" Damn thing not to get much sleep. Makes a body awfully testy.

"No. No, it isn't. But Ah've given Hutton late papers before without penalty," she said.

There were things graduate students just didn't do, like plagiarize

or pad a bibliography or turn a paper in late because of a boyfriend.
At least the good ones didn't.

"Ah'll jest carry it down to the Xerox room and be back directly,"
she said.

VI

"Missed another class, huh?" Meg Ramseur asked in passing.

"Jest too much to doo," said Georgia from the hallway.

We all knew who was doing a good job and who wasn't, who the teachers and scholars were and weren't. We all knew, but those were secrets and word rarely leaked out of the department.

"So who's the kid in the hall?" Meg Ramseur wanted to know.

"One of Bennett's."

"Damn good-looking. Damn good-looking," she said, "for a boy."

Any male under thirty was a boy to Meg. It was the thirty-five-and-over set she was interested in because, as she put it, they appreciated and knew how to treat a woman.

"Let's go to the lounge," I said. "I need a laugh."

Going to the lounge, I had discovered, was a good way to get rid of friends. Once you had a drink with them, you could simply say, "Well, I've got to get back to work" and that was that.

We walk down the hall, passing a few students.

"Good morning, Ms. Ramseur."

"Hullo, Mike."

"Nice student, that one. Writes fine papers, really fine," she says after Mike passes.

We turn the corner and walk by Hleblschuk's room. He's still

calling roll, probably doesn't know half his students by name yet. We feel sorry for them and pass on. In the next classroom Candace Wilkins is sitting on her desk lecturing, her legs crossed. She has their attention.

We file into the lounge and Hardee nods and Hutton smiles and we do the same. Becky Bennett and John Boy Honeycutt are there too but too involved to do more than glance our way. They're talking about their worst student, a perennial favorite of English teachers, but they're talking mostly because they like to hear themselves talk.

Meg gets coffee and I a Snickers candy bar and we sit at the end of the bleakest of institutional furniture, two long tables pushed together lengthwise. I tell Bennett that a student is waiting to see her and she says okay and starts in about one of her freshmen who still uses contractions and second person. She doesn't know what he's been doing all semester. He certainly wasn't paying attention. He must have had a busy social life and now he'll have to pay for it.

People have to pay for things, a simple matter of exchange: you do a thing and get something in return. You study hard for years, losing sleep, friends, and good times, and are rewarded with a position at some college or university. At least, that's the way it's supposed to work. It's best not to think about it. Try and take that advice sometime.

Dr. Hardee says he's going to write a book about student papers as soon as he finishes his novel, the one he's been writing for six years.

John Boy turns the conversation toward specific boners, reading from a theme. "And you think you've got problems," he says to Bennett.

"The little buggers don't deserve us," says Meg.

Hutton thumbs through a pile of themes, clears his throat, and

reads from a paper about love and infatuation being "unrelated words projected by their definitions."

"Why should we have to deal with such rot?" Meg says.

"It's beneath us," I say.

The discussion goes from bad to worse, the worst sentence, paper, class.

Meg and I were not appreciated, so we left.

VII

I did not get much sleep that week, nor was one day much different than another. I had the sense of it all being repeated, something I had done already and had to do again and again like a nightmare.

My Royal typewriter was not cooperating and finally the carriage refused to move. Dr. Wruck returned my paper on Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. It sported an A grade and this commentary: "Excellent. The focus is sharp and expression precise and clear. Your argument is well-supported with reference to significant scenes and dialogue." I felt let down.

After spending days on that paper, nursing it along, caring for it, I expected correction and criticism. I wanted Wruck to make suggestions, as Giles did, so I could learn from them. When Giles graded a paper, you knew what was wrong and how to make it better. He'd mark it and then write commentaries of two and three pages, even on an A paper.

I graded the last research paper for my composition class, fifteen bloodless pages on the legalization of marijuana, a subject as popular with freshmen as birth control, rape, abortion, and pornography. There

was just no stopping them. A few students always used these subjects no matter what you said.

A friend named Morley called, said her husband was on his way to the green hills of Africa to film a safari for a Nashville television station. Said he was going to collect some animals there--she loves euphemisms. Morley was one of us, only she didn't hang around after getting her MA degree. So many hang on as adjuncts year after year for below-poverty wages just to be near the intellectual community and hoping to get on full-time. I invited her to the department party on Friday but she had other plans. Probably just as well, for you could never tell how English majors would mix.

Finally Friday arrived, bringing heavy rains with it. Some late research papers were left in my mailbox, several students now wanted to talk about their low grades and how they could bring them up, and a father called about his son's excessive absences, telling me that his son really enjoyed my classes, probably why he came so often. Dr. Giles reminded me of my comprehensive on Monday and a student who'd been out for a week with mononucleosis came to see me.

"I'm still having trouble with my research paper," he said. "I can't seem to say what I mean. For my opening, I mean."

"So what is it you're trying to say?"

"Well, I have the research and I know what I want to say. I just can't write a thesis sentence that covers everything."

"What does your research show?"

"Well, it . . . it shows that . . . that the early American myths . . . about this country being a land of plenty and opportunity . . . where a man can become anything he wants through hard work and

education . . . are just myths and no longer applicable. I . . . I just don't know how to say it."

"You just have."

He smiled. I smiled back.

"Don't try to impress anybody. Just say what you have to say," I said, "and make it clear."

I got home around five, let the dog out, and fell into bed. Scott woke me at nine.

"Hi, hon," he said.

"Hi, yourself."

"How about some good old-fashioned sex?"

"Oh, Scott, I'm so miserable."

"That bad, huh?"

"Don't let's talk about it."

VIII

When we arrived, everyone was there already. People were on the steps or inside, standing, seated, on the floor, the rooms smoky and noisy with a lot of drunken talk. Some were trying to have a good time and some were having a good time. There were many women without men and students courting professors and vice versa and faculty wives watching over their husbands like German shepherds.

We moved slowly through the crowd on our way to the bar. Brawner was telling Giles about his yearly physical and Giles asked him if he passed, saying hello without saying it as we passed.

Dr. Hutton was telling Candace Wilkins some cock-and-bull story, and Becky Bennett was chatting with our hostess.

"I can't believe they ate the deli cheeses and meats already," Bennett said, referring to graduate students. "It's awful, simply awful. You'd think they'd try and show a little breeding."

"They must have been the most hungry," said Mrs. Giles.

"How are you, Henry?" Scott asked Henry Harris who was coming from the bar, a beer in hand. It was a bring-your-own-bottle party, wine being the most popular. When students were invited, it was always BYOB.

"I'm so tired," Henry said, "that when I wake up in the morning I feel like I've had it."

"Be grateful," said Scott looking at me, laughing sociably.

"A good man is so hard to find," said Meg who was nearby.

"And," said Scott, "and, a hard man is so good to find."

Scott was in fine form for the party. So was Meg. There was much wine and ignored tension and a feeling of things coming that couldn't be stopped.

There was also a lot of gossip and jokes about Dr. Hardee and his wife. It seems that she left him for another woman. Hardee had introduced them at the last Christmas party and thought they were just good friends. You never know about someone else's sex life.

Mrs. Whitfield was celebrating the success of her three-hour comprehensive and telling me how she answered some questions when Candace Wilkins joined us.

"Why, I took mine last semester," Candace said. "It was perfunctory for the most part, only lasted half an hour."

"It all depends on who's on your committee, I suppose," said Mrs. Whitfield who studied more than a year for her exam. She soon left us.

Candace talked about collaborating on a women's literature book. She said it would be easy. We'd write a forward and follow it with a collection of pieces by other writers. Candace's personal life was far too busy for me to consider such a project.

"You know," she said, "I really enjoyed reading your thesis."

"You read it?"

"Yes, I borrowed the department's copy from Brawner's office."

"You actually read it just to read it?"

"Yes. I was doing this paper for Hutton and found some sections of your book quite useful, so I just copied them."

I soon left Candace. Several people asked about my plans, and Bennett told me I had a nice husband. I almost said a good man was hard to find but didn't; she'd take it personally.

John Boy muttered something at me about the DA being less prestigious than an PhD, and then Hutton took it upon himself to find me a dissertation topic.

"You could do a study of high school grammar texts in a certain school system. Ahem. Or the preparation of high school English teachers, say in the Nashville area."

"I've seen some of those studies," I said. "There was one done recently about why children fall off their bikes."

"So why don't you do a comparative study of say . . . Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot?"

"Because I don't want to."

"I know. I know what. Ahem. Why not the treatment of the Negro woman as a major character . . ." he said before being called to the telephone.

"A momentary stay against profusion?" asked Giles who always made me feel better about things. "Maybe you should do a study of the Black woman as a major character in nineteenth-century American novels."

"Now that's narrowing my topic."

I was drinking far too much wine when Scott asked me if I were ready to go home.

"Almost. Just one more drink."

"You better not wait too long," he said, "or someone with a headache will want me to take her home."

"Who's the someone with a headache?" Meg wanted to know.

"Someone who belly dances."

"Oh, that someone," I said.

"Yeah. She did this belly-dancing number on me, told me she could move her hips like a machine."

"What kind? A pogo stick?" asked Meg who began looking for Bennett. "I'll have to ask her about that."

"Becky. Oh, Becky," she said in a loud voice heading toward Bennett. "Scott tells us you can really move those hips of yours. Like some machine I hear. I'd rather like to see that."

"Oh, no!" Scott said, heading for the bar.

Bennett's mouth opened and shut but nothing came out.

"Well, Becky. We'd all like to see this demonstration. That is, the few who haven't seen it already."

Bennett stood up, her eyes wide, her face red. There was a lot of nudging going on and the room grew quiet.

"And while you're at it, let's see you shimmy. Can you shimmy, Becky? Can you?"

Bennett set her drink down and looked around for someone to rescue her, but there were no rescuers, so she turned to leave. Meg gripped Bennett's arm to stop her, bringing them face to face.

"No, on second thought, you probably can't shimmy, Becky. But you can lift something for us. Yes, do, Becky. Lift something for us, by all means. And I don't mean your skirt."

"Go to hell," said Bennett, jerking her arm free. "Go to hell, Meg!"

Meg stood there watching Bennett make her way through the crowd. "No. No, Becky. I refuse to go," Meg called after her. "Do you hear me, Becky? I don't want to go, but you have every right to."

Bennett left and it was all churning and I walked outside to be alone. The sky was filled with stars and the grass wet with the day's rain, and then Meg was beside me, saying something about pigeons being on the grass alas.

"Don't worry about her," she said.

"Bennett? I'm not."

The night was peaceful and we walked a little ways looking at the stars.

"Feeling low?" she asked.

"The lowest."

"Don't worry about it, Andrea. It's not all for nought. Someday we'll be teaching at wonderful universities and be feeling appreciated, really appreciated."

"Isn't it pretty to think so?" I said. "Isn't it pretty to think so."

Chapter VI

THE SYSTEM

Dr. Giles

It was not love at first sight.

The first time Andrea saw Dr. Giles she searched frantically for another class to take besides his and settled straightway for a Giles' seminar.

Andrea was registering for classes, along with 15,000 other students in a two-day period. There was no pre-registration because it made too much sense. So everyone waited until an assigned time ticket got them inside, and then they scrambled to get class cards by waiting in long lines. The best classes filled early, and required courses and those everyone really wanted were taught once and at the wrong time or closed--upon reaching the front of a line. Fortunately, Andrea had drawn an eight o'clock time ticket, the earliest available, which guaranteed her early entrance and choice of classes.

"You can't have either class," the man under a GRADUATE ENGLISH sign told her, his eyes penetrating like his mind, putting some people off and making devotees of others. Andrea knew his name, Giles, and his reputation, hard. He was the best in the department but never nominated for Teacher of the Year because he was too good a teacher.

"Why?"

The contemporary literature course, Giles explained, was open to doctoral students only (although an undergraduate named Honeycutt got in), and all the cards for the popular literature course had holds on them, held for the first ten students on a long waiting list. (The pop

lit course was popular because the instructor played tennis and wrote poetry more than he taught--he was the department chairman and could get away with it.) In fine, the department of English that had difficulty sustaining offerings and was begging for graduate students wouldn't let Andrea enroll in either class of her choice.

"There are other seminars," an associate professor named Wruck nosed in, giving Andrea the once-over as he did all female students. He stood next to Professor Giles under a LOWER DIVISION ENGLISH sign. A line of students zigged and zagged to the middle of the gym, waiting for Wruck, who saw fit to deal with Andrea, the only one in Giles' line. Wruck was Andrea's advisor, though he couldn't solve his own problems, and he immediately disliked his advisee. Her looks suited him, but she asked questions, and people who asked questions were dangerous.

"All new TAs, that is, teaching assistants," Wruck said, arching an eyebrow, "are required to take the seminar in teaching composition." It was taught by Dr. Hleblschuk, who couldn't teach, and mandatory as no one would take it by choice.

Giles, shorter than Wruck but heads and shoulders taller, handed Andrea the entrance card for Hleblschuk's seminar.

"The system's a wonderful thing," Giles said, his eyes snapping. He could sometimes undo Wruck's doing.

Andrea was unsure, of Giles and the offerings. She needed two of three courses that fit into her schedule: general linguistics (a study of phonology, morphology, and syntax), Victorian prose, and Giles' early English drama.

"There's none better?" she asked, not expecting an answer.

"You don't expect an answer to that," he answered.

As a teacher, Giles was demanding and intimidating in intellect and quickly became her favorite.

Publishing

In a way Andrea was pretty lucky because teaching and graduate classes demanded all of her hours and energy. Time was measured in deadlines, semesters, students, and TAs. Some TAs graduated, some didn't, and some, like Emily, just disappeared, but none got hired by the University to teach English. The department only educated graduate students; it didn't hire them. Gloria got fed up, Hope got C's, Thelma got pregnant, John Savonarola got stampeded at a rock concert, and Mylan got drummed out for moral turpitude. No one seemed to mind though; there were always more bodies to replace them.

Andrea taught, was taught, and survived on one or two teachers like Giles. As the years passed, a sameness set in: the same student questions and mistakes, research and critiques, and arcane readings for a comprehensive that loomed ominously at the end of Andrea's graduate work--a thing to be got through like an operation. Fortunately, there was little time to think on it or that other thing that English majors share but don't discuss because it was too real, nebulous, and infuriating.

Outside the University was the publishing world that paid everyone scale, except the writers, who were beholden for any advance or acceptance because some publisher was going to publish their words.

Inside the English department where the study of literature and writing was the reason for being, no one wrote much, except critically, or encouraged creative projects, except superficially. There was a poet

or two who published some and pretended much and the "creative writing" teacher who worked endlessly on a novel he never finished. For Andrea, the publishing world and English department were inextricably bound, and yet when she reminded people that some students wanted to write fiction, they drew away from her as if she were crazy.

"Are you crazy?" asked Becky Bennett, a junior faculty member who loved to make TAs feel like TAs.

"Why else would I be here?" Andrea answered.

"To get an education . . . and a job." Bennett had acquired her position with the help of a well-known Rutgers' professor who bedded her and banished her to a position far away to keep her quiet, and in so doing did her a favor.

"I almost have my doctorate, remember?" Andrea remarked, a remark Bennett with only an MA took personally. "They'll have to pay me too much . . . that is, if there were open positions, which there aren't . . . except in Kalamazoo, maybe."

"Andrea, be serious," Bennett said seriously, leaning back in her swivel chair. "By this time next year, you could be teaching at some junior college, and you could write in the summers, if you must."

"That's if I don't teach summer school and after I've done academic research that may get published so I may get tenure."

Bennett winced and adjusted a floral skirt below her knee. She wore colorful clothes and heavy makeup to temper her flat chest and ordinary face.

"You could work at a publishing house to get a start," Bennett said.

"I tried. You have to have experience to get a job there, and you

can't get experience without a job."

"It's just not done. You can't just write fiction for a living."

"Some people do."

"Sure, but they're published," Bennett said.

"So I'll get published," Andrea told her playfully.

"There's a catch," Bennett said smugly. "You know you can't get published without an agent, and you can't get an agent until you're published."

"Have you ever tried?"

"No. There's no reason to. I'm unpublished." Bennett's mind glazed over with thoughts of Wruck, the tall, flat-nosed man slated for the freshman composition chair, according to him.

"That's crazy," Andrea reflected. "But it makes as much sense as anything else."

"Suppose everyone felt that way, Andrea?" Bennett said with a superior air.

"Then I'd be a fool to feel otherwise, wouldn't I?"

Teaching

Bennett didn't care what Andrea felt. What Drs. Brawner and Wruck felt and whom were what mattered to her.

It was quite a ménage à trois. Bennett courted her way into Brawner's heart by almost but never quite beating him in tennis and into Wruck's bed by making much of his memos.

Wruck was flattered by this young woman absorbed in his work, and he liked her body and what she could do with it--Bennett came to know much about muscles from belly dancing.

Wruck also cared what Brawner, the department chairman, felt. So weekly, and sometimes in between, Wruck issued monstrous memos about teaching, meant to solicit regard from Brawner and others, that no one wanted to read but everyone read. He also numbered his students and referred to each by a number, no names to muddle matters. As far as he was concerned, one failing student was as good as another and easier to fail as a number. No one knew Wruck was a bad teacher except his students, and some of them didn't know how awful he was because he was a good actor.

Things were very bad as it looked very good for Wruck. His vacuous ten-page memos actually paid off. Brawner was sick to death of them, didn't like the competition, and was sending Wruck away for a year's leave of absence with pay. Wruck planned to tour Europe and return as the new head of freshman composition.

Hleblschuk, the white-headed head, had no intentions of being retired any time soon, particularly by some flat-nosed whelp (Wruck was forty-six) who had loads of experience and knowledge but no brains. So the week before finals while looking at his wizened image in the men's room mirror, Hleblschuk determined to update his person. The next morning he adopted a new standard for manuscript preparation, the MLA Handbook, becoming the first in the department to do so, and he got a crew cut to boot.

For years, journals and universities across the country embraced the MLA Style Sheet which dictated how research papers should look. But the MLA Handbook was the latest word of what was right, be it italics or abbreviation or italics in abbreviations, and as it was new, everyone would have to buy it and its conventions until they were no longer

conventional. The bookstore ordered only a few copies of the new gospel of form, however, and all were gone when Andrea tried to buy one. The library didn't have a copy to loan, nor did anyone else.

"It's an A paper, all right, except for the documentation," Hleblschuk told Andrea, pointing to the last two pages of her paper which listed sources consulted. There were only minor changes in the new form, but they were major to Hleblschuk, and one way to penalize students he disliked.

"You single-spaced and headed this page Footnotes instead of Endnotes. What was right yesterday is wrong today."

The Style Sheet had been right since Andrea started college and prescribed by all her professors. Now it was wrong and the Handbook was right, at least for Hleblschuk's last paper of the semester.

"In all fairness to others, I have to lower your grade."

TAS

If fair was fair and Andrea had had a choice, she wouldn't have chosen classes with either the flat top (Hleblschuk) or flat nose (Wruck), ever. Nor would she have chosen Georgia, who'd never been to Georgia, for an officemate.

"Damn it, Georgia, you took everything I said and added more, not much, but some."

"Such nit-picking," said Georgia, unwrapping a care package of goodies her mother sent every week or so. Momma Piganelli also paid Georgia's rent and car payment and flew her home at least once a month while Georgia was on her own.

"Nit-picking?"

Andrea walked the length of their office, three steps, and turned.

"Georgia, you wouldn't have said what you said had I not said it first! Had you not Xeroxed my paper before starting on yours!"

"It's awl a matter of how you look at it, Andrea," Georgia said, batting dark lashes.

"You were dishonest, deceptive, and double-dealing no matter how you look at it. Hell, Georgia, you plagiarized!"

"That's soo ugly," Georgia protested, cupping her ears. "Pleease say no mowr."

"Gladly, Georgia, gladly! Whuu . . . whuu . . . whuu . . . "

The whistling started after Mylan stripped naked before his nine o'clock class in the middle of March and marched out of the English department forever.

"Whuu . . . whuu . . . whuu . . . "

Andrea was weaving her way through the crowded hall when everyone ahead of her stopped moving. There was considerable excitement but little noise, and what followed was over almost before Andrea knew what it was. A path of gaping students quietly parted for a naked body, white as a cucumber and wearing dark shoes and socks. Andrea just stood there staring like everyone else at her hairy classmate carrying an armload of books and papers. Striptease aside, Mylan didn't seem any stranger than anyone else. He did find imagery sexual and dialogue frothy, even when they weren't, but that wasn't so unusual for an English major.

"It's symbolic," Mylan said to her as he walked nonchalantly past under bright, artificial lights. "It's what this place does to people. That and that other thing." And so Mylan and his jiggling bottom were

gone for good, and people went on to do whatever they did, with smiles, and Andrea thought on that other thing that makes so many drop out.

Rumor had it that Mylan lost his job at a pizza place because too many students dined and dashed without paying; he also had some difficulty with his advisor Hleblschuk, the hoary one hell-bent on a crew cut.

"Whuu . . . whuu . . . whuu . . . "

Soon thereafter Andrea started scrawling on her desk blotter.

"You certainly know how to ruin desk blotters," Meg Ramseur said.

"Some things take talent."

"What's your plan? A book?" Meg asked indulgently.

"No, only two hundred pages or so."

"Great expectations?"

"No."

"I'm your friend, Andrea. That's why I can be brutally frank."

"Friends can be the most brutal."

Meg leaned back in the only extra office chair and took a deep breath, ready but reticent to talk about that nameless shared thing English majors don't discuss.

"It's the kiss of death, Andrea."

Andrea waited.

"It's self-indulgent to write."

"I feel self-indulgent when I'm not writing."

"Shit!" said Meg making a face. "What makes you think you can write anyway?"

"If I need someone to tell me I can, then I probably can't."

Meg puckered her lips toward one side of her face. "Andrea,

graduate school does things to people. It changes them. They wear jeans and glasses, swear, and talk a bunch, especially about things no one wants to hear."

"I've noticed that," Andrea replied smiling.

Meg stood up and turned toward a metal bookcase weighted with books, most of them paperbacks. "The worst part is their writing. Their writing becomes prolix."

"Prolix?"

"Prolix! Prolix from practice! Think of all the critiques they, we write . . . and the affected way we talk. Think how we come to know too much about technique and tradition."

Meg rested an elbow on the bookcase and propped her head on a fist, touching on their common anger but unwilling to go any further.

Andrea considered what Meg had said. "So we, they, who know the most about writing can't write?"

"Yes."

"Yes. That's definitely crazy, Meg," Andrea laughed and whirled around in her wobbly chair doing a complete revolution.

"And you're crazy if you go through with this foolhardy plan."

"And crazy if I don't."

Advisors

Wruck felt it was crazy to saddle him with three graduate students to advise, though he never advised any of them. He already spent nine hours in the classroom every week, and there simply weren't enough hours in the day to get his work done.

"Close the door and sit down," he snapped at Andrea, his nostrils

flaring in and out like gills. He wanted to talk to her about her attitude without talking about it.

"It's about your attitude," Wruck snarled. "You don't have much regard for comprehensives, do you?" (Becky Bennett knew how to belly-dance and play informant.)

"No, I don't."

"Don't try to deny it," Wruck growled.

"It's hard to have regard for something no one fails."

"But you do want to pass, don't you?" he asked.

"How can I fail if no one ever fails?" Andrea wanted to know.

"What if everyone felt that way?"

"Then I'd be a fool to feel otherwise," she said.

"Whereupon comprehensives would have to be eliminated altogether or actually result in failure for some."

"That would be good," Andrea commented.

"Don't you see? As it is now, we instill doing well for the sake of doing well, learning for learning's sake. No other reason."

"Other than the testing," Andrea pointed out.

"Then," Wruck bellowed, knowing how to hide his anger, "then, after studying selected pieces of literature, the student undergoes a close examination to see what he or she knows, whether he or she can talk on his or her feet, stand up under scrutiny and interrogation, answer all questions asked while the committee takes him or her apart piece by piece until he or she squirms under questioning, recognizes our superior intellect, and must be led babbling from the room!"

"Whuu . . . whuu . . . whuu . . . "

"Whew! Judith, I still have students to advise," Andrea argued.

"It's the end of the semester, Andrea, and the department needs your office so the new TAs can move in."

Judith was organized and efficient and made it her habit to tidy up the semester's business before the semester was over. She was also smart in and out of her dress, a matter of some importance to her boss, Dr. Brawner. He was the department chairman, and the office ran quite efficiently without his help.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Judith. I still need my office, and the new TAs rarely report for duty before fall. Some aren't even selected yet," Andrea emphasized.

"I know that. But they can't move in until you move out," she said, her hands folded on too orderly a desk. "They probably moved in already."

"That's crazy, Judith," Andrea argued.

"What if everyone felt that way, Andrea?"

"Déjà vu!"

"Pardon?"

Typewriters

April 17, 1978

To: English Department Faculty and TAs

From: Dr. Brawner

- 1) Congratulations to Dr. Hutton and Georgia Piganelli for drafting a plagiarism statement and for doing it so well. It was to serve as a standard for the University but was tabled by an ad hoc committee.
- 2) We wish all the departing graduate students well and ask the one who hasn't turned in her office key yet to do so posthaste.
- 3) The department's film projector is missing. If you see it,

- please return it.
- 4) The Xerox room typewriter is missing. If you see it, please return it.
 - 5) The department coffee, flower, and party funds need replenishing.
 - 6) Andrea Reed's comprehensive is scheduled today at two. All faculty members and graduate students are welcome to join the jury.

Judith mimeographed Brawner's memo by ten, and a work-study student placed it in the mailboxes promptly at two.

At eleven-thirty, Andrea picked up her mail.

"I'm sorry, Andrea, but Dr. Brawner doesn't want anyone alone in the office at lunchtime," explained Judith who hurried about the business of running an English department.

"I've been in here hundreds of times alone, Judith, and so has everyone else. I only need it for ten minutes."

"A no is not a yes, Judith said, punctilious as ever.

Andrea straightened. "I'll use it in my office then."

"Sorry, Andrea," said Judith, passing Andrea in the hall. "Dr. Brawner says you can't use our typewriters in our office, your office, at noon, or any other time."

"Where are you going with that?" Andrea wanted to know of Henry Harris who was carting a typewriter from the main office.

"I'm taking it to my office," he grunted without stopping, "to finish a paper for Wruck . . . uck . . . uck," his voice trailing behind.

"Whuu . . . whuu . . . whuu . . . "

"Bennett has a good typewriter and a better tan. Why don't you borrow hers?" Meg suggested, winking at Andrea.

"Are you crazy?"

"Of course," Meg said, appraising everyone who passed in the hall, sizing up the scholars by their slump and color, her own a common classroom pallor. "But that's a given. You never said anything to Bennett on Friday to make her mad."

"No, but what you said was enough for both of us," Andrea chortled.

"Moi? What did I say?"

"Not much. You merely announced to the entire English department that Bennett was a loose woman. Then you reminded everyone of her belly-dancing talents."

"How she moved her hips like a blender." Meg stopped her hall monitoring momentarily to attempt a blender movement, first moving her hips in a circle, then a figure eight, and finally a jerky, irregular grind.

Becky Bennett with the swiveling hips and chair was not grinding at the moment. She was calculating in her office with the door closed. When she wasn't in, the door was open; when she was in, the door was closed.

It was the last day of classes, and Bennett had cancelled all of hers to evaluate the semester and her chances of getting tenure. On a two-column page she took inventory of what was good and bad:

BLUE CHIPS

Work with Wruck
Influential liaisons
Belly-dancing excesses
Faculty friendships in lounge,
at lunch

BLACK EYES

Meg's effrontery at party
Too many liaisons
Belly-dancing excesses
Poor teaching job

Andrea, hearing the typewriter, knocked on the door before entering.

"Hey, Becky," Andrea said, her throat dry.

Becky looked up and saw all of her black eyes concentrated in Andrea who stood staring at Bennett's beautiful portable typewriter.

"Just thought I'd say hello, Becky. Hello, Becky . . . and goodbye." Andrea closed the door on a hostile face as a handsome IBM in the arms of John Boy Honeycutt, a toady TA, passed her in the hall.

"Hey, Honeycutt, whose typewriter?"

"The department's," he answered, a cord trailing behind.

"I don't suppose you'll be finished with it before one . . . nn . . . nn?"

"No . . . oo . . . oo."

"No. That's out of the question," Wruck said. "The paper is due at one o'clock today without exception." Actually, the graduate faculty often accepted late papers, especially near the end of the semester when the demands were heavy and many papers late.

"Sir," Andrea explained, "my paper is finished and ready to turn in, as soon as I type my bibliography. The thing is my typewriter broke early this morning, and although typewriters are everywhere, it seems they're all in use."

"I see," Wruck said seeing nothing. "What if everyone turned in late papers?"

"Then sir, I'd be a . . . "

"'Sir' is right, and the rest inexcusable."

As Andrea left Wruck's office, Georgia entered with a paper in hand to hand in. It was a semester late and accepted without penalty.

"Hiii, Andrea."

"Whuu . . . whuu . . . whuu . . . "

At one o'clock, Andrea gave Wruck her typed paper with the bibliography neatly written in longhand. She got a B in the course, her first in an English class; everyone else got A's, including the Nigerian student whose English no one could understand.

Comprehensives

"We can't allow you to use our typewriters. In my office. In your office. Nowhere," Dr. Brawner said, planting himself in Andrea's path as she approached from the opposite direction. "What if everyone wanted to use them?"

Andrea walked toward Brawner as he talked and around him as if he were a post in her path. The further she walked from him, the louder he got.

"The department typewriters are for departmental use only," he barked at Andrea as she walked past him and down the hall, not looking at Brawner, not stopping, not saying a word.

Brawner didn't need this. He'd probably be in some other line of work if it weren't for the honor of the thing. "If you want something typed, Judith will type it," he bellowed as Andrea walked on. Of course, Judith wouldn't type graduate papers, except for a fee, and not at the end of a term, though she typed Brawner's personal letters, poems, research, church bulletins, tennis news, and any other thing he wanted.

Brawner was yelling now, his face red, shoulders tight, and neck throbbing. "If you want Judith to type something for you, see that she gets it at least three days in advance," Brawner hollered, his voice echoing down the nearly empty hall, "or a week, eek, eek, eek . . . "

"Whuu . . . whuu . . . whuu . . . "

Andrea ducked into the seminar room where Drs. Giles, Wruck, and Bass, formal and reserved, sat waiting at a long table. It was a hot afternoon and heat issued from the air vents.

"Andrea," Giles began after the barest formalities. He set up the comprehensive and was in charge. "Is the traditional novel as an art form dead? And if so, what do you see taking its place?"

It all seemed so trivial and grave.

Wruck tapped his pencil on the table several times and cleared his throat as whips, stocks, and ducking stools whirled in his head--he was bent on making Andrea's comprehensive as pleasant as a stake burning.

"Yes, and please comment upon contemporary trends in poetry, drama, and criticism, as well as fiction, citing specifics." Wruck paused, relishing his own resonance, his flat nostrils flaring. "While you're at it, tell us what direction all of it is headed and postulate why." He smiled, not a little pleased with his question which had nothing to do with the literature Andrea had studied for the exam. Her mind was sufficiently muddled, he thought, and she an easy mark for the inquisition.

"This is no simple question," Andrea said looking at Bass, a quiet, gentle man without tenure or a position in the fall, and Giles who had seen Wruck browbeat and demoralize students before.

"No, it isn't a simple question," Giles said. "And since I have a class soon, why don't you write your answer, Andrea, and mail it to us by Saturday."

"Saturday?"

"Saturday!"

"Fine," Andrea gulped. It was fine with Bass too, but not so fine with Wruck.

"I could amend my question," Wruck offered, befuddled and beside himself.

"No, no, let's have it this way," Giles said bringing the dreaded affair to a happy conclusion.

Andrea

"You can't just turn your back on your education and responsibilities," insisted Meg who had fetched Andrea a typewriter two hours too late.

"I'm not," Andrea told her. "I'll take my exams and mail in my grades."

"You're running away from all you worked for is all," Meg argued. "It's escapist and cowardly."

Andrea laughed and shook her head. "I'm not running away from my responsibilities. I'm running to them. There's nothing cowardly about leaving something behind and starting something new." Andrea faced her friend squarely. "Teaching would be escapist for me. You know that, Meg."

"Damn it all, Andrea. Be sensible. Just nobody does this. Nobody," Meg said, her lips pursed in disapproval.

"I thought everyone did," Andrea answered amused.

Meg was not amused. She rapped her knuckles on the desk, weary of literary pretension, pedants, school, the whole can of worms.

"Why do you think you're so special, that you have something to say that's never been said or done?" she asked, abrasive as ever.

"What makes you think I'm not or can't or won't?" Andrea answered.

"Because the world is old. Because it's all been done and said. Because you're no different than any other English major."

"Nobody ever said I was," Andrea said, patient with her friend's anger, an anger all English majors shared. It was easy to read in her face, in all their faces, but not so easy to talk about.

"You know why you're so angry, Meg? It's not me you're angry with. It's the degrees that overqualify us for most positions except in higher education where there are none. It's the teachers who don't teach and those who teach us to write but discourage us from writing. It's the journalism majors with their slam-bang BAs who think they can write for a living and actually do. It's this dead-ended educational system, creativity that isn't encouraged, and fiction that isn't fostered, isn't good until some editor says it's good."

"How often does that happen?" Meg asked with sarcasm.

"And we all want to write but fear failure and rejection, and we fool ourselves into thinking we can write without ever attempting to do so, and we're frustrated because we're not writing and could be, if we weren't teaching or tied by other responsibilities."

Andrea breathed deeply, and Meg looked at the cracked ceiling.

"That's what makes all of us angry, Meg, and that's what makes us crazy too, if we'd only admit it."

"Golly gee! I thought it was your plainsong whistle."

"That too," Andrea laughed gently, "but only to make Georgia crackers."

Meg thought on the single, maddening note Andrea whistled evenly and without variation or interruption for Georgia, the department

plagiarist who helped draft the department's plagiarism statement.

"You said a whole lot more to Georgia by not talking to her, you know."

"And to Brawner too."

"Whuu . . . whuu . . . whuu . . . "

"I'm no better than anyone else because I want to write fiction, Meg, nor do I pretend to be. It's just that I won't know if I can unless I try."

"How will you live?" Meg asked not giving her time to answer.

"You know how few make money at this game, and how little they make, except a few. Andrea, listen. . . ."

"Meg, will you please shut up?" Andrea began gathering folders, pens, and papers.

"What about your. . . ."

"I could care less."

"But this may actua--"

"To hell with it all. I've got responsibilities of my own."

Andrea carefully removed her desk blotter and folded it.

"I earned my degrees, no matter how you look at it. They've taken me years to get, and they're not in danger any more; I am. I've been working like hell to satisfy everyone else. Now I'm going to do something for myself."

Andrea removed a purse from a middle drawer and flung it over her shoulder, almost hitting Giles who came in the doorway with yet another typewriter.

"I see you're in need of a typewriter," he said, setting it next to Meg's.

"Now more than ever," Andrea answered, happy that Giles was there.

"She's only committing academic suicide is all," Meg said, her arms crossed.

"Academic safety is suicide for some," Giles told them. "It took me years to get my PhD, and I've been trying to overcome the academic and moral damage ever since."

Andrea beamed at Giles.

"Andrea," Meg persisted, "you'll never make it. It's very unlikely anyone will buy what you write. The public wants biographies and sensitive dribble. You're too different."

"Hell, Meg. Five minutes ago I was like everyone else."

Meg inspected the ceiling once more, the cracks wiggling in opposite directions.

"I know I'm different, but everyone is different, and at least I'll be trying. I have some things to say, some stories to share. That's not entirely selfish, is it?"

"It's positively bananas is all. It'll never let you rest."

"God bless it," Andrea laughed. "I wouldn't want to live without strong misgivings."

"You'll always be alone," Meg offered. "No one will ever be on your side, and you'll always live in danger of failure."

"I live that way now," Andrea answered, sighing deeply.

Andrea looked about her office, then at Meg and Giles, and picked up an armload of papers and books and the folded desk blotter. They stood staring at her.

"How do you feel?" Giles asked.

"Fine and dandy . . . and frightened."

"That's good," said Meg. "It proves you're not completely crazy."

They all laughed uncomfortably.

"It won't be fun," Giles warned her.

"Yes it will," Andrea said starting for the door.

"I mean it, Andrea. You'll have to discipline yourself and work like hell."

"I'm disciplined," she returned, leaving them behind.

"You'll have to run for it," Meg called after her.

"I'll run for it."

"Run!" Meg yelled.

Andrea ran around the corner and down the stairs. Dr. Brawner stood in the hall bellowing at her because she wouldn't talk to him, but she was running too hard to hear.

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