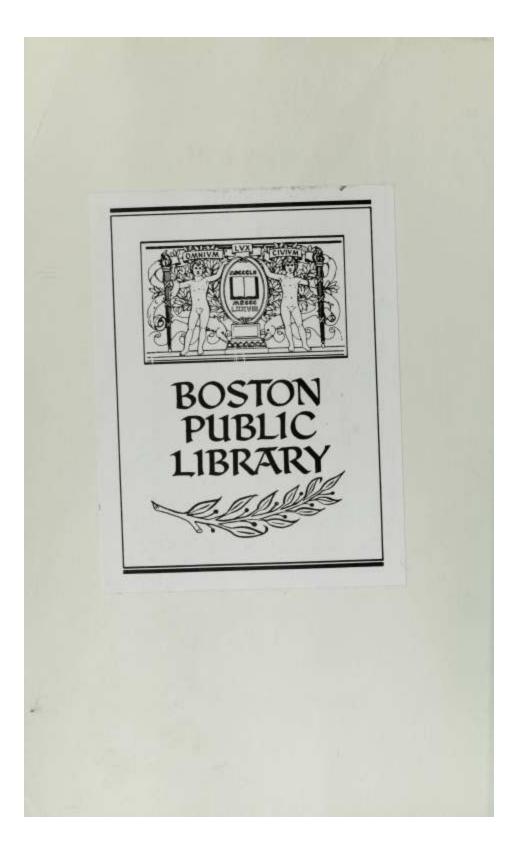


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Playing Soldiers and the Dark Stephen Dueweke



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Jim Brandekker's prayer is a jimjammed version of St. Paul's I Corinthians 12:31 – 13:13.

Hallelujahs to I.C.B.M. for inspiration enough to finish the manuscript, vicariously to John Gardner, and, always, to Dean Taitt.

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JS&JS

who made me

For It is a land of images, and those who dwell There worship idols.

the prophet Jeremiah

WHO MADE YOU, *Jim Brandekker?* His ghosts would wanna know in tomorrow's catechism. *Who made you run away?*

Fourteen-year-old Jim Brandekker brushed the hair outta his eyes—hair the yellow of cornsilk, almost white, that Ma left long, in a nifty curve over his collar, and in the bangs that troubled his eyes—columbine eyes, the blue of the moon on lucky evenings, a blue so intense his stare left the mute impression of the smell of rain on pine. Jim looked up from his Nothing Book and risked a glance at Ma and Dad.

Ma had given up daylight and dreaming to keep both eyes on every move Jim made. Dad crumpled and uncrumpled his plans for his Big Development, folding and unfolding his arguments with the dreams her son had spoiled. Only the t.v. played, playing the Evening News, just as normal, but with no sound. At the Ground Zero of their living room there was no sound.

"I guess I'm going to bed."

"Shall I tuck you in?"

Dad grumbled. "Let the boy go!"

Ma flustered. "Leave your sneakers down here, Jimmers."

Jim took his feet outta his big red shoes.

Ma presented her cheek. "Good night, Jimmers."

Jim kissed Ma, and, tonight, he offered to shake hands with Dad.

Dad fussed, surprised. "Ummm? Good night!"

Jim should hold their hands. Jim should tell Ma and Dad he loved em, and press their warm-cool hands. He stood in the doorway for a hot minute, the high house behind him like the breath of his ghosts on the itch of his neck.

Ma looked at him queerly in the flickering colors of the Evening News. "Good night, Jimmers."

"Yep. Good night."

His homebody ghosts followed Jim up to his bedroom. Ma wouldn't let him use the back stairs. He undressed in the cold and black. He left his underpants on—so no raven could steal em—and he got between the sheets without committing his body to warming his bed. The night was alive, and alive with ghostwhispers.

Jim heard the cuckoo clock crow downstairs. He heard Ma and Dad climb up to bed. The stairs creaked extra loud in the black and cold. Jim held his breath. He tried to make his heart beat less and be still.

If Ma crept in to gather his clothes he would pretend to be sleeping. He would run away in his absolutes, then, with completely nothing. Shannon would buy him a new favorite shirt. He yawned, and shivered, too cold and nervous to be ascared he might really fall asleep.

Jim waited until he heard the click, familiar now. He had almost gotten used to Ma locking him in. That Dean told Ma how to make Jim change. Jim had to knock on the door in the morning, and call, singsong, *Ma-a! I'm ready to come out!*

Jim lay still until he couldn't hear the night moves of Ma and Dad. He

slipped outta bed, soft as the cold and black creeping up his legs. He pulled on his bluejeans and his yellow socks, and put on his rugby shirt. He pressed against the bedroom door to listen. (Maybe the ghost of Farfar walked the old Brandekker house, and he would awaken Dad, and Dad would fetch that musket from the attic, and blow down Jim's bedroom door to show Ma her runaway son.)

Jim bubbled. He boiled inside his favorite clothes. How could he sweat in this cold black? He heard Ma. He was sure he heard Ma. He heard Ma roll over in bed. She would discover her Jimmers. She would walk right through his bedroom door, the way mothers could walk through the bedroom doors of their sons, and in a glance she would recognize a runaway. Jim needed to pee. He couldn't use his bathroom. If Ma heard his flush, or even if she heard his spurtle she would leap to his side, aflame with a fresh conviction that he made a noise to disguise a second escape. Maybe he should pee in the gutter once he climbed out the window. He'd sure like to pee on the old Brandekker house. *Pee off, Dad, with your old house!* But his piddle would rattle in the drainpipe, and Ma would hire a searchlight to spot him on the roof. He would pee on the family plot once he got in Pumpkin Hook Cemetery.

Jim backed away from his bedroom door—and tripped himself—and fell backwards across his bed. He let himself bounce, to make his bed guit squeaking. He wished he had that flashlight he left in the little conservatory. He needed to see. He rolled over to the other side of his bed and switched on the light in the stomach of his clown nightlight. The cold and black became cold and blue. The clown stared at Jim with the face of a kid who would not grow up. Jim yanked the clown over by the cord, and the lamp hit the floor, and the bulb shattered, and sparked, and the cold and black reclaimed the room. Jim heard Ma for sure! He heard Ma ask Dad what was that! Dad mumbled, ummm. Jim inched off his bed. He better go. Just go. He tiptoed to the window. He pressed his nose to the cold, black glass. Go. He pushed the window high as he could. His shadow touched ground with long fingertips. The cold licked his neck, the black nuzzled his chin. The new moon put a finger to his lips, bold and indivisible. The cold was too black for the high house to make Jim dizzy. He sat backwards on

the sill and looked back into his bedroom. He could not tell the cold black inside from the desperate black outtadoors.

Shannon rolled down Auntie's drive in neutral. He did not start his Volkswagen, or turn on his headlights, until he rolled out onto Waterloo Road. He followed the wind to Donald's house. The wind pushed him up the front walk with huge flat hands. Shannon opened the unlocked screen door. His hands shook. The wind held the screen door open against the house. He pushed, and the front door opened. Dark and dark inside. Shannon let in the wind.

"Donald?"

This house had been made into a home for the wind.

A small hand beckoned, warning Shannon to keep quiet.

"I brought the money."

Donald closed and locked the front door. "We'll get caught if you keep talking."

Donald snuck Mad O'Donnelly up to his bedroom. Donald bounced down on the foot of the bed.

Shannon saw magic in the shadow the boy cast on his bedroom wall. "You should look sometimes into the stains of walls. You may find wonderful ideas."

"Huh?"

"Leonardo."

"Listen, faggot, we're not here to play games."

"Leonardo liked to play games with boys. He played the game in the behind with Salai."

"Lemme see the money."

"Just wait and see, Bruce; just wait until I undress. One good show deserves another, the motto of a generous heart. You don't want me to make my escape without a peek at the Naked Faggot. What did you steal my camera for if you don't want to take pictures?"

"Gimme the money and I'll give you pictures!"

"I want to strike a new pose! I'll smile prettily, and thrust my privates at the lens." He dialed a button on Donald's shirt. "Why don't we hop in the sack together? I'll teach you to fetch the stick!"

Donald bashed him. "Don't touch me, faggot!"

Shannon tore off his own black shirt. "I'm going to get naked and ride you to heaven and to hell!" He tossed the first plug of dollars at the ceiling. "And the chief priests took the silver pieces that Judas had thrown into the Temple and said we may not lawfully put this money in the treasury for this is the price of blood!" He threw the second fistful at the window. Twenties, fifties, and one hundred dollar bills fluttered across the carpet and the bed. Shannon twisted off his jeans and his underpants, crippling himself to tug off his boots. "Give me those pictures, Bruce!" He chased Donald around the bed. He beat him with a pillow, until the pillow exploded, feathers everywhere. "Ill fuck you if you don't, I'll fuck you if you do!" He caught Donald, and slammed him down on the bed, leaping aboard. Shannon clawed him, ripping open his shirt. He felt deliciously warm on top of the boy.

Donald squirmed, but he couldn't get free. He wrestled one arm out from under Mad O'Donnelly. He twisted his elbow, and swung the stolen camera out from under the bed. "Here! Take the camera!"

Shannon caught the strap before the camera hit him in the nose. "Keep the camera! I want those pictures!"

"The pictures are here!"

Shannon touched the lens with a long white finger.

"In the camera!"

Shannon made a fist around the lens. "You didn't process the film!"

"Who's gonna process these pictures? These are pictures of faggots! Who's gonna process pictures of faggots? But I took em! You better believe I took em!"

"You took em! You're lethal! You want to destroy me and Brandy for silk threads and green ink! I bet you took em! And I will take you!"

Shannon throttled the boy. The bed collapsed. The bedroom door crashed open.

"Dad!" Donald struggled out from under Mad O'Donnelly, and escaped from the ruined bed. "He's trying to rape me!"

Shannon crossed his eyes, and stuck out his tongue, and charged headlong into Daddy's fist.

Jim crouched in the bushes outside Donald's house, cold but sweaty in his short sleeves. He shivered. He had snagged his socks on the cedar shingles, and his big toes were bloody. Where was Shannon? Jim saw his Volkswagen parked at the curb. How come he dint see Shannon? How come he's taking his time? Maybe Donald changed his mind. Maybe he dint wanna sell. Maybe he wanted more money. Maybe he never had pictures to sell. Maybe he told one whole lie to trap Shannon and show no mercy. Shannon and Jim should be on 1-75 by now, driving North, looking for the new moon, and feeling each other out. Then Jim heard sirens.

Cripes! Maybe Ma had discovered that Jim had run away, and, in her hystericals, she knocked over something hot and set the old Brandekker house on fire. Maybe Dad set the fire on purpose. *If I can't have this nobody will!* Porch lights went on— first Donald's, then across the street, and next door. Jim crouched lower in the shrubbery.

Maybe Donald and his parents would catch Jim in their bushes. They would make him use the telephone to tell lies to Ma and Dad. Ma would chain Jim to the bed, with no clothes on, and feed him protein supplements in suppositories. They would paint his bedroom windows black, and lie to him, telling him Shannon had died along with the sun.

Jim heard shouting and struggle. Sirens got louder. Close, close, getting closer. Police cars went by—Cripes!—Police cars arrived. Police cars parked in jaggy lines to block the street. A police car drove up on the lawn. Policemen drew their guns and trooped into Donald's house.

Jim Brandekker ran.

Wouldn't the policemen stop him? Wouldn't the policemen see? Their flashing sirens made the whole night red. Neighbors crowded; gossip crackled. Donald's Dad came outta Donald's front door, followed by two policemen, dragging somebody between em. Cripes-on-a-hillock! Jim Brandekker ran.

"Shannon!

Shannon!

Shannon!"

A policeman grabbed Jim, and tossed Jim into the crowd (as if Jim had come outta the crowd).

Four policemen led Shannon from Donald's house, his hands cuffed behind him, his hair black as a mutinous river, nothing on but his ratty jeans, his other clothes bundled under his arm. His jeans hung low, giving Jim a stiffy.

"Shannon"

But something worse than policemen had captured Shannon.

"I love you all! I love no one at all!" Shannon yelled.

A policeman pushed his head into the car, like a policeman on t.v., and the police car drove away with the sirens screaming red.

Jim ran into the street. He could not call. He could not yell. Who would hear him if he screamed? He could not even see.

The night chased Shannon downtown, like a lost young boy.

CLASSROOM windows, way-up-high, stood wide open, allowing Indian Summer to bewilder the kids inside.

Jim Brandekker looked up from the crisscrossing blue lines on the blank leaf of his Physics lab book. First quarter days were too hard to bear, even without the extra torment of a pretend summer. How could Jim write a composition on the three states of matter? Jim had a poem on his mind.

Dear Chris

Jim had written to get on target. He wanted to write one of those sonnets.

Wounds of the heart leave wisdom when they heal

How come Jim couldn't imagine nothing more than that one line?

He glanced at Mr. O'Donnelly. For once his Physics teacher dint notice his every move. His teacher had been watching the last hexagonal lab table since Jim took his seat there on the first day of class. The Raven had been staring at Jim since Orientation Day. Jim called his teacher The Raven because his long black hair reminded Jim of Edgar Allan Poe. And because a kid only knows his teachers by their family names, and Jim hated to know anybody by only their family name. The

whiteness of Jims family name above all things appalled him.

The Brandekkers were the whitest family in Stickford. Farfar, Jim's Grandpa—who liked Jim to call him by the Danish endearment—left the Brandekkers more than the largest tract of land in town. He told Jim that the Brandekkers had a mission to be First in the Sight of All. A Brandekker had been the first to burn out the wild peach trees on his property, and subdivide his apple orchard, and open Pumpkin Hook, the first cemetery in town. A Brandekker had been the first to build a cider mill on Cassidy Lake, because a Brandekker had been the first to convince the farmers to band together to grow apples. A Brandekker had been the first to see the value of owning the swampy Michigan lowlands along the Okemus Trail that would remind the original German settlers of their Black Forest homeland. A Brandekker had been the first Danish helmsman on the first Dutch ship to smuggle guns to the American rebels.

Dad had fallen from first place with Farfar after Ma gave birth to five daughters before she gave Dad his first son. And Farfar never forgave Ma for baptizing Jim the first Catholic in his otherwise Lutheran family. Farfar banished Dad for the changes to Pumpkin Hook that Dad called Big Developments. Dad fired the caretaker, who lived in the old mill, and closed the cemetery. And on Labor Day Dad announced plans to demolish the old Brandekker homestead and clear space for his biggest Big Development—the Catholic Academy of Stickford. Ma said, "The time of fulfillment has come!" and Dad said, "We've waited too long," and Farfar died at twilight on the second Saturday of September, and left the whole Brandekker estate to Jim.

Not even the neighbors, who knew the answers before they knew the questions, knew how come Farfar left the Brandekker property to a fourteen-year-old boy. Not even Jim knew how come for sure. He knew he belonged to Farfar more than any other Brandekker ever belonged to him. He stayed with Farfar for hours, as a little kid. He sat in Farfar's lap in his creaky king wicker chair out on the veranda. They walked in the rain under the green green buds. In the summer Farfar would stargaze, holding Jim in his arms. They whitewashed the

cemetery wall with lime, and Farfar told Jim about Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn out loud. They trimmed grass and lilacs, pulled weeds, picked wild peaches. They raked leaves, and shoveled snow off the cobblestone paths. On Halloween Jim sorted his treats with Farfar's help. Farfar snitched Jim's favorite Snickers Bars, then gave em back in bite sizes, snapped behind his back. On Christmas Eve they sipped hot chocolate outta the same mug, until Jim dozed, waiting for Santa. Sometimes they talked in words they made up. And Jim really shared the stuff Farfar had to say. He listened to his stories and his memories. And Farfar whispered the first poems Jim heard. He spoke right into Jim's ear. Those words were real, made outta warm, old breathing that rushed his ear in a spiral, soaked with rum, bay rum, and pipesmoke from the Virginia hills. Jim heard the neighbors on Waterloo Road: "Old Man Brandekker, kooky as a clock, tending his graves like his own son sick in bed." Sunrise thrilled Farfar with the higher purpose of his calling: laying the broken, the ample, the exemplary—his fellow human citizens—to rest. Til Morning Breaks, read a familiar inscription that Farfar encouraged families to cut on the headstones of the Faithful Departed. Til Day Breaks and Shadows Flee. "Words cut in stone are sure things," Farfar told Jim, like he told his clients. And the only thing Jim knew for sure was that now Dad needed his permission to even think about his Big Development. The only thing he knew from Farfar was love.

The peach trees that grew wild around Stickford were the first things that Jim really saw. Small flakes of the white sky were falling. Jim put a hand on the narrow black trunk. He reached as high as he could, and snapped off a brittle twig. Little green green buds dotted the branch. The golden sap had frozen, and the pinchy ants had not returned.

Jim had been first, like all Brandekkers.

Jim had been the first Brandekker to get the measles. A dark was in his room. His ghosts danced on the foot of his bed. His skin felt hot and itchy. Ma put a huge cool hand on his head. Wooden logs, Lincoln Logs, iron wheels as big as worlds, rolled down from the ceiling with the press of her hand.

"How's my baby Jimmers?"

Dr. MacKenna had huge hot hands. "Measles. Ill give him an injection."

"Roll over on your tummy, Jimmers."

The Doctor's words pinched and burned.

The black funeral limousine that dropped Jim off and picked Jim up from kindergarten made Jim the first kid to scare the kids at school. They said they bet Jim lived with ghosts, and they pushed him down on the playground. He always had skinned knees. The one suddenly warm spring day he walked home alone he kept the winter coat Ma made him wear zippered up to his chin, chewing on the drawstring of his hood, and ladies gossiping on a porch watched him march past at attention, with his most serious mouth, and laughed. He frowned for his first school picture, wearing chocolate corduroys with suspenders, a bow tie, and his goldenrod shirt with the yellow dragon cross-stitched on the pocket.

Jim had been the first kid to get sick to his stomach the first day of first grade. Sister Dominic Michel told him to put his head down, and Jim told Sister he wanted to go home. She took him to the boys' lav. Her rosary beads rattled on the stall door while Jim stooped inside and pretended to spit up. She wiped his cheeks with cool water and patted his forehead with a stale tissue she took from the sleeve of her habit.

"If I send you home you'll miss our fairy tale. I'm going to tell a fairy tale about dragons. Boys are very fond of dragons, aren't they?"

"Don't dragons," Jim said to Sister, "like little boys?"

Sister kept a box of gold stars to stick on good foreheads, and a box of black dots to mark the foreheads of bad boys.

Jim got so sick in his stomach he became the first Brandekker to spend

two weeks in the hospital.

"Milk allergy," Dr. MacKenna diagnosed. "We'll keep check. We don't want him to develop a calcium deficiency. We want Jim to grow up to do what boys have to do."

Ma and Dad stood over his narrow bed. Jim looked desperate and frail. Jim looked puny.

Jim got all Cs on his first card marking that semester, because of absenteeism, but Sister Marie Gregory hugged him when Ma brought him back to class. The sleeves of her habit smelled like Snowy Bleach, but she had a rusty stain on the cuff. The other kids told Jim they bet he had cancer when he swallowed the vial of medicine that Dr. MacKenna made Ma pack in his lunch.

Jim had been the first boy to make his First Communion on Mother's Day that year. The boy who knelt beside Jim told Sister Jim touched the Host, and, on Monday, Sister called Jim up to her desk. The other kids did what Sister told em to do and folded their hands.

Sister flicked dust off her desk. "Donald Wilkes says you touched the Host."

The altar boy laid the golden paten under his chin, and Father Burns lifted a Host from the ciborium, dipped the wafer in the chalice, and held the sacrament out to Jim.

"Body of Christ."

Consecrated wine, gold with True Faith in Him, flowed along the disk of unleavened bread. The body of God—transubstantiated (the first difficult word Jim learned) into a saving feast for the Faithful. Jim had seen the Son of Man in his first nightmare, slumped in a heavenly warehouse, his face ripped to bleedy shreds to please the hunger of pilgrims: the Lamb of God. *Behold! This is my Beloved Son, on whom my smiles glimmer!* Jim opened his mouth and Father put the body of God on his tongue. Half melted—Jim was too afraid he'd taste blood if

he chewed—but half stuck to his bottom lip—and Jim became the first kid in class to touch the Host.

Jim looked Sister in the eye. Nuns who could no longer see baked the Hosts. They shaped the water and wheat flour, and stamped the circles with the initials of God, like happy creatures preparing the patterns for the flowers of spring.

"No," Jim told Sister, "That ain't true."

"Isn't" Sister insisted. "We do not say ain't, we say isn't."

The Mass darkened after Jim Brandekker lied. His lie attacked his stomach as soon as the Elevation began, and Jim froze at the Communion rail, unable to approach the sacrament. Finally, Jim spit up on the floor during the *Dominic Has Some Dinkus*, and Sister took him to a chapel in the basement of the convent to find out what about the Mass made Jim Brandekker throw up. Sister backed Jim up against an ebony piano. A crucifix glowered in agony above his head, a trellis of ivy covering the bleedy feet of the Saviour. Jim wiped a string of sour drool on his sleeve.

"What is wrong, Mister Brandekker? We can't have you getting sick every time we go to Mass. Does Mass make you sick?"

"I got ghosts in my spine!" Jim cried hard, and confessed his lie. And Sister made Jim donate his milk money to the missions until he ransomed his own pagan baby.

Sister Ellen Richard had Room One Hundred, a room with two doors—one that opened onto junior high, and the other that returned a boy to elementary school—and she let Jim know he balanced pre-carious-ly between these two possibilities. She called Jim a *very bold individual*, and slapped him, when he talked back when she caught him giving milk money to another boy. "But I like this boy!" Jim protested. "I like him!"

Jim spent his grade school summers playing alone in Pumpkin Hook.

He'd pack a peanut butter and tuna fish sandwich and spend the whole day in the cemetery. He'd pretend to be the Lord of Ghosts, wearing a beard from Farfar's Santa suit, and toting the musket he found in the attic. He'd warn away trespassers with a jolly rogers skull & crossbones, and skinnydip in Cassidy Lake, and spy on boys on the other side of the fence of the Windmill Point Technical School for Boys. When the night promised to be clear Ma would let Jim sleep out in the abandoned mill on the shore of the lake. Jim liked to lay in his sleeping bag, with no clothes on, laying under the hole in the roof, holding his breath the moment the world turned from twilight into night, the rafters becoming the skeleton of a slain beast, stars shining between the ribs, Jim himself the wounded heart.

Miss Murray, Jim's sixth grade teacher, had been the first teacher to understand Jim. She talked about Impressions and Expressions, and scribbled swirly-legged stickmen on the board. She made the class cut banners outta burlap and felt, and she made the best comments on the banners Jim made. She laughed out loud at the especially nifty, Jim thought witty, pun he glued in four colors plus white on purple: *I Dream of Jesus with the Light Brown Hair*, and she honest-to-gosh admired the speech Jim made to introduce his second slogan, *Give Peace a Chance*.

"Everybody's talking, the song's so popular, but nobody's giving peace a chance. We gotta stop protesting; we gotta stop the parades; we gotta be quiet, because if we aren't, how we gonna listen, how we gonna care?"

Miss Murray let Jim clap erasers, and empty wastebaskets. She let Jim correct spellers, and English papers. And one Thursday afternoon, when Jim stayed in from recess to help change a bulletin board, she asked Jim if he wrote poetry. Jim told her he dint, but all-a-sudden Jim Brandekker knew what he wanted to be. Jim crossed to the grown-up side of the library for the first time, looking for poem books, and Miss Murray herself gave Jim a copy of *The Oxford Book of American Verse* for keeps, for Christmas.

For the next two years Jim filled every free minute with poetry. He

recited poems in one voice with Farfar, and they were both delighted. He read Britannica articles on prosodeia, meter and rhyme. All the money he earned working with Farfar he spent on poem books. He bought a *Nothing Book* to Express his Impressions. Farfar bought him Skeat on etymology, and *The Capricorn Rhyming Dictionary*. He struggled through Aristode's *Poetics*. And he discovered his own favorite poets, Emily Dickinson, William Blake, and Leonard Cohen. He stayed up until the small hours to memorize poems, and, most of all, he kept his own poems a secret.

Other boys in grade school had called Jim names because he skipped gym class because of his nervous stomach. He spent the hour in the library reading poem books he brought to school. Bringing books to school also made other boys call him names. If other boys found out Jim wrote poems they would really label him queer.

What did that word mean, anyhow? Queer. Skeat said strange, odd. The word had traveled south, a flea in a convict's wool coat, crossing the ice into green weather with a bad temper. Well, Jim guessed writing poems did seem strange to other boys. But other boys meant that Jim had those feelings for boys that only girls are supposed to have. Usually, other boys only stole his speller, or played keepaway with his poem books, or wrestled Jim if they caught him walking home alone from school. Once other boys Scotchtaped a sign to Jim's back: I Suck Dicks and I'm Proud. Jim knew what other boys meant by dicks. (Jim dint need to look that word up in Skeat. Skeat dint list the word, anyway.) Every boy had his own dick, inbetween his legs, with his balls hanging below it. When Jim heard that word dick his own dick got stiff — popped a boner, other boys called that—feeling the way it felt when Jim mashed the grass out in Pumpkin Hook, tracing a drawing in one of William Blake's *Illuminated Books*. Jim wondered how other dicks looked—especially the dicks of older boys. Probably husky and hairy. Jim had noticed his own hair sprouting down there, pale yellow, too, like the hair on his head, or his eyebrows and eyelashes. Sometimes Jim hid in the mill, and pulled down his jeans and his underpants, and stared at it—not daring to touch it—because Ma yelled at him "Don't hold yourself!"—but it smiled up at him all-the-same.

Jim had to be the first boy in line for his grade school graduation, the shortest boy in his class, at just an inch over five feet tall. Sunlight warmed the back seat, and flooded Jim with even warmer relief as Dad drove em home after the ceremony. A whole summer stretched before Jim: three months to read the three volume *History of English Prosody* that Miss Murray gave Jim as a graduation present.

Then Dad announced that Ma had decided to send Jimmers to summer camp.

"Camp seems far away, Jimmers, but Tahquamenon Falls is only in the Upper Peninsula."

Jim burped.

"Did you pack your stomach capsules? Behave yourself. Don't roughneck."

The other boys in line at the bus station watched Jim. He swung his duffel aboard his shoulder, and Dad sternly gripped his hand.

Ma held Jimmers by both shoulders. "We'll visit one weekend of each month." She patted the back of his neck, and kissed his cheek: goodbye.

Jim could feel other boys looking.

A man in the camp uniform blew three blasts on his whistle, and Jim lugged his gear aboard with the other boys. He found a seat by himself, towards the rear, near a window. The chartered bus moved out past the lights, climbing a tunnel onto the street. The sky had no color. The buildings were blocks of stone. Jim tried to concentrate on the first volume of Saintsbury, but the other boys began to sing—a dumbo drinking song with a hundredsome verses. He let the ride jounce him.

He couldn't doze. He read the first paragraph through without pause, fixing his eyes on the final period. He had missed the sense, and the jostled letters queased his stomach.

"This seat taken?"

Jim looked up. A boy stood beside the bench, rocking with the bus to keep his balance. He had hair the gold Rumpelstilt-skin might spin, and eyes the hazel of willow leaves under water.

"This seat taken?"

Soft, Jim answered, "No."

"I've been visiting my Grandma in Stickford," the boy said,

as if he needed some excuse to sit beside Jim. "You don't live in Stickford?"

"I live in Traverse City. I don't know any kid on this bus." "Sure you do. Now you do. Now you know me."

Rain began to fall as soon as the bus left the freeway. The exit broadened into a two-lane highway Puddles reflected the pine trees that stood along the road. The bus had quieted, many of the boys asleep, some sullen, most simply bored. Rain fell faster, in long waves along the metal roof. The wipers flipped water off the windshield.

Miles had gone by, and Jim had not moved his hand. Christopher slept, with his head on Jim's shoulder, and Jim burrowed his nose in Christopher's hair, inhaling the gold of body heat and shampoo.

The bus lumbered past drippy trees, and Jim could smell pine and rain, and then he got a glimpse of stark log buildings through the pines. The bus turned down a dirt road, and other boys cheered the entrance to the camp.

Three men wearing yellow slickers huddled on the porch of a cabin. Jim heard their laughter when the driver shut off his engine, or maybe he mistook the rain for acclamation. The other boys shuffled to life, shouting out the windows, waving, slinging their gear. Delighted, a man on the porch lit his cigar.

Jim woke Chris gently. "Chris? I guess we're here." Jim could not believe the softness of his own voice in the commotion of the unloading bus.

"Climb aboard!"

Chris straddled a cedar that had toppled into the pool at the bottom of the Upper Falls.

Jim liked straying off the trail with Chris. Chris held out a hand and helped Jim to board the log. Jim locked his hands together in front of his crotch. Underneath the shaggy bark the wood had rotted, hot and black. Jim dangled his legs to keep his balance. Chris stared at Jim's wrists.

"You ain't gonna fall."

"We don't say ain't, we say isn't"

"You isn't gonna fall?"

Jim giggled. He brought his foot aboard the log. "My shoe's untied."

Chris pulled the floppy laces tight, comparing the unequal lengths. The plastic aglets had been bitten. "You chew your shoelaces?"

"Only when I'm worried."

"I bet you bite your toenails, too."

"Check and see."

Chris held Jim, toe and heel, and scooped off his sneaker. "Cripes! Don't you wash your socks?"

"Clothes aren't comfortable until you wear em at least three days."

"I'm not touching anything that smells that bad."

Jim rolled off his sock. "I like the smell." He wiggled his toes at Chris. "Take a whiff."

Chris caught Jim's feet and held em together at the ankle.

Jim did three quick sit-ups. "One foot hiding, one foot bare, tell me how do they compare?" He clapped. "I can always make a rhyme."

"I forgot. You're a poet."

Jim shrugged.

"You ever hear of a poet name Strato, Jim? Strato of Sardis? He lived a whole long time ago, on some old island."

"What poems did he write?"

"Lemme see if I can remember—"

Boys cocks got three phases

Say those in the know,

Leave em alone, they whimper,

Get em to swell, they ring,

But when a hand yanks em

Can those pricks sing!

Chris laughed.

Jim puzzled. "What're cocks?"

Chris laughed louder. "You're funny! And you got funny feet!"

"My second toes just longer than my thumb."

"That's not a thumb!"

"That toe has got the thumb spot on my foot."

"They're still funny! They're funny because they've got thumbs! And because they smell."

"Sweat smells like hay, or grass."

"I'd hate to smell your underwear."

"I'll sniff yours if you'll sniff mine."

"Shortarm inspection, huh?"

"Huh?"

Chris crossed his legs around the log. He unclasped his bluejeans, and unzipped, showing Jim the knap in his underwear. "You go first." Chris bedeviled Jim. "Your ideer."

Jim studied the twin blue stripes stitched into the waistband. "Fruit-of-the-Looms, huh?"

Chris lowered his jeans. "Official! My Mom buys only the best!"

"I wear little kids underwear," Jim said.

"What brand?"

Jim fumbled his own jeans open. "I dunno. My ma buys em in the little kids department. The red stripes give em away."

Chris snookered Jim's briefs. "Those're racing stripes—"

Jim giggled, tickled. (Embarrassed, too—nobody had ever touched Jim down there.)

"—means you're always horny." Chris dug his hand as far as he could into Jim's jeans. "Cripes! Is your dick as big as your balls?"

Jim pumped his legs. "Time for that sniff." He ducked in and brushed his lambent nose along a seam of those Fruit-of-the-Looms. He inhaled, and the boy inside got bigger. The boy smell filled his mouth: poultry seasoning and cotton candy

"Ummm, ummm, good, huh?"

Jim gasped. "Pine and clover! You smell like the woods, maybe rain. Your turn!"

"This'll be gross!"

"A promise is a promise is a deal—"

Chris plied his open mouth against the front of Jims underpants. He licked the inside of Jim's fly, found Jims acorn near the waistband, and frogged Jim, his nose in Jims bellybutton. He slurped, and sat up. "Piss and apples!"

Jim rollicked, and protected his slobbered-up underpants. "French cooking!" A good feeling banged between his hips.

"A biology experiment!"

Jim held Chris by his shoulders. And Chris coaxed him, pinching the tab of his zipper. "You do smell good. Hey—you wanna see me?"

Jim showed the even spaces between his white teeth when he smiled.

Chris swaggered back, and pulled down his underpants. Sparse, sandy-brown hair sprinkled his tummy above his sleek, young boner.

"You're—-jumping!"

"You turn me on!"

That dick transfixed Jim. Showing Jim his boner made Christopher the first bold individual Jim had ever seen.

"Touch it!"

"I better not."

"Don't you wanna give it a long kiss? Maybe I'll come."

"You—better not."

"Okay, I promise not to come in your mouth."

Jim retreated. "We—we better get back to camp."

"Huh? What about you?"

"Me?" Jim let one shiver escape. "I got the chills."

Jim lay awake all night for a reason he could feel but he could not name, listening to the sound of Christopher sleeping in the bunk overhead. Jim snuck out at dawn, hopping across the yard that divided the bunkhouse from the counselors' offices. Ashes circled the remains of the sing-along fire. Jim sprinted past the showerstalls. His bare feet left skeleton footprints in the wet sand. He stopped to catch his breath, his shadow trailing, long as the shadows of the pines. Morning advanced with a forward spy of fog. A crow called, suspicious of blond boys. Jim skipped over a tree root, and scampered, jackrabbit, into the woods. He made his way to the pool at the bottom of the Upper Falls. He lay down on the grass, feeling the earth turn over the ghosts in his

spine, trying to forget what was just a feeling.

A hand flipped the bangs outta his eyes, and Jim jumped, clunking his forehead on a chin. "Christopher!"

"Who else could I be?" Chris scoffed. He squatted in the fallen pine needles.

"What are you doing up, Chris?"

"I heard you get up and I followed you."

Jim could feel the deep sky, where the blue deepened and ended. He looked over the pool to keep from looking Christopher in the eyes. The bank smelled of rain and pine and boys. He could smell Christopher sitting close by—a faint smell of sweat, and Johnson & Johnson's. Gloom swung from the low branches, the pines troubled by humidity. That toppled cedar had sunk deeper into the pool. Jim drew an hourglass in the earth with a stone: two triangles touching tip to base. He looked at Christopher. The breeze tossed his hair. His eyes shined. "We go home tomorrow, Chris." Jim looked away fast. The breeze turned into a wind, blowing southbound, and burning with wishes: a wish to sit beside Christopher for every day of forever. The wish rose from somewhere behind his ribs, tootling a tune on a fishbone flute. The sad notes floated upward on a tousle of unspoken breath. His eyes bubbled. "We're—friends—aren't we, Chris?"

"We're best friends."

"You're not gonna forget about me?"

"We can write!"

"I like writing letters!"

"And I'll send you a Christmas card. A Hallmark! With stars all over the cover!"

Jim burst with grace. "What's the card gonna say!"

Chris towered, wearing light and shadow like a crown of gold and iron. "Merry Christmas to my best friend—"

Jim put up his hand. "Don't say nothing!" He threw his drawing stone into the pool. "Just—sit by me. Okay?"

Chris sat closer than before, pressing his leg against Jim's. "What's bothering you, Jim?"

"Nothing bothers me."

"You can tell me. You know I'll listen."

"I'm sick."

"You mean you don't feel good?"

"What I feel is sick!"

"Do you hurt?"

Jim nodded, his head as heavy as one of those boulders about to tumble into the Falls.

"What hurts you, Jim?"

Jim sniffled. "You."

Christopher stared. And his stare trailed like a highway of smoke above Jim's shoulder. Chris put his arm around Jim, and Jim crumpled against Chris, like a burnt leaf. Chris smelled good as honey, like a boy who had run a long way in the rain. Chris put his mouth near Jim's ear. "Did I ever tell you that I like you, Jim? I mean, I like everything about you." They sat close. They sat so close they bumped noses. "I mean, I even like that you're another boy."

Jim swallowed hard, his face strawberry. His tongue throbbed against the backs of his teeth. His dick smiled.

Chris brushed his lips across the corner of Jim's mouth, eager to get Jim to open his smile. Their beaver teeth clipped, and they swapped tongues, clumsy and juvenile. Just as they fell back, mashing the grass, the shout broke em apart—

Donald Wilkes ran along the shore. "Fags! Christ, Brandekker!"

Jim wrote Chris letters. He got a legal tablet outta Farfar's rolltop desk, and carried the pad around with him, writing Chris about everything, anyhow. He sent Chris his own poems. He guessed he sounded schoolgirl, confessing that he hugged his pillow every night, pretending to share his bed with Christopher. Ma said this pen pal was healthy, and Dad said nothing at all.

Farfar had plenty to say the last day he saw Jim.

Jim got into his first argument with Ma that day, over his favorite shirt.

Ma made Jim waste his last Saturday of summer shopping for school clothes. They argued at Thorn McAn, because Jim wanted to buy green Jox running shoes instead of the penny loafers Ma liked. They fought for thirty minutes before Ma let Jim buy red high-top Converse All-Pros.

"You can just pick out the rest of your school clothes yourself!"

At K-Mart, Ma busied herself in Household while Jim bought his own underwear and socks. (Ma reminded Jim three times what size underpants he wore.) Jim sheeped back, and surprised Ma while she considered buying an imitation antique lamp. He handed over a wad of dollars, and Ma counted his change as she put the money back in her purse.

"You've given me too much change, Jimmers. Were your socks on sale?"

"Nope."

"Did you buy six sets?"

"Yep."

"That cashier must have shortchanged herself. Let me check that receipt."

Inside the bag were two packages of size fourteen Boys On Track briefs, and six pairs of yellow socks.

"Jimmers, you forgot to buy undershirts."

"I'm not wearing undershirts. I'm saving you money."

"Your poor health and you're not wearing undershirts?"

"Boys my age don't wear undershirts."

"Your Father wears undershirts and he's a grown man! And why yellow socks?"

"I don't like white socks, Ma."

"Than why not blue, or brown, or black, or grey?"

"Well, red socks would give away the color of the stripes in the elastic of my underpants."

"Who's going to see the elastic of your underpants?"

Finally, after Jim stormed away from the saleswoman at Hudsons (who merely wanted to measure his inseam) they ended up at J C Penney shopping for shirts.

Jim dodged a spinner rack, brushing a ring of short-sleeved rugby shirts. He stared at their circus stripes. He stared after em.

"Don't you see any shirts you like, Jimmers?" Ma wandered the length of an aisle, then came back to Jimmers, since he dawdled. She trilled her fingers, and chose a sports shirt from a rack of permanent press. "Look at this shirt, Jimmers. Just your size. Just your style." Ma looked around behind for her son.

Jim slouched against a mirrored pillar, his tongue squirreling his cheek, still slyly inspecting the wheel of rugger shirts. He went to Ma, glancing back over his shoulder at those striped shirts. He smoothed his palm over the package that Ma held out to him. The cellophane stuck to his skin. A thin mustard stripe was woven into the powder blue cloth. The collar buttoned down.

"You can wear this shirt with those navy blue corduroys. This stripe would go well with your hair—since you're so concerned about stripes."

"Ma!"

"I don't understand why you won't wear polyester trousers. Polyester trousers hold their creases. They look fresh at the end of the day. Why don't we at least look at the polyester trousers since we're in this department? You need at least one pair of dressy pants. What will you wear for school pictures?"

"I got that dumbo suit."

"You look very handsome in your blue suit. As-a-matter-of-fact, this shirt will complement your blue suit."

Jim wagged his wrist, and the wrapper pealed off his fingers, and the package dropped back onto the counter.

"You need at least one more shirt. All you've purchased is that awful gingham thing."

"I like my new Levis shirt a whole lot."

"Levis! Those pre-washed jeans you had to have weren't enough! Honestly! Allowing a boy to wear his bluejeans to school! Why doesn't St. Agnes have a dress code? That Levis shirt costs twice as much as these."

"I don't like these shirts."

"Well, do you see any shirts that you do like?"

Jim pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "I'm gonna buy me one of those red-and-white rugby shirts."

"Uh uh. No, sir. No son of mine is attending school dressed like an American flag."

But Ma did buy Jim his red-and-white rugby shirt at J C Penney. And the day before Orientation Day a package arrived addressed to Jim, from Lands' End, and inside were blue-and-white, red-and-blue, and red-and-white rugby shirts mono-grammed with the Brandekker family name, and the card attached said From Ma.

Jim hauled his package up to his room, feeling muddy and sluggish. Maybe he better take a nap, or take a shower, or take a pill, or something. He dropped his bags and his shoe box on his bed, and dug out his new rugby shirt. That store dint stick pins in knit shirts. Jim just snipped the plastic string on the price tag with his teeth, and pulled off his blue oxford shirt. His skin smelled sassy, like honey and sassafras. He tugged on his new rugby shirt. He left the bright collar open, and unmussed his hair.

The shirt felt scratchy, and starchy, and felt too new to be his. Blond hair looked good, splashing these striped shoulders, the open collar showing off his collar bones. He stretched the collar lower on his chest. That looked nifty: those collar bones set off in a v of red-and-white.

The shirt fit his ribs and belly like a sock. Maybe Jim could make Ma take a picture of him in his neat shirt to send to Christopher.

Jim skedaddled to his bed. He had stashed his legal tablet under the pillow he liked to pretend he could shape into Christopher.

"Looking for something Jacy?"

Jim dint need to look behind him. Only Farfar called him Jacy—for J C: James Crispian Brandekker —the next in line. Jim looked under his pillow. All he found was empty space.

Farfar came all the way into the room. He closed the door. "Could you tell I came in here while you were shopping with your Mother, Jacy?"

Jim still dint look. He looked under his pillow a second time, looking for wishes. "I can tell."

"I meant to make you a gift. I meant to put a little gift under your pillow. You read poems in bed, don't you?"

"I sneak. I read by flashlight."

Farfar put both arms around Jim, showing Jim a book he held in his hands. Jim looked down at Farfar's hands. His hands looked bigger than normal, and made the book look small: *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. "This is my favorite poet."

Jim took the book in both hands. "I never read Yeats."

"Yeats. Rhymes with gates."

Jim grinned. "To find the Western Path" Jim wanted to turn round to face Farfar. He couldn't try. Farfar stood too close for Jim to try. "Right through the Gates of Wrath."

Farfar held Jim tightly from behind—he dint really hug Jim, he sorta strangled him around his heart. "Wrath? Lemme tell you about wrath, Boy. Wrath is when people coldly forsake you when you don't become who you are. You're a Brandekker, Boy You're not made to be playing secrets in the dark."

Jim looked at his own hands. His hands looked small, like pale stems. His hands looked silly. "Did you read my—"

"Your *letters?* Is that what you call em? Your letters to your *boyfriend?*"

Jim wiped his eyes, then his nose, on his wrist. "Don't—"

Jim gave up his body, to make Farfar hug him.

"This is wrong, boy! This is wrong for you! You're next in line!"

Jim cried; he could not answer. He let one word escape in one evaporating breath. "I—"

"You *love* him." Farfar took a big breath, to give his heart room. "Don't you, Jim?"

Jim screwed a palm into each eye, leaving a thornprint of tears in the centers of his hands. "Same as I love you—"

Then Jim saw Farfar face to face. Farfar's eyes were disappearing. And Jim never saw Farfar's eyes again.

September turned cold before Indian Summer, and when no letters came from Christopher Jim began to dream. Mostly in the mornings, scrunched up tight with his pillow, a wool skeleton of heat doing a tincan shoulder dance in the register, Jim walked into the deeps of himself, losing the will to do anything but want, wanting Christopher as truly as Jim knew he was a boy himself.

The freshmen were scheduled for Orientation at St. Agnes the last

humid Friday of August. The kids waited outside the back doors of the cafeteria, boys mostly talking to other boys, girls mostly talking to other girls, all the kids mostly talking to kids they knew from grade school. Jim sat alone on the grass, looking the other kids over with prowly eyes. He recognized a couple—he recognized Donald Wilkes—but he dint wanna know any of em. The janitor unchained the doors at twelve-thirty, and the Dean put the boys and girls in separate lines. The Dean came over and stood behind Jim, and nudged Jim between his butt with a toe.

"What is the matter, Young Man, legs not working today?" The freshmen were marched inside in groups of nine. They were issued book lists, school numbers, and photographed for IDs. They assembled in the cafeteria to hear the Principal encourage em to excel. His words echoed, big but dull.

Other boys jostled Jim, herded outside the gym, to wait to get into the book sale.

The Dean trooped by em. "Give people room, please!" He looked especially at Jim. "Do you want to stick your nose in the other person's armpit?"

They let the boys into the book sale six at a time. Table by table, upperclassmen dumped another new textbook on the frosh. Jim held his stack of books in both arms, his arms fully extended. His hip pockets burned, and he looked behind him to see The Raven staring at him from behind a stack of Physics text books.

Jim was the only freshman in Science and English classes fulla seniors, bumped ahead because he got exceptional grades on his entrance exams, and the Dean convinced Ma to enroll Jim in an accelerated curriculum.

Ma held Jim's hand all through their interview with the Dean.

"Your son is an intelligent boy." The Dean patted his hands together, his pudgy face crayon red, like something wicked trying to keep warm.

"He will be a great man someday."

Ma and Dean Haarman looked at Jim askance, as if they expected his head to explode from their recommendations.

"He has—good looking percentiles."

"Thank you, Father Haarman."

"Call me Fritz, please." The Dean dug in his pockets, then parked his hand under Jim's nose. "Would you like a gumdrop?"

Rain could bring the truth, not just Indian Summer. Bored yawny by the silent science fiction movie on t.v. to read Lord of the Flies, Jim spent last Saturday missing Chris, sitting out on the veranda, his butt on the edge of Farfar's creaky wicker chair, leaning on the railing, sucking on the salty taste in the crook of his elbow. Rain trickled off the brink of the roof. Jim could smell rain on the grass, and on the granite and marble in Pumpkin Hook, mingled with the smell of his own spit on his skin, and on the fine yellow hairs on his arm. A dove called softly, lost in the rain, her mate elsewhere— you you o you —so lonely. Only Chris could make Jim so lonely. Jim wiped away a tear of rain. He could smell his own movements inside his shirt, the smell of the faith he had sweated out over another boy, a musk of teenage sorrow. Could Jim change rain, or change a dove, or change another boy just because he wrote him letters? How could rain, simple rain, change his lonesomeness into hope? And could Chris be mutually lonely?

I love Chris! Jim told nobody, nowhere. Cripes! I love another boy!

Jim ran his baby finger along a ballpoint canyon rivered with ink that scratched a word in the top of his lab table

FAG

Somebody had carved that word in this spot before Jim started high school, but the coincidence made the classroom seem aloof from Stickford, as singular as a place composed solely of air. Jim could smell Indian Summer, smells which spoke with the pointy tang of yellow wild peach trees that shed bright leaves in the water of Cassidy Lake, the lake almost purple in the shadow of the empty mill.

The stuff that Jim wanted was the stuff that would fly like a red warning flag in this high blue air. The people who made Stickford would capture Jim late on a school night. They would coat his hands with hot wax, so he couldn't feel, and pinch his nose in a steel vise, so he would sound funny when he tried to shout or plead. The people who made Stickford could care less for a boy who knew that raindrops had names; who knew the wind had a heart and bones and feelings; who knew ghosts hoarded his fears in a goatskin bag.

Jim snuck a look out the classroom windows under the crook of his arm. The armpit of his red-and-white striped rugby shirt smelled secure. Jim had gotten away with wearing his favorite shirt from Monday to Friday without changing, and he sure needed extra security.

Tonight the Future Festival Dad had planned to support his Big Development began, and every kid at St. Agnes had to have sold their quota of raffle tickets to show their support for the new Academy. Next period, second period, when Jim's Physics Lab began, Mr. Rice will switch on the p.a. and ask the teachers to collect final returns, and Jim—the son of the sponsor of the Festival; the son of the builder of the new Academy—remained the only kid in class who hadn't sold a single ticket.

Nobody would catch Jim going house to house with a please-please-me smile, begging his neighbors along Waterloo Road, or pestering

alumni, or flashing his school i.d. at shoppers going into or out of Bleuchers Supermarket; and he dint mean to make Ma and Dad and his sister fork over fifty dollars a buck at a time—besides, Meg had her own quota to sell. Jim dint care whose son he was.

Every other Friday of the dumbo drive the teachers hosted a rally in the gym to coax the students to sell their quotas. Dad even showed up at the first rally and made an embarrassing speech. Jim concealed himself in the top corner of the bleachers, as far away from the student body as possible, until last Friday when Donald Wilkes (pro-bab-ly) got the other kids chanting his name.

"Brandekker! Brandekker!"

Jim cringed like a rabbit. Other boys rassled him, and lifted Jim over their heads—like a boy to be sacrificed to the Beast—and passed him down the side of the bleachers. He felt their hot hands under his rugby shirt, and behind his knees, and even inside his thighs

"Brandy?"

A mere whisper.

Jim looked up. Cripes! The Raven!

The Raven smiled, lolling his head, his long black hair touching his left shoulder, and holding out a ballpoint pen in one long white magic hand. "You dropped your pen, Brandy. Here."

Jim shivered beneath the fragile protection of his shirt. He accepted his pen.

The Raven had eyes the green that glory must be, and a girly nose sprinkled with freckles. He had hands a swan would have if swans had hands instead of wings.

"Thanks. I was—thinking—"

"Dreaming, you mean." The Raven examined the lab book spread open

in front of Jim.

Sweaty palms had rumpled the top sheets, and skinny elbows had cratered the bottom corners.

O'Donnelly read the minuscule, circular writing along the bottom edge of the top page.

Wounds of the heart leave wisdom when they heal

What's that? A poem? A line of poetry. "You haven't written a word of your composition, Brandy."

Brandy? Who? "I can't think of something to say." Why make fun of my name? Why talk to me?

"Don't say you can't!" The Raven touched Jim's hand. "Don't ever say you can't! There was a time when you couldn't walk." He returned slowly to the front of the room.

The senior sitting next to Jim leaned over, screening his interest with his own composition. "Whasamatter, did Mad O'Donnelly cop a feel?"

Jim slouched, and scowled, and stared at his knuckles where The Raven had touched his hand. Jim had heard a rumor that this senior had got caught kissing a sophomore in the boys' joh. Of course, no sophomore would be believed even if he told the truth about an upperclassman. But what underclassman would dare tell lies about a senior? Randy Biswanger sure dint look like a fag. He had brown eyes, as alive as sparrows, and beachstreaked hair the burnish of raw chestnuts. Close by he smelled clean as rain on pine. And Jim refused the rides that Ma and Meg offered him, eager to watch Randy jog to school. Jim listened for the sound of swift feet, and turned slowly, and stepped off the shoulder of the road, and Randy appeared, coming out into the sunlight from beneath the peach trees, frost smoking around his blue Nikes. Sweat glistened on his chest, and spangled the dark hair on his arms and legs, and the darker hair curling up inside the legbands of his skimpy lemon shorts.

Jim had seen Randy where Randy worked, too, at Wellingtons bookstore. Jim saw him when he went to special order a translation of Sappho, and he noticed Randy shelving books. Jim ordered his book, watching Randy all-the-while over his shoulder. Randy stayed in one section a long while. Jim ducked down the aisle behind him, and stood on tiptoes to see what sorta books kept Randy interested. Randy had taken time out to study a big white paperback in Sex Education. Jim tried to see the title, but Randy shifted from foot to foot, and blocked his view. Jim hung around History, hoping, then not hoping, that Randy would notice him; then not knowing how come he hoped at all. The man from the Special Order desk came and shelved a book right next to Jim.

"Do you have another question?"

"Nope. No, Sir." Jim checked to see if Randy recognized his voice, but another customer went up to the register and Randy had to go ring. Jim ducked into Sex Education. He picked up the book that Randy had left outtaplace, just as he heard the doorbell chime, and, before Jim could read the title, he looked up to see The Raven enter the shop. The Raven noticed Jim right away; he came right up to Jim, staring, and he looked, and smiled at the book Jim was reading. Jim looked down at the book, to keep from smiling at The Raven, and made big eyes: Cripes! *The Joy of Gay Sex!* The man from the Special Order desk looked across the aisle.

"Young man, would you look at a different book, please?"

Randy seized the lab book from in front of Jim. "Lets at least make Mad O'Donnelly worry."

"Hey! Gimme back my book!" Randy scribbled, then held up the page for Jim to read:

Jimmy and O'Donnelly

Sitting in a tree

K-I-S-S-I-N-G

And Randy had encircled the message with a valentine heart.

The girl sitting across from Jim grabbed the lab book from Randy. "Think that up yourself?" She tossed the lab book back to Jim. "What the Blond wants to do he won't have to do in closets."

Randy flipped her off.

The girl puckered. "How about tonight?"

Jim knew little about Wendy Paulson, plenty about her reputation. Other boys said she'd do anything, with any boy, all a boy had to say was "Sounds like fun," or "Come on over." A slut—that's what Ma would call Wendy (if Ma knew all about her) a vixen feeding on young boys and birth control pills. But Wendy dint paint her face the way Jim heard purple women painted their faces. Sure, she wore her jeans too tight, and even Jim could see she dint wear a bra, but Jim was best friends with her brother, Moose, and Wendy was best friends with Jim's sister Meg, and if Ma knew Wendy's reputation Ma would never let Wendy sleep over with Meg, or see so much of Jim. Jim dint worry that he saw too much of Wendy. He worried because Wendy worked part-time for the Brandekker's family doctor, and their family doctor was the team doctor, and Moose had convinced Jim to go out for football, and fourth period Jim had to report to the nurse's office for his team physical. Jim worried because Wendy might see too much of him.

"Bubbles!" The Raven proclaimed from the front of the room, like a man discovering the Grail. "Let's perform a little experiment!"

Jim groaned. How come they're late calling for ticket returns? Even total disgrace in front of a class full of seniors beat Physics experiments—even if the experiments The Raven conducted were funny.

Twenty-eight-year-old Shannon O'Donnelly had taught what he called Natural Philosophy, and what the course catalog listed as Physics, for five years at St. Agnes. He had gotten through Michigan States Physics and Education program in three years, his education a previous experiment. Mad O'Donnelly earned his reputation in less time. He wore his black hair long, and his bluejeans tight, impressing the girls in his classes. (Overimpressing them, his critics charged.) He left the collar of his black shirts open under a leather jacket. He spiced his lectures with what he called his personal Natural History, learned along what he called his Profound Walks on Waterloo Road, or through Mesa Verde, Cape Cod, Isle Royale, the Maine Woods, or among the Victorian mansions in downtown Detroit, and, though he could talk about the Quantum as keenly as he could tell anecdotes about his beloved Thoreau, he grounded the stuff seen only in numbers in his daily experience of nature. And his experiments were funny. Wearing rollerskates he pulled himself across the classroom along a clothesline tied to the radiator to demonstrate Newton's Third Law. He had his students attempt to set fire to empty air, to prove that not everything containing oxygen will burn.

His critics charged that he performed for his class, grinning like the Theory of Adolescence, and, more and more, what O'Donnelly had once perceived as interest now looked like brooding. The deep quiet he took for attention now sounded like the white buzz of quickless minds swallowing his parables like a gag of stones. More and more he saw his students as lost things, made of less wonder than a tree in the sun. Everybody saw why a portrait of Thoreau superintended his lessons from the wall behind his big pine work table, but nobody understood why a bust of Antinous graced the corner. His answer to Antinous dwelt in the depths of his room, behind Wendy Paulson, and beside Randy Biswanger, at the last hexagonal lab table, endeavoring to conceal himself, but revealed like the most outstanding star in heaven: Jim Brandekker.

Jim remained the youngest boy O'Donnelly ever taught. He had been bumped ahead, an experiment himself, and O'Donnelly took time to observe him. Week after week, five days a week, O'Donnelly followed this boy, walking up and down the school corridors, going to and fro, sometimes noticed, sometimes sly. Up close the boy smouldered with the wax and amber scent of his sweat, a scavenger smell that circled Shannon and never set him free. Beside his peers the boy acted as if his metabolism meant something, among older students, getting ready for life beyond cap-and-gowns, the boy stood out as a maverick whole person. He maintained a high B average—an A average in his accelerated classes—but he charmed O'Donnelly with his shrugs when he called on him. Jim knew the answers, but he never volunteered. Often O'Donnelly caught Jim daydreaming, looking out the window, seeing nothing but the inside of himself. The boy had gone out for the football team, despite his delicate build. He played flute in the band. He spent his study period pondering books of poetry that he brought to school. He was the first and only son of the purest family in Stickford, produced to be a little lower than the angels, springing from some quixotic image of an infant, a boy, a man; claimed the way people claimed they owned things they could never possess —the way Auntie raised Shannon while he remained an orphan, or the way the Brandekkers owned their high house, but could not possess their son.

Shannon lived with his unyouthful Aunt Thelma in a baby-block of pink Chelsea brick on a tumbledown farm past the Windmill Point Technical School for Boys, across from Pumpkin Hook Cemetery. Many times he had driven his Volkswagen past that one house that no one in Stickford needed an address to recognize. Blue light shined out of that window at the peak, and Shannon tightened his brakes, imagining the boy's room, way-up-high, at the top of that high house.

Shannon had been looking at the Brandekker house since the day he took his first Profound Walk. He was five years old. Auntie came in from watering her geraniums, holding her hands high above his head, her earthy fingers sprung apart. Shannon spread his big white hands—big even—big especially—for a child, as if mastering a magic pass of his dead Father. He strummed the mesh of sunlight and shadow. Auntie had not locked her screen door, and the wind opened the door for Shannon. He remembered the big hands of the wind on his back, crossing Waterloo Road. He did not see the Brandekker house

suddenly, not the first time. He saw the house like someone coming home after living away from home, and homesick for a long long time, or like ghosts coming in from the first twilight of their afterlife, moving low over the earth on the bottom of the wind. He stood before the high house, among the wild peach trees, holding his palms high, held open to the sun—

"Christ, Shannon!"

He did not look at Auntie. He did not take his eyes off that high house.

All things had been above Shannon since that day. He had grown up standing under the shadow of all things. How could Jim Brandekker be growing up the way O'Donnelly had, from a wintery boy to a desperate young man, given to childish moods, and sudden, meaningless despondency? How could Shannon sense his own mystery ripening about the mouth of this blond boy? This boy would never be lost in frosty aloneness, a barren spar of driftwood standing upright in the snow. Shannon did not see himself reflected in this boy. Looking into Jim Brandekker Shannon O'Donnelly saw the being to become, the being to be. That had to be the meaning of Jim Brandekker. Otherwise placing this gifted boy in this worry of seniors was a waste of season and color, like a dandelion in a rich man's front lawn.

"Bubbles!" The Raven repeated. Jim Brandekker looked right at him. Jim smiled weakly, but The Raven looked shocked, and looked away, and Wendy glanced up, and guessed that Jim meant the smile for her.

She smiled back. "You're sweet."

His lonesome ghosts nudged his inseam.

"Bubbles are gaseous water molecules trapped inside liquid water molecules. Heat—energy—is absorbed by the liquid molecules in the substance, and kinetic energy and temperature increase. Energy keeps on building in some molecules until they break their cohesive bonds—"

"Cohesive bonds?"

Typically, Randy Biswanger spoke out of turn, in a tone that suggested he knew a forbidden gospel of cohesion, and challenged his teacher to commit heresy. Shannon had heard his fellows taunt Randy

Big wanger, Biswanger

Who dost thou please?

Man, woman, child

Or none oj these?

"Cohesion is the attraction of like to like. Do you have a vested interest in cohesive bonds, Mister Biswanger?"

His class laughed, but no exchange of remarks could insult Randy Biswanger into silence.

"Let's observe the generation of bubbles by boiling water. Each table will need their bunsen burners, ring stands, and a five-hundred-milliliter flask. Fill your flasks with water, and clamp them to your ring stands. Don't light your bunsen burners until you're told. I'll set the flasks on my worktable to be picked up by one—and only one—person from each table. If you bust em, you buy em, ladies and gentlemen."

Randy slid off his stool. "I'll get the flask."

"Let the Blond get the flask. We never let the Blond do nothing," Wendy said.

Jim glared at em. Plotters!

Randy got back aboard his stool. "Go get the flask, Brandekker."

"You always get the stuff!"

"Go get the flask, will you!"

Jim squinted up the bully aisle, weak to the bones of his feet. He would have to pass eight tables of seniors, each one of em with weird things on their minds. He hoisted himself away from the table, elbows last, and started up the aisle, as if entering a maze middled with the Minotaur.

Wendy liked to watch Jim Brandekker move. She liked to watch him wiggle under the tight protection of his jeans. He would be ticklish, too. She could tell by the way he guided his body with his elbows. And Wendy would show him the sensitive spots on the body of a boy: under his collar, and in the geetch of his belly, and in the sweaty hollows behind his knees. And he would show her how to cherish his grumblings the way she already treasured his laughter, and she could already tender the tiny awakening sound he would make the first time he

Randy whistled. "Boy, he has the sweetest ass!"

Wendy unhitched the combination lock on the drawer that held their equipment. She slid the support pole out of the bin in the side of the table. "Aren't freshmen a trifle young for you?"

"Hey, I'm a true Christian. Suffer the young boys to come unto me!"

Wendy connected the hose of their bunsen burner to the gas jet built into the table.

"Hey, they're exciting when they're out for their first ride," Randy said.

Maybe if she shoved the hose up his nose and turned on the gas

"Besides, I bet Jimbo has a whopper!" he said.

"And I bet Freud confined penis envy to women."

"Hey, don't think I haven't thought about getting a look at him. I can sneak down to the boys' locker room when he has Phys-Ed. I might even get to watch him take a shower."

"I just bet," Wendy said.

"I bet you're hot for him, too. I see how you look at the Frosh, Wendy. You look at him like you can see him even when you're not looking at him. You care about him. You wanna protect him."

"Somebody has to protect innocent boys from child molesters."

"If he fucks he can fuck other boys. The same thing only different. I bet you'd fuck him as fast as he could pull down his zipper."

"Wanna bet?" said Wendy.

"I bet!"

"I bet you, Randy! I bet you that I'll be his first fuck, and— this is Friday, right? the festival weekend?—well, I bet I'll be his first fuck by Monday morning."

"Oh, right, whatll I win?"

"You won't win, you'll lose."

"Yeah? Joy! Well, what if I do lose?"

"If you lose then you have to fuck me!"

Jim dint need to look, he could feel em watching him. That's all being a Brandekker meant: everybody watched Jim— observed Jim—like a

biology specimen, or one of those exactly nasty diagrams all labeled in a Sex Education book. Everybody looked to see what Jim had to show; to see if he looked different; to see how come the son of the founder of their dumbo Festival hadn't been the first kid in school to sell his quota—

Something kicked Jim in his ankle, and he yelped, and tripped, and banged his head, nearmost demolishing the flasks.

The seniors laughed, not sure what had happened, but positive that only something hilarious could happen to the Frosh.

Jim lay on his back, weirdly tranquil at the bottom of the room, their laughter hot in his ears.

"Mister Brandekker?" Shannon tried to see the boy from his side of his table. "Are you all right?" Was he bruised? Was he bleeding? Did he smash his cute blond head?

Jim peeked under the worktable. Yep. The Raven stood on tiptoes. "I bumped my head." Jim tested his scalp—a lump, but no bleeding.

The laughter steamed like a calliope.

The Raven came around the long side of his worktable, careful not to step on Jim Brandekker—on his head—or his crotch. He offered him a hand and helped him up. Jim chose a flask, and stood close to The Raven, looking out over the seniors. "I bumped my head," he said.

"Someone tripped you."

"I bumped my head."

The Raven seized Jim by his shoulders and made the boy face him. "You may go back to your seat! I'll handle this my way for once!"

Jim cringed like a bunny. What did that mean? The Raven frowned like the face of a storm putting a mean forehead against Jim's bedroom window

Suddenly, Shannon saw Brandy as his own son, or as someone closer, as the youngest, as the prince of his lovers. He should hug him—crush him—until he yelped the way he yelped when he banged his head on the table. He should lead him out of school, lock him in his Volkswagen, drive him to his sunny study at the top of Auntie's house, the ambience there enticing with the scent of blossoming lemon verbena. He should undress this boy, give him a cool baking soda bath, pat him dry with terry cloth, sprinkle him with baby powder, comb his hair with whalebone, wrap him in all-healing linen, and carry him to Auntie's cozy kitchen, serve him peanut butter cookies starred with a fork, and mugs of warm breastmilk dusted with nutmeg. He should dress him in brown corduroy and pose him on his back fence to snap his candid picture with the brand new Olympus he used for action shots for the yearbook. He should teach him to find middle C on the piano, and to locate Castor and Pollux in the harvest twilight, leafsmoke smouldering in his yellow hair.

But burning leaves had been illegal in Stickford for years, and Auntie had run out of Johnson & Johnson's, and Arm & Hammer (and the spare box that kept her refrigerator fresh-smelling would sour his bath with the odor of cold food.) Brandy had parents, and he belonged to the Brandekkers, and one day soon he would belong to her, whoever his virgin lover would be.

He touched Jim's cheek.

Jim backed away.

"Go back to your seat," he said.

The boy returned to his seat, bearing his flask like magical protection, watching The Raven over his shoulder.

"Fill your flasks! Light your bunsen burners! Lets observe the generation of bubbles in boiling water!"

Jim stared into the flask as the water began to boil, transfixed by the bubbles. Steamclouds rose from all eight tables in the room. "What's going to happen?" Jim asked no one, nowhere. Wendy and Randy stared into the steam, blank as samples of white.

"Kinetic energy is the energy of motion," The Raven said, answering a question. "A bubble is made of vectors of tension and motion. Nature does not use the figure pi because nature generates bubbles, nature does not measure them. I want you to learn this from our experiment."

Wendy snickered. "Only Mad O'Donnelly would call boiling water an experiment."

Jim drew small invisible circles in the air with his Black Eagle. "This whole thing is experimental. This—whole thing."

Randy reached, but did not touch, Jim. "Come home with me and you can participate in a real experiment."

Jim hollowed.

Shannon did not look at Brandy until Brandy looked out the window. Eight tables of steam rose between them, like the ghost of a fountain. Brandy sat sidesaddle on his stool, facing Shannon, but looking away, his feet hooked around the rungs, his legs spreading open the triple seam of his jeans.

The p.a. clicked on, deliberately loud.

"Today's the day!"

Jim dint jump. Jim dint move. The p.a. broadcast the bubbles of excitement in other classrooms, louder than Jim expected. The school had fewer Hold-outs than Jim hoped.

"Tonight, thanks to our esteemed alumnus, Mr. James Brandekker, a new era dawns for your school with the opening of our first annual Future Festival. This is not my Festival, this is not Mr. Vachon's Festival, not Dean Haarman's Festival, not even Mr. Brandekker's Festival—this is your Festival, the Festival that could not have happened without your support. And when your Festival opens behind your school tonight, each of you will have reason to celebrate. Each of you—from the upper-classmen—"

The seniors roared.

"—to the frosh—"

The seniors roared even louder. They had the frosh trapped in their classroom—their last Hold-out—and they knew that if the son of their esteemed alumnus hadn't sold his quota he could never escape them now.

"—by selling your quota all of you have staked your claim to what few people can possess, the possibilities—the future of your school."

Jim heard the excitement of every kid who had done his pan. He heard em broadcast over the p.a. He heard em through the classroom door.

"I ask that the second period teachers call the roll of our Hold-outs. Please collect their returns and send them to the office with your attendance sheets."

The seniors got silent. Jim could only hear the water boiling away in the flasks.

Shannon opened his ticket return book. If only he didn't have to make a point of this. If only this boy's father hadn't sponsored this Festival. He found the blank spot in line with his name. "Jim Brandekker." If only his name made no difference. The flasks boiled on, indifferent to every suspense but their own. "Mister Brandekker." If only he didn't care—of course he didn't care—he didn't care about raffle tickets, or quotas, or sponsors, or festivals, or the future. He looked at the possibility he cared about, and Brandy did not evade him. If only Brandy would look away—to show Shannon that he at least cared about the sacrifice Shannon made in letting the school make him

single Brandy out. Of course, his name singled Jim Brandekker out from birth. "I suppose you have your returns today—" He went slowly from the front to the back of the room and stood behind the boy.

The boy did not shift his haughty pose: his chin on his fist, his elbow on his book, his legs open. "Nope."

Not even a polite negative. "Did you forget? Ill put down that you forgot. Ill tell the office that you'll bring your returns tonight."

The seniors remained silent. Were they willing to accept a promise—even from the frosh?

"Put down nothing."

The seniors grumbled.

"Except zero. You could put down zero. You could put a zero next to my name." He lifted his hand and slowly closed his palm on his lab book, covering his half-written poem. "Then close your book on me."

The seniors reacted before Shannon could offer Brandy another excuse. The girls shouted, and the boys stormed the last table.

"People!"

A red-and-white rugby shirt went down like a flag.

Four boys tackled Jim. Two grabbed him around the knees, and two grappled his elbows, and tipped him over off his stool—right into The Raven.

"Levitate the Frosh!"

"Enlightenment through levitation."

The Raven caught Jim in a hug—and Randy nipped the Frosh, once and quick, between his legs.

"Hey!"

Jim squirmed free, stabbing the other boys with his stick-out elbows, and tumbling through em and toppling into Wendy, and they fell together, and came up—with Jim ahold of Wendy's chest.

"Omigod!" Jim broke away, and held out his screaming hands.
"Omigod! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" He was holding himself, and holding his body away from the girl. "I dint mean to! I dint mean to *touch you* there!"

"S'okay," Wendy whispered, louder than the laughing. She checked out the tilt of his jeans. "I'll get a grip on you during your team physical."

Jim cringed like a rabbit.

The Raven looked as intense as lightning.

The warning bell rang to signal the end of class.

"Shut down your bunsen burners! Put away your equipment! Leave your flasks on your tables! Write your lab reports up at home! Let's have a little consideration!"

Drawers opened and banged, stools scraped.

Jim dint make a move to help. He sheeped away from Wendy when she knelt close to put their equipment in their drawer. It felt so stiff inside his jeans that he felt sure that if he moved it would snap in two and he'd bleed to death before the final bell. Jim balled up the top sheets of his lab book, wasted anyhow, damp with sweat, and tossed em at the wastebasket, and he would have scored two points, but The Raven bumped right into him and spoiled the shot.

"Mister Brandekker, can I see you for a moment after class?"

Jim made his bangs flop, nodding hard. He retreated to the window, to try to adjust his jeans with his elbows.

"And Mister Biswanger? Miss Paulson? Would you please wait in the hall? I'd like to talk to the two of you, too."

The final bell rang, and every kid but Jim scrambled for the door.

Jim looked over his shoulder, slow as smoke. The Raven stood beside the windows, too, staring at the same anxiety of clouds putting out the sun.

"Mister Brandekker, would you come up here, please?" The Raven spoke without looking.

Shannon waited until the boy approached before he moved away from the windows, moving from the heat to the source of heat. This would be the first chance Shannon would have to face this boy. This would be like facing the child god Chance. Could this boy make out the difference between Shannon and his other teachers?

The boy fidgeted, guilty with heat in the innocent light, like wine in the chamber of the ripening grape; like the seed of the next grape in the middle of that sweetness. His floppy bangs left one round wet eye exposed, leaving his other eye occulted by that cloud of yellow hair. The boy turned his left shoulder on his teacher, like a limn of Jeremiah confronting the crowd in the market place. He tugged up his rugby shirt and wiped his eyes on the hem, bringing the faint risk and honey of his short sleeves nearer, and showing his skinny chest. His nipples were pudged with puberty. A little rash, like prickly heat, dotted his belly. His underpants were swooped high in the rear, with red stripes in the waistband, but were tightened low in front by his buckled belt. His body looked soft, like the underbelly of an unweaned lamb. Oh, Shannon's name for this boy was best: Brandy Eanling; Brandy the fledgling lamb.

Tm sorry about those tickets." The boy spoke quickly, to quench his nerves, or fountain his suspicions, by coming to the purpose of this meeting without delay.

A shadow crossed the classroom. Shannon looked beyond the boy to

see out the windows. Did this boy imagine that Shannon wanted to discuss trivia? The clouds were coming closer, bringing the storm that would close Indian Summer. a Do you find my class difficult, Mister Brandekker?"

"Don't I get As on my tests?"

Shannon thought of this boy's name, written indelibly in his record book: Brandekker, James C. Boys must be ordered alphabetically, family names first, making them links in a genetic chain that extended from the stars. Clouds straggled across the sun. "Do you have other problems in my class?"

"I guess I cause a lot of trouble in your class."

The boy did not answer the question. This heat between teacher and student had substance, the property of the storm. "I have something to show you, Mister Brandekker."

The Raven took a narrow blue and yellow book outta the teaching side of his lectern.

Jim leaned over the counter, from where he stood, snooping the page The Raven opened to face him.

The heat of his blond head passed across Shannon, like a cloud made of solid water vapor.

The pages, twice as long as they were tall, were covered with pictures, two to a page, of the Brandekker family house. Jim glanced at The Raven from under his bangs. The Raven said yes with both eyes. Jim leafed through the pictures. The Raven had taken pictures of the Brandekker house by day, by night, in all sortsa weather, in all four seasons, from every point of view, from close-up and far away. The first black-n-whites were as old as Jim with scallopy edges, then the pictures got glossy and slick as those little dates in the margins climbed through the 1960s. The first real good, real neat, real technicolor shots had dates after the moonlanding. Jim checked out a

nifty shot on the last page of the Brandekker house decked with the red-white-n-blue bunting that Farfar made Dad display to celebrate the Bicentennial.

"I took these photographs, Mister Brandekker."

"Who? You?"

The Raven nodded, his nod big at the beginning, but shrinking. Sweat pinched his top lip. "I've taken photographs of your family house since a friend of mine gave me a camera—"

The boy rooted through his hip pockets. His elbows stuck out, pinker than his wrists and forearms, as if their skin had been ground down hard on top of difficult books in a difficult study. "Some friend, giving you a camera."

Shannon surveyed the boys jeans. "Fourteen years ago—"

"Oh yeah?" The boy rocked from foot to foot, changing the shape of things to come. I'm fourteen—"

Shannon watched the sunlight then the shadow move across his classroom windows. "He was a seaman."

Jim had seen The Raven take pictures. He had seen him at scrimmage games, and even at those dumbo rallies. He had watched The Raven moderate the kids who took yearbook pictures. Donald Wilkes had been pestering to take yearbook photographs.

"I'm interested in your house—"

Brandy spocked his eyebrows. "Looks like."

The Raven held his hand open over his picture book, to caution Jim, as if making a move to erase a mistake off the board. "Your family property is my Place Apart."

Jim flipped back to the first picture: a spooky shot through bare-naked

trees of the window at the peak of the house, smack above his bed. Brandy groped his front pockets, and changed that private property in his jeans. "I dunno what to say"

"To me, a Brandekker is someone to be."

Jim looked at his feet. "Tell me about em."

"How about tonight?"

Jim looked up fast, and blushing. His inseams blazed, more than remembering what Wendy meant when she asked Randy that same question.

Heat seeped into Shannon, pore by pore. His pulse ticked in his ears. "I mean, I'd like to take your picture, sometime—"

"For the yearbook?"

"For this album."

"Will I have to stay after school?"

Heat blurred his vision. This boy could change from Brandy to any other blond schoolboy—fast as a cloud could bend and fade. "Perhaps —perhaps you could accompany me on one of my Profound Walks?"

Brandy gumballed his tongue. "Where could we walk?"

"How about your father's cemetery?"

The boy retreated, netted by sunlight the color of his hair. "I dunno. I used to have fun in Pumpkin Hook. Now if I walk there, I walk alone."

"No wonder you're not having fun."

Brandy slung the comment off his shoulder. "I read the names on the gravestones." He pouted.

"Do you publish an almanac?"

His pout doubled in size. "I think. Something wrong with thinking?"

"What do you think about?"

"I got my own thinks. Can't a boy even think about what he wants to think about?"

Shannon could taste the body heat of this boy. "Sometimes," Shannon spoke with the tone of translunar communication, like a husked spirit coming through the wine glass in a railway carriage on an Irish poet's September-May honeymoon. "But a boy should be fulfilled."

Fulfilled? That word suffered with deepness, pooling with wildness inside Jim, like sweet slender yellow leaves ripped from the wild peach trees on the outskirts of his family property. Maybe The Raven could read minds, and the thoughts he found Jim thinking were the same thoughts he thought himself.

The Raven got hotter and closer. "Have you ever thought you could fulfill someone, sometimes?"

Jim punched out his cheek with his tongue. "Sometimes . .." This Raven was somebody else, his questions were something new. "Sometimes I wonder how you fulfill somebody, sometimes"

"Walk in the Spirit!" The Raven proclaimed. "Fulfill the Lusts of the Flesh!" (He never told Brandy he misquoted.)

"Don't talk to me about religion—"

"I'm talking about philosophy—"

"Well I hate philosophy religiously."

The Raven laughed—and made Brandy smile. "Talking to you fulfills me," The Raven said. "You see how easily we are fulfilled?"

Brandy touched the peak of his tintic house with his baby finger. "I wish I could fulfill my Dad that simple easy."

"Isn't a son a fulfillment?"

"My Dad hates boys with yellow hair."

Shannon clenched his fist, his knuckles like stones in the wilderness. "I don't see anything queer about yellow hair." His words outran his breath.

Jim narrowed his eyes. Did The Raven mean *queer* the way Skeat meant *queer?* Or did he mean *queer* the way Donald Wilkes meant *queer?* Questions chased answers in a whirligig pool. Jim gulped a huge breath. "My Dad thinks boys with yellow hair have gotta be queers."

The Raven went whiter than normal. The heat laid white hands on his shoulder blades, prickling his skin beneath his black shirt. This boy could blast the hills and houses of Stickford with the things he learned today.

"Your Dad must like you, being a teacher, I mean."

The Raven set his fist on his pictures, near Jim's hand. "My parents are dead."

Should teachers tell students about their parents? Tm sorry." Should students ask? "I'm sorry they died." Jim felt the heat of that white magic fist soak into his knuckles, as if his own skin caught sparks leaping off an electric pinwheel in some old-time experiment. "I mean, I'm sorry I said something."

"They've been dead for twenty-three years. My Auntie raised me."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I."

All the sentences Jim thought of saying sounded dumb. "I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing. You look shorter when you say you're sorry."

"Sorry." Jim clapped his hands together between his knees. "Boy, am I dumb." Wild birds banked in his eyes. "Mister O'Donnelly, can I ask you a dumb question?"

"Ask me. Ask me anything. Ask me for the Universal Truth."

The small birds fluttered, as birds do. "How do you feel once you get fulfilled?"

That question whirled the heat and the clouds. Shannon let his body fall forward against the edge of the counter, head to blond head with Brandy. "Fulfilled how?" The cloud of lemon hair and body heat enveloped him. "Spiritually?" He leaned closer with each question. "Sexually?"

That question unsettled the wild birds, and they flew around the corner of the boy's eyes. He spoke in a cubscout whisper. "Do you feel fulfilled if you do sex?"

Shannon stared after the flock of wild birds in those eyes the blue of clear, expectant sky beyond a storm. "We better not talk about sex."

"How come? You're my teacher. Don't teachers get to talk sex?"

Shannon staggered. The heat licked his ribs. "Making love makes you fulfilled, yes. Love fulfills you. Love makes you really alive."

"Am I really alive?"

"Of course, you're alive!"

"I dunno." Jim snuggled himself. "I never done sex—not even, you know, by myself."

Shannon struggled, his inscape aflame. "A real hard turn-on, hey?" He

used a boy's language to tease this boy.

"Don't make fun of me! I'm scared!"

"Are you scared of sex?"

That dint sound like a teacherly question!—simple but enigmatical, like an alchemical riddle of all things, dividing gold from iron, true from false; like a tie in tic-tac-toe.

"I'm scared of just that word sometimes."

"Do other boys see that you're afraid of sex?"

Jim squeezed his eyes closed. That question was a clock-spring wind about to explode in the quietus of a cyclone. "Donald Wilkes," he said, like a kid naming names in some High Treason: the Contrition of Jim Brandekker. "He saw me."

Shannon recognized that name. Donald Wilkes had been tormenting Shannon, too—about joining the yearbook staff as a photographer. "What did Donald Wilkes see?"

"He saw all about me. He saw another boy about to fulfill me. At summer camp."

The Raven raised his hand, in a desperate stroke to tame the filaments of heat and air. "Is this other boy in your class?"

"Christopher lives nowhere near Stickford. I write him but he never writes me. I read his story in my Walt Whitman poems."

I loved somebody like these poems

But I got no love on my turn

But I guess love never gets never returned

Outta that love I got these poems

The Raven smiled.

And Jim thought that he shouldn't've said that word love. He shushed his thoughts. The Raven said that word first, the same way The Raven said that other word before Jim.

If equal affections cannot be

Let the more loving one be me

quoted the Raven.

"That's a good poem." Brandy shined—sweat, and acne oils, and all those clever teenage hormones glistening on his face. "Whose poem is that?"

"Auden." Suzanne had spoken that poem the first rainy spring night she and Shannon made love. There had been no heat that night after the rain, nothing like the heat that cored his heart today. "He was homosexual."

Light dashed his eyes and Jim blinked, then swallowed. Sex then love then *homosexual*—those whole three words. "Oh," Brandy replied, and his mouth remained in that shape: *O*.

"His poem is about love and the indifference to love. Do you know what indifference means?"

Brandy looked down and he did not look up. "That's when you make no difference to somebody who makes a big difference to you."

"You are wise in your generation."

Jim shrugged, and left his shoulders bunched up around his ears. "Otherwise, maybe."

"And I could never be indifferent to you."

Jim untensed, and looked up quickly, one teardrop un-spilled in one eye. "I dunno what to say."

"Just tell me that you'll see me tonight. Maybe you'll see things differently tonight."

"How about my tickets? I'm supposed to sell my tickets tonight." The boy smiled, spoiled rotten. "I'm the son of a sponsor, the biggest of your last hold-outs."

"I'll take you to your father's Festival! That's where we'll take our Profound Walk! I'll call your Mother and make the arrangements." The Raven made a dollar appear by magic. "And I'll buy your first ticket. You'll make me lucky."

"You think I'm lucky?"

"Maybe you'll get lucky tonight."

"Tell me Mister Biswanger, Miss Paulson, were you two helping Mister Brandekker cheat?"

"Who? Us?" said Randy Biswanger.

"Would we cheat?"

Were you and that blond kid feeling each other out? Were the three of you getting down in front of me? Why didn't you pull down his pants?

"Nobody's gonna cheat."

"We like Jim Brandekker."

"Oh? Are you his friends?"

"We'd like to be," Wendy Paulson said.

"He won't even let me hold his hand," said Randy Biswanger.

Shannon looked at Randy Biswanger slowly. "Randy, are you gay?"

"Yes," Randy said, "I am."

"And—Jim Brandekker?"

"Oh, sure, he's gay. I had to give the Dean head to guarantee to get Jim Brandekker in your class. I like a daily reminder of what freshmen feel like when I'm on top of them in bed."

"Oh, right, I bet!"

"Miss Paulson," Shannon looked at Wendy Paulson as slowly as he had looked at Randy. "Is Jim Brandekker gay?"

"What are you, unAmerican, Mr. O'Donnelly? You think I could be in this by my lonesome? Where's your spirit of competition? Everybody likes Jim Brandekker. He's the boy made by angels, *hair of gold and starlight in his eyes of blue*. I bet everybody likes Jim Brandekker."

"You-bet?"

"And I bet I win!" Randy said.

"Oh, right! I just bet!"

"I see." Shannon closed his eyes. "I see what you're telling me." He nodded slowly. "I'm hot," he said. That was safe and meaningless. Indian Summer poured through his classroom windows thick as butterscotch. Everyone was hot.

"So'm'I," said Wendy.

"I bet," said Randy.

"I bet you are." Shannon continued to nod, solemn-eyed. "Both of you. I bet you truly are."

Late, late, getting later.

The Raven had made Jim miss change of class. Jim hurried to drop off his Physics stuff, and get his English books. He took his lunch to English, too, and his big paperback copy of Walt Whitman that he got Ma to buy him at Wellington's last night.

Ma blinked at the cover, two bare-naked men on a log of driftwood by a green pool, the standing guy with his hands on his hips, turning his back on the guy crouching behind him, beating the pond with a stone. (The cover reminded Jim of him and Christopher.)

"You're reading this in school?"

Cripes, the picture only showed the first guy's butt! "The-cov-er-shows-a-de-tail-from-The-Swim-ming-Hole-by-Thom-as-Ea-kins," Jim read, snooping down to read the back cover while Ma held the book. His palms itched. Couldn't he just buy his book?

"Which poem are you reading?"

"Song of Myself."

"You have that poem in your English book."

"Ma, you don't understand. This book has got poems that Walt Whitman cut out."

"Why read poems he cut out? If he cut these poems out you're not supposed to read them."

"Ma, you don't understand poems!"

Ma had begun to believe that she did not understand her son.

Another boy shouldered into Jim, cutting into English, as late as Jim.

Cripes! Randy Biswanger!

"Didja do your homework, Jimbo?"

"I did extra credit."

"Didja read the whole poem?"

"I always read the whole poem."

"Well, I'm glad I sit next to you, then."

"You're—glad?" His ghosts flowed in, his ghosts flowed out, they filled his stomach and cauled his mouth.

"You can help me answer Bejin's questions."

"Okay, Bud, what's your excuse?"

"Mr. O'Donnelly says for me to tell you that he wants me to do extra credit."

Ralph Bejin had graduated from St. Agnes in the same class as Shannon O'Donnelly, though he had returned to his alma mater to teach two years after Shannon. Ralph and Shannon had the same first job, too, at Rzardko's Tire Center, back before they started high school. Shannon had been seeing Ralph's sister Suzanne since junior year of high school, and Ralph and his mom watched with approval while Shannon waited for Suzanne to finish med school, expecting them to announce their engagement, since Suzanne had entered a partnership with Dr. MacKenna in Stickford.

Ralph shared a common loss with Shannon: they had both lost their dads, although Ralph still felt sheltered by the home his dad had built for his family. Mom owned and operated the Treadle & Thread dress

shop in Stickford, and collected antique Singer sewing machines, and the clearest memory of his dad shined for Ralph when he saw the sterling silver thimble on Mom's finger.

Dad had that silver thimble in the silver case wrapped in the bottom of a box from toilet tissue. Mom made omigod eyes, and Ralph and his sister giggled. Beautiful, Mom said the box looked beautiful.

"And so big. You shouldn't have."

Mom set her hand on top, and the wrapping paper sagged, and Mom looked puzzled, and tore out a strip of rosebuds.

"Someone will have to help me—"

Ralph giggled, and Dad coaxed him, and Ralph hopped, and punched his hands through the paper rosebuds. Light pealed into the beautiful darkness, and Mom reached down, and brought out her hand, a silver thimble starring her finger.

"There's a case in there somewhere."

The year after his dad died Mom caught Ralph reading in bed, way past his bedtime. She must have seen the light under his bedroom door.

"What are you doing up at this hour?"

Ralph showed her the cover of his book.

"Melville? You're too young to read your dad's books. Honestly, Ralph, you get more like your dad every day."

Ralph smiled. "I suppose Mr. O'Donnelly wants you to get no credit in my class?"

The boy did not answer. Boys never see when their teachers are

kidding. Especially not this boy.

Girls twittered, hearing the comment, and other boys laughed out loud.

"Whasamatter, bud? If you did as much extra credit as Mister Brandekker maybe you would fill your empty head. Take your seat, Jim."

Jim sat down in the corner of the first row, next to Randy Biswanger.

Mr. Bejin slammed the classroom door. "Okay, where were we?"

Jim put up his hand, but he answered before Mr. Bejin called on him. "We've been reading Walt Whitman."

"Okay, Jim's forgiven. He's not here and he knows where we are." Ralph wandered past the board, drawing a chalkline.

WALT WHITMAN

He scrawled in huge letters above the line. "And who knows all about Whitman?"

Jim put up his arm, a hand propped in his armpit.

"Okay, Jim, show off."

"Walt Whitman got born a hundredsome years ago---"

"Specify, bud."

"1819. The same year as Herman Melville."

"Okay. Extra credit. Jim knows the literary milestones of 1819."

Another boy made kissing sounds.

"Okay, cut the peanut butter. What big book did Melville write?"

Jim stopped before he put up his hand. Yeppers. Randy watched him. "Moby Dick" Jim whispered to Randy.

"Whose dick?" Randy said, too loud.

"Moby, Moby."

"Moby's dick!" Randy shouted, without raising his hand.

Kids laughed at that title.

"Okay, Randy scores. Next time raise your hand, bud." Ralph wrote that name on the board.

MELVILLE

And under the name he wrote the title.

MOBY DICK

"Now don't get excited. Don't go home and tell your parents that Mr. Bejin's writing nasty words on the board. The book's about whaling. And about a single-minded hunt for one white whale. Whitman and Melville were born the same year. Whitman wrote the poem you were supposed to read for homework when he was thirty-seven. Follow along while I read, I'll let you read later."

I celebrate myself, and sing myself

And what I assume, you shall assume

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you

"What's Whitman talking about?"

Jim waved his hand.

"C'mon, Jim, give someone else a chance."

Slowly, Randy put up his hand.

Jim blinked, surprised. He put down his hand.

"Okay, Randy remembered to raise his hand."

Randy watched Jim while he answered. "He says he's singing about himself, but he says that anybody can sing about themselves, too."

"Okay. He sings for everybody, and he wants everybody to sing."

"Especially the people who nobody thinks *should* sing," Jim said, outtaturn.

"If you're going to talk, Jim, talk to the class."

"Walt Whitman wants to sing for everybody—but especially for nobody."

"He sings for everybody especially nobody? Congratulations, Jim, everybody's confused!"

Kids laughed.

Jim held onto the top of his head, hard at thought. "He wants to sing for *the* nobodies. He already sings for the every-bodies, and the anybodies, and the somebodies, but he wants to sing for the nobodies especially, and even for the people who say Walt Whitman was a nobody himself."

"Whadayamean he's nobody? We're still reading somebody's poems?"

Kids laughed more.

His lonesome ghosts tottered around Jim. "Some people say Walt Whitman's dirty-minded."

"Specify." "Like this part:"

I mind how we lay such a transparent morning

How you settled your head athwart my hips

and gently turned over upon me

"Okay," Mr. Bejin smacked Jim on the shoulder. "What does *athwart* mean?"

Jim glanced at Randy, thinking about Christopher.

Jim had gone downstairs to the family room in the dark last night, nothing on but his underpants. The bottom step creaked. He found his Skeat where he left the big book, in the little conservatory. Just a star or two shined in the square black windows, and just a star or two fingered his white cotton briefs. He found the page by starlight, but he had to switch on his tall flashlight to read the definition.

"Between," Jim told his memory of how Christopher nosed those white cotton briefs.

"Right. You settled your head between my hips. Little raunch in there."

Kids laughed.

"Jim earns extra credit. He can spot the dirty parts of Leaves of Grass"

[&]quot;Brown nose," another boy said behind Jim.

Jim frowned over his shoulder—and he saw Randy frowning, too, at the other boy, and Jim smiled.

"But you didn't prove your point, Jim."

"Yeah!" a boy shouted, "Anybody can be raunchy!"

"Everybody is!"

"You said Whitman was a nobody. You said he wasn't like everybody else."

"Okay, let Jim defend his point."

"I got this book? I got this book last night? This book has got poems that Whitman cut outta *Leaves of Grass?*"

"Are you asking the class, or telling the class?"

"I found this poem in this book. Whitman cut this poem outta *Leaves of Grass*"

"Okay, Jim's gonna read poetry to the class. Nobody laugh."

Jim read:

Hours continusome long

Sore, heavy, heart

Hours of dusk when I withdraw to a lonesome and un-fre-quent spot, seating myself, leaning my face in my hands

Hours sleepless, deep in the nights, when I go forwards, speedy, swift-foot, over country roads,

or through these city streets, or pacingfor miles, stiff by plain-old-cries

Hours discouraged, distracted—for the one I can't get content without, soon I see him get content without me

Hours when I get forgotten o weeks o months are passing but I believe I'll never forget
Sullen suffersome hours! (Shame-on-me, but that's useless

Jim looked up. Randy looked at him. But Jim looked lost in his poem. a I am," Jim said, "What I am."

Hours tormentuous —I wonder if other boys have this like-outta-the-like feeling?

Is there even one other boy like me — subtracted — his friend — his — lover —lost to him?

Is he, too, like I am? Does he get up in the morning rejected, thinking who he lost? And in the nights, does he wake up and think about who he lost?

Is he a harbor of friendship, silent and endless?

Is he a harbor of angerish passion?

Does some strong rememberer, or the chancy mention of some name bring the fits on him, taking-turns and depressing?

Does he see himself reflected in me? In these hours does he see himself reflected?

Weird, how even the other boys got silent.

Mr. Bejin broke the silence. "What's Whitman saying about himself in that poem?"

"He sounds embarrassed," a girl said, softly.

"True. That's part of *Leaves of Grass* he didn't print."

"He sounds—sick," said another boy.

"He sounds like a fag."

Kids laughed.

"Okay. Let's not call Whitman names." Ralph wrote on the board:

HOMOSEXUAL

Jim stared at that word: the stiff, attention-getting H, the two big Os (an o for each boy) astride the meek M, U and AL calling from beyond the forbidden core of S-E-X.

The girls giggled, and the other boys made disgusted sounds.

"That's a word you don't see on the board everyday. Whitman was *homosexual*. We heard rumors, but this poem pretty much proves

what we suspected. The *like-out-of-the-like?* He felt like nobody because of these preferences. He felt lonely, and alone, but he still felt like singing."

The kids wouldn't shut up until Mr. Bejin erased the word.

"Okay, the class laughs. But I wonder how many of you would sing if you felt like Whitman? Poems are hard. You don't wanna read them. I hear you squeaking: *Mr. Bejin don't make us read poems!* But being a poet is difficult, too—and I wonder how many of you would be what you are if being who you are was hard to be?"

"I guess I'd be nobody," Jim said, thinking aloud—and loud

enough for Randy—if nobody else—to hear.

Randy moved in close to Jim. "Would you be nobody like that guy in this poem?"

Close, close, getting closer.

The nurse hid out in a square two-room office at the end of the school, like she had been added as a second thought, like Catholic kids got healed by prayer. "Don't report to your third or fourth period class on Friday," the Coach told the kids coming out for football as he passed out the Requests for Students, and the forms for the physicals, on Monday. "Whichever your slip says. Go directly to the nurse's office." Jim had only been in Miss Sullivan's office to deliver his excuse the day Dad buried Farfar. He had never seen her examining room.

Jim got lucky, having his family doctor volunteer to do these team physicals. Jim passed his high school physical with no trouble. He just sat beside Ma in those humungus chairs, while Ma chatted about his birth and the doctor filled out that form.

"You were a breech birth, Jimmers. You were no easy delivery. And Dr.

MacKenna never charged a cent. Did we ever tell you that?"

About five-hundredsome-thousand times! He was the first freebie born into the Brandekker family.

"The sixth one's free." The doctor signed the form. "I told your mother." The doctor winked at Jim. "And now Jim's nearly old enough for me to deliver his firstborn."

"Oh, doctor, Jimmers is still a boy!"

"He's a boy about to become a man."

Who cared if Wendy got to watch his team physical?

Dr. MacKenna would just borrow Miss Sullivan's office to sit and chat with Jim while he filled out some other form. He'd just tell the same dumbo story.

Only one other boy coming out for football sat along the wall outside Miss Sullivan's office, across from Wendy.

"Hi, Jim." Kevin Burgham wore a red-and-white rugby shirt, too, but his shirt had a red collar instead of a white. His honey hair hung past his shoulders.

Jim waved from his hip in his small way. "Where's everybody?"

Wendy handed Jim a pencil, and he dug out his form. "Physical examinations began last period."

Jim made his meanest mouth. Wendy went and stood by the windows. "This must be simple easy, if everybody already went back to class."

"Quick but thorough," Wendy said.

Jim pouted. He wrote. October 22, 1976. Brandekker, Jim. His family

name sure liked to be first in line. 214 *Waterloo Road, Stxckjord, Michigan, 41217, 3-15-62,* Jim wrote, *14.* He put a tiny check in the tiny box marked M for *male*.

"How come you're not helping the doc?" Kevin asked Wendy when Miss Sullivan called Kevin into the examining room.

Wendy watched Jim. "I have to wait until you've all finished filling out your forms."

Jim leaned close to Kevin, watching Wendy, and whispered. "Will the doctor make us take our underwear off?"

"Doctor is waiting to see you," Miss Sullivan said, before Kevin answered.

Jim checked through a long list of diseases. "You gotta go back to class after you collect my form?" he asked Wendy.

"The doctor may want me to observe your physical."

Kevin came out as Jim scratched his signature on the bottom of the form. "She makes you take off your underwear," he said.

Jim looked at Wendy. Wendy grinned, like she knew all along the unanswered question Jim had asked Kevin. Wendy had stayed out in the hall. How could she have made Kevin take off his underwear?

Jim stood on the threshold of the examining room, staring blankly at the small square opaque window panes. The room had scales, and a cabinet stocked with glass jars of cotton balls, Q-tips, gauze, and Band-Aids. A thermometer protruded from a lean brown bottle of alcohol. A roll of wax paper covered the examining table. Jim rigged his hands to the front of his jeans.

A—lady—scrubbed her hands at a corner sink.

"Where's the doctor?"

"This is the doctor," Wendy said.

Jim stared at the examining table. That waxy, stain-resistant paper had been laid out fresh for Jim. "Where's Dr. MacKenna?"

"Dr. MacKenna is on vacation," Wendy said.

"He went to Arizona to see the prehistoric ruins," the Lady Doctor said.

Jim shrugged. "Who wants to see a mess of dumbo stone?"

"Oh, someday I bet you'll be as curious about Mesa Verde as Dr. MacKenna," the lady doctor said.

The doctor watched Wendy shut the door. "Do you know Jim, Miss Paulson?"

"His sister and me are best friends."

The doctor considered Jim.

Jim rocked from foot to foot. Least Wendy told the truth on herself. Jim judged the whole room with all his senses, his shoulders shrugged up around his neck, his hair bunching his ears, extra warm and blond. Lukewarm shyness stained this room, like sunshine piercing slender leaves after a longsome sneak, or a sweet imagining on some lonesome yellow morning. "Don't you just look in my eyes, maybe weigh me?"

The doctor looked at Wendy, not Jim. "I'm certain Jim would prefer to have you leave the room." For the first time the doctor sounded like she wasn't just reading his name off the form.

Wendy waited in front of the table, like a stone amidstream, anxious to break an unsuspicious current, staying put in place. "I can't embarrass Jim. We know each other too well."

The doctor considered this. "Let's hop up on the table, Jim," she said. "And we'll begin."

Jim gumballed his tongue, and did what the doctor told him to do.

The doctor did look in his eyes, and she looked in his ears, and she looked up his nose, and she made him read a line of eeny-weeny type off a chart Scotchtaped to the wall. She depressed his tongue with a Popscicle stick, and peeked down his throat. Then she squeezed his neck, and stepped back from the table.

"Take our blood pressure please, Miss Paulson."

Wendy inflated the thick grey cuff around his skinny arm and read the gauge. She went and told the doctor what to write on the form. "Should I wait to check Jim's weight?"

"Yes. Wait."

The doctor approached Jim, like sunlight creeping up on someone, awkward and golden. The doctor reached, and pulled up the front of Jims shirt. A draft pleased his belly. The doctor slipped her hand up under his shirt. Jim clamped his arms to his sides. A sweatdrop trickled down his ribs.

"Relax, Jim." The doctor thumped his chest. She listened to his heart, his shirt tenting her arm and stethoscope, then she stepped around behind Jim, the meaty crease of her palm mousing along the nubs of his spine.

Wendy liked the look of the Blond, pouty, hunched over himself, the hem of his shirt pushed up to show her the baby creases on each side of his bellybutton.

The doctor made Jim take six deep breaths, pressing the cold little disk of her stethoscope up and down both sides of his back.

"Please draw our blood sample, Miss Paulson."

Jim turned his head, and he dint look back until Wendy stuck a Band-Aid over the puncture and folded his arm.

"Should Jim-get ready-to get weighed?"

The doctor glanced at Jim, then took a long look at Wendy. "Yes."

"Get ready, Jim," Wendy said, closing in on the table. "Take off your clothes."

Jim did not move. "You want me to take off my sneaks?"

"Take your socks off, too," Wendy said. "Take off all your clothes."

"Down to my underpants?"

"Take off everything you've got on, even your underpants."

Jim went strawberry. He sniffled at the doctor. Dint he get his chance to make Wendy leave the room?

"Thank you for your instructions, Miss Paulson," the doctor said. "We need you to file those forms."

"Soon as Jim gets ready—"

"I'll handle Jim now, Miss Paulson. Please file those forms. Then you may return to class."

Wendy took a step towards, not away from the table. "Soon as I see that Jim gets ready—"

"Miss Paulson, you may return to class." And the doctor held open the examining room door.

Wendy seemed to recede, like an image pulling away from Jim, as if she were an islander seen from a harbor, while Jim waved from the stem of a busy boat.

Wendy closed, she did not shut, the examining room door. Miss Sullivan was not at her desk. Wendy wheeled over the desk chair, trying to keep the casters from squeaking. She sat down smack outside the cracked open door, sorting the forms, like the forms needed sorting. She could hear the Blond move now, on the other side of the unshut door.

"Now, Jim," she heard the doc say. "We do need you to undress to your briefs."

"I got nothing in my pockets."

"We need to check a few other things, too, Jim, not just your weight."

The Blond would stall, wasting time over his shoelaces, a blend of nerves and boldness, like all boys.

"What's your name, anyhow?"

The Blond sounded snoopy, lolling his head, his warm hair sweltering his skinny collar bones.

"Dr. Bejin."

"I mean your real name."

The Blond sounded muffled for a second. He would be tugging off that shirt Wendy liked to drag over his head in her best fantasy.

"Your first name."

His privacy would be feely and hot. Did she make her first boy, or did he make her? That boy had come over to play football with her brother, and he saw her when the ball took a bad bounce into the garage. *Lose something?* She knew what he wanted to lose. She got her first close look at a boy when he came back into the garage after the game, looking for her. She made him show her all she needed to see.

She did not ask him his name.

"Suzanne."

The Blond would squirm when Wendy unbuckled his belt. He would wiggle when she popped the button. He would freeze when she found the tab of his fly.

"Hey, I got a song about a Suzanne. A Leonard Cohen song."

Suzanne takes em down

And she leaves you to the river

His zipper made that sound: metal shearing metal—loud enough for Wendy—loud enough for Miss Sullivan—loud enough for the whole school—to hear. "Perhaps you know my fiancé, he teaches here at St. Agnes."

"Who's his name?"

"Mr. O'Donnelly."

Cripes! The Raven!

The Blond would wear those snug white schoolboy skimpy-skins with the cute stripes in the waistband.

"Hop up on the scales, please, Jim."

The Blond would be clumsy and timid, triple aware of his bulge in his cheap rabbity underwear.

"Relax, Jim."

Wendy could hear him balance. She could feel his heat and weight, lukewarm, lemony, and sky blue. If she leaned any closer she would push open the door.

"Slip out of your briefs."

She could hear elastic snap, the slight, sticky, slip of cotton on skin, revealing what he struggled, too hard, to conceal. No wonder boys keep their worms in cotton. He would bridge her body with his body, ascared it would jump off the second his body touched her body. *Time to show you the facts of love*. The Blond would be blond down there, too, around his chubby longfellow.

"Relax, Jim, an erection is a natural reaction."

She would clasp it tenderly, intensely, deliciously, delicately. She would crush it until he yelped; she knew how She knew how to hold the blondest boy, in her hand, inside her body, even in her heart....

Go slow, Jim, go slow. Don't push so hard just because you get so turned on near the end.

"Looks to me like you're not ready."

"Ready or not for what?"

"I can see you're best to wait until your sophomore year. You're not ready to play high school football. Relax. Your body develops at your speed, and you're well-developed; you're a mature boy, but your bones and muscles need to catch up with your private development. Have you ever suffered from a calcium deficiency?"

"I got a bad stomach. A milk allergy."

"Let me write you a prescription for a vitamin supplement. Pull your briefs up, Jim."

"May I help you, Miss Paulson?"

Wendy flinched—and rolled backwards in the desk chair, clunking open the examining room door.

"Hey!"

"We beg your pardon!"

Wendy spilled the forms. She got an eyeful of red-and-white stripes, and bluejeans with a grinning zipper.

Miss Sullivan pulled the door shut. "We beg your pardon. May I help you, Miss Paulson?"

Her breath evaporated. "I have to file these forms."

"You should have returned to class by now." Miss Sullivan returned her chair to the proper location.

Dr. Bejin came out of the examining room. "Finish dressing, Jim," she said into the room. "And relax, we change as we grow" The doctor shut the door tightly. She looked up from his form, and looked into the empty house of Wendy's stare.

Loud, loud, getting louder.

The loud rock-n-roll made the cafeteria the only place in school where his lonesome ghosts couldn't get Jim—a course other boys were substitutions.

Jim checked the catch on the folding legs of the table before he set down his books. Every day Donald Wilkes set up the cafeteria tables, and, as soon as Jim put his elbows on top, the legs collapsed, and dumped his lunch in his lap. Jim checked the chair for gum. Jim had sat on three wads of grape Bazooka before he realized that Donald also set traps for the seat of his jeans. Donald and two other boys always joined Jim for lunch— they intruded, really. Jim never saw Moose until after lunch in the library. Moose coached volleyball for the fifth period frosh. Donald was free to parade Jim in front of other boys, two by two, to test Jim nerve by nerve. Jim took a humungus bite of Wonder Bread and baloney, untwisting his Baggie to get at his pickle. He gulped on his carton of Farm-Maid. His warm white milk tasted

salty. Donald Wilkes would make Jim the most famous boy in school, famous for all the wrong reasons.

Was it wrong, the way it jacknifed up, gonna split his zipper, even after Dr. Suzanne made Wendy leave the room? Jim had to talk down his underpants. Not even Christopher had seen Jim's natural reaction—and after Christopher Jim naturally reacted a whole lot quicker, and his natural reactions lasted longer. Was even a doctor allowed to see a boy's natural erections? And Dr. Suzanne must see The Raven down there the way that she saw Jim.

"Hiya, Jimmy!" Donald konked Jim on the head. "Are we having a gay time?" Donald piped in a cartoon tone. He had dirty blond hair, and brown eyes as opaque as those windows in that examining room. Two other boys crowded their trays onto the table.

The first boy had greasy red hair, and a mulberry birthmark that went down his neck inside his shirt, like that boy in *Lord of the Flies*. "Hi, Jimmy, how's your chick?"

"She's-good."

The second boy had curly hair, and smeary glasses that punished his nose. "And she's also made outta rubber and you gotta inflate her to knock her up."

"Don't make fun of Jimmy. He's sensitive," Donald said. "And I've got good news for him. I read in Webster's Dictionary that you're not a virgin once you get buttfucked."

"Hey, you fags are official at last!"

"Pretty soon they'll convince normal people that you're not just sick animals."

Jim blinked. Fuckbutt?

"What's up, Jimmy?"

"Nothing."

"Not even your dick?"

The three boys laughed.

"You lead a boring life."

"What's up in Science class?"

"That's right. Jimmy's been bumped ahead."

Jim bottomed out his milk. "The class is simple easy. Today we boiled water."

"That's Mad O'Donnelly."

"That's his experiment. He was nice to me when some senior tripped me."

"You never were very coordinated."

You don't even know me!

"Whadaya expect from upperclassmen?" The second boy had the voice of a Kleenex. "They do anything to freshmen. They stuck one kid's head in a toilet. Flushed and everything. Poor frosh nearly drowned. I don't mess around with upperclassmen. I'm not afraid. I'm gonna make the most of my high school years. I'm not afraid, though."

"Did you talk to Mad O'Donnelly about me like I told you to, Jimmy?" Donald said. "Did you mention my name?"

Jim fidgeted. Donald told Jim to tell The Raven to put Donald on the yearbook staff. Donald wanted to publish pictures almost as badly as he wanted to spread the news about Jim. "I dint get my chance."

Donald looked like he wanted to smack Jim. "You gotta take a chance!"

"I'll get my chance tonight," Jim said in a hot hurry. He just wanted Donald and these other boys to leave him be. He wasn't afraid, though. "I'm supposed to see—Mr. O'Donnelly—for the Festival."

"Did you finally sell your quota?"

"You kidding? Jimmy's old man sponsored the Festival."

"Where's your name?"

The Art Class had painted the names of students and faculty on the cafeteria wall as they sold their quotas.

"My name's third," the first boy said.

"Brown nose."

"I guess they won't paint my name on the wall until Monday," Jim said.

"You gonna sell your quota in one night?"

"You're sure taking your chances!"

The second boy stole Jim's Snickers Bar. "Your ass is grass if you don't sell your quota. Those seniors will stomp you."

"His old man will kick his ass for them."

"Nobody in school will beat his ass. Jimmy pays protection," Donald said.

"Yeah. His Dad sponsors festivals."

"Naw, he sucks every guy in his Science class."

The boys laughed.

"How about that, Donald? Is Jimmy still a virgin after he starts

sucking dicks?"

"You mean he hasn't started?"

Jim looked from boy to boy. You settled your head athwart my hips.

"Oral sex doesn't count."

"Not even if Jimmy swallows the sperm?"

"How about that, Jimmy? Are you a spitter or a swallower?"

"He's a swallower, for sure. He likes the taste."

"Does every guy taste the same, Jimmy? How much have you had?"

"Don't pick on Jimmy. He knows he's a virgin until he fucks or gets fucked by some guy."

"Where's this school headed when fags get protected?"

"You hear what happened in the joh?"

"Somebody got pissed off?"

Donald sneered at the no-good joke. "Nobody got whaled on. This is worse than upperclassmen drowning some frosh in the toilet. The Dean caught two guys kissing in the joh."

"Fags!" The second boy pushed away from Jim, as if Jim were polluted, and a drop of his perspiration could make another boy impure. "This school's fulla fags."

Jim made his eyes huge. "Yep."

Donald nodded, pleased. "The voice of experience."

Jim looked at the wall, covered with names. How many of those names belonged to—fags? Jim shivered. Walls could fall, and bury Jim alive.

The library got crowded for fifth period study, and the thought of Phys-Ed rushed the hour by for Jim. He pushed open the double doors, and the Lady Librarian glared at him. He monkeyed across the room, checking out the other kids. No enemy here. mostly sophomores, and they had survived into their superior mood, and dint care a nickel about freshman rumors. If they cornered Jim they'd just hassle him about those tickets. And any kid could see that Jim dint have his name up on that wall.

Jim hunkered over to his best section of the Library and looked for that name of that poet The Raven quoted. Jim had to stretch and stand on the bottom shelf, the way he wasn't supposed to, to snatch the book off the top shelf. *W H. Auden*. Jim sniffed at the name on the binding. Here's a poet Jim's best teacher says was homosexual.

Jim liked to sit at the table by the outside exit, past the Tutoring Center, between the magazines and the World Book Encyclopedias, in the space set aside for Intense Study. Jim ducked around a philodendron, into the safety zone beyond the Absolutely No Talking sign hammered out in boldface by somebody who shouted for a living.

The same senior sat at that table, today like everyday, reading, with an open pen in his right hand, his left hand touching his forehead, posed like Shakespeare in an English book, a mess of long light brown hair falling across his John Lennon glasses. He took one look at Jim, and, like always, without a word, without a smile, left the library in a firehurry, leaving a message for Jim to read.

Jim squared his books on the table, and spun the open book around to face him. He read where his eyes fell, at the bottom of a poem

When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," — that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

What does that mean?

Jim shut that book. He read the poets name on the spine. John Keats. He took a look at the flyleaf. Cripes! John Keats died long ago, before even Herman Melville or Walt Whitman got born! Poets went back to the first words. What Jim wanted to be had been and been. He'd have to look a long way before he could be his own poet himself.

Jim popped open the index of the names of poems in the Auden book. He looked and looked for *Equal Affections*. Nowhere. What was the rest of that rhyme? *If equal affections cannot be, let the more loving one be me*. Jim looked and looked at the names. *The More Loving One*. Jim had found The Raven's poem.

Jim read

Looking up at the stars I know quite well

That for all they care I can go to hell

Jim snickered to himself at the snappy, smart-as-heck rhyme. He opened his Walt Whitman and copied the poem on the backcover, staring hard at the last two lines of the third stanza

If equal affections cannot be

Let the more loving one be me

That's us. Jim knew. That's me and Christopher. The news came over Jim in a heat, like crybaby tears that could not would not fall. Is Chris the more loving one, or me?

The philodendron that screened his place apart smelled suspiciously plastic, the most excellent dwelling place for his ghosts. Jim burped in secret, tasting baloney and salt. His free period ended too soon, and soon Phys-Ed would scream to see Jim in the locker room, like those hungry machines in that silent science fiction movie that bored Jim last Saturday. His stomach burned. He could take an aspirin. He had two orange Baby Bayers stashed in aluminum foil in his jacket pocket in his locker, but aspirin, like questions, made his stomach burn worse. Jim had no one to turn to, nobody to see. Christopher faded like a photograph on glass, wasting in the sun. Jim would waste a generation. That's all Farfar needed to know: then the more loving one left Jim to return to that place where all questions come from, but no questions burn; where everybody sees, but remains unseen. *Tell me, Farfar, tell me true. Tell me in a whisper in the deeps of the night. Did I make you qo? Do I break your heart?*

Jim squinted at those doomed World Books. Doomed, and old, and getting older. How come Ma and Dad counted his birthdays, hoping over their accounting, until he obeyed his hormones and got a haircut, got a girlfriend, got a good education? How come Jim couldn't be written out in a book, his future and his history spelled out in simply easy prose and printed on paper cheap enough for any public wind to turn the pages? Then anybody could take *Jim Brandekker* off the shelf and read his comprehensibles.

Once, Christmas trees were giants, and an old saint spilled peppermint into a stocking hanging from the mantel, now Meg made fun of him if Jim spent an evening dreaming over the Sears Christmas Wishbook. Once, Jim cried if he skinned his knees, now Ma never even brought Jim the tin of Band-Aids. Once, the Goodyear blimp amazed Jim, now even steamboats ran on principles Jim could read about in a book. Now Jim never smiled without reasons, and his dreams dint come true, they just had meanings. Since high school started Jim had learned to run, and running, run away. Jim ran away from his questions, and, mostly, Jim ran away from his—desires.

Other kids said Jim had bubbles in his head. If he dint act his age his

head would explode, and his soul would escape, and his body would seep into the earth, nothing but a dribble of cold, stale, rain, and all Jim loved would be gone, like darkness releasing a handful of pale doves into the day.

Jim knew a word: Jim knew a word: Jim knew a word: Fuck!

"Hiya, Little Jim—Hey, you sick or something?"

Jim recognized the big voice. He sat up quick, like a boy caught peeing behind a tree by a girl cousin on a family picnic. "Hi, Moose."

"Hiya."

Being best friends with John Paulson dint surprise Jim. Moose had friends throughout the school, even among upper-classmen, popular same as his sister Wendy—for similar if not the same reasons. Moose crashed silently across from Jim, a giant of a kid, warm and friendly as Florida; loyal as ice and fire. Moose always talked buddy-buddy, a hero scoring the needed touchdown; a solid student, helping an underdog solve accelerated algebra problems; a lover, screwing cheerleaders in the old mill in Pumpkin Hook.

Saturday nights, after scrimmage games, Moose invited Jim to Osiris for pizza. Moose talked extra loud when he went somewheres with Jim. He shoveled great slabs of pizza into his mouth, and pinched pretty girls in their butts. Jim never spoke to girls. (His Ma probably told Jim he'd grow hair on his palms if he let a girl hold his hand.) Jim chewed his pizza too many times, keeping the pepperoni in his mouth long enough to give himself bad breath. Jim just smiled, spoiled, or polite, and said hello, when a girl sat beside him and coyly touched his hand. Jim did act *different*, you know, shy.

"What's new, Little Jim?"

"Not nothing."

"Don't you ever do something new?"

"I like to do the same thing."

Moose sneered at Jim's close business with the book. "What stupid poem book are you reading this time?"

Jim flashed the cover for both of em to read.

"The Poems of John Keats" Moose read. "Keats? Sounds like the name of a parakeet."

"Oh, he's a good poet. I heard've Keats. He died young. He died in a boyfriend's arms."

"Don't talk about fags to me."

"Well, he's not like my hero. Sappho's my hero. I'd like to be the Sappho of boys."

"Who's Sap-o?"

"She's Greek."

"A woman?"

"She's my best hero."

Moose shook his big blond head. "Heroes."

"Aren't heroes supposed to be the people who people want to live like?"

"You want to live like a woman?"

"You wouldn't like Sappho, Moose. She was a girl who liked girls."

"Forget this fag stuff!"

"And you'd hate who told me about Sappho—"

"And forget about that kid at camp! You're in high school, Little Jim."

"I never forget I'm in high school."

"You're talking about Science class."

"Yep. Science class—Physics class—senior Science class."

"Those upperclassmen still pushing you around?"

"Not just those seniors, Mr. O'Donnelly's—weird."

"That's why they call him Mad O'Donnelly. What does he do?"

"He—pays attention to me—I guess you'd say. He always asks me if I understand the stuff he just explained. He always asks me to stay after class, then he makes me look in his book, and he explains the same stuff twice. He's always—touching me."

"Mad O'Donnelly feels you out?"

"He touches my hand, or touches my arm, or fluffs my hair. Also he picks up my pen."

"How suggestive!"

"Sometimes he calls me names."

"What does he call you?"

"Brandy."

"Cute. *Brandy* for *Brandekker*. That does sound queer. If he wasn't a teacher I could bruise him up a little—"

"You can't beat up everybody who makes fun of me, John."

"How do you know he's making fun of you?"

"Now who's making up rumors?"

"Well, you gotta be careful. You can run into real queers in high school."

"Cripes, Moose, could a teacher be a for real queer?"

"The only person I've heard that rumor about is you."

"Thanks, John, I'm glad you believe all sortsa rumors about me."

"I just want you to look out for your reputation. You shouldn't mess around with anybody who's not guaranteed straight."

"Then how come you mess around with me, John? I got the worse guarantee in school."

"We don't mess around."

"Well, how come a teacher would wanna mess around with me?"

"You gotta be careful. Some guys go for boys."

"Would a grown-up guy really mess around with a skinny blond frosh with the hots?"

"Don't sound so eager—"

"Well, Cripes!"

Moose smiled, slowsome. "You know what you need, Little Jim?"

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"A good fuck!"

His ghosts pinched his zipper. "I heard the story of big events that wait beyond my wedding cake. I'm a virgin, okay? Is that what you want to get me to admit?"

"I know that, Jim. I know you got a serious problem. And, seriously, Jim, don't you ever jog it a little?"

"Do how?"

"You know: pull your pudding, whittley-tink, drum up a little business, pull your pod, shake the bad boys outta school, tickle the bad boy until he sneezes, manufacture hand lotion, give all for God and family, squib, come creamy, jingle balls, shock the monkey, go for a gusher, frig, pump spunk, jerk off, play with yourself in the dark—" Moose brought his foot up from under Jim's chair and screwed his toe into Jim's crotch. "Masturbate."

Jim tilted his chair away from the table, knocking away Moose's foot, closing his knees. "Don't ask me that stuff, John!"

"Every guy in school beats his meat. Good for the soul. I admit, whacking off has got nothing over a good lay, but a hand job sure can help. You can tell me, Little Jim. When's the last time you gave it the ol' squeeze?"

"Let's skip that subject, okay, John? I got RE. in ten minutes—"

"What, do you jack off in the locker room? No wonder Wilkes thinks you're queer!"

"I don't, John! I just don't!"

"Jacking off doesn't mean you're queer—"

"Honest-to-Gosh, I don't."

"Don't you know how?"

"I don't do that, and I don't wanna do that!"

"Your problem's obvious, Little Jim. You're horny. I see how horny you are. Wilkes sees. Everybody sees. Now if you want me to fix you up with a chick—"

"How about your sister?"

"Hey! Good choice! She plays the game! She's hot for you, too. She wants your body."

Jim had to pee. He stuck his hands in his pockets, and rested his chin on the book that senior had left behind, like some sign in rock, from the Maker. "I don't play that game, John."

"What game do you play, Little Jim?"

Weird, weird, getting weirder.

Cripes, Jim had to pee. He kept his hand in his pocket. He walked funny. He came up against the door of the boys' room across from the library.

BOYS

Donald had warned Jim. could this be the same joh? What if those two boys were back inside, kissing, like two married people? Jim was gonna pee his jeans. Slowly, with silly caution, he pushed open the joh door. He peeped inside. Nobody. A trickle of water in the sink made Jim need to use the joh even more. He stepped in and peeked under the stall for body-less legs, for a boy's foot crossed over another boy's foot, sneaker to sneaker, shirt to shirt, a boy's hand on another boy's hill. Nobody. Jim went over to the corner urinal where he could watch the door.

Jim unzipped, and popped it outta his underpants. He pointed it into the basin, letting his shirttail hide it. Jim peed.

It finished, and Jim looked at it. He pressed it up against his belt buckle, cooling its nasty tip with metal. It smiled up at him, its little mouth turned to one side, like an uninnocent serpent, blind and weird. It wished it had saved enough juice to squirt Jim in the eye. Jim squeezed it, and fixed the good feeling. It dared him to rub it good, and get it stiff, then sick to its stomach, until he made it spit up. He

pinched it— *yooou* — and his thumbnail left a tiny crescent in its dimpled tip. What did Moose say? It was his and he could beat it up. Every kid goes stiff in school. Who's gonna blame Jim?

Cripes! Jim let it go! He crammed it extra stiff, back in his underpants, back in his jeans, and zipped his zipper fast.

School johs were squeamy places, and smelly, and they weren't clean. Don't anybody flush? Other boys were worse than animals, and they wanted Jim to be an animal, too.

Jim held his filthy hands away from his body and hurried to wash em. He let cold water pour over his wrists and arms. The coolness evaporated the moment the water touched his skin. He was hot. Splotches where other boys had popped pimples smeared the reflection of his face. Bad luck had cracked the glass.

The door whooshed open, and the face of Donald Wilkes filled the mirror. "Hey, Jimmy Woodpecker, did I surprise you whacking off?"

Jim scowled at Donald over his shoulder. "I'm washing my hands."

Donald went over to the urinal Jim had used. He faced Jim and unzipped. "You should save yourself for your closet, Jimmy Woodpecker." He wormed his penis outta his underpants.

Jim dint look. He dried his hands on his shirt. "I'm no woodpecker."

"Whasamatter? Can't get it up?" Donald scrunched so close to the urinal that Jim couldn't see.

"I gotta get to Phys-Ed."

"Hey, wait for me. I'm in your class. And I know you don't wanna be late. You don't wanna miss your chance to see nude boys. I bet you don't have any trouble getting it up in the locker room." Donald put it away before he moved back from the urinal, Jim couldn't even sneak a curious look. Donald dint wash his hands.

"What's up with me means nothing to you."

Donald blocked the door. "How do you know? How do you know I don't want to see you nude? How come you never strip naked until everybody else goes upstairs? Maybe I'd like to see you strip to your skin. How do you know I'm not a fag, like you? How do you know I'm not one of those guys the Dean caught kissing in the joh? This might be the same joh where I kiss other faggots. Maybe if you ask me pretty we can go all the way. You'd like that, huh, Brandicker? You'd like to get some other guy to go all the way. You can suck my smoogie. I'll fuck your mouth like a pussy."

"I'm no girl!" Jim pushed past Donald. "I got what boys got!"

"Hey, who gave you permission to leave? Fags've gotta ask normal people for permission to leave."

Jim pushed open the door. "Then who do I ask, since I can't ask you?"

The final bell rang, releasing a stream of students that stranded teachers in the hall, like stones in the middle of all.

Jim ducked around the other kids with Donald pestering his ear.

"And you better tell Mad O'Donnelly I'm interested in yearbook."

The corridor branched off into the cafeteria, and dropped down to the locker room stairs.

"You better make sure he knows I'm interested." Donald stopped Jim with a hand on his shoulder. He let stragglers pass them, going down into the locker room. "Or I'll make sure he knows what interests you."

All the while, Donald's hand was on his shoulder, and Jim was scared of being easy prey. Maybe he should just surrender. "Maybe he's got what I'm interested in." Jim turned away, and trudged down the steps, consigning his body to the eyes of all those other boys in the locker

room below.

"Ooo, I got the fem to tell the truth!" Donald shouted from the landing. "I got the little woman to confess!"

Jim marched to his locker, trying not to look right or left. Jim hated how he liked to see other boys. Seeing other boys wearing nothing but their underpants got it hot the most. Jim dint need to pause to unlock his locker to stash his books. Coach Golgar said that locks wasted their play period.

Donald stood on the other side of the bench down the middle of the room. "I'll take my pants off first, Jimmy, to let you get a longer look at my dick."

Jim stood behind the half-closed door of his lock and scuffed off his sneaks.

"Don't be shy." Donald swung the door away from Jim. "I want you to watch me."

Jim dint look. Donald made that sound: metal shearing metal. Jim watched Donald's shadow take off Donald's pants. Jim kicked his sneaks into his locker. Shoes that reminded him of summer and Christopher deserved better than being condemned to the bottom of his Phys-Ed locker. His sneaks would take revenge on his feet and give Jim fungus. Jim put his feet on the bench to take off his socks. He snuck a look at Donald. Donald pulled off his chambray shirt, and stood in front of Jim, nothing on but his underpants. Jim read the blue stripes in the waistband: Fruit-of-the-Loom like Christopher.

"Don't be shy, Jimmy." Donald thrust his fly at Jim, gonna bop Jim in the nose. "Take a look." Donald pulled down his underpants.

Donald dint have a big penis. His balls looked puny, bigger at the top than at the bottom. His hair down there was sparse and brown.

"That's what interests you, right, Jimmy Woodpecker?" Donald held

Jim by his shoulder, and yanked it with his other hand. "Just your size? Just your style?"

Jim swung around on the end of the bench.

Donald straddled the bench, to bother Jim's collar. "Don't hide, Jimmy. You interest me, too."

"You look at you."

"I wanna see you."

"You wanna see a fag?" Jim lolled his head—the way The Raven lolled his head, only the loll of Jim's head left his shoulder soft and gold, while The Ravens black hair made a storm-cloud on his shoulder. "I wonder how many other boys wanna look at fags?"

Donald shoved Jim off the bench.

Jim bunched his socks and stuffed em in his sneakers. He hid behind his locker door again. Donald could only see Jim from the knees down, and he could see red-n-white stripes through the vent in the door. Jim crossed his wrists and tugged his rugby shirt over his head by the hem. He heard Donald pull on his strap. Jim turned his shirt right side out, and smoothed the morning of schoolwork and dread outta the sweaty collar and sleeves. He set his favorite shirt on the shelf. He looked over his locker door. Most other boys were down to their underpants. Donald sat on the bench, watching Jim, holding his left shoe absolutely still in his right hand. Jim stared down his skinny chest. He unbuckled his belt. His belly quickened. He read the name stamped on the brass button: Levis, the name of a generation, white as his own wasted family name. Jim popped the button. He stood on his bare tiptoes and looked over his locker door a second time. Most of the other boys had no clothes on. Jim watched the other boys. He just watched em. He saw all of all of their bodies. He saw their hair, their arms and shoulders, their nifty collar bones, the small sweaty caves

behind their knees, and in the crooks of their elbows; he saw their butts, and he saw their penes, too. He saw all of all of em—but he dint see their eyes. He couldn't look other boys in the eye. His own penis turned over, alive and alive, never absolutely his own, his big namemaker. Hard, hard, getting harder. Too hard not to interest Jim, too. Jim groped in his pockets to set it straight. Straight? Who could set Jim straight? Jim watched other boys too long. And nude boys notice how long a boy who is not nude looks at nude boys. Donald noticed. He had his gym shoes on, but he still dint leave the locker room. He stared at all he could see of Jim. Jim watched other boys put on their jockstraps and their shorts. Donald fluttered his eyes at Jim. Donald dint leave until so many boys had suited up and left that if he stayed they would notice him watching Jim. Jim always waited for an empty room before he unzipped his jeans: metal shearing metal, as loud as the gates to Sodom. His jeans went loose, and he slid em down, and freed em from around his ankles. The red stripes in his waistband flashed like sirens: Warning! Big dangers to come! It made a pyramid outta his fly. Jim bunched up his jeans, and crammed em in his locker. He faced the empty room, stuck his thumbs behind his waistband, and pulled down his underpants. He nimbled out of em. They lay on the floor, a simpery animal, squished flat by a hit and run, the red stripes trickles of innocent blood. He snatched em, and tossed em in his locker, and meshed his fingers, and hunched, and crossed his legs; he tried every trick, every move he could make without touching it, to keep it from being seen. It stood, stiff as an arrow—erect, Doctor Suzanne would say—a lonesome middle finger aimed at Jesus in the Manger, a natural reaction gone every-way-wrong.

Jim looked at his body as little as possible, suiting up in a hurry. First his jockstrap—the worst torture Coach Golgar could inflict. ("I don't want any accidents on the field that'll affect your performance off the field!" Every other boy laughed.)

"Brandekker!" The Coach hollered from the stairs. "Move your ass!"

Jim squirmed into his gym shorts, and pulled on his gym shirt—backwards—and he had to take his arms outta the sleeves, and turn the collar on his neck to get his shirt on the right way. He shut his locker without slamming the door. His fingers were sticky on the damp, uncool metal. Indian Summer could not get in under the gym, but heat remained: heat from the bodies of other boys, like a ghost of desire. "Coming!" Jim put on his sweatsocks and gym shoes, and dashed upstairs.

The Coach smacked Jim upside the head as he passed. "You're always the last little pecker upstairs. Think you can find a better place to play with yourself?"

Coach leaned against the folded bleachers and fulminated, because boys got the gym hot. He laughed when a boy cried when he got the wind knocked outta him, and he muttered "Crybaby," not so far under his breath that the other boys dint hear the remark and chant, and winners would pummel losers with rotten names.

Jim tried to concentrate on the game, but his body burned, too hot to obey, and he hit the ball into the net for the third time.

"Look alive!" Donald said. "You play like a fag!"

Jim wiped his hands on his shirt. The volleyball was sticky with sweat from the hands of other boys. "Lemme alone!"

"We might as well. You're not playing like you're on our team."

Donald danced, la-de-dah. "You're bigger than the rest of us, aren't you, Jimmy?"

Jim looked from boy to boy, confused. The other boys were taller than Jim by a head or more, and their arms filled out the sleeves of their gym shirts. How could Jim be bigger?

"Lay off, Wilkes!"

Jim recognized that baritone: Moose, unoffically coaching the sixth period game from the sidelines.

"Ooo, Moose!" Donald limped his wrist. "Everybody knows you and Brandicker are butt-buddies!"

Moose aimed a fist at Donald. "You better take an alternate route home tonight, Donny. I take care of guys who call me a fag."

Donald posed, a plastic ballerina. "I bet you do!" Jim volleyed the confrontation—not the game. He dint even see the ball—until he turned, and the ball bounced off the bridge of his nose. Jim yelped, and let the punch knock him off his feet. The other boys laughed, as loud as those seniors laughed when they tripped Jim in Physics class. Jim crumpled, and lay on the floor. He wanted nobody to see his tears fall

down

down

down.

His heart sank, an unlucky penny tossed into the wishing well that all boys call the world. Who waited at the bottom of his fall? God-his-Father, QuakerMade, and Puresome, his plump lotioned palm patient enough to grant any prayer? No! Jim would wrestle with angels!

Jim stood on his knees, and searched for sympathy, his Coach, Donald Wilkes, the other boys, even Moose—everybody laughed. Jim tried to

laugh. He tried not to cry. But his eyes got wet as soon as he got hit. He tried to turn his back on that laughter. He went to look—and two long white magic hands offered Jim the ball.

Jim approached The Raven without a word.

"Lose something, Brandy?"

Surprise hooked his throat. The Raven put the ball in Jim's hands. A big white hand leafed back the collarband of Jim's gym shirt, and stroked Jim's bare shoulder under his warm, sweaty shirt. Then The Raven released Jim, and receded through the other boys, towards the locker room stairs.

Could The Raven be real? Really truly real? Jim could smell the heat those magic hands left on the ball.

Moose tugged on Jim's arm. "Don't let these assholes get to you, you're just having an off day."

Jim let Moose lead him back to the game. He watched The Raven disappear below the horizon of the floor. Jim faced his team, and socked the ball—and the ball bounced back at him off the net—scarely missing his head a second time—and giving the opposing team the winning point.

Coach Golgar blew his whisde. "Hit the showers, guys!"

The other boys surged down the locker room stairs. Jim lagged behind, burning with thought.

"Hey, Brandekker!"

Jim even walked away from Moose.

"Hang on a second, Brandekker!" Golgar planted his hand on Brandekker's shoulder and made the kid stop and listen. The kid wiped a tear streak off his cheek. "You sick or something? I know your stomach's been bugging you." Jim swallowed his unspent tears. "I got the news. I'm too little." And Jim was scared—scared twice by The Raven—scared of those magic hands.

"Too little?" The Coach slapped himself on the head. "What an ignorant bastard I am!"

"Sir?"

"I see what's bugging you!"

"You see, Sir?"

"Your chick won't give you any."

The remark rolled up a slope in Jim. He pinked. He glanced towards Moose.

"Don't worry, son." The Coach squeezed his shoulder and crushed the tense impression The Raven had made in Jim's flesh. Christ, the kid's skinny, a real toothpick fairy. "You get your ass on the football team and she'll come around. You know?"

Jim did not know. Jim ran.

Jim dint even see the other boys. He pulled off his gym suit in as few moves as possible, and swished his sweaty bangs outta his eyes. He peeled off that hateful jockstrap, and hurried, revealed, to the nearmost showerstall.

His ghosts sang, deeper than sweat: Fear, boy fear? Are you afraid? Afraid of girls? Or afraid he's a fem with his eye on your nuts? Afraid of dark birds that you want to hang on to?

Jim twirled both knobs, but the nozzle only delivered cold water. He doused his body, blasting it until it shriveled, trying to keep water

outta his hair. Fear, yeah, fear. His ghosts were carbonated fear. And those eyes the green of glory bewildered Jim; that black hair trammeled his heart when he thought of burning alone in bed tonight. Tears pooled.

Chicks are baby chickens, and you chop off their heads, and pluck their feathers, and fry their parts in iron pans, you cook em hot in grease. Girls recline in lemon meadows, sweeter than baby aspirins, and twice as good for the common cold. But what does a feather like you intend for pretty sweetlings when he's chicken over other boys?

Jim dove, and let the cold surge smash him squarely face-first between his eyes. He twisted off the taps, and backed outta the stall, groping for his locker—his towel—his clothes—

He wrung out his yellow hair, and he could not care less that the puddle he left on the floor broke the locker-room rules. He yanked open his locker, and stuffed in his gym suit, and flipped the strap into the bottom behind his sneaks, and— Cripes!

Jim pulled his jeans off the shelf. He let his favorite shirt fall on the floor. He felt green and dizzy, freezing blind.

"They're gone! Which one of you creeps took em!"

"You fruit!"

"They're gone! Give em back!"

"Awww, lick me, Brandekker!"

"You better not say that! He might try!"

"They're gone!" His ghosts made war noises: Pica! Boom!

"Stop trying to be the center of attention!"

"Pansy!"

"Crybaby!"

"Fag!"

Jim pounded on his locker with both fists! "One of you clowns took em, now give em back!"

The Coach shoved through the other boys. He slapped Jim back against the lockers. "Brandekker, you asshole! What's all this goddamn swearing about? You want the goddamn Dean down here? Whasamatter now?"

Jim cried. "They're gone! One of these jokers took em!"

"What did you lose? Your watch? What?"

"They're stolen!"

"What? Money? All right, which one of you slap-happy little bastards copped this kid's wallet?"

"I dint lose my money!"

"Then what!"

"My underwear! Somebody swiped my fucking underpants!"

How come that Coach dint give Jim back his unstolen clothes? Jim sat in the glass office off the locker room, wearing nothing but the towel the Coach let him wear. How come another boy would steal his underwear?

Somewhere the thief cackled, gloating over Jim's underpants, like an Egyptian tailor over Hebrew swaddlings. A Nazi with pinchy eyes took em, living alone in a Stonehenge house, stashing stolen clothes in tall chests of drawers, and playing tiddley-winks with other people's buttons, eating dirty laundry three meals a day, slurping elastic,

crunching zippers, snacking on shoestrings, wiping his mouth on Jim's underpants, or stretching em over a lampshade to flash a filthy invitation through the wicked-boy stripes. His whole freshman class would autograph Jim's underpants and present em to Jim at the next pep rally with a testimonial voting him the boy most likely to like boys. The thief would run em up a flagpole at City Hall, and the good citizens of Stickford would flock to salute em on some pink holiday. A boy who would steal another boy's underpants would frighten children and hurt the family dog. He would molest children and shoot the family dog.

"Mister Brandekker?"

Jim dint need to look to know Dean Haarman followed the Coach into the room. The Dean had ahold of Jim's favorite shirt, and he had Jim's jeans draped over his arm, and he had a finger hooked in each red sneaker, a yellow sock stuffed between each tongue.

"Stand up when the Dean greets you, Mister Brandekker."

Mister Brandekker roped himself with the towel and obeyed.

"I did not expect to see you today, Mister Brandekker."

"I dint expect you to see me, either, Father."

"I couldn't believe that you misbehaved in Physical Education. Can you see how this upsets me, Mister Brandekker?

Can you see?" "I see, Father."

"I could not believe that a boy like Mister Brandekker would misbehave. But you are Mister Brandekker, aren't you?"

"I guess I am." Jim never got closer than a guess as to who Jim Brandekker might be. Did Jim Brandekker mean this shadow, this body? Did Jim Brandekker mean this way to see, these things to say? Who made Jim Brandekker, and what is Jim Brandekker supposed to make? How come he had to move Jim Brandekkers body, and look outta Jim Brandekkers blue eyes, and brush away Jim Brandekker's yellow hair, and wear Jim Brandekkers favorite shirt, and feel the difference in Jim Brandekkers heart? Did he have to be Jim Brandekker—from worse to Eternity? He was Jim Brandekker yesterday, he never remembered being any other name. If he had to be Jim Brandekker he would never leave this glass room. If somebody called "Oh Jim Brandekker!" he wouldn't answer. If Jim Brandekker was the only boy he could be nobody would ever see him again. He would be nobody at all. "Maybe you should try to see what made me do what I did, Father."

"What does the reason matter? Any behavior different from acceptable behavior is misbehavior, and misbehavior must be punished."

"But somebody took something out of my gym locker." "Stealing? That's a serious accusation. What was taken?" Even if the Coach dint tell the Dean what got stolen Jim had just watched the Dean feeling out his favorite shirt and jeans. "Don't you know, Father?"

"Don't you trust Father, Mister Brandekker?" Jim looked as if the Dean had squeezed him outta his clothes. "Somebody stole my underpants."

"I see. I almost see your point, Mister Brandekker." "I got so embarrassed." His words scattered like scared baby birds.

"You swore, didn't you, Mister Brandekker?"

"I guess I said *fuck*." Jim spoke in his smallest letters.

"Do you now what that word means, Mister Brandekker?"

"I guess."

"Vicariously? Or through experience?"

Cripes! What did this Dean think Jim had been doing? "Other boys use

that word all-a-time!"

"You were yourself when I met you a month ago! Who made you do what other boys do? Can you see how this upsets me? Can you see how this will upset your parents? Can you see how upset your Mother will be when I tell her you're

suspended

The front of the school was pure empty

Other kids had been absorbed by their last classes. Jim stood between the brick walls of the lobby, a frightened boy, unsure of what to do. Crying had smudged his cheeks, and worry had snarled his cornsilk hair. Doubts pegged his chin.

Suspended: that word hit Jim between his eyes, and he jumped up, and before he could remember to get ahold, the towel fell off. The Dean smiled when he saw Jim with no clothes on. He dropped Jim's clothes after a long stare and pushed em across the floor with his foot, and Jim twisted his ankle, shoving his legs into his bluejeans, and turning his back to zip his zipper.

The Dean made Jim stop and fill out a form for the lost-n-found.

"May I help you?" Miss Sullivan could tie up hope with red tape and triplicate forms. How come Miss Sullivan never misses a day of work? Because she never goes home. She's been here so long they just roll her into the closet at night.

"I'm supposed to fill out a form for the lost-n-found. The Dean says so."

"Very well, be seated, please."

Be seated? How long is this gonna take?

Miss Sullivan twigged through a batch of folders until she found the required form. "I'll need some information, name, student number."

"My name's Jim Brandekker. That's with two ks. I'm a freshman."

Miss Sullivan regarded this boy. He was short. Short as Indian Summer. Short as childhood. "I can see that. Didn't we just see you for a football physical?"

Jim quizzed the floor. "I'll have to look at my i.d. card to give you my student number." He squirmed for his wallet.

"Do you have to use the lavatory?"

"Nope. No, Ma'am."

"I'll look up your student number in my files." *I saw what you did,* and *I know where you live. Ill phone your folks and they'll give consent. I'll spank your bare butt with my broomstick.*

"Are you certain you had the lost item with you when you came to school?"

"O, yes, Ma'am." Bad boys, bare-assed under their blue-jeans, hitchhiking, drinking beer, smuggling funny cigarettes through customs, and picking up chicks.

"What did you lose?"

"Huh?"

"Be polite, young man. Say, pardon me, Miss Sullivan."

"Pardon me, Miss Sullivan?"

"What did you lose?"

These offices were made to make Jim do embarrassing things to himself in front of crowds, like volunteering to have a mesmerist pickpocket his underwear—Cripes! Underwear! "Can I fill in that part, Ma'am? I have very good penmanship. I won an award for penmanship in grade school."

"Young man, these forms must be compiled by trained office personnel."

And they roll me into the closet at night, too!

"Can't I talk to somebody else about this part? The Principal, maybe?"

"Young man you are wasting class time. I insist that you tell me what you've lost, otherwise you are dismissed."

Jim covered his mouth. "I lost my underpants."

"Pardon me?"

Jim moved his hand over his eyes. "I said, I lost my underpants!"

Miss Sullivan smiled. He was short, fair and foppish. Little Mister Brandekker, a tinkerbell boy dancing lewd in a bar, his tail a-jingle. "I see." The section labeled *description* would be amusing. "What color are your underpants?"

Jim softened. "White."

"And that cute little stripe in the waistband?"

He had nothing private! "The stripes are red." Jim squeezed his belt buckle.

"And the size?"

Jim squeezed his belt buckle with both hands. "Fourteens."

"You look like you'd take a bigger size than that!"

Cripes Almighty!

"Should I trust you, or do I need you to lower your blue-jeans to show me you're not making up a story?"

"Miss Sullivan!" The lady doctor came outta the examining room. "What sort of question is that?"

Miss Sullivan looked at nothing but her form. "Very well, Mister Brandekker, if anyone turns in a pair of white, size fourteen, boy's underpants, with red stripes in the waistband you will be the first person we notify."

Jim watched the doctor scowl at Miss Sullivan. "Uh, Doctor Suzanne? Could I talk to you, uh, personally?"

The doctor looked Jim over for a long minute. "Come in the examining room."

Jim followed the doctor into the examining room. This time Jim truly shut the door. The doctor sat on the squeaky stool, and Jim scooted up on the examining table, kicking his feet, in his big red shoes. "I got this problem." Jim began without asking. "I got this friend—"

The doctor sighed. "What's her name?"

Jim got cross. "His name is Christopher, if you gotta be snoopy."

"I apologize, Jim. I thought you were experiencing difficulties with your girlfriend."

Jim blinked at the doctor, like she spoke in some funny tongue imported from the moon. "How come I gotta have a girlfriend?"

The doctor sighed in a bigger way. "May I speak to you plainly?"

"I wish somebody would—"

"You shouldn't be ashamed of your sexuality—"

Jim closed his eyes. He switched positions twice, irritated by his raw

zipper. "I'm shy-"

"You shouldn't be embarrassed by your physical development—"

"My—chest—you know, got swollen. Maybe I'm less boy than girl. Maybe that's why."

"Boys don't become girls, Jim. Believe me, your body is perfectly normal."

Jim squeezed his eyes shut tighter, until he saw nothing but the dark inside. He wished he could block his ears, in a way nobody would see. He wished he dint have to hear his burning question. But he would still hear his blood surge, the way his pulse beat, burning fast, when father slid that screen open in those confessionals *Bless me Father*, *I'm a sin*. Jim snapped his eyes open, looking squarely at Doctor Suzanne. "Am I perfectly normal if I'm ho-mo-sex-u-al?" Jim said that word in syllables, the way he read that word off the board in English class.

The doctor dint answer for whole minutes. "Are other boys calling you homosexual, Jim?"

"Other boys gimme those erections."

"An erection is a natural reaction—"

"My erections are natural reactions for me when I see other boys. Down in the locker room. Or sometimes. With no clothes on.

"Embarrassment may cause an erection in a boy your age—"

"Or sometimes even when I see other boys at all. When I just see em. Sometimes I get erections even then. And I had a thing with another boy at summer camp—"

The doctor dint know what to say. "What do you know about homosexuality, Jim?"

"I don't even know about, you know, sex! I just know how I fell."

"And you feel sexually attracted to other boys?"

"I feel good when I'm close to other boys."

"Boys may experience sexual arousal just by looking, or even from their thoughts."

"You mean like during my dreams?"

"A boy may become aroused by his dreams. A boy may experience a nocturnal emission, or a wet dream, at night."

"I dream mostly in the mornings."

"Do you know what a fantasy is, Jim?"

"That's when you make up stuff that you want to happen."

"Not always, not entirely, but fantasies are stories we tell ourselves. Do you make up fantasies about other boys in private?"

"How do you mean private?"

"There are three stages of private activity in a boy; sexual activity. Arousal, erection, and ejaculation—"

"I don't do that! I don't—jack off—"

"You misunderstand me. Many boys experience their first ejaculation through self-stimulation. A boy ejaculates at the climax of sexual arousal. This sexual climax is called an orgasm. When a boy has an orgasm he ejaculates—he squirts semen."

Jim hunkered down, interested. It got interested too, butting its pink nose against his brassy zipper. It would scrape itself sore. "How much will I squirt?"

"A small amount, Jim. An orgasm is an intensely pleasurable experience. Some boys say a boy comes when he ejaculates, or climaxes, or has an orgasm. Some boys stimulate themselves sexually by making up fantasies. Do you fantasize about boys when you masturbate?"

"I don't do that!"

"Do you ever fantasize about girls when you masturbate?"

"I don't do that masturbation—"

"Do you ever masturbate with other boys?"

"Could a boy make another another boy have his first orgasmix?"

"All right, Jim. I'll tell you something. I don't want you to talk about what I'm going to tell you with anyone except your parents. If you want to talk about what I'm going to tell you I want you to have your parents call me, and you and your parents and I will talk. Your feelings are a big thing, aren't they?"

"They're big to me."

"All right. You're asking me if two boys can have sexual relations. Yes. That is possible."

"How's that possible?"

"These are big things, Jim. And I don't want you to think I'm telling you to do these things. I'm telling you these things because you're a big boy, and you're too serious to do the things that maybe a boy your age should not do. I'm telling you these things because if you're sincerely experiencing homosexual feelings I know you will think first, and then have second thoughts, before you act on your feelings—"

"First I need a second to see what's possible."

"Two boys arouse each in the same way that boys and girls arouse each

other. Two boys hug each other, and kiss each other, and deep kiss—"

"Kiss how?"

"Sometimes you may have heard your friends talk about French kissing?"

"Is kissing all else that's possible?"

"Two boys can tease each other privately, in a sexual way. Or two boys can kiss other parts of each others' bodies. Two boys can kiss each other's penis—"

"With their mouths?"

"One boy can kiss the other boy's penis, or two boys can lie close and kiss each others' penis—"

"Would I—come?"

"Y-yes. A boy can make another boy ejaculate by kissing the other boy's penis—"

"How about those sperms?"

"Swallowing sperm is not harmful, normally, Jim."

"Maybe, but a boy goes to the bathroom down there—"

"I want to show you something, Jim." The Doctor took a little blue foil pack outta her black bag under the sink. She tore open the packet, and unrolled a funny, see-through balloon down her first finger.

"That looks like that's made to fit on me—"

"This is a condom, Jim. A boy puts a condom on his penis—"

"You want me to put that on?"

"If you have sexual relations with a girl or a boy I want you to put a condom on your penis. Sperm collects in the tip of the condom when a boy ejaculates, and that way your companion does not come in contact with your semen. Most boys wear a condom to keep from getting their girlfriends pregnant. But a condom is the polite thing for you to use for your companion in these big sexual matters, and for you, too. That's safe."

"What've I gotta get saved from?"

"A boy can contract a sexual disease from being sexually close to a girl or boy. And, be mindful, Jim, homosexual young people cannot be married. Homosexual young people cannot obtain a marriage license. A boy does not get a blood test to be with another boy."

"Well, what about two married people, you know? Married people don't just kiss each other down there—"

"You're asking me if two boys can have sexual intercourse, Jim. Yes, that's possible. Two boys can perform intercurral intercourse. To do this one boy lays on top of the other and thrusts his erect penis up between the other boy's legs—"

"Up near his butt?"

"Or one boy may put his lubricated penis inside the other boy's anus __"

"Up his butt!"

"This requires lubrication—special lubrications—or Vaseline, Baby Oil, soap, saliva—"

"No way! No other boy's gonna spit on it and stick it up inside me!"

"These are big things, Jim. These things are against the law in some states—"

"Am I going to jail?"

"Love is the biggest of these possibilities. Now don't you dare snicker. A young boy may think love is silly, but wait until you see how big the possibilities feel the first time you fall in love. I can't tell you if you'll fall in love with a girl, or another boy—simply because you had a thing with a boy one time does not mean that the next time you won't have something with a girl. But the first time you truly fall in love you'll see clearly—"

"What if I do fall in love—"

"Well, that's possible. A boy your age may fall in love—"

"But what if I fall in love with somebody a whole lot older?"

"Well, you're not even old enough to marry in this state without your parents' consent. You can't even consent to sexual relations in this state. Your feelings are one thing now, and when you're older they'll be another. But you should wait to have sexual relations until you're grown-up."

"I don't mean an older kid. I mean somebody a whole lot older. What if I'm in love with a fullgrown man?"

"Oh, no, Jim. You must never consent to sexual relations with an adult! You're a young teenage boy, and you must not allow an adult male to abuse or molest you!"

The urge to leave school came over Jim like someone else's shadow as soon as he left Doctor Suzanne, and he skipped his Religion class, and got his brown corduroy jacket, and abandoned all his books but Walt Whitman. He just couldn't convince his feet to walk him out the front doors of the school. His ghosts eavesdropped, snuggled in the bricks.

"What's happening?" Moose came outta the niche of drinking fountains outside the boysroom.

"What are you doing outta class, Moose?"

"Skipping."

His ghosts giggled, clinging to their bricks. This Moose walked bravely, nothing like Jim.

"I heard about the lifter, Little Jim."

Jim squinted. Could Moose see his ghosts, bending their bricks? His ghosts wanted to live in Jim's pockets, in the feely tension of his jeans.

"The story's all over the cafeteria. Especially about you telling the Dean to stay outta your fucking underpants!"

Jim pouted. Now he had been misquoted. His world goes from wrong to wronger. "Maybe I can get transferred to a different school."

They crossed the lobby and sat down on a marble bench along the wall that harbored Jim's ghosts.

"Who do you think took em, Jim?"

"I dunno." A time for whispering, that's what this was. His ghosts knew this, too, squeeging the bricks, bone-dry already, with the thin blades of their hands.

"You know," Moose snickered, and the ghosts went deeper into the wall. "This is really pretty funny."

"I'm silly all over." Jim squinted harder over his shoulder. Yeppers. He could almost see em, his fat grey ghosts, as old as the moment Jim was made, dressed in frumpy burlap, and smelling like potatoes spilled in the root cellar.

"You think you got a fag in your RE. class?"

Jim shrugged one shoulder. "Maybe one."

"You shouldn't get so upset."

"Cripes, Moose! I don't want somebody doing stuff with my underpants. Underpants are private."

"Yeah. Stealing a guy's underwear is pretty low. If I were you, I'd skip a couple Phys-Ed classes."

This Jim already knew. His ghosts went on without Space and without Time. They just nestled in their bricks to be near Jim. They dint need to embarrass Jim in the locker room. They just liked to watch Jim cower and blush in public. His ghosts jittered the bricks with their song:

Prickfishy boy with the light yellow hair, your ears won't prick, and your prick's a peacock feather. Your little chest is empty, your Muma doesn't live inside you anymore!

"I feel like I peed my jeans in class! The most embarrassing moment in my life and all I do is cry, and swear, and get suspended."

Moose wouldn't look at Jim. "What do you think you should've done?"

"I dunno. Put the rest of my clothes on and forgot the whole gross thing? Punch Wilkes? You got me, John."

His ghosts grumbled, rowdy in their bricks. Their muttering lessened the tense order. One false word and walls could fall. His ghosts could weave his feelings into ropes. They had his lies and confessions to use as phids, and old Boy Scout Manuals on knots and hitches. They could make Jim hostage to any boy—even Moose, even Donald Wilkes—maybe even someone who was not a boy, but a full grown man—

"Do you think Wilkes took em?"

"I guess, John. Who else?"

His ghosts wondered, too, pulling on their bricks like the peachfuzz on Jims cheeks, his teenage gold.

Moose still wouldn't look at Jim. "You gotta admit you're not the most popular kid in school."

His ghosts knew this, too, but they were eager to hear other boys repeat keen truths about Jim.

"Thanks, Moose; thanks for reminding me." Jim tented his nose. He had to speak carefully. He could offend his ghosts. And walls could fall, and bury Jim alive. "But maybe this means the opposite. Could be, you know?"

His ghosts wondered, too, pulling at their bricks. Can two know the same in their knowing? What natural meaning can a blond twink know?

Jim dwindled. "You know what I think this means, Moose? Maybe who took my underpants might wanna make me, you know? Maybe who took em wants my body? You think that's possible?"

"How about my offer, Jim?"

Jim stretched his neck, curious. Had he missed a good deal?

His ghosts chewed their fingertips.

"A chick, you know. I can set you up with your best first lay—"

"Awww, Moose, you'll just make a wrong thing worse—"

"Jim," Moose looked at the floor. "I figured out the news you tried to tell the Coach."

The ghosts rubbed their double chins. They only understood Moose when he spoke this softly.

Moose could only look at Jim's big red shoes. "You didn't make the team, didja?"

"Who gives a care? So some dumbo Lady Doctor says a horny sexstarved little crybaby can't get on a football team. Maybe I'll get wrong and famous anyhow. Maybe Mr. Kodak will come along and take matinee movies of me when I once-n-for-all squirt it off! Doctor Suzanne says I'm an underage criminal in this state! Who gives a nickel!"

Moose looked beyond Jim—since he couldn't look Jim in the eye. "What—what's wrong with you, Jim?"

His ghosts jumbled their bricks. Jim had to be careful. Doctors were some people, Moose was somebody else. Those ghosts like Jim's shyest movements best. And walls could fall, and bury Jim under asked and unasked questions. A time for whispering, that's what this was. His ghosts knew this, too. They murmured in the liquid verbs of their dark, erotic language. "I can't say."

"You mean you—" Moose wanted to look at Jim. He wanted Jim to see that he cared. "Is what the other guys say about you true, Jim?"

His ghosts nuzzled the bricks, like clocksprings; like unexploded bombs.

"Do you like boys?"

His ghosts swallowed bricks and spit the whole wall at Jim, screaming to drink Jim, blood, sweat, and sperm. Jim stared at Moose through a dust of tears. The wall had fallen, and buried him alive.

"Is that what's wrong? If that's what's wrong I understand; I understand how you feel: I see why you've got problems. I'm not gonna throw myself at your feet, or nothing, but I understand."

"Just because other kids wanna lock me in a closet with a fag doesn't mean I don't have feelings, Moose. I don't waste my feelings on one cheap squirt of sex—"

"Don't get hyper, Jim. I believe you when you say you're not gueer—"

His ghosts yowled. He's a fool walking silly past St. Sophia. He believes your baby lies, and you're a coward sucking your toes!

"Look, Jim, I'm having a party tonight, to celebrate the Festival—"

"I dint even sell my quota—"

"You gotta come! You're like the guest of honor! Your old man developed this whole big idea—"

"I got suspended, Moose—"

"All you gotta do is pout and your Mom'll tell your Dad that a party'll be good for you—"

Jim smiled, slyly. "Boy, Moose, you got me figured for a real plotter—"

"I'm throwing a real party. My old man and old lady are away for the weekend. We won't even have a chaperone, only my sister, and she's got the hots for you—"

"C'mon, Moose, I said I'll see—"

His ghosts sang: Infantile, childish boy! Jump in a rain barrel and roll downhill. Let's all sing and sway! Nobody loves me, everybody hates me, think I'll go suck worms. Big, fat, juicy worms, eenyweeny-squeemy worms, see how they wiggle and squirm? Chomp off their heads, and squeeze out their juices, and throw their tails away! Nobody knows how I survive on worms three times a day.

Crybaby tears hooked Jim's throat.

Moose shook Jim. "You gotta promise to come!"

Humor this fool, he might break your nose!

"I promise! I promise to come!"

"And I promise that what happened means nothing at all."

But somehow what Moose said wasn't true. What happened had more meaning than Moose could see. And Jim's zipper meant more than just a zipper sewn uptight in a seam.

HOPE had not returned. Shannon O'Donnelly paced his cell, the only prisoner in Stickford Jail.

The minute Donald's father opened Donald's bedroom door Shannon lost hope. He charged the big man, praying for God, or the devil, or Big Bad Daddy, to grant him the power to pass through matter. He ran into Donald's father's fist, Donald's father did not hit him on the jaw.

Shannon came to minutes later. Red lights flashed across Donald's bedroom walls. Shannon pulled on his jeans, and gathered the rest of his clothes. He did not try the door. He pushed open the window. But the photographs! He spotted his stolen camera in a corner, scrambled through the schoolboy trash, overturned the bed, and seized his camera. He broke the catch, prying open the back. Donald had left the film inside! Shannon pulled the film out to the end of the spool, exposing what would expose Brandy—exposing everything to the light

Three policemen crashed into the room.

Shannon picked up a lamp to defend himself. One policeman smashed the lamp, and the second wrestled Shannon down on his stomach on the ruined bed, and handcuffed him. The third policeman shouted Miranda. All three policemen hauled Shannon through the door.

[&]quot;Let me explain—"

[&]quot;Anything you say will be used against you!"

"You don't understand how a poor queer feels, watching someone he dreams of seducing. Donald is an exceedingly cute boy. He has a charming ass. We were swapping photographs when things went a little nutty. He invited me up to his room! The battle-cry of Nuremberg! I am not responsible!"

If the policemen listened, or even if they heard, Shannon could not say. They lifted his feet off the ground, and dragged him downstairs, and through the living room.

Donald's father, talking to more policemen with stupendous animation, overheard Shannon. "He's a rapist! Ask him why he brought all that money! He came here to buy sex from my son! He assaulted my son!"

"AhHa, the money!" Indeed, the money had been removed before Shannon regained consciousness. "Pocket money! I have a cellar full of doubloons and amontillado! I'm a spy from Neverneverland!"

The policemen led Shannon out into a night as bright as if the moon had gone from new to full. Neighbors with chalkboard faces surrounded Donald's house, their eyes unpierced, dumb as people who had spent too much time down in the mines. Cornsilk and blue came alive in the shrubbery, and ran to Shannon, calling his name. Shannon couldn't look. The policemen threw the blond boy back into the crowd.

"I love you all!" Shannon shouted as the policemen stuffed him into one of their flashing cars. "I love no one at all!"

The policemen delivered Shannon to the jail as if he were the most dangerous man alive. They stripped him. The sergeant searched his genitals and anus for weapons and poison. They looked down his throat with a penlight, expecting to find monstrous condoms full of controlled substances. They gave him back his clothes, though—they didn't cast dice to divide his garments among them. They inked his fingerprints, and spread his identity across square white cards, and

read the charge against him onto forms for him to sign, and photographed him from the front and side. They gave him a dime, and told him to make one phone call.

Shannon dialed Auntie.

The phone rang two dozen times plus two.

"Hello?" Auntie gurgled, talking in her sleep.

"Auntie, do you believe people are treated justly in prison?"

"Wha? Who is this?"

"Your darling nephew has gone and gotten himself arrested."

"Shennin? What are you talking about? My nephew's in bed!"

"Absolutely! I've been arrested for forcing—excuse me, we must use the proper legal jargon—I've been arrested for attempting to force another person into bed."

Auntie Thelma began to listen. "Rape?"

"Not rape, sodomy."

"Don't that have something to do with the Bible?"

"Unless they've included Whitman's *Song of Joys* in the Revised Standard Version I believe the Bible speaks only ill of sleeping with grown and partgrown boys."

"Fireballs, Shennin, did you rape Jiminy?"

"I didn't have to. I tried to rape Donald Wilkes for the sake of Brandy. I've left your number with whatever people I could find here. The authorities, as the authorities say, will be calling you with further details as they develop. I have to go bub-bye now. They have a nice, snug gas chamber all warmed up for me. They've laid out my pink

triangle, and poured the Zyklon-B. A bullet in the head—the only fitting end for a boy-fondler. Remember that Jesus said to visit the imprisoned."

Quietly, the policemen lead Shannon to his cell.

Shannon had been in his cell through a bleak morning to a bleak afternoon, and he didn't need to imagine the social climate his arrest had engendered in Stickford. When the guards brought him breakfast they also brought him the news that he would be brought to a swift trial. Stickford could not control the tension, and the town council feared violence. Already the Women's Auxiliary was picketing the jail, carrying signs that read

Save the Children!

and

Citizens for Clean Education Vote Guilty!

as well as famous quotes from scripture

Crucify him! Crucify him!

and demanding that Shannon be efficiently, publicly lynched.

"Don't they want to see me castrated first?"

The guards refused his request to be moved to a front cell to watch the women scream to break his neck, though one guard told him he might get to talk to members of the League, seeing that three women had been arrested when the bonfire they started to immolate an effigy of Shannon touched off a historically designated stand of chestnut trees. Shannon knew the guard told the truth, since the air smelled deliciously of chestnuts roasting on an open fire.

Shannon discovered poetry written on the wall of his cell:

The Scottish lad may kiss his lass

The sparkling wine may kiss the glass

The evening dew may kiss the grass

And you, you pigs, can kiss my ass

and he added his own verse below, in honor of his boy, the poet:

I've been a lot of places

And I've seen a lot of girls

Some girls with icky faces

Some honest to goodness squirrels

Most of em are pretty tacky

None of em ever get enough

I'll send the straight life packing

I'd rather be a puff!

Afternoon brought a new face to his cell: a terrifically old man, who appeared to have time-warped from the nineteenth century "Good afternoon, I am your appointed counsel, John Waldmann." He stood six-foot-nine, in patent leather shoes and pin-striped trousers, with mother-of-pearl buttons on his black vest and jacket. The smallest diamond glinted on his gaudy gold and scarlet tie, and, like Shannon, he wore a black shirt.

He combed his long white hair with a long white hand.

"You are dismissed. Better for you to defend the innocent."

"You are innocent until you are found guilty by a jury of your peers."

"No jury of my peers will convict me—but where do you intend to find a jury of my peers?"

"Shannon, may I speak earnestly?"

"With no bunburying."

"Good. Good!" Waldmann folded his long body onto the dingy bunk. He brought out a tremendous meerschaum pipe. "Do you mind?"

"Weed is the incense of the gods."

Waldmann smoked for a long while without speaking. When he spoke, he spoke gently. "I read your statement to the arresting officers and I cannot imagine a jury that will not convict you."

"Jubilation! My attorney is biased!"

"I like to hear you call me your attorney."

"A Freudian slip. Tell me, Herr Doktor, do you really believe I am guilty?"

"I believe what you tell me, unless I know that you lie. I am gullible."

"Gullibility is a quality every attorney should have."

"Gullibility is a quality every attorney should possess."

"Saint Upchuck! You've read the *Theaetetus!*"

"Timaeus"

"Phadeo! I owe my cock to Asclepius!"

"What of the Symposium? And I say that whoever is detected in doing any disgraceful act, or submitting through cowardice when disgrace is done him by another, will be more pained at being detected by his beloved than by being seen by his father."

Shannon continued for Waldmann. "The beloved, too, when he is found in any disgraceful situation, has the same feeling about his lover."

Waldmann seemed pleased. "This is delightful, but a waste of precious time."

"Talk about love never wastes time. And time is never precious. I have a deliriously supple body. Let me undress and wink at you."

"The way you undressed for Donald Wilkes in his bedroom?"

"My striptease has become a hit!"

"What happened in that bedroom, Shannon?"

"I took off all my clothes! I shoved it longways up his nose! You see? I am a poet."

"Do you read poetry Shannon?"

"I dreamt a dream. What can that mean? In that I am a maiden queen. William Blake. I know. The poet told me."

"Why did you bring five thousand dollars to Donald's bedroom?"

"Are you telling me that the prosecution intends to suggest that I would pay five thousand dollars to buttbang Donald Wilkes? He's not that thrilling."

"Good. Good! We see eye to eye."

"Fly to fly! Head to toe! Tip to lip, with such a grip! Bone to bone two boys get blown! Fellatio! Sweet soixante-neuf!"

"What were you paying five thousand dollars for?"

"Don't cook tonight! Call Chicken Delight!"

"Who did you intend to meet after you saw Donald?"

"A pretty boy with a cute ass in pre-washed Levis! I love boys wearing tight Levis! I'm a true worshipper of Artemis Philosmeirix! I love the sound of zippers running down!"

"Why did you bring five thousand dollars? What was the five thousand dollars for?"

"Toilet paper!"

"Be silent!"

"A good attorney never asks a question that he can't answer."

"Speaking generally I can answer my questions, speaking specifically, I need your help."

"I love to talk in paradoxes! I love the Paradox Boy!"

"The only question I need you to answer is who is blackmailing you?"

"And the only answer I have to give is I am blackmailing myself."

A fascinating reply. Please expound."

"I am not a topic sentence, nor was I meant to be."

"Do you prefer Mathematics to English? You've taught Physics for seven years."

"Offer me a paradox to solve."

"I offer you this equation: a homosexual teacher plus his homosexual student—"

"Equals?"

"Protection. Who are you protecting, Shannon?"

"Who are you defending, Waldmann?"

Had his heart been wrong?

He continued in his own darkness until nightfall. Hours passed, and he did not move his hand. He straddled the rusty receptacle, urinating, watching himself. Why did this pissoir have to face the cellblock?

"Shannon?"

Shannon startled. He turned around, and finished pissing on the jailhouse floor, before he looked over his shoulder to identify his visitor. "Suzanne!"

Suzanne smiled. She still smiled.

Shannon zipped his war-torn jeans before he faced her.

"Still shy?"

She would forever insist on his shyness. Shy. She annealed the word with meaning. We were made shy for each other.

"I have no privacy in here."

She assented, still smiling, not looking around, watching his eyes for traces—of the night before? "This is a terrible place."

"Welcome to the inside." He lolled his head and tipped his long white magic hand. "No one told me you were coming."

"The police called Thelma and told her you needed a good suit for your trial."

"You're a godsend, Suzanne Bejin! Crowds will come from miles around, but never to view an untidy faggot! Just imagine if they let me perform naked?"

"Shush! I brought your black suit and tie. Will a white shirt look all right for a change?"

"The immaculate white of unfucked boys—"

"Be quiet, Shannon. For once will you just be still?"

Shannon stepped back from the bars. If only he could drop out of her sight completely; be changed to nothingness; be nothing but truly still. "Don't tell me you don't believe I'm not right where I belong?"

"I belong here with you."

"What have you done?"

"I volunteered to come here. I'm bringing you what I chose. I picked out these clothes for you, right out of your room. I even found you a change of underwear. The police told me I couldn't bring anything back here, but I broke the law. I smuggled these inside—"

She opened her hand, and a childish thing sprung open in her palm, like a white flower with a red stamen.

Shannon stared into her hand, like the hand of someone presenting a souvenir in a dream. "Seek and you shall find."

Suzanne held them out to him—wrinkled and stained as the day they had been stolen. "I'm guilty of bringing these to you."

If only she would accuse him; bash him with a tablet of ice inscribed with his sins and offenses. If only she would let him go. She could never be right for his world. His world was made out of so many wrongs. Wrong decisions. Wrong numbers. Wrong moves. Wrong turns. Wrong places. Wrong times. Wrong ways. Wrong ages. Being in the wrong place. Being in the right place at the wrong time. Doing the

wrong thing. Doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. Feeling the wrong thing for the wrong people. His world got worser and wronger—as the right boy would say in the wrong way—from worse to Eternity.

"These don't belong to Donald Wilkes, do they?"

"I can't—answer." His heart stalled.

"Are you collecting boys underpants?"

"I collect nothing. I'm encircled—" He looked into her swimming eyes, stirring her eyes around in a circle, twirling a long white ringer, "Surrounded."

"You're wrong." She dropped the thing that exposed his longing. The remnant of the boy made a significant white scar on the floor of his cell. "You surround me, every-which-way I look. I see you everywhere. I'm blinded by you. You're all I see."

She made to leave.

"Don't go—" He had wronged her heart.

"Let me go, Shannon—"

"Where?"

"Let me go to the boy these belong to—"

HOT, HOT, getting hotter.

Shannon hurried down the last corridor. He delayed his lunch period as long as he could, waiting for the teachers' lunchroom to empty. Hot. The heat of the sun, and a deep personal, abiding heat, blasted

Shannon, from his core, and he made a magic pass through the sunlight slanting across the hills and houses of Stickford, as if he had made himself the center of the sun.

Why did Shannon still reflect on his silly notions of possibility? He had merely followed Brandy. He followed the only son of Stickford's first family through these corridors, enduring September. He had followed Brandy close enough to smell the tension smouldering in that shirt that the boy wore too frequently. And even Plato had suggested that Shannon steal a souvenir.

He who loves, loves all that is akin to his beloved

Shannon had gone home to his supper with no appetite last night. He tossed his lab reports aside uncorrected, and grunted at Auntie's attempts at conversation. He sat in front of a rerun, reading a book with an introduction that made less sense than the text, until Auntie complained that he'd ruin his eyes, trying to read by the light from the t.v., and he spat out a dumb accusation, and dashed upstairs, and locked himself in the bathroom, and turned on the shower full force, and cried. He tossed in his sheets, too lovesick to sleep, until just before dawn when he dozed off long enough to dream.

Shannon dreamt that a knock on the backdoor woke him, and he went downstairs, stubbing a toe and breaking glass. He shot back the deadbolt, and opened the door. The yard was dark. The gate closed. The moon hidden. A dog whined nearby. He glimpsed Brandy in the weird moonlight, appearing without motion or sound, as if Shannon had conjured the boy out of darkness by opening his door. The boy came close, enticing Shannon with the faint scent of his sweaty shirt. Brandy reached across the threshold, and handed Shannon something white and personal. He tossed his fists in the air. He asked Shannon to dance the watusi.

Four boys were dribbling a basketball in the otherwise empty gym. None of these wise or otherwise boys could be that one boy among many. Brandy had not forsaken the transparent heart he had as a child, while these boys abased themselves for the sake of parents, peers, and popular opinion. Brandy lived above their Teenage Wasteland. He had been christened Jim by his white family, baptized with a boy's name, marked out for Neverneverland, blessed to play Jackie Paper to Shannon, a diabolical Puff. He might be innocent and biffen Jimmers to his Mother, or less-than-normal, three-letter Jim to his Father, or cowering and disrespectful Mister Brandekker to his intellectually-stunted teachers, and clumsy, sissified Little Jimmy to the kids in class, but to Shannon he would always be Brandy, his own Brandy Eanling, cute and unshamed, and twice as saving as any paschal lamb.

The four boys did not break their huddle beneath the basketball hoop. Their shirts made a sloppy still life on the sidelines, one banana yellow t-shirt, one navy-and-kelly rugby shirt, one red plaid and one blue chambray. Shannon recognized the tall freshman who picked up the chambray shirt.

"AhHa Donald Wilkes!" Shannon said directly to Donald as he walked backwards past the boys. "The boy who knows all about him!"

Donald held Mad O'Donnelly's stare and sneered. "Huh?"

Shannon nodded, then looked away, neither troubled nor untroubled.

"Hey!" Donald called, after O'Donnelly had gone through the double doors and into the rear corridor. "You talking to me?" Donald couldn't tell whether or not the other boys noticed that he gave Mad O'Donnelly plenty of time to get outta earshot before he called. "I said, Hey, are you talking to me?" Donald crossed the floor, but waited another minute before he entered the rear corridor.

The trophy case along the wall reflected the empty sunlight, glittering on the brass fribble won by other shirtless heroes.

Ralph Bejin glanced up as Shannon entered the lunchroom. "Greetings to Mad O'Donnelly."

Brother Ken sat at the table with Ralph. Brother Ken had been assigned to St. Agnes as freshman guidance counselor, and he made himself known to the kids as BroKen, hoping for rapport.

"If any job will drive you crazy," Shannon said.

BroKen stirred his coffee with his fingers. "I had begun to wonder if you were going to grace us with your presence."

"Give the guy a break, Bro. My sister won't be finished for another ten minutes. Why should Shannon waste his time with us when he can wait ten minutes and see his intended?"

Shannon sat on, not at, the table. "Suzanne's in school today?"

"MacKenna can take a vacation now that he has his new partner to stand in for team physicals. Didn't you have to release any kids from your third or fourth period?"

"The only student of mine trying out for football is in my first hour."

"Will your sister be joining us for lunch?" said BroKen.

"Not for a while. She has to put her finger up a long line of freshman butts."

"Mr. Bejin! Really!" BroKen squealed.

Shannon boiled. "A pity. I yearn to discuss the trial of Socrates in her company."

"Pardon me?" said BroKen.

Ralph chuckled. BroKen had not been at St. Agnes long enough to

become accustomed to the madness in Shannon O'Donnelly. Ralph had survived St. Agnes with Shannon. Ralph had survived his first job with Shannon. Ralph had survived because of Shannon.

"Phaedo, Crito, The Apology. The execution of my Athenian hero. Suzanne and I are prone to cultural history. The Apology is required reading in Ralphs Freshman Lit, for Crissakes."

BroKen pushed his chair into a corner. He could only stand sunlight if properly supressed. "I have not read Plato since I left school."

"You should re-read Plato, Bro." Shannon joined Ralph in calling BroKen Bro. The name irritated him, and renewed their camaraderie. "The indictment against Socrates has a coincidental meaning." He should chase Brother Ken out onto the fringes of the Okeanos, pierce his eyes, make him beg for mercy. "We're told that Socrates subverted the youth of his society, too."

"Sometimes the judgment of history makes a point," Brother Ken said.

Ralph had heard this argument before. Both sides.

"Critics question his commitment to democracy, but Socrates lived in an age as difficult as our own. The people who Socrates tried to convince to rule themselves were as incapable as we are today."

"In point of fact, we do not rule ourselves," BroKen said. "We are ruled by a higher authority."

"The Church is simply another majority. I doubt that any majority cares if we know ourselves, and the minority has forgotten how to know Socrates doubted these same gods that the Church has established over self-knowledge, and that's why the Athenian Court served him the iron cup of hemlock, not because Diotima the sibyl spat a curse between her breasts. Call the ideal Hymen, or Liberty, or Mother Russia, or Our Lady of Guadalupe, or Didactic Materialism, if you doubt the double crunch of family and society the Fittest will make you wash the floors of the government on your hands and knees your

entire life."

"May I remind you, Mr. O'Donnelly, that the contract you signed contained an ethics clause, and that you may be held accountable for your opinions?"

"Don't worry your pretty little head, Bro. I'm considering a change of venue."

BroKen startled.

Ralph didn't even glance up. Shannon had threatened to walk out of St. Agnes since the afternoon he walked in—first as a student, then as a teacher.

"Where would you go?" said BroKen.

Go? Shannon knew BroKen raged to tell him where to go. Go to hell! Go to the devil — you're his child, dontcha know? Go slink under inner city porches and eat rats! I'm joining the cloister! I want my vacation pay!

"I mean your passion is honorable, philos, love of wisdom."

Ralph grinned. BroKen always liked to remind Shannon that he could read the classics in the original.

"You could be accepted anywhere—at any secular school."

That's funny, BroKen! Hilarious, Bro! Accepted anywhere, you say? Accepted at my wedding to a flute-boned adolescent boy with me taking the veil? O we'll gather at the Altar of Our Abba of Priapism, decked with hyacinths, exchanging vows, and pink triangles, then sipping chablis from one of my Cinderella slippers.

"Or? How about New York?"

I will float through fashionable affairs, invited up to penthouses, where ardent poogs, wearing thorins, will beg for my size, and

indulge me with a goblet of exotic drugged wine.

"In point of fact," Shannon said. "I'm considering changing professions."

Ralph looked up, surprised. Shannon had never mentioned giving up teaching.

BroKen became eagerly attentive. "What other professions have you considered?"

"Flowers might be nice."

"Ah, horticulture! A growing profession!" And BroKen grinned stupidly at his stupid pun. "You can make a lot of bucks selling flowers!" Even mavericks must be encouraged to remain practical.

The profession is a purple clover falling over on the head! The profession riots with faggots! The profession is a good way to bother women.

"Or perhaps psychology!"

"A healthy field! Charitable!"

Perceiving, sensing, feeling, thinking. Fingerpainting baby cradles. The Swiss Tweedledee, collectively unconscious, weaving new beliefs out of modern irreligousness. Kids are sheep, introverts drink ink, extraverts break Auntie's best china. Perverts bother little boys. The Viennese Tweedledum. Object libido: libidinal energy is directed towards, or infused into, some object in the outerworld. Object-libido is essentially a motor striving towards the object primarily as a source of somatic satisfaction.

Shannon patted the naughty object-of-libido in his pocket, detrimental to his well-being, and worshipfully full of libidinal energy, galvanized by the passionstirrer of a fourteen-year-old boy. "Do you know what I would choose as my dream profession? A parapsychologist. I've seen

ghosts myself, and with the power of my convictions I could spend my evenings crawling around attics and spelunking through cellars with goosepimply boys, discovering what they're really afraid of. You don't believe in ghosts, do you, Bro?"

Ralph laughed.

Brother Ken did not laugh. "You haven't seriously considered any practical profession!"

I'd like to rape a newsboy in a little league dugout, tempted by the dimes of sunlight on his braces. I'd gag his mouth with a smutty hand, yank off his jersey, break his zipper.

"I don't understand what you want out of life!"

"I'd settle for the Vienna Choir Boys."

"No one can talk to you seriously! That's the primary trouble with you! That's this school's major complaint against you! You're less capable than your students of ruling yourself!" Brother Ken whirled away from the table, and left the lunchroom without waiting for Shannon to reply.

Shannon sat like a maniacal monk, making goonball eyes.

"You shouldn't mock him, Shannon."

"I'm an orphan. I have Dickens and the angels to protect me. Who shall I mock if I don't mock him?"

Ralph laughed.

"You shouldn't laugh. He's wrong, you know. I'm deadly serious. Frightened, even. I'm afraid no one cares about the truth."

"What truth?"

"The Universal Truth! I'm afraid I'm becoming a philosopher."

"You'll starve."

"All philosophers starve. This is the first of Universal Truths. But I'm afraid I have no right to entice your sister into my camp at Starvation Cove."

"Don't be scared for Suzanne. She's tough. And she cares about you. She's not afraid of the truth."

"No one understands."

"Why don't you try to understand everyone else, then?"

"I try. I get these headaches . . . "

Ralph laughed.

"Girls," Shannon said.

"I see what you mean. These teenage cheerleaders are jail-bait."

"I'm frightened of women."

"You're not looking forward to tonight. You're popping the question."

"I'm popping. And I know the answer."

"Isn't the answer that you expect the answer you want to hear?"

"I'm afraid."

"What else frightens you?"

"Boys."

Ralph stalled. His heart grumbled, and he quickly added another brick to the labyrinth he had built around what he knew and what he did not care to admit. "Children? Who isn't afraid of that responsibility." Shannon faced the wall, dangling his legs over the edge of the table, his hands clasped between his knees. "You don't date, do you, Ralph?"

"Not many girls are like my sister." Who else but Suzanne would journey down the dark mutinous river, arched by stone questions, passed under with the chills and a stubborn shake of her head. She could always let the doubts pass like shadows rippling blacker than the river. Ralph could never confront what could be forgotten. *Because we are journeying. Because we are not there.*

"Most girls won't commit themselves to marriage."

"Dating doesn't have to end in marriage."

Ralph shifted uneasily. He did not want to hear details. He heard enough details from his sister. "I guess screwing for the sake of screwing doesn't make sense to you and me." Mercy, Shannon! Let us pass through old brick tunnel. Let us again find the safe and silent shore. "I guess we're a couple of moralists."

"Moral people do not exist!"

"Don't be silly! Plenty of people save sex for marriage. Look around you, Shannon, you'll see lots of good kids."

"Like—Jim Brandekker?"

"Brandekker?"

"He's the only freshman in my Natural History class, never mind."

"Short kid with long blond hair? Got bumped ahead into your class? He's in my American Lit, too. He's quite a kid. He sure knows his poetry. You can't live in Stickford and not know the Brandekkers. I've seen Jim Brandekker floating around."

Fags float. Bubbles float. Ivory Soap floats. "His friends all say that he is gay." That sounded like the refrain from an Old English ballad. Mony a one for him makes mane, but none shall ken where he is

gang.

"Kids and rumors." What I shall assume, you shall assume. Shannon made Ralph aware, many times, many ways. Why make Ralph admit? "Who starts these rumors?" "I'm told Donald Wilkes started this one." "You should set the Wilkes kid straight. That Brandekker kid shouldn't have to survive high school pegged with a homosexual label."

"We bear our easy troubles, students and teachers." "That rumor is too much for any kid to bear." Shannon bullwinkled his elbows. "I have my own troubles." His orphan onus, the onerous rites of Onan. "You know, Ralph, sexual desire overcomes me every night. Every night I go up to my Auntie's attic and undress real slow in front of my Grandma's mirror. I tease every shirt button. I count the teeth in my zipper. By the time I'm down to my underpants, I'm standing proud. Then I go to pumping with a will, gyrating my hips, pushing my pelvis into my fists furiously. I come after only a few thrusts, but when I come do I come! I swear, sometimes I make a bullseye on the mirror with my ejaculation. Sometimes I go for double, or even triple plays." Ralph staggered.

"America has a new sex-symbol, Ralph: the adolescent, wearing Levi's, and red-and-white rugby shirts, and sailing through the multiverse on skateboards painted lincoln green. Their parents tuck them into hope chests every night. We teachers are keen over their every word, their every deed. I really have been granted visitations from the Otherworld. I've seen my Father's ghost." Shannon leaned close enough to whisper. "Are you a virgin, Ralph? Don't answer, I knew you were! Jim Brandekker's a virgin. Why don't you band these virgin boys together and form a club? You could wear burlap sackcloth, and join the Missions, and save pubescent boys from themselves."

"My God! You've got the hots for Jim Brandekker!"

Shannon swallowed lightning. "You—know?"

"I've known about you for a long time. How could I not know? If your troubles with Suzanne didn't clue me in, every time you join me for lunch we talk about sex, and we never talk about pretty girls—"

"But you treat me like I'm normal—"

"You plan to marry my sister. If you don't think you're normal you better see a shrink and stop seeing my sister. And you better really see someone if you're—attracted—to boys! My God, Shannon, Jim Brandekker's your student! He's fourteen years old!"

"He won't even let me hold his hand—"

"You can't make a joke out of this, Shannon! Talk about jailbait, this is criminal!"

"If only I could talk to him—"

"You can't talk to my sister about impotence but you want to talk to a freshman about homosexuality? You know what a gay man is to a kid in high school? A gay man is a fag who has just come into the room! Don't even talk to me about this! I don't want to have to testify at your trial—"

"I need to talk to someone—"

"You need to talk to Suzanne—desperately—before you get engaged. I'll help you talk to Suzanne. I can see how you could fall in love with another man. I can see how you might even want to have sex with another man. But I can't see this—thing—for a teenage boy! Nobody will see that!"

"What about you and your cheerleaders?"

"C'mon, Shannon, that's talk. That's just talk."

"All I want to do is talk. I don't want to ruin things between Suzanne and me. Even my troubles with Suzanne would be cured if I could talk about this. I simply want to tell him how I feel—"

"But can't you imagine how he'll feel after that confession? How's he supposed to answer in class, and pass your tests— how could he even come to your class if you told him a thing like this?"

"He might surprise you. He's an intelligent boy. And how can I make you understand something about myself that even I don't understand? If he's gay maybe he can make me understand—"

"Even if he's gay he's fourteen years old! And he's surrounded, like any fourteen-year-old boy. He's surrounded by his parents, his brothers, his sisters, his peers. Sexy thoughts about girls make him self-conscious—"

"His self-conciousness makes him attractive. He's as charming as a rabbit, twice as innocent as a lamb. He lives in a better age; he lives on rhyme. He always keeps his bluejeans zipped. Why shouldn't I be attracted to a boy as attractive as Brandy?"

"Oh, God, Shannon, don't call him by a nickname!"

"But, Ralph, I think I'm in love—"

"You better listen to your self-mockery! If you're attracted to boys you better change professions. You can't double back to your ancient Greece. Pedophilia is a crime in the twentieth century. You're not Socrates, or Heraclitus, or Diogenes—"

"Lycurgus." Ralph made Shannon imagine Brandy, and imagining Brandy made Shannon smile. "Hadrian and his favorite Antinous. I'd love to hear Whitman's *Song of Joys*. You know the poem. *Sleeping with grown and partgrown boys*..." Shannon grinned. "Forgive me. I've even acquired his habit of making inadvertent rhymes."

"You're better off with your current nightly pursuits, and with your troubles with Suzanne. If you chase this boy until he catches you you're in for a tragedy."

"Are we taking parts in a tragedy?" Suzanne asked from the doorway, overhearing nothing but the last word her brother spoke.

"A romance," Shannon said.

"A tragic romance," said Ralph.

Suzanne smiled, seeing Shannon waiting for her. Every time she saw Shannon she smiled, as if she were seeing him for the first time.

She had gone to her bedroom to find the copy of *Dubliners* she had been reading. Daylight came through her side window, leaving her bed a nest of shadows. She found the book, and was about to return to the living room when she heard the voices of boys. She went to her back window. Feathers of frost coated the glass. Her reflection was a white shadow on rippled crystal. She laid her hand on the glass, to rub the frost away, but her fingers stuck. She breathed on her hand three times, as if commencing a spell, and the frost melted, first near the web of her fingers, then outward, whitely into white.

She first saw the boys through the clearing her breath had made: two shadows wrestling on white, then the shapes gathered and darkened, and formed her brother and a boy she did not know.

Suzanne sat in the kitchen, reading the last paragraphs of *The Dead*, when the boys slammed in from the yard. She stared at the dark boy, her teacup steaming in the shatter of cold. The boy did not speak. Ralph mumbled some vague introduction, and she thought, *Can't you see neither of us can hear you? Can't you see?*

She would never forget her glimpses of Shannon. Shannon on his first day at St. Agnes, wearing a leather jacket and no necktie. "I'm not strangling myself or the minds of my students!" Shannon graduating from high school, mucking a snotty face for the Stickford *Publica*, when Mr. Wilkes sent a newspaper reporter to cover the story of the school's youngest graduate. "Later I'll pose in the nude!" Shannon during Homecoming, his second and last year at St. Agnes, decorating the fenders of his car, a pink Puff flower Scotchtaped in his hair. "I'm willing to do my part for our school, but only my part." Shannon dressed as a black magician on Halloween, the year she met him, resting his head on the porch rail, leering, twirling his fake moustache.

"Leave your will to these long white magic hands." Shannon slouching in the breakfast nook, sipping an illegal beer the afternoon she met him. "Sometime I'll tell you the truth about me—the same day I figure that truth out for myself." Shannon running through Pumpkin Hook, flapping his arms, like a grackle, the March wind blowing his hair, like those dark, mutinous Shannon waves

"I'm taking my part by getting to class," Ralph said. "I'll talk to you later, Shannon." Ralph let his sister take his chair. "We'll —talk—later. I'll see you at home tonight, Sis." Ralph left quickly.

"Why's my brother in a hurry? He doesn't have class for half an hour."

"Perhaps he has to make arrangements."

"Perhaps he wants to leave us alone." Suzanne went and brought a cup of coffee to the table. "Finished for the day?"

"I have one more class." Shannon lied.

"Perhaps I'll wait for you. Perhaps we can ride home together."

"I have my car."

"You should have called me yesterday. Perhaps we could have ridden to school together."

"I didn't know you were going to be in school."

"Well, if you'd call me sometimes."

"I've been very busy. This is still the beginning of the year."

"You didn't call me all week. You never call me since I came back to Stickford. I heard from you more when I was away at school. At least you wrote me letters."

"You want me to write you letters, I'll write you letters."

"I live two blocks from you now, Shannon."

"You want me to call you, I'll call you. I've been very busy."

She sat in the chair beside his dangling legs. She sipped her coffee, and drew circles around his kneecap. "Ralph told me you've been busy. He told me you've both taken on students from the high ability program."

"One freshman does not a program make."

"I've been busy. We were busy at the office before Dr. MacKenna took his vacation, but these team physicals are exhausting. I don't know how Dr. MacKenna can volunteer this much time."

"He has a heart of gold."

She punched his knee.

"Perhaps he's a pederast then."

She laughed. "You might have something there. I don't know how else he could stand all these teenybopper patients."

"Rich kids have parents who pay their bills."

"But teenagers cause trouble for doctors. Especially teenage boys—especially for female doctors. You know yourself. Teenage boys are—modest—"

Each of them had their own memory of the first time she tempted his modesty. He had been a teenage boy then, a sophomore in high school. (Her mom told Shannon that his sophomore year would be his stellar scholastic performance. "Who's a wiser fool than Shannon?" Shannon laughed, but Suzanne could see that her mom's remark pierced his heart.)

Ralph convinced him to sign out working papers their first summer of high school, and he and Shannon become two Champions of Art Rzardkos Tire Center—the Best in Tire Service. (Shannon looked cute in his blue-and-white striped railroad coveralls, with his name— *Shannon O'D*—stitched in red over the breast pocket.)

Shannon introduced Suzanne to his first employer the first time he showed up late for work. Mom had paid Shannon and her brother to chop out a dying lilac bush on a Thursday evening—the Ides of March—and after a sunset of axes, soap-stones, and split blisters—even though Shannon brought his coveralls with him as a reminder—he still forgot that he and her brother had to work the late shift at their new job.

Ralph had to pick up Mom before he went to work, and he said he'd come back to pick up Shannon, but Suzanne told him not to bother, she would give Shannon a ride.

Suzanne waited in her bedroom off the hall outside the bathroom door while Shannon changed into his coveralls. He came out of the bathroom and stood in her doorway, as if he sensed she would be waiting for him in her bedroom.

"Your bathroom needs contrast. Even the toilet paper is green."

She stood by the window on the other side of her bed. "Green is the color of hope."

"Don't get Catholic."

"Don't you believe that green is a hopeful color?"

"I don't believe anything about green." He clapped ahold of the lintel, stretching his body into her bedroom, balancing on his toes. "That's silly."

"Do you think I'm silly, Shannon?"

Shannon let his fingertips slip, and toppled onto her bed, facefirst, reaching out as if still clutching her bedroom door frame. He grinned at her, delinquently. "Did I come too fast for you?"

She sat on the foot of her bed. She did not answer him.

He rolled over on his back. "There is no gratification. And faithfulness is dead." His skin glistened where he had splashed his face with soapy water. He held his eyes closed.

Suzanne leaned over him, holding her face an inch from his face. He smelled like rainwater; like earth and lilac leaves. "Open your eyes."

He obeyed, but his eyes were blank.

"You have green eyes."

"Does that make you hopeful?"

"Are you asking me if I still believe my silly notion about the color green?"

Suzanne drove slowly, and Shannon complained. She saw the neon sign from three blocks away, and she realized that his boss had already done one of his newly-prized employee's jobs and switched on the revolving sign. She parked, allowing a weakly cruel thought to pass, that, from the graceless way that Shannon moved his long white hands, that he had accepted her invitation, and invited her to meet Art Rzardko, only to buffer the mild fury of his boss over his being late.

Old Art liked evening best—the busyness of the morning over, the slow labor of the afternoon complete, his Boys—his Champions—coming in to take over the yard, and the stockroom, and set Art free to sit back in his swivel chair, doodle over his paperwork, and chainsmoke White Owl cigars.

Art's Champions wore their uniforms with pride, and Shannon became

his Finest from day one. Shannon couldn't get a license for another year, but he redesigned tire storage, better utilizing space, and making selection of the proper tire twice as efficient. And none of his Boys could balance a wheel as fast as Shannon, or with such, well, grace.

Shannon stood over the tire, spinning the wheel on the pedestal, like a world globe, faster and faster, his long white magic hands poised over the rim, as if he were a native god, making the earth, about to finish by accidentally planting his hand in the middle waters.

Shannon did not apologize for coming in late; he introduced Suzanne.

Art Rzardko squashed forward in his swivel chair, belly comfortably protuding, his cigar plugging the center of his big yellow grin. "Sweet choice," Suzanne heard the old guy say after Shannon thanked her four times for the ride, and closed the office door. "Hey," old Art said—and she could hear the wink in his voice—"You cannot begin too soon."

"If only." Shannon leaned against the office door, in an attitude that looked like the loose morality that Art hated.

"If only you'd come in on time."

The kid looked like some kinda foreign acrobat when he tipped his head like that, all toothy grin, and shaggy black hair. (Art warned him to get a haircut.)

"I have to study."

"What about Ralph?"

"Ralph doesn't study, he dates girls."

Old Art was a widower. His wife had died seven years ago, leaving Art sleeping in a bed too big for him. "Don't we all?"

Shannon shrugged. "Suzanne's a whore." *Arty Rzardko, Daddy, hit me on the head!*

"Sit down, Shannon. I want to talk to you."

"I am late."

"Sit down."

Shannon sat down on top of Old Art's desk, crossing his legs, resting his chin on the bridge of his interlocked fingers.

Art folded his hands on his belly. He leaned back in his chair, as if admiring some weird jungle idol captured on t.v. by the *National Geographic*. "What do you mean, calling this young lady such a name?"

"Who?"

Someone get a gun and blow the owl off the barn.

"Suzanne's not a whore. Her brother knows a whore. I'll get her phone number for you from Ralph."

"Why call this girl such a name, then?"

"Isn't that what you want her to be?"

"Look, I'm not another zippy kid. And I'm not your aunt. And I'm not your teacher. And I'm not your mummy or daddy. I'm the guy who gives you your paycheck. But that doesn't mean I don't care about you."

"You're sweet."

"I'm as mean as they make em. And if you wanna keep your pretty ass intact you better get the hell off my desk."

"Sieg Heil!" Shannon leapt up, saluting. "Where do I report to receive my pink triangle?"

"You know you're my best worker?"

"I am a saint!"

"You're a mixed up kid who never got back at the kids who hated you in grade school because you had brains, or a big dick, or something. You trust no one, do you? You don't trust your aunt. You don't trust your friends—if you've got any. You don't even trust yourself. Why don't you trust this Suzanne? She looks sweet to me."

"Do you suppose I can trust the boy next door? Or hasn't the boy I can trust been born?"

"Maybe this girl is a whore. Maybe that would do you some good."

"Master, teach us to pant and pray!"

"Go teach Ralph to stack that shipment according to your plan. I'm thinking of redesigning the stockroom."

"Do that. I stole the design from your competition anyway."

The door to the stockroom had a big square window, but the tip of his cigar gave Old Art away when he tried to sneak up and check and see if his Boys behaved. Tires lined the walls, stacked like giant, segmented worms, strangled by the heat. A muggy draft slithered through the delivery bay. There was no light—except the light shining through the stockroom door. If Shannon saw that telltale tip at the window this evening he'd heave a jack handle at his dear old boss.

"Ralph?"

"Back here!"

"Why are the lights out?" Was Ralph Bejin asking for something? The thick smell of rubber and synthetics could slow light. He found Ralph sitting against the corrugated steel wall, reading, out of sight of the peering window. His coveralls were all undone, and his face close to a text book.

Shannon peeped at the cover. "Latin?" Small, private percussions

stiffened Shannon.

Ralph sheeped. "Not so loud. You want the Old Man to catch me?" Ralph closed the book on his thumb, and wiped his forehead on his sleeve.

Shannon picked up his scent—not the smell of sweat, but cinnamon and spice, the smell of the pantry in Ralph's mom's farmhouse. "I gotta pass this Latin exam. I gotta keep a three-five GPA. My mom says that if I score the honor roll this semester she'll buy me a car."

"I'll buy my own car."

"Yeah, but you'll buy a used car. My mom'll buy me a brand new car. Any car I want. I thought about a Corvette—but not a new 'Vette. I'd wanna restore an old 'Vette. But my dad always said they crumble, you know, fiberglass."

"Like picnic baskets. Three years ago I went on a picnic with my aunts, and my uncles, and my cousins. I, being the only orphan, received special attention in the restroom by the Adults. We went skinnydipping before dinner, just us boys. And I crumpled Cousin Kevin's picnic basket. I sat on his basket and crumpled the thing all to hell. Cousin Kevin refused to swim with us, you see. He was an exceedingly cute boy." Shannon lied. He was wishing.

"Or maybe I'll get a foreign car, a Jaguar maybe. I'd like a fire-engine red Jag with a jet black interior. Impressive, dontcha think?"

"Most professional psychologists believe first impressions are eighty-five percent correct."

"Standard transmission! I gotta have standard transmission! A standard trans gives the feel of the road."

"Yes! Cop a feel! Hurrah!"

"A hood ornament!"

"Lady Godiva riding through a schoolyard! A pteroi!"

"An eagle!"

"AhHa! Ralph Bejin, all-American, wears Fruit-of-the-Looms, and climbs trees on Arbor Day!"

"You haven't heard a word I've said!"

"I've taken notes! Your Mother's buying a jet black eagle, and a red jaguar that you'll firetruck at night! You feel out drivers, and carry lunch in fiberglass picnic baskets! Lay down, I'll sit on you!"

The stockroom door opened and Art Rzardko crashed in, in a glaring mood. "Can't you hear me ringing the service bell?"

"He who has ears, let him hear, let him listen!"

"We got an emergency road service call."

"Saddle up, Ralphie boy, you gotta ride."

Art Rzardko called Shannon aside. "I want you to answer this call."

"Rubber Man speak with forked tongue. Haven't you heard? I'm not a legal driver on the road—"

"Answer this call anyway. I'll risk the truck. You know this girl. This girl might be a whore ..."

Shannon had nothing but trouble driving the wrecker. The truck had more than one speed forward, and three speeds in reverse. He didn't switch on the flashers until he got out of sight of the Tire Center. Old Art would worry more if Shannon attracted attention to himself. Shannon found Suzanne broken down between his house and the Brandekker house.

(All the lights were on in the Brandekker house, and there were strange cars in the drive.)

A storm thundered.

Suzanne did not get out of her car. He blasted her with the spotlight, and got out of the cab. She couldn't recognize him— she couldn't see him in the glare. Soon as he stepped into the beam he saw her smile through the window And she met him in the middle of the road, at the fringe of the beam of light.

"Hello, Shannon!"

"Hello, Kitty!"

She kept a step away from him, but she moved like she wanted to be right beside him. "Where did you call from?" said Shannon.

"I called from the Brandekkers."

The wind settled around him in a shelter of open spaces.

"From the Brandekker house?"

"They let me use the telephone."

"They let you inside?"

"Mr. Brandekker answered the door. He thought I was Dr. MacKenna. I told him, I'm not a doctor yet, but wait and see." She left her mouth open between expressions, expecting some reaction.

He did not react. "They called a doctor?"

"I think she's having her baby."

"Mrs. Brandekker?"

"You're always talking about the Brandekker house. How come you never know what's happening with the Brandekkers?"

"I bet you thought Old Art would send your brother." He sounded

breathless below the lowering sky. He did not answer her question.

He went straight to work, as if she were any other customer. (At least he didn't call her Ma'am.) He inspected the flat without touching the tire. The tire looked slashed. The car listed.

"Sick vandalism," he diagnosed. "Or else a clever ploy."

"To lure my brother out in the rain?"

"What rain?" he wrestled her spare out of her trunk, but he had his own pneumatic jack. "When?" He twirled the lug wrench, strong and mechanical, the veins popped out in the clench of his long white hands.

The rain fell. Wind slammed the car door.

"Shannon! We can't change this tire!"

He smiled, wildly—looking even wilder in the suddenly blowing rain.

"Shannon!" She looked delighted to say his name.

"You better get in the car—"

She did not shelter herself.

"Let's get in the truck, then—"

"Follow me!" she commanded. Suzanne ran.

Shannon obeyed. He ran after her. He chased her across Waterloo Road, into Pumpkin Hook Cemetery.

The storm was a solid creature, sweeping uproad, bending over the lowlands, swooping after them in a greatcoat, saying that he must be apprehended; he must seize everything.

He caught her, and they held each other in their arms.

He's only holding me to keep himself on his feet, she thought, then she scolded herself for such thinking.

They struggled together to open the door to the mill. They closed their hands in common, her hot hand under his hand, the bite of the iron door handle hot for an instant from their flesh, then their skin and the iron were soaked by cold, fierce rain. His knuckles were scored with grime, and a scrape ran a red trickle. They got the door open, and shouldered each other inside.

Suzanne had never been inside the Brandekker Mill.

Shannon stood in the doorway, like a Dark Lord, dispelling the storm, or beseeching the wind.

"Old Art will think you're doing your champion job."

He hunkered on the threshold, feeling the rain blow in over his knees; feeling the rain.

"Shannon?"

He rattled the lug nuts like dice.

"Shannon, what are you doing?"

"Casting the lugs." He spilled the nuts out across the threshold.

"Mysterious business."

"Shannon, close the door."

He lolled his head, to wizard the arcane pattern the steel hexagons formed in the rain speckled dust.

Suzanne leaned over his shoulder. "What are you wishing for?"

Did the warmth of her hair bother his neck? He could not say. He scooped the lug nuts off the floor and tossed them into his pocket under his name. "I don't believe in wishing."

"Your life is too small."

He hobbled out from under the warm curtain of her hair, and pushed the door closed. "Too small for silly notions."

"Like my silly notion about the color green?"

His head sagged, a weary monk. He scuttled his long white magic hands. "You can't see my eyes in the dark."

She was close, really close. He did not withdraw. "Don't be afraid of the dark." She cupped his chin. Her hands were warmer than her hair. She put her head down on his shoulder, pressing her cheek to his cheek. He turned his head, to face her, and met her mouth with his mouth.

They kissed deeply in the darkness.

Was this his first kiss? Who made him kiss before her, absolutely in the dark? She stopped the kiss to say his name once, and once only. "Will you sleep with me?"

"Are you afraid of the dark?"

She was close enough to look into his darkening eyes, even in the dark. They made love. He was no master, but she was no judge. The mill became their place apart. They met at the mill every rainy night. Shannon would bring wine, and they corked their wine bottles with candles, and made love in the candlelight in the sound of the rain.

[&]quot;Perhaps you can help these teenage boys the way you've helped me," Shannon said.

[&]quot;Have I helped you, Shannon?"

- "We help each other."
- "Perhaps I helped one boy during these physicals."
- "Did he need advice about women?"
- "About his sexuality."
- "I hope you sent him to his counselor. We're not supposed to talk to students about sex."
- "He asked me for help and I helped him. I hope I helped him. He's convinced he's gay."
- "Who? What's his name?"
- "I can protect his confidence if I can't protect him—"
- "He might be one of my students!"
- "This boy is a freshman—"
- "I have a freshman in my first hour—"
- "If you have only one freshman I bet you don't have this boy—"
- "Tell me his name. Perhaps I can help him. Perhaps he needs to talk to a man."
- "You couldn't talk this boy out of this. I'm convinced this boy is gay."
- "Are you planning to see him again?"
- "I'm not planning to see him, no. Perhaps I will see him. Perhaps I'll see him at the Festival. Will I see you at the Festival, Shannon?"
- "I have to take a student to the Festival."
- "I'll see you there, then. Perhaps we can ride the Ferris Wheel. Let's

meet by the Ferris Wheel. Like when we were young—"

"Like when we were nothing but young."

Shannon parked his midnight blue Volkswagen where other cars were sparse, behind St. Agnes, instead of in the teachers' parking lot.

Shannon had been supporting himself since his sophomore year of high school, ever since Auntie had announced her departure from employment, soon as she paid off the Dibble mortgage. "I'm thirtynine, gonna be forty. I raised you for ten years. Time for you to take care of me for a change."

Sunlight had charged the black upholstery, and Shannon sank into the heat. He backed out using his mirrors. He hated the game of chance he played leaving school. He risked meeting a colleague, or a student, and having to break the rhythm he liked to unwind as a whole. Sunlight danced a swordthrill on the windshield as he swung around into the exit lane. He glided past the three wings of the school, hopping in and out of the first speedditch.

Kids were leaving school in every direction, eager to get home and waste the older generation. Sons were the beginning and end of all fathers. Shannon had seen the ghost of his father.

Efrem O'Donnelly, the Magnificent! Stupendous Feats of Prestidigitation!

Shannon had gone to take out the garbage. He carried the first can to the curb, and he saw the ghost when he came back for the second; more than unreal, his seedy magician's coat and hat forming out of a gust of darkness. He stood triple-life-size, taller than the dead peach tree in the center of the yard, his clothesprop body wavering, less than solid but more than make-believe, his face the face of the photograph

in the attic: high cheekbones, pencil moustache, lips parted in a transparent scream, his eyes as green as the eyes he had given his son. Only his hands moved, moving among themselves; guesses from another world, secrets of the undead, quickened with each sleight of hand.

Shannon had just turned five when his father died. The family was out east, his father struggling to make magic for a traveling carnival. The circus people liked Shannon. He was the youngest member of the troupe. The freaks were his babysitters. The midgets and the dwarfs let him try on their sequinned costumes. The acrobats took him up to the peak of the big top to show him the tightrope and the trapeze. The clowns helped him make-up his face. The wife of the ringmaster fed him peppermint tea and gingersnaps. He got to ride an elephant—he squealed, the striped tent spinning, his palms buried under the thick, hairy ears. He waded naked in the highdivers tub, and ran wet through the sawdust, and slipped, and rolled, great pads of the stuff sticking to his wet skin and soaked hair. A clown sat with his floppy arm around Shannon, and Shannon clapped as his father performed his tricks without a sound: he turned wands into roses, made doves and crows out of thin air. His father made himself disappear, and he sawed Mother in half, and Shannon screamed, and cried, until Father put Mother back together.

The hotel fire that ended his childhood broke out on All Souls Night. A window shattered, and Mother screamed. Fire and glass rushed over Shannon when he jumped up in bed. A hot sticky red spun down his arm. Fire swept his pillow, and seethed his neck. His father called. Doves and crows flew through the room, filling the smoke with a flurry of motion, pursued by the smell of singed feathers. Fire covered their magic hats and cloaks, and the oriental disappearing cabinet, the wands, the paper roses. Shannon reached for a hand he could not see. He closed his hand on fire. Father called. Father coughed. The door burst. He saw Father on all fours on the floor, naked and choking, and a crowd of shadows fell around his head. Then Shannon saw men and arms and legs hurried over him. Fire chased the men downstairs. Hairy faces peered at him through the cold air. And rain fell.

Father lay under a striped tent at the outskirts of the city. A leak pattered on the burlap bundled under his head. The canvas sagged under the rain. His father gurgled—the name of his son, the men assumed. And they brought Shannon close to the yellow face. His eyes were blind, and smoke unwound from his mouth. His father reached, and held Shannon by the arm. Shannon did not cry. Blood ran down his bandaged wrist, looking dark but not red on the yellow hand.

"Shannon "

The name made a brief crown of smoke for Shannon to wear.

"Put the name of the river on him . . . Name him after the river "

Mother did not say a word on the long ride to Auntie's house. Mother did not buy them lunch, and they did not eat breakfast before boarding the train. Mother never moved from her seat, and Shannon was too frightened to move without her. He squirmed by the window, and watched the grey shapes that were buildings and houses, and the green shapes that were trees and hills. Dawn came late as the train neared the city.

Steam filled the station. A porter met them on the platform.

Shannon looked up into the big face. "Are we home?" He didn't take his fingers out of his mouth.

The porter did not know this little boy. "Yes, child, you is home." He carried Shannon, and he carried their single bag.

Auntie Thelma wore a cherry red pants suit, and her eyes were red and sad. She stood in front of her nephew while her sister got in the car without saying a word. Her nephew didn't speak. He didn't even nod. His stomach growled. Sometime during the train ride he had wet his pants. He looked through Auntie. Auntie squeezed her nephew next to her in the front seat. She prattled about the rooms she had ready, and what a good time they'd have, living together on the little Dibble farm. Auntie continuously blew her nose.

Mother scarcely ate. She sat in silence in the corner of the dining room, with the window shades pulled down, drinking cup after cup of heavily sweetened tea, while Shannon vroomed his new Tonka steam shovel around and around the braided rug. Mother only stared when Shannon gave her the Thanksgiving turkey he made by tracing his hand on parcel post paper.

A noise woke Shannon after midnight that Christmas Eve, and his heart skidded. Would Santa come if he were seen? Instead of Santa, Shannon saw Mother dancing in the snow. She had plucked a branch of dead leaves off the peach tree, and a ribbon of blood from her pricked fingers gleamed on her feathery nightgown; Auntie rushed out, holding her coat closed over her housecoat.

Thirteen weeks after they arrived in Stickford, Mother was dead.

The front tires of his car dropped into the second speed-ditch, and jarred Shannon back to his driving. The rear wheels slowly took their dive.

"Burn em!" the kids on the sidewalk shouted.

Shannon spun his wheels.

Kids choked on burning rubber, and cheered.

A nameless boy ran past his car, shouting, his open shirt flapping, his jeans advertising his ass. He caught the hot black smoke in his lungs and gagged.

Good for you! Cocksuckers!

Don't you wish!

Shannon glanced through his windshield (for he had been admiring

the kids enjoying the smoke that made them sick) and he almost screamed: the ghost of his father stood on the hood of his car!

Alive as recent memory, livid as the moon, a wind out of nowhere roaring around his magic coat, his right hand extended to smite his son, and squelch his heart.

Someone pulled on the door handle (not the ghost—his father had lost the substance of his hands) Dean Haarman! Shannon stomped on the accelerator.

The Dean went down on his behind as the car took off. I go boom! A ridiculous thing to think! "Get that license number!"

None of the kids listened. They were out of school.

Shannon careened onto the street. When he opened his eyes the ghost had vanished. He ran a red light, swerving left, and looped around the island to take the road north, out of town. He slowed, and stopped for a second light, and, elated, he forgot his name, and, for a moment, he really went insane. Shannon pounded on his steering wheel with both fists. Goddamn! He had seen a ghost! His second time! He really was blessed to become a full-hearted seeker of suspects from the Otherworld. (The old man and the old woman stopped in the car next to Shannon regarded him and shook their heads.) The ghost had made Shannon horny! If Dear Lord God had sent Daddy back to earth to warn Shannon away from Blond Boys in sweaty rugby shirts he might as well send Hamlet. Daddy was screwing up! (Shannon smiled at the old woman, and popped the finger at her as the light changed, and she struggled to explain her shock to her old man, and Shannon broke the speed limit once again.)

Old Chelsea Road ran north-northwest from St. Agnes, through the business district of the Hill, then he would turn onto Waterloo Road, the winding, hilly highway through Pumpkin Hook Cemetery and down onto the swampy lowlands.

Once James Brandekker got his Development underway the selectmen

planned to drain the swamps and close the Technical School to develop Cassidy Lake as a resort community. State and local taxes had increased on Stickford land, with the urging and approval of James Brandekker, and a citizens committee had convened to relocate the inmates of the Technical School. The rehabilitation center had been a gift to the city by the James Brandekker of three generations ago, back in the days when he doubted he would father his own son. Brandekker money still funded the school, even though the ruling Brandekker intended to close the facility. Technically, of course, James was not the ruling Brandekker—not since Old Man Brandekker hop-scotched his own heritage, bypassing his son in favor of his grandson. James Brandekker couldn't cut off funding, or close the school, or change any of the Brandekker property without the permission of his son, and, although that permission was assumed, James could not rest in the face of his fourteen-year-old's irascible choices.

All James Brandekker had was his son.

Brandy was their keepsake, their family heirloom. Mommy protected his boyhood like a tabernacle, her devotion sponsored by the Society for the Propagation of Pure Thoughts during Puberty, and Daddy surrounded him with his wheel of graves housing paternal spirits who longed for the boychild to fulfill his promise to the Book of Genesis. And Brandy had grown up to be a Glad Day of freedom amidst their family tradition, like the peach trees that grew wild among the surveyed apple orchards.

Shannon drove past Auntie's house, not ready to go home. Auntie still worried when Shannon didn't come home on time. Good! Let her worry her eyes out! His watch on the old Brandekker house was useless, as useless as keeping watch on their only son.

Shannon thought of the red-and-white cotton and elastic in his pocket. That was useless, too. Shannon had taken them on an impulse, hurrying down the locker room stairs, searching through the lockers, finding the clothes he could recognize without i.d., stretching them out on the floor. Shannon held the clothes Brandy wore to school, his favorite clothes. He thrust an arm down a leg of the bluejeans and

turned them inside out; he practiced pulling down the zipper. He nuzzled the collar, and the armpit of that sweaty rugby shirt, the scent of the boy's body the ripest aphrodisiac in his realm of being. He shuddered, reaching for Brandy's underpants, bringing them up to his mouth, drawing three measuring breaths through the fly, tasting the fossil poetry, the ripening lust promised by the boy.

The feeling of Jim Brandekker falling backwards into his arms returned. Hey! Brandy yelled. What does hey mean? Hay's for horses. Hey meant Go away! Watch what you're doing! Lemme alone! Don't touch me down there! Hey was a red light, a white flare. Hey was a final word. Hey! The end of the message. Spell hey backwards, yeh! Yeah meant Yes! Of Course! I sure do! I'm willing, ready and able! C'mon over! My parents bubbled away! I changed the lock on my bedroom door! Let's pull down all the shades.

Auntie kept Shannon unused throughout his own boyhood. Shannon never had his diapers yanked away to let an anorexic spinster poke at his pre-school beginnings. He never had his kindergarten suspenders shot back to let a refugee uncle worm his plasticine hand down the front of his briefs. He had a less than average boyhood considered from the darkside of sex. He wasn't even part of the I'll-show-you-mine-if-you'll-show-me-yours school of prepubescent sexplay. Oh, he wanted to look, but he doubted he could have stood up to his end of the match. In grade school, when he stood up to read aloud about Dick and Puff he always checked behind with one hand to be sure his shirttail wasn't untucked and revealing his underpants.

Shannon used reading for his excuse for not noticing the girls that trooped back and forth, up and down the road in front of the Dibble farm, as soon as they detected a thirteen-year-old boy living nearby "He taught his self to read," Auntie proudly announced to his kinnygarden. He started by reading the only picture book Mother had bought him for the train ride to Stickford, then he read cereal boxes, then the comic sections, the comics, before he got his eyes on his first real books. He began reading Thoreau before he left elementary school —"A couple a million words," Auntie bragged, "Last night he was

drying dishes and he told me how this Thorough guy lives alone in an experiment house to live in quiet desparation. That's how he says he wants to live. He says I'm awake and I got a dawn in me!"

He liked to read by the blue t.v. screen light after Auntie bought them their first set on his thirteenth birthday. "Our Monstrosity," Auntie dubbed the used Muntz that cost her three weeks' pay ("Shennin! Don't leave your books on our Monstrosity! We gotta leave room to play with the rabbit ears.") The delivery men had to clobber down the porch rails to shove the huge square maple set inside, and Shannon had left the wooden slats and posts to blister in the overgrown flowerbeds. Shannon felt weirdly at home with himself, reading in the blue t.v. screen light. He had been reading in the flicker of the Evening News the night He arrived.

Virgil Raine was his name, and he came on the Detroit train. Auntie had decided to take in a boarder to better feed her growing boy, and Virgil kicked in, sopping wet, without knocking the rain off his hair or his wool coat. He carried a sea chest—like Billy Bones in Treasure Island —that he crashed down off his shoulder as loud as those buccaneers firing broadsides. Shannon closed his book, and hugged his knees.

"Hello, Son."

Shannon did not say hello.

Auntie haggled with Virgil for less than a minute, and Auntie always found the neat roll of dollars on the kitchen table every Friday morning.

Virgil lived like the rain. He was a Depression baby—born for nothing to folks who had less, on the Outerbanks, in the newest house in Kitty Hawk (and that house was eighty years old.) "First in Flight's the motto on our license plates," Gil kidded Shannon. "Naturally. Everybody flees North Carolina." Virgil was forever fleeing the real N.C. sense of home. Virgil shifted from Mother to Father to Uncle to Aunt until he lied about his age and shipped out on his first Adantic

crossing at fourteen. "I seen the whole thirsty world, all widths and sizes." Virgil did not leave home to judge. That's the only philosophy Virgil creeded to religiously: don't judge and no one will judge you.

Shannon took Gil on a Profound Walk. All Souls' Night deepened from blue to black under the older trees. They tramped over soft slender leaves shed by wild peach trees. Shannon had not grown into his long legs.

Gil paused and puffed. "How far do you walk?" The tip of his Lucky Strike flickered when he coughed.

"You could walk further if you quit smoking."

"He meets me and he needles me."

Shannon slumped against an apple tree, squinting up into wet black branches. "This tree looks dead."

"Honey, all these trees look dead. If I threw down here I'd start a forest fire."

"You know, Thoreau started a forest fire."

Gil sparkled. "You talk too much. That's why I carry my camera. If you look you don't have to talk."

Shannon stared hard into the dead apple tree. "I'm looking. I like to look."

"Sounds like your buddy Thoreau has already looked at all that you wanna see."

Shannon scowled: at the dead tree, at the deepening sky. "Let me show you something that Thoreau never saw."

They walked to the old Brandekker house.

The long narrow windows glowed, warm and yellow, blushing the pink

brick. Shannon heard the low murmur of hope, smiling graciously into the night from the lintel of those comfortably secure doors.

"Who belongs to this house, Honey?"

"Brandekkers," Shannon dazzled, like some professor identifying a new species. "Someday—somehow—this house will belong to me."

"Whachagonnado? Marry his daughter?" A smoke ring magically vanished into the night.

Gil smoked cigarette after cigarette the evenings that Auntie left him home alone with Shannon. "I been places. Unreal places. Places that have gone nowhere."

"Tell me about the most unreal place you ever saw."

"That would be a ruin. Ruins always look unreal, because even a stranger can make out how they used to be alive. I saw the most unreal ruins along the Nile—"

"Sure, the sphinx, the pyramids—"

"Neither of em ring the prize. I seen Antinoopolis."

"Whose city was that?"

"The Roman Emperor Hadrian named Antinoopolis for his favorite, Antinous."

Shannon grinned. "They were close?"

"Hadrian built the city to immortalize the spot where he lost Antinous."

"How?"

"He fell into the Nile."

"Did he slip in the mud? Couldn't he swim?"

"I reckon he was a strong swimmer. That's all the ancient records say. *He fell into the Nile*. I suppose Antinous lost himself."

"Whoever would find himself must lose himself ..."

Gil chuckled grimly. "Odd you should quote the Son of Man. Hadrian made his boyfriend a god to rival Christ—"

Shannon closed his book. He looked into the blue t.v. screen light, his long white magic hands pushing open his lanky legs. Moment by heartbeat those blue images raced into the past. "Why?"

"Love," Gil replied. "Freely given."

Shannon lolled his dark head. "Nobody can tell the real thing."

"The real thing? What does that mean?"

"Love," Shannon smiled. "Freely given."

Gil touched him. His hand moved through many dimensions, each moment of distance eclipsed by the shadow of a different gesture, like glass negatives exposed to the blue light of the sky. Shannon always remembered seeing the hand, and the shadow of the hand. He never remembered the touch.

Gil wheezed. "Good boy."

Shannon put up his hand. Gil kissed the roughening young knuckles.

"G-oo-d boy."

Gilly took one photograph of Shannon. Shannon was nude. The third night they were alone, out at the edge of the farm, sheltered from the neighbors by the wild peach trees. Shannon undressed for Gil as if they were confirmed lovers, an emperor and his favorite, a man and his boy. Gil fired one shot, full figure, and from the front, and after the

shot, Gil touched Shannon a second time.

Auntie was changing the bed when Shannon got home from school.

"Where's Gil?"

"Gone."

"Gil went out?" Shannon bounced down on his bed. "Good. Good for him!"

"He's gone outta our life for good." She held Shannon by his shoulders. "I found his dirty picture of you. He won't touch you again!"

Shannon melted away from Auntie.

"I—loved him—Shannon. But I love you more."

"You loved him?" Shannon smashed his hands into the window. The glass cracked, but did not shatter, blocking his intent. He cut his hands. "So did I!"

Wounds of the heart leave wisdom when they heal

Shannon watched his hands circle his steering wheel. His hands had healed, leaving two small crescent-moon scars across the meat of his palms. Even at thirteen Shannon realized that his healing did not depend on how, or why, or when, but who; who made Shannon heal.

His name was Andrew, the other boys called him Andy. He was fifteen, two years older than the other boys, having failed the eighth grade twice. Shannon had gloomed until he met the new boy the first thing in the spring semester. The nuns gave Andy the seat in front of Shannon, and, during the first test they took sitting near each other Andy faked a yawn, and hugely stretched, and turned his head, and whispered a stubborn question. Shannon gave Andy the answer. And he didn't feel made to cheat. Andy was no bully, and no other boys

called him idiot nicknames, because on the basketball court Andy could do anything with the ball. And, after watching Andy change into his cut-off jeans in gym class, Shannon was made to believe that Andy could heal his wounds.

Andy never showered after winning a game in gym class. He never took off his Fruit-of-the-Looms. He thumbed his waistband with his left hand, pushing his right hand down inside, straightening, or scratching, or squeezing himself before he stepped into his cut-offs or legged into his brown corduroys. Shannon hungered to discover the reason. If other boys had discovered the reason for Shannons admiration he would never have survived to see his grade school graduation. Fast-growing boys, with minors in abuse, and majors in the fear of nonconformity, would have Shannon castigated, castrated, and crucified, or else they would have pissed on Shannon by lots and transformed him into something marked and misbegotten.

Shannon decided to talk to Andy near the end of April. Andys father lost his job at Chrysler, and he decided to move his family back to Swoyerville, Pennsylvania. Andy would not be returning to school after Easter. If Shannon could never wrestle with Andy as his lover in the wild peach leaves he could at least try to get a chance to compare his peppermint boyhood with what Andy had to arrange before he put on his pants.

Andy didn't even look at Shannon while Shannon confessed his admiration. "So you add-mire how I play basketball. What's that to me?"

The wind scratched at an almost bare elm across the street from school. The nuns made Andy keep his shirt buttoned in class, but on the playground, or after school, Andy left his shirt all undone. Shannon could make out the raspberry smudge of a nipple in the crimson light of his flannel shirt. His cuffs were frayed and mended. "You're my hero, Andy."

[&]quot;Your hero, huh?"

"I want to be the first person to take pictures of you, so that after you become a famous basketball star I can claim I took the first photographs of Andrew Arwhola."

"Call me Andy, okay?"

They met at the gym on the Wednesday night before Easter. Rain ran like a blue watercolor on the gym windows, the glow from the streetlights streaking the maroon floor tiles. Andy was beating the ball to death, shooting baskets, himself his opponent.

"I warmed up, so's I'll play at my peak for our pictures."

Boy, was the boy warmed up. Shannon almost peaked, looking at him. Sweat glistened on his forehead and ran down his neck, and down his chest behind his unbuttoned shirt. Shannon could taste him.

Andy began to play.

Shannon followed Andy as best he could, firing shot after shot every time Andy sprung into a new position. Andy made basket after basket. Shannon jumped with Andy towards his last basket, to fire his last shot. They landed together. The ball took one bounce, and Andy reached out expertly and made the catch. Shannon took the camera away from his eye. They stood nose to nose, huffing.

Andy beamed. "Didja get some okay pictures?"

Shannon couldn't catch his breath to speak. He nodded.

Andy raked the sweaty hair out of Shannon's eyes. "You know what we need?"

Shannon needed a mad dance with Andy; he needed to meld with him; body clutching body; he needed to be this other boy.

"We need a shower."

Andy locked the locker room door. "There might be girls around, you

know?" Andy opened his locker.

Shannon wanted to adjust his jeans. "I—I don't have the key to my locker."

"You keep your locker locked?" Andy swiped off his shirt. "I never lock my locker. I'm the biggest guy in school. Anybody goes in my locker I'll pound them. Put your clothes, and that camera, in my locker."

Andy opened his brown corduroys, pushed em down, and stepped out of em, to stand chest to chest with Shannon. True to his tradition, he put his hand inside his underpants.

Shannon drowned. "Why—why do you do that?"

"What?" Andy put both hands inside his underpants.

"Why do you put your hands—down there?"

Andy pushed down his underpants. "It doesn't feel good when it gets snagged in my underwear." His testicles were wine-dark, and his penis stood, tall and straight as a shaft of wheat. "Does your thing ever get stiff, Shannon?"

"Sometimes."

"How about now?"

A heartbeat passed, and Andy pressed his sticky lips against Shannon's lips. He crushed his body against Shannon's body. He curved his hand between Shannon's legs. His jeans slackened. Andy frisked his underpants, first outside, then inside, then he held them together in one hand.

Ever since getting inside those Fruit-of-the-Looms, Shannon had a thing for boys' underpants. All through high school Shannon committed the brands of boys' underpants to memory, the way other boys memorized baseball scores. That's why Shannon took Phys-Ed both of the two fast years he spent at St. Agnes. He collected samples

of every brand he saw in the locker room, a spendthrift in the boys' department, to flesh out his nightly handstands as other boys, and, if Shannon ebbed without a young mister to stem the tide of his desire for the two years his accelerated curriculum took to crash him onto the shores of his university career, he made up for his sea wrack of self-desperation the following three years at MSU, still identifying his fellow seamen on the sea of samesex passion according to their underpants. Shannon didn't precisely lie to Suzanne. I don't see other girls, he told her. And advancing into the university early as a pretty, raven-haired beginner of sixteen, boys were easy for Shannon to see.

He saw the bold, individual boys, who wore the brands with waistbands that advertised the makers name: Mister Jockey Shorts, who barged into Shannon's dorm every Tuesday and Saturday, through freshman, sophomore, and junior years, wearing nothing but those y-fronts, turned on from his communal shower, he liked his blowjobs on the floor with the light left on and the door left ajar; or Mister BVD, who liked a lush slow hand combed over the waistband labeled with that maker's initials, right down in the public showerstalls before and after swimming; or studious Mister Hanes, who could always be counted on for a ride home from the library where he risked the handy hard-on that topped the triple, black-red-black stripe, when he unhooked his wireframes and hopped into the backseat of his surplus army Jeep; or coy and lusty Mister Fruit-of-the-Looms who plucked his thumbs behind the double blue stripes to free his bottom for tricky interfemoral thrusts in the green grass behind the stadium. Shannon cossetted testicles, stroked shafts, nibbled nozzles, tweaked, gobbled and caressed every willing and any drunken boy who freed it from its fantastic cotton protection, or otherwise consented.

Consent had been spoken between him and the first young mister who fell in love with Shannon.

Shannon met Kevin Murphy at a Halloween party at a sorority house, where a bunch of the sisters had smuggled in high school boys, betting to bounce some firstriders after they got em snookered on their first beers.

Shannon belonged with the younger boys—he had just turned eighteen that day He had been at MSU for six quarters. Shannon liked the younger crowd. His jokes sounded sharper, and he liked to hear young boys giggle. He left em at a high-point, after telling his favorite anecdote about Thoreau—"God and I have never quarreled."—and tripped into the kitchen to get a fourth or a fifth beer.

He didn't even see the boy. The boy drew his feet out of Shannon's path. "Hi!"

Shannon peered into the dark highbacked chair in the darker corner between the butler's pantry and dining room. "Hello!"

"You need another beer?"

"X-actly!" Shannon snapped his fingers in front of his own and maybe the boy's nose. "Are you beerkeeper?"

"Lemme getcha one."

"Well thank you—"

The boy scooted out of his dark chair. Shannon caught ahold of his shoulder, and the boy steered them both through the swinging door into the kitchen with the grace and eagerly-boned skill of a gazelle. Shannon got his first clear glimpse of Kevin in the bright kitchen.

He was eighteen, and still in high school, a lean boy with neatly clipped naturally-wavy brown hair, tall and skinny. He wore that black-and-white big-check flannel shirt, with the zippered pockets, that became the shirt Shannon liked to peel off Kevin best. His jeans were in tatters—although the zipper worked. Shannon found out that first night how well Kevin's zipper worked.

Shannon did not leave the party early—he stayed until Kevin said he had better get home.

"I'll walk you home," Shannon said.

Outside, their breath steamed, and fog had struggled in around the Red Cedar River.

"You live far?" Shannon asked.

"You live on campus?" asked Kevin.

Shannon nodded. Kevin looked good in the smoky lamp-light. Kevin looked good in any light.

Kevin glanced at his Mickey Mouse watch. "I got time. I'd like to see your room."

Shannons roommate was asleep. Kevin blushed, and Shannon felt his nerves bristle when Kevin saw the other boy asleep in bed six feet from Shannon's single bed.

"Bob doesn't sleep," Shannon said. "Bob dies."

Kevin sat on the foot of the bed, and faced the books that lined the wall. He didn't read the titles. He made his breathing rhyme with the breathing of the sleeping boy. "Bob," Kevin said. "You can't spell his name backwards." Kevin giggled.

That giggle tingled. Shannon sat hip to hip on the bed beside Kevin. "Bob won't mind."

"Bob knows." Kevin forced a yawn—and Shannon knew the yawn was fake: his body did not quiver, and Shannon watched his body closely. Kevin lay back on Shannon's bed, braced on his elbows, his hands on his hips, his legs open.

Shannon lay hip to elbow with Kevin. He set his hand on Kevin's knee. His kneecap bobbed. "You're cold."

"I'm hot." Kevin crossed Shannon's arm with his arm, their arms crossed at the wrist. He squeezed Shannon's knee.

"When do you have to get home?"

Kevin glanced at Mickey, then quickly returned his hand to Shannon—setting his hand higher up, and inside Shannon's leg. "I've been late before—"

"For many reasons?"

"For this reason."

Without one more useless word, Kevin rolled over on top of Shannon, and without a useless worry Shannon responded. In a short, warm while later Kevin lay flat on Shannon's single bed, nothing on but that open flannel shirt, with Shannon wearing nothing, with nothing between them.

They were two Celtic boys who made the same jokes, saw their world the same way, liked the same writers, and took photographs of each other. Shannon spent Thanksgiving with Kevin and his parents and his younger sister. Kevin's parents liked Shannon—they sat for a portrait, taken by Shannon, choreographed by their son. Shannon and Kevin slept together on the sofa bed with the full knowledge of Kevin's parents. Kevin told Shannon when he walked him back to the campus in the morning:

"My parents know I'm gay."

Shannon couldn't reply. Kevin noticed his silence, and he didn't press what he thought would be good news.

They spent Christmas in Stickford, and ate dinner with Auntie.

Auntie liked but didn't like Kevin. Shannon could tell by the way she made Shannon serve the goose, and then kvetched about the discrepant portions.

Auntie slugged down the last of her wine. "Are you gay, too?" she asked.

Kevin giggled. "At least we'll only mess up one set of sheets."

They didn't go to bed early Christmas night, like they usually did when they had a chance to go to bed but not to sleep. They took a walk—past the Brandekker house. The trees and the gravestones in Pumpkin Hook were black and nameless in the snow, like spars of driftwood ships, wrecked ages ago on a polluted, ash-cold coast. The house looked lonesome and blue under the winter moon, but the narrow windows were yellow with the light of a family at home. Shannon stared into those perfect windows. He did not hear a word Kevin said.

They sat side by side beside the frozen Red Cedar River in January. Kevin had waited for nightfall before he put his arm around Shannon. "I love you," he whispered.

Kevin had said many things, but he waited for the coldest sunset of the year to say what he had never said before.

"I want to marry you—"

Shannon had never considered—"That's not possible."

"Maybe not in a public ceremony, but anything's possible— you said so yourself. We could—marry each other—"

Shannon reeled, as if he had grogged a gallon of wild peach wine. The peach trees grew wild around that old brick house, not many miles away; that old Brandekker house.

"Boys don't—belong—married to each other."

"But we belong together—"

"I can't. I'm—promised—"

"You promised?"

Promised to a shadow—promised to an impossibility—a tintic shadow—a brick and timber and bubble glass promise—promised to an absolute other—promised to a baby, or perhaps an unborn boy. "I'm promised to a girl I know at home." Forgive us our promises, all our

useless promises. All art is useless; all possibility.

The maple leaves shivered, the storm that would end Indian Summer coming in over the hills and houses, out of the southeast. Waterloo Road dropped into the low-lying land along Cassidy Lake. Sumac bushes burned like holy signs, and the wild peach trees loaned yellow gold to the dark water. The screak of crows, and the chirr of crickets, and the thick complaints of frogs, could almost convince Shannon that he had come upon a genuine swamp, not a wedge of endangered wetlands.

Shannon went around the hairpin turn past the sign that warned him not to pick up hitchhikers, and saw Windmill Point: the small, limestone barracks, guarded by a cluster of larger, official buildings, surrounded by a red cedar wall topped with barbed wire. No one in Stickford trusted the boys who lived in the school. All of the inmates were under eighteen, most were runaways, incarcerated for shoplifting, petty larceny, selling drugs—or prostitution. Shannon liked to imagine the boys in prison.

The boy lies on his rubber mattress, protected by a threadbare sheet, bleached bone-white by the sun, but smelling of mildew. He works his hips, spreadeagle against the foam pillow imprinted with the shape ofhis head. The bedspring squeaks. The forbidden clutch strikes, sticky and hot on his belly. He ungrits his teeth, untenses his elbows, relaxing his chin and spine, nervous but exhausted.

Shannon rounded the bend past the school, and saw the boy walking alone.

Shannon braked as he passed him, steering onto the shoulder. Gravel crackled under his tires. The woods were wondrously silent when Shannon shut off his engine. He watched the boy in his blind spot mirror. He stood on the opposite shoulder, scuffling his feet. The gust stirred his hair by fractions, and spiraled around his legs. He wore faded Levi's, with his blue chambray shirt all undone. He walked with

a limp, and Shannon noticed that his right foot was bare. He scanned the car. He just stared, rigid as a boy made of newspaper and tar, swinging a ratty paper bag. He reached his left hand up to his mouth and took a bite of something he clutched, half-hidden, in his palm. He turned around twice before he walked down the road.

Shannon leaned out the window. "Hey!"

The boy did not stop, but he looked back over his shoulder.

"Hey!"

The boy stopped. He planted his left foot in front of his right, as if he knew a charmed pose to deliver himself from evil. Shannon reached ahold of his camera strap with a blind hand, and swung out of the car.

The boy twitched. His lumpy brown bag swung like a pendulum at the end of his arm. The boy darted his eyes from Shannon to his car, to the swampy woods, unsettled as any rabbit poised to run away. The road lost purpose at his feet.

Christ! Mad O'Donnelly! And he must have stopped to stop him. He could see no one else on the road.

Shannon stopped two yards way—and recognized the boy. "So. Donald Wilkes."

"So? So I'm Donald Wilkes."

Shannon had made a wise choice by stopping this boy, wise for himself, and wise for Brandy. Donald was cute, too, in a raggy way. His sandy hair needed combing, and his nose was a trifle too big for his face. Pimples pocked his cheeks, and the hemisphere of a large mole peeked out of the placket of his open shirt. His eyes squinted, grey points.

"I thought you might be from Windmill Point."

Donald moved his mouth. Was he reading lips? He crumpled his bag

up tighter. "Do I look like a kid from prison?"

The Brandekkers hated when people called the school a prison.

"Do boys look different in prison?"

"How do I know how boys look in prison?"

Shannon acquiesced. "You're right. Prison makes a boy hard. And you don't look hard to me."

"What do you care how I look?"

"You can tell a lot about a person by the way he looks."

"You can't tell anything about me!" Donald stuck a fist in his front pocket. "How do you know I don't have a weapon in here that can kill you dead and maybe steal that car?"

Shannon hooked a thumb behind his belt buckle. "Who's to say I don't have a weapon waiting for you?"

Donald swallowed. "Well, I was joking."

Shannon grinned. "Of course you were." He touched Donald on the arm. "Silly." He winked like a cat, with both eyes.

Donald took a step away from Shannon. "Hey—Did Brandekker give you my name?"

"AhHa! You mention our mutual friend!"

"Brandekker's no friend of mine! He's such a woman!"

"He looks like a boy to me."

"I mean he's a sissy. He reads poems."

"I read poetry Am I a sissy?"

"I didn't say you, I said Brandekker. You're a teacher. Teachers are supposed to read poems."

"You think Jim Brandekker is a sissy because he reads poetry?"

"Well, he's afraid of everything."

"I think you're afraid to talk to me."

Donald slapped open his hand like a switchblade. I'm afraid of nobody!"

"No one is afraid of nobody. That's not very brave. If there were nobody in the world I would never be frightened."

"You think you're smart, huh? Crazy teacher and everything! You wanna know how scared I am?" He uncrinkled the top of his bag, and let Shannon see inside.

Fuzzy, over-ripe peaches filled the bag.

"That's peaches."

Shannon nodded. "Yes. Those are peaches. Very good. You get an A in fruit identification."

"You know how I got these peaches? I stole em right out of that prison yard. Those peaches grow wild on the other side of that wall. They're ripe, and the law says that nobody's supposed to come over that wall to pick em, but I'm not scared of the law. I hopped that fence, and I picked those peaches, and I took my time picking em, too."

"What if those guards saw you?"

"Those *guards* are just teachers like you. They can't shoot people. I'm not afraid of guards, anyhow."

Shannon pointed at Donald's bloody toe. "Is that bare foot your red badge of courage?"

Donald glanced across the road, almost solemn. "They got big spy dogs roaming the yard on the other side of that wall. And they got barbed wire on top of that wall. When those dogs chased me, I got caught on that barbed wire, and tore off my shoe and sock, and ripped my jeans." He tagged his lip with an incisor, and shook his head at the torn knee of his jeans. "Christ, my mom's gonna bitch when she sees this tear. I don't think I'll steal peaches next time. I'll steal hubcaps."

"Why?"

"To make fun of the mayor." Donald grinned.

His teeth had been brushed and flossed. Shannon glanced at Donald's knees. The unripped knee of Donald's jeans had been darned with mustard thread. This boy would steal hubcaps to outrage his mother with the shattered nerves and the pink sponge rubber rollers in her hair, who offered him the Tupperware tumbler of tapwater, and told him to spit not swallow. He would make her ask his father what they had done wrong. His exposed knee had the trace of a suntan. This boy had spent a solitary summer, lazing on the private city beach, his fingers whippling the cloudsmoked lake, the water rippling the image of his body, lifting a golden arm into the sunlight, dripping hairs like golden needles, quick drops falling into the glare, his eyes dreams. If he could wait until August then he could get working papers and get a real job—pumping gas at the full-service Shell station, or ushering at the Stickford Cinema, wearing a royal blue uniform, gold braid on the roomy shoulders of the doublebreasted coat. He would time the feature presentation on the four faces of the clock on City Hall. He could hope to meet a girl to smuggle into the balcony. This was a lonely boy.

"I hear you want to come out for yearbook as a photographer?"

The kneecap jumped.

Donald scrunched his shoulders and churned his tongue. "I don't know I had to come out."

Shannon squinted at his face. His sandy hair could stand a washing, loose but oily. He was too young for his acne to clear, but not young enough to avoid a shadow of beard. A smear discolored his chin. This was the boy who had seen Brandy's first attempt at fulfillment. He believed because he had seen. Shannon presented his camera. "I want to take your picture."

"For the yearbook?"

"I'm thinking of art photography."

"Don't you need to see how I take pictures?"

"My photographers are also my models. For art photography, you see."

Donald scrounged his hand through his scag of hair. "Well, if I gotta model for a picture, go ahead."

"There are a few artistic considerations."

"Yeah?"

"Because of the sheer honest tintic appeal of human anatomy I want you to pose *in puris naturalibus*"

"How?"

"I want you to pose in the nude."

Minutes went by and Donald did not move, not even his hands. "In the buff?" He shivered. (Nothing but the dusty wind; the coming storm, billowing his jeans, sniping at his wee-wee; gloating over his wee-red-rubber-balls.)

"Naked as a needle."

Donald grubbed in the dust with his bloody toe. "Why?"

"The human body is more sensitive to light and shadow without

clothes."

"Yeah? Maybe." Donald looked at the sky. Was he praying? "But how come you gotta take a picture of me for me to become a yearbook photographer?"

"If you're shy I can find another model. I know other boys who are as anxious as you to get on my staff."

"Like who?"

"Like Jim Brandekker."

"Brandekker. Why would you wanna take a picture of him?"

"I've heard you're the source of these rumors about Jim Brandekker in school. You've made Jim Brandekker famous. You know the truth about famous people."

"You better believe I know the truth about Brandekker! And I bet he'd be glad to take his clothes off in front of any guy— even in front of a teacher. He likes to take his clothes off in front of me in the locker room. He likes boys to see him without his clothes."

"But how about you? How do you feel about being photographed in the nude?"

"And then I'd get on your staff?"

"You could make yourself my ace photographer."

His eyes glowed, like falling stars ashamed to be caught by the Spirit of Gravity. "How?"

"Can you suggest a setting for the photograph? We need a place where we can work without interruption. I'd be glad to have an ace photographer who could act as location scout—"

Donald pointed towards Cassidy Lake. "How about the mill?"

"That's a wonderful suggestion! Well, do you want to come out? Will you pose?"

"Will you really let me on your staff?"

"This will get you right where you belong."

Pumpkin Hook surrounded the mill.

Donald counted the saggy rungs nailed to the outside wall.

Twenty-eight, but two were missing, leaving gaps at the bottom and top that made his stomach windy. "Can that ladder hold our weight?"

"Wait and see."

"You go first, then."

Shannon scurried up the ladder, watching Donald over his shoulder. Donald stumbled, and shouldered after him.

The upper room was bright in the last of the sunlight, before the coming storm stole more of the mossy cedar shakes off the roof. The big wooden central gears clanked, turning alone, unlinked to the grindstones, the original leather drive bands long since stretched to atoms. Shannon sat across the room from the entrance, framed by that square opening that looked out over the lake.

Shannon could see Windmill Point clearly from the top of the mill. He imagined Donald sneaking over that red cedar wall. No one entered the boys' school, no one escaped; no one went over, no one came back over, the wall, only this legbound boy with the loggy bladder and the speeding heart, slipping along the long grass on his sneakers. Sunlight pinned the barbed wire, like messages for a telegraphy of forgotten nerves.

Donald knelt. "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm remembering the future."

"How do you remember the future? The future didn't happen yet."

"Past, present, future—memory suspends time. When I remember myself looking out this window, thinking about what's going to happen, I'll be remembering the future."

"I don't understand."

"You and I aren't here to understand." Shannon displayed his camera. "Ready?"

"Huh?"

"Take off your clothes," Shannon said.

Donald set aside his bag of peaches. He pulled his shirt off over his head without unbuttoning, mucking his hair. Shannon fired a shot of his dazzled eyes. "Take your shoe and sock off next."

Donald balanced on one foot to pry off his unlost shoe. He caught the lace between his teeth, and his shoe orbited, suspended from one string, while he pulled off his sock. He leggo, and his shoe bounced off the toe.

Shannon snapped another picture.

"Do you have to take pictures of me while I'm getting, you know, nude?"

"I have to test the light." Shannon liked the sight of the boy's nipples, and the curve of his belly. Not a trace of hair showed on his chest, or under his arms, or above the waist of his jeans. Was he getting a glimpse of Brandy? Would Brandy have sweet round nipples, perfect circles, a hairless chest, an elongated oval belly, still quilted with baby fat? Would Brandy be blond between his legs? "Take off your jeans.

And your underpants."

"Do I gotta take off my underwear?"

"I'm an artist, Bruce. I'm a boy myself. I've seen other boys. You're not afraid to be seen by Jim Brandekker, and you say he's homosexual."

Donald cramped. He fumbled open the brad, and unzipped his jeans. He slid his jeans down his hairless legs, and off his ankles. Donald wore Fruit-of-the-Looms—the only significant bulge directly behind the fly. He swallowed hard, watching Shannon release the shutter. He pulled down his underpants. Shannon dropped to his knees, subdued. Had Shannon completely forgotten how boys look at fourteen? Donald must be less of a boy than Brandy. Shannon grabbed the scrunched sack of peaches.

"Hey, don't play games with my fruit!"

Shannon flipped Donald an over-ripe peach. "Strike me the pose of the boy-god of the peach grove, Bruce!"

Donald missed the catch. "Stay outta my fruit!"

Shannon pitched a second peach at his head. "You candy-ass, Bruce!" He hurtled peach after peach.

Donald finally caught a peach and stood still, blue sky and blue water the perfect background behind him, the weathered wallboards the perfect frame. He tossed his peach from hand to hand.

"Stop juggling, Bruce! You're not a clown, you're a god, I swear!" Shannon crouched close, and aimed his camera right at Donald's penis.

"Hey!"

"I just want to get a crotch-shot, Bruce."

Donald covered himself, and fell over backwards. "Now you stop! You

just stop! You got enough pictures of me! You let me be private! And my name's not Bruce, my name's Donald!"

"Donald! Donald!" Shannon stalked him, and the boy cowered.
"Quack! Quack! I'm sick of your goddamn name! Is Donald any sort of name for the boy-god of the peach grove? Consider yourself reborn! I give you a new name! *Ergo baptisto in nomine diablo Bruce!*" Shannon smashed Donald, bull's-eye, between his eyes with a peach. Juice and pulp burned his eyes. The pit would make a bruise. "Maybe now you won't make up rumors about Brandy! Maybe I'll post my pictures of you on the school bulletin board! Maybe I'll start a rumor about you!"

Donald wiped at his eyes. He sputtered. "Who's Brandy? What are you talking about? Don't post up pictures of me!" Donald cried. "Call me by my name!"

Calmly, Shannon knelt beside Donald, and calmly he took his hand. "I'm sorry, Donald." He toyed with a toe. "There. I said your name."

The boy tensed.

Shannon held him by the wrist with quiet fingers. "Donald?"

The boy whimpered, daubing at his slushy eyes.

Shannon stretched out alongside him, and rolled on top of him, graceful as smoke. "Have you ever made love with another boy?"

Donald struggled like a boy awakening. "You're like a goddamn fag!"

I'm going to make love to you, Donald. Then I want you to tell that to Brandy."

"You mean Brandekker! You're both faggots!"

Shannon reached between their bodies—and squeezed Donald's penis.

Donald punched Shannon in both temples with his fists.

Shannon did not cry, though Donald threw him over. They wrestled, and throttled. Donald kneed him, and Shannon cringed. "Faggot! Goddamn faggot!" Donald blocked the exit, chanting his litany. "Faggot! Goddamn faggot!"

Shannon pounded him, bent double. Donald twirled, like a boy bullfighter, and Shannon tackled an armful of air, and Donald pushed him headlong at the sky.

Now SEE Jim Brandekker trudge through the hot afternoon, unseen by all except you and his unseeable ghosts. His ghosts followed him home from school, stepping on cracks, to break his back with bad luck. It itched under his rough jeans, and he squirmed to try to make it fit without touching it. He could feel how it looked: barenaked behind his zipper, all bad-boy, curved over his thigh, half-stiff at the root.

Jim dashed across Waterloo Road, and down the deadend path that could only lead to the back gates of Pumpkin Hook. Jim could see headstones and wildflowers through the iron gates between the limestone walls, like a twisty rock garden. He could see the roof of the old mill, and beyond the mill he could see the minor white square of the old Brandekker house. His lonesome ghosts lived in Pumpkin Hook, sleeping between the headstones, playing in the purple clovers, holding their meetings in their unknowable languages. His ghosts covened around the mill at half past midnight, and drew up nightly plans to cling to Jim like his favorite shirt in the heat.

Jim squeaked into Pumpkin Hook. Now he was home. His ghosts squeezed in behind Jim, drunk on heat and song. Jim needed both hands to count the James Brandekkers buried out here, counting Farfar on his second thumb, and saving a finger for Dad, and his

second pinky for himself. Dad had buried his dad out here same as Farfar burying his dad and his grandfather. (Farfar's grandfather got killed when his Stanley Steamer exploded. "I lucked out on my Grandfather's funeral," Farfar joked, pretty grim. "Tweren't nothing left to bury but mist and a hat.") All those fathersome faces stared up at Jim outta their soulboxes, their lonesomeness a thing Jim would see completely an hour before he died, just before his eyes dissolved in a blue of atlasting lukewarm water.

Jim sweated at the thought of that cool lake by the mill. Jim liked the path that lead to Cassidy Lake best, leading away from the granite and the marble. (A course his ghosts liked lonesome paths, too, and if Jim stripped naked to swim the same two-dimensional thief that snatched his underpants would creep out from behind a peach tree to steal what remained of his clothes. Jim would have to sneak home wearing leaves and traffic signs. And if Jim got a pretty tan from skinny-dipping his ghosts would never bear the sight of him. And Ma would worry herself dogsick if Jim came home late after a skinny-dip—and if she caught Jim swimming with no clothes on she would make him come in the front door for the rest of his life. She'd spank his bare butt with the family Bible to remind him.

Jim had a photograph of Ma in his bedroom that Dad had taken out in Pumpkin Hook: Ma, smiling at secrets, teasing the stem of a pink chrysanthemum, the backdrop a maze of moonlight on willows. Jim had stashed that picture under his Nothing Book in Farfar's rolltop desk, because pictures of Ma looked at him when he undressed or changed clothes.

Jim watched his big red shoes make grasshoppers leap outta his path. Sometimes Jim saw chipmunks in the cemetery, with neat black spots in their brushcut fur, and once he saw a garter snake, roping thinly around a limestone marker. The oldest headstones were made of limestone, and rain had washed em so smooth that not even the people they were named for would be able to read em.

If Jim could shrink small enough he could lose his own name in this long grass. His world would be a colossal tumbledown city of the dead,

like in Egypt around the Nile, or those skull & crossbones sites south of the border down Mexico way. He'd battle daddy longlegs, and pinchy ants, and that garter snake, that would be like a dragon, for specks of food and inches of territory, wearing dandelion leaves for clothes, and bits of quartz as jangles and trim, and use jags of blue Vicks jar glass for weapons, and his home would be that sinkaway hollow spot at the threshold of the Brandekker crypt.

Graves could be good places. Cold and dark, but snug and sunny on top in the summer, and to make their blankets October gave up her leaves, and the winter sky came down soft and white, and the spring rain would seep in and make his young blond body smell fresh and clean as dawn. Least in a grave Jim would be completely alone, and nobody would make Jim get naked, or make it stiff. Jim would always be a good boy in a grave; he would never dream up nightmares, make mischief, or wonder how come he had to do what he had to do. And only felons disturb graves—weird animals who can't stop drooling—like that scoffer that crooked his underpants.

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A dove called from the wheel of graves. Jim stopped. He heard birds all-a-time in Pumpkin Hook: whiplash starlings, peeping sparrows, piping robins, or even the soft hew of a hummingbird nosing wildflowers, but a dove sounded pure. Not a call like a wren, or a hoarse old jay, or a fiery cardinal, but the sound of morning that God the Father gave doves all alone. Doves were one of the Friendly Beasts, Bethlehem birds, who saw the Messiah at his birth, luckbringing peacemakers with olive branches in their beaks, flying from the shoulder of the Holy Ghost to bestow triumph over squeemy things of darkness: sinus congestion, chicken pox, bad breath, tooth decay, Dminuses, mental illness.

Another sound scratched the air. Jim listened. The sound scraped again: some vicious animal, nasty and sly: A cat! Wings scrambled for the air. Jim ran towards the clamor. Wickets of heat whipped him, and his ghosts cut pinwheels in and out around his path between the willow trees.

The fight had ended before Jim got to the rescue. The dove had been killed, her torn plush body clenched in needley teeth. The cat was black as doomsday, with white spots like leprosy.

She ellipsed her peagreen eyes and hissed.

Jim jumped the cat with both eyes closed. The cat screeched. Jim strangled her around the belly. The cat clawed his stomach, and bit his thumb. "Leggo!" He threw the cat down—crack!—against the packed earth. The cat ran.

Jim sat in the shadow of a headstone, outtabreath, and hot. Shy, he looked right, then left, then tugged off his rugby shirt to look himself over. That cat had clawed him, yeppers. Four sets of bloody pinpricks dotted his collar bones and bracketed his bellybutton. Jim put his shirt back on. The wounds were too small for worry, they just stung. Those claws snagged his shirt, though, and those little pulls would run unless he stitched em, and Ma would not help, she hated the smell of his favorite shirt. He took a look at his thumb. Superficial—yep, that was a good doctor-word for his wound. A drop of iodine and an Ouchless Curad would cure the itty-bitty nip. Maybe that cat spit poison into his blood, though, and soon he would grow sickly ascared of water, and come down with lockjaw, and his tongue would swell to three sizes too big, and he'd sweat to death, and die all sidewise and alone. Robbers would filch his favorite shirt, and Dad would paint his deadboy face with cute colors, and build his casket outta cypress and brass, with a snowsuit lining, tarred, not painted, black. He would write Jims eulogy with a guill pen dipped in reptile tears. Ma would wash his lunar-white boyhood, and dress him in that dumbo blue suit, and bury him safe and snug in the family plot, from worse to Eternity. Jim glanced at the sun, and saw the moon rising in the late afternoon. Farfar would rise from the Sea of Tranquility to disrupt the rosary and call Jim Jimmy Pink, and break his dead nose with the family Good Book. If Jim lived Dad would sell him to a fifty-some-year-old flit for Confederate money. The fiend would lock Jim in a closet, and pump every last living sperm cell from his body, forever and a Tuesday.

Jim looked down along his body, hating his favorite clothes. They were

the sizes and styles for a kid. What's worse, they fit Jim. He belonged in little-kid's clothes.

Jim bit the top button off his rugby shirt. He curled up in an adolescent ball. How dumbo did he have to get before he grew up? He felt brave, like a true soldier, just fighting a cat. Jim crossed his eyes. Threads sprouted from his collar where he had bitten off his top button. He searched his mouth with his tongue. Had he swallowed his button? Cripes! He found his button wedged between his molars and his cheek. He sucked the tip of his tongue through the four small holes in the plastic for a second, then spit the button out into the grass, to add his own fossil to the graves. "Face the way of things," Jim told nobody, nowhere. "You're just not growing up."

Jim stood, shaky, and started across Pumpkin Hook to get a shovel from the mill where his ghosts stowed their ropes and hitches. Shannon came to nine minutes after his fall. He had been knocked silly, not unconscious. He lay alongside the foundation of the mill. Spears of grass pierced his shirt, stabbing him in the back. The palest moon had risen across from the sloping sun, like the ghostly eye of Daddy, musing upon this queen his son's wreck, and his wife wrecked before him. The riven clouds crowded between the sun and the moon. His shoulder throbbed, and he put his hand inside his shirt, and cupped the muscle, cranking the ball in the socket. No bones appeared broken, no muscles seemed torn. He stood on his knees, and wobbled —and realized he could not feel the familiar bulge of his wallet, the same instant he spotted his wallet crouching in the grass, like a rabbit about to bolt, and run away.

Shannon pressed his fingertips to his skull. If his brain swelled and he expired from a concussion in his sleep Auntie could have sex with herself Saturday morning, playing with the parts of his corpse. How long had he been out? He glanced at his wrist. The red mark made by his watchband remained on his skin, but his watch was missing. Donald, you bastard. That watch had been his birthday present to himself—the only watch he could find with a minature wheel that told the phases of the moon. Now Shannon would have to resort to some popular pin-up chronometer. Shannon retrieved his wallet. He found his drivers license intact, but Donald had taken his cash. He tested his front pocket—thinking of his souvenir (which he found) and his car keys (which jingled.) He should have known that Donald only blustered about stealing cars. Cars required energy to steal and convert to profit. Shannon searched for, but he could not find, his camera. Donald, you sneaky little pimple! Donald had stolen his camera and film. His shoulder made him wince. Perhaps he should check into emergency.

Help me, Doctor! Help me, Nurse! Stand me straight on Muma Earth! I'm one clobbered faggot!

His car looked abandoned, as if by thieves. Shannon would not be surprised if men appeared from town and opened the hood, like the lid of a treasure chest, to show him the empty space where the engine had been. Shannon staggered. Donald had taken a rock, or a rotten peach, or his head, and smashed the back window. He peered at the shattered glass starring the black upholstery.

You petty bastard! Who made you?

Broken car windows turned to dust, or Shannon would have opened his veins for Brandy's sake, and called in his weakening voice until he lured the boy out of his old high house, and Brandy held his teacher in his arms while his life seeped away, the boys tears dropping into his teachers eyes. Hold me up a minute longer, I am dying! He would plead with Brandy to leave his body along the highway. Leave me for two corbies and the rain! If he died in his boy's arms with his own truth unwitnessed his spirit would be captive to the earth. He would walk backwards through his few, cheap, close, concealed moments with the boy; for not revealing himself Shannon would be condemned to devour the adolescent boys who came out of Stickford to investigate the source of the smell of pansies at the crossroads. He would bounce stars off Jim Brandekker's door.

Jim Brandekker would be home from school by now, drinking icecold Kool-Aid, and sitting on the veranda of his old family house, protected by his mother's will and his father's shadow.

Shannon could still amuse himself. He could report this vandalism to the police.

Hello? Stickford Police? I want to report a robbery!

o this sounds urgent! Like a boy who fed his fish too much! Tell us what was taken! We will come at once!

Only my cash, and my moonwatcher, my birthday present to myself. I was born on Halloween. Boo!

How did this hideous crime occur?

O I tried to rape a schoolboy in Pumpkin Hook Cemetery, and he got pissed off, and kicked me in the nuts. He also smashed my car window with his head.

CHORUS: We'll stomp on flits and fags, hoho! We'll smash down all gay bars that show!

Then the crime would be reported on the Evening News:

Good evening, fellow mortals, eleven p.m., and where have all the flowers gone? Think fast! They may be eating your boudoir, and luring your sons into the ice-pink chambers of the somdomites.

In the news tonight: educational pederast is foiled by a kick in the balls while trying to release his abominable frustrations and defend the innocence of the blond kid he yearns to buttfuck. Film of his injuries after the Weather.

The weather: pink at night, seamen delight, the skies are filled with enticements of Sodom! o, I hear Lot weeping for the sphincters of his sons, and his enspiratered daughters!

Christmas carols will be rewritten in his honor:

Boyballs ring, are you tinkling?

Same-to-same, two boys a-twinkling.

A be-you-tea-full sight on this lavender night

Floating with a swish to faery land!

Jim looked up at the vanes of the mill, turning on their giant shoulders in a small wind, lumbering without their skins. Jim pushed open the green door. The hinges squeaked. The bottom room was empty as always around the untrundling grindstones. Leftover rainwater spread a mirror of the rafters and the sky on the floor. In the winter ice

formed on both sides of these windows, and the upper room was cold as a fistful of frost. Jim took a shovel off the wall. The outline of six other shovels had been chalked on the rough siding but only one shovel remained. This had never been a good place to store took, too close to the lake, and with a leaky roof, the dampness parented rust on steel.

Jim leaned on the shovel, looking out over Pumpkin Hook from the doorway. Thunder stuttered, way-up-high, in clouds Jim could not see. The public road that divided Pumpkin Hook gave kids an easy way to sneak into this mill without being seen. Kids did sneaky things in here, sneaking in to break the laws laid down by their parents. Jim wondered how he would feel, sneaking in here to do stuff he dint want nobody but the other person he would be with to see him do. Jim swung his shovel at the wall of the mill, splitting a true two-by-four. How come the mill dint have to grow up the way Jim had to? Jim wanted to piss all over the walls, and make the mill smell like growing boys.

Spidery daylight showed Jim to his ghosts: a golden blond boy, his bright stripes dazzling after the gloomy mill. His ghosts side-stepped behind him, peering at him from behind the skinny peach trees, tickling the smart of his neck with their lavender eyes. They reaped his fears and foolish frustrations, playing fag music on a flute made from a human tibia, and jingling their tinkerbells.

Undress! Undress, my foppish lad! Undress and lay thee down! Be still, shout not, nor call out loud against the coming storm! Look! Look! The sky sweats pink happiness! Out west the day bends low! The storm that comes will wash thy fly away! Be calm! Lay down! He's near, he'll come for you!

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Jim followed the low mellow mournful call back to his little-kid's battlefield. He found the poor dead dove. He humped the shovel off his shoulder, and sat on the cooly grass to survey her wreckage. Wind scattered the fluffy feathers from around her heart.

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Jim strained his eyes sore, watching the skies.

Another dove descended, music in his wings. Jim watched this other bird land on the tippy branch of a catalpa tree, flexing his dull red toes to keep his perch. The wind kicked up, coming outta the southwest, the house of storms. Jim shielded his eyes. The dove hopped low in the tree. Jim could see his moon-beamish eyes. The bird cocked his head, hurt, or angry, or dumb, or already lonesome, or maybe ashamed to see the end of his mate left to this feeble earthground creature with hands but without wings.

Who made you stick around, you dumbo bird? She's dead!

The bird looked once across the whole of Pumpkin Hook, towards the old Brandekker house. Maybe Jim had insulted him. The dove blinked, extra sly, like he could read a boy from thought to bottom, and maybe even see the future. If this was a storybook this bird would speak in a language common to man, and tell Jim not to dread. But real birds just poke for seeds, and sing their songs, and get chewed to tissue by wildcats.

The dove song was too sad to hear. Jim stuck his shovel blade into the earth, hopping on the stands after the jab to wiggle in deep with his whole body. The ground was so hard that the little bit of labor sweated Jim up; made Jim hot and sticky. He unstuffed the handkerchief of Dad's that Ma made him carry, and laid the wrinkly cloth out as smooth as he could. He creaked up to the poor dead bird. Cripes! Could he scare this bird away? She's dead. She couldn't be timid. His fingers were glass. He supported his open hand above the slaughtered body, holding his wrist, his elbow planted in the little heap of earth. Blood speckled the grass amid her stray feathers. Spooky the way he had to make his hand move. He pronged the bird, careful to keep her blood from touching his skin. Jim yucked his tongue. The wind stole a couple more feathers. A smidget of down fluttered up his nose. Jim sneezed. His sneeze blew the feathers further out in a circle. He closed the handerchief in four folds over her body. "I never like to carry this

thing, but I bet you're glad Ma made me." He sounded dumbo, almost cruel, his voice hollow in the coming rain. Jim placed the dove in the small grave. Funny. The smell of freshly opened earth never made his eyes water before. He yanked his hand outta the grave before he realized the reflex. *Cripes! Are the worms gonna get me?*

His ghosts sang:

Sing together, finding feathers, this boy's a simpery worm! O his eyes are stones! Go sniffle pansies by the highway, hang yourself by your jeans from a wormwood tree! You're a coward eating borrowed apples. Climb into your crib and suckle with your Muma! Unfaithful fair-haired boy.

The wind blew steady and powersome as his heartbeat. The spirit of the dead bird had gotten into his eyes. That spirit moved, magnificent, outta range of gravity. Maybe he better pray.

Omigod I'm heartsick sorry for habbing upended thee, and I protest all my sins —

No! Better thought! How about his best Gospel?

Love. How's that go?

Love is gentle, love is kind

Cleans the room in half the time

The steeple of his hands crumbled. Jim snickered. That's not how his best Gospel goes!

Love!

Set your heart, I pray, I'll show you the way. The other way. The way up above all other ways. If I speak with all my tongue, and with the tongues of angels, but I don't love, I'm a noise, just a police siren. If

I'm some prophet, and I know, and I got know-how, and I can make the big into the little, but if I don't love, I'm nothing. If I give all I got to poor souls, and I even give em my body, to burn for em, but if I don't love, I get nothing for what I give.

Love keeps patient. Love's so kind. Love plays for keeps. Love doesn't get jealous. Love's not full of hot air. And love doesn't enjoy when things go wrong. Love doesn't feel sorry for his self. Love's true, limitless true. Love holds out Love forever bears heart. Love trusts love. Love endures.

And another thing, love won't fail. All words, true or not true, will fail. Everybody who sees will face silence. Everything everybody knows won't be of any use when everybody we'll ever know is nowhere but gone. Nothing's perfect.

I'm a boy. I think like a boy. I talk like a boy. Soon I won't be a boy no more. Now I see our mirror, but soon I'll see face to face. I can't know anybody perfectly but someday I'll know even as others know me.

Love's the end; the last of the Three; I believe, I hope, and I love. And love is the biggest of me.

The living dove went airborne, his wings a bell. Jim's first father dint lie here, or there. His roots were lost in the boneless wind. Jim knelt in the last of the sunlight, getting grass stains on the knees of his bluejeans, offering a silent prayer.

THE HOUSE that Shannon had been raised in had been built before the Civil War. Shannon had done some digging in the cellar. He had unearthed a number of blue-green bottles from household elixirs. He even harvested bones—though they looked too small to be human, unless they were the bones of a very young boy. Maybe the cellar had

been the sacred ground of a savage shaman, and his vision flights had hallowed this spot forever as a haven for lost boys. Today was Friday, and Shannon had to empty the mouse traps.

"That you, Shennin?"

Auntie always greeted him with the same vaguely suspicious tone, and he always wondered what she would do if he was not Shannon, but some delinquent escaped from Windmill Point, his glistening eyes bugged out like the eyes of a toad, horny and raw from being locked up with his own sex for too long, ready to rape Auntie, and butcher her for a cold beer.

"Who else?"

"You finally home for supper?" Auntie sat where Mother had sat, sprawled on top of pillows from Shannon's bed. "Give us a hug."

He went to her, and she embraced his neck with her flabby arms. Her breath smelled like gingersnaps. Crumbs clung to the creases of her housecoat, and floated sluggishly in the muddy air. "Why're you late?"

He pulled away from Auntie, and went into the living room, and collapsed on the threadbare couch. "I had to solve a problem for a student."

"Some kid I know?"

"Do you know any freshmen?"

"That's the trouble with teaching. You gotta hang out with little kids. They're filthy with diseases."

"This boy's clean. Sometimes his shirt's a little dirty."

"What's his problem?"

"Another kid was hassling him."

"Did he get beat up?"

Her questions fingered the living room, irritating his nerves. "My student believes this other boy stole his underpants."

"You're kidding, swiped his underpants? That's sickening. Did he report it to the Principal?"

"No one knows who took them."

"That doesn't matter, Principals should be told such things. Private schools must be fulla fags."

"Somewhat." He had a second thought to distract her. "Perhaps a girl took his underpants."

"What would a girl want with a little kid's underpants? He big for his age?"

"He's not like that." Shannon slouched. His erection threatened to prick out over the waist of his Fruit-of-the-Looms. Shannon crossed his thumbs over the button of his jeans. "Someone smashed the window of my car."

"You're kidding, Shennin, smashed your window? Did you report that to the Principal?"

"1 don't know who's guilty, either."

"You got to report to somebody somewhere when something gets swiped or something gets smashed. Somebody has gotta be told."

Shannon rocked himself upright off the sofa. "Should I report to you?"

"Who do you want to report to? Your betrothed?"

O yes, I date Princess Whatmelons, dancing naked in the sunflowers to a band of dwarfs playing fiddlesticks and strings. We rock her glass carriage, doing bang-bang in the palace parking lot, and cuddle close in King Thrushbeard's beard. I'm to be gelded and drowned for doing the Princess like a doggy. I will wear pink to my execution. My magic Father will perform to keep the crowd amused.

"I'm just trying to be a concerned parent."

"My parents are dead."

"That's right, honey, they're dead—Mrs. Frigid and Horny Houdini. Dead as old screws."

"They weren't like that!"

"You were only five when they died. You know she never let him near her. Five years before the fire that killed him he finally got at her, and raped her—I mean he beat the living bejesus outta her and raped her. Funny way to be conceived, dontcha think, Shennin? In rape."

"They were my parents! They loved me!"

"Course they did, honey Almost as much as you love me."

Her remark did not build the familiar fire in the empty house of his stare.

Anybody could see that her nephew dint look at all like her side of his family. Thelma Dibble had only one picture of her parents: dancing in the barn on their wedding night, the rafters swept of spiderwebs, fresh straw carpeting the plank floor, the apples bright and brightly red, even in the black-and-white picture. Pop married a widow who made the farm his own. They danced close in that picture, and even though the widow looked older than her thirty-two, and Pop looked younger than his eighteen, they looked, well, damned happy. The widow left Pop widowed, too, during her second childbirth. And Pop got on with the drab busywork of trimming and grafting, smutpotting and

spraying, choking, hiss-weep-hiss, picking bushel baskets without end, from sun-up to the rising of the giant grinning punkin-faced moon. The neighbors found Pop frozen solid on Christmas morning, twenty-two days before Thelma turned twenty-one. His body sat on the copper wash kettle that serviced the pump in the barnyard, his eyes wide open, an icicle dangling from the tip of his nose. The sun cast a white dot into the ice that brimmed the tub. Pop looked to be mildly soaking his feet. Thelma packed up Pop's belongings the Christmas Day he died, and stored em in the barn. To mourn she walked the farmhouse late at night, with the chills, repeating to herself how much Pop would miss the Christmas tree.

Thelma had a wedding picture of Iffy and Polly, too.

"That boy has got charm to alarm," Thelma told Polly that Halloween when the dark young stranger from the farm across the road banged through the screen door without knocking. "There's Martians in New Jersey!" He yelled, his silly, fakey, Irish brogue trilling his rs.

Polly and Thelma spent a lot of trips marching past the O'Donnelly farm, trying to lure the shy young son outta his hideaway in the loft of the barn. The neighbors gossiped that the boy played magic tricks on himself up in that loft.

Efrem proposed to Polly in the same parlor, and with Thelma in the room, almost a year later, while the radio reported a real invasion. Iffy and Polly married in an eight-day-whirlwind that got em coupled for a single night, and left his new bride breathtaken, chasing the enlistment train. Polly followed Iffy's army unit as best she could, pasting newspaper clippings into scrapbooks made outta shirt cardboard and paisley cloth. That April VE day was the first and last time Polly and Thelma danced. "He's bled white," Thelma whispered to Polly when Iffy stepped off the tired train, using up his last stint of soldiering to make his way to his wife and her sister through the hip-deep shroud of steam.

Iffy got into a professional magic cape as soon as he took off his uniform. He and Polly went on the road to take their chances with a

circus traveling south to Florida. The farm worried down around Thelma while she waited for news, the stone walls crumbling in crazy tumbles around the apple orchard stoned with wild peaches and misshapen punkins with twisty faceless faces. Auntie did not work on the first Saturday of November, and she had not moved since breakfast. The telephone did more than wrangle her: she stared at the ringing phone as if she had forgotten how to use the thing. At a distance, Thelma recognized Iffy.

"A baby? Iffy, you're kidding?"

"You're an Auntie, Thelma."

A boy had been born at dusk on Halloween, in St. Augustine, in the shadow of a Castle of Saint Mark of Somebody. Thelma got down south to be her nephew's godmother. The trickle from the silver shell made a river on his forehead. *I baptize you Shannon Efrem in the Name of the Father and of the Son* — and her flash bulb popped out of her camera and clattered on the marble floor.

Neither the O'Donnellys or the Dibbles took baby pictures. They didn't take any pictures, like Hollywood horror movie creatures of the night ascared of cameras and mirrors. Thelma wished she had pictures of Shennin. She wished she had pictures from their holiday rides, the ghosts of colors in the leaves. She wished she had a picture of Shennin knee-deep in punkin vines, that first Halloween they celebrated his happy birthday together, his spine skyscrapered. Is our Thanksgiving turkey gonna be as big as me? She wished she had a picture of her nephew, staying put in the waiting room when Thelma had to visit Polly in the hospital. She could show him then that she could see that he'd be a real lady killer when he got big, cause he had the looks, with his long black hair against that black chair, sucking on his Slo-poke. She wished she could forget the picture she had in her head of Polly in that hospital. Thelma found her way to Polly's room on her own, getting lost down one white corridor after another. They ought to give sick people some color to look at. How did they expect them to get well in all this white? They had Polly hooked up to some white machine that chimed with her heartbeat. Thelma barely recognized Polly, and

Polly could not remember her sister's name.

Every room in a house is good for something, but the bathroom is the best room for suicide. Shannon considered the healthy stock of Gillette Super Blue, and the three built-in receptacles for emptying veins. The sink would fill too quickly for the drain. He could squat over the toilet, holding his twin spurts just below the waterline, the blood dyeing the TydeBowl Blue a royal purple. The tub would be his best choice. He could fill the tub with warm water, and curl into the fetal position, and peacefully bleed to death, like Nerva cheating Caligula outta the fun of torture. Auntie would only need to open the drain, and sponge the accidental splash off the tile, and scour away the curious ring with Ajax, the Blue Dot Cleanser. Shannon pressed his back against the bathroom door, his ears pulsing. He laid his long white magic hand over his erection. He hung his black shirt on the door knob, to cover the skeleton keyhole. He tugged off his Dingos, and pulled off his jeans. He crouched, and stretched his briefs low, latching his waistband under his scrotum. The lacquer of his sweat drifted upward. He fondled his glans, an autumnrose, a trickle of semen creeking the bud.

Tenderly, Shannon brought out his souvenir. The underpants were new, but the On Track tag hung half-off the stretched-out waistband. They must be a size too small. The twin red stripes were rippled, bright and childish. He could smell the boy: cool, dry, tangerine sweat around the legbands, a lemon blot by the fly, a crease of nitrogen in the seat. He saw the underpants bloom with fantastic adolescence: Brandy, the boy with the heaven of yellow hair. He saw the mindprint he loved best of all: Brandy alone in the doorway of the mill, like a true promise, his jeans unzipped, his spoiled shirt hiked up past his nipples, hasty thumbs inside this waistband. He saw these underpants flung off by a smiling hand—

Shannon worked for release, covering himself with the souvenir he had stolen.

Virgil Raine had been the last person to take a picture of Thelma.

Virgy rented Pop's room across the front of the house. He must've got outta bed before dawn, because Thelma went up to see him every morning after she saw Shannon off to school. Most days he didn't budge from his room, aiming his old camera at the blue limits of what was left of the Dibble farm. Thelma had heard moviegoer stories about sailors living their mysterious misty lives at sea. "You want something? Something to eat or something?" What did Virgy want? Did he miss the sea?

Virgy took one long look through his camera. "Come and see what I see. I don't wanna talk."

He never needed to talk. He was like rain.

Virgil sang to Thelma. He sang hightoned songs outta Shakespeare, and Shakespeare's day and age. Thelma never saw Virgy so much as squint at a newspaper, forget about him doing a whole book of plays or songs by some fella like Shakespeare. Thelma knew his songs were Shakespeare songs because five years after she made Virgil leave she would hear Suzanne singing songs to Shannon on the porch, and Auntie would poke her head out around the screen door

With a heigh-ho, the wind and the rain

and ask: "What's that you're singing?"

And Shannon would always reply: "Shakespeare"

For the rain it raineth every day

And Thelma still held onto her silly notion that Virgy showed her how to love. Of course, she was silly. She loved Pop enough to keep his house for twenty years. She loved Polly enough to support her into and out of her marriage. She loved Iffy—plenty—and she loved their son.

But she loved those lessons in love that she and Virgy made through those winter afternoons, the shadow of the old Brandekker house reaching through her window a long way across the road.

Thelma had a crystal picture in her head of that window that Shannon broke that afternoon that she made Virgil leave. The picture Virgy made of Shannon had stolen the peace between Thelma and her nephew. Stolen for never. Thelma watched the outraged window cry in the rain. He had left nothing in her house—only his camera, and he left that on her nephew's bed.

All lovers are equally dire acts of God.

Shannon set his penis free. It tingled, scrubbed sore, but limp. He had not come. He should have used a slick of Baby Oil from the bottle on his bedrail, but bojo would have muddled the scent of the boy. He creaked upright on needled legs, and pulled up his briefs. He crossed to his bedroom with nothing else on, not even checking to see if Auntie might be waiting in the hall to catch a thrill. He tucked his souvenir under his bluejeans on his bookshelf. He tugged on a pair of cut-off jeans, and a white Izod tennis shirt. He put a string of pumpkin seeds around his neck. He must attend to appearances if he intended to succeed as a boy scout.

The lightstring bristled between his fingers. Shannon yanked on the attic light.

The attic was an awesome place—even almost empty. Auntie, unlike her sister, saved nothing. Auntie stored Grandma's mirror in the attic, and the single trunk that had survived the fire. His sudden reflection in that mirror always startled Shannon, like a loud, expected bell. He watched his reflection open the trunk, and he watched his reflection scramble through the costumes, the dented top hat, and Mother's wedding gown. He found an old straw hat—old enough to belong to

Grandpa

—and he did a little cakewalk for the mirror, then put the hat on his head. He found Fathers watch before he found the small square faded burgandy velvet box. He should have searched the attic for this weeks ago. Why had he waited until the night he needed Mothers engagement ring?

Father cherished this ring more than Mother herself. The ring was the O'Donnellys' last token of Ireland, made of gold pawned by the faeries. Shannon suspected that the ring suffered under the enchantment that had laid Father low. Why else would Auntie refuse to mix a diamond with the costume trash in her jewelry box? He put the box in his pocket unopened. He did not need to look. He knew the ring would be inside.

He wiped the dirt and dust webs off Grandma's mirror with his shirttail. He looked into the reflection of his eyes. If he yanked off the light he would see nothing. He saw his reflection by the reflection of the light. He set his hand on the reflection of his hand. The reflection of his body looked perfect, if indistinct, dressed in fashionable white and fashionably faded denim. Pumpkin seeds encircled his neck, the way the whole community would encircle him, once they rooted out his passion. He should undress slowly in front of the elderly mirror, the way he told Ralph he undressed; he should exhibit himself to himself, make love to his own reflection, a bastard spilling, himself upon himself. He touched the reflection of his zipper, and found himself aroused. He made a fist, and smashed the mirror.

The hall rivered. Each tread made him stumble, like the river dropping over glassy rocks. The parlor made him tremble, like shelter in a cave, even though Auntie had the three-way up to the limit, and Indian Summer smothered the draperies. Shannon unzipped his cut-offs, and went into the kitchen, fingering himself.

Auntie stood at the stove, scraping at something yellow and gummy she had frying in a pan. "What are you trying to do, Shennin? Wake the dead." "I woke the dead. Daddy will appear any minute and hit me on the head." He pushed his straw hat forward, brimming his eyes. "Do you like my hat?"

"That old hat must be fulla worms! I don't want you coming down with head lice."

"I refuse to come down with anything! For anyone! The words of Christ: I have overcome the world! Man is something that must be overcome! I have to be going. I promised my student I would come over to his house."

"Who made you look in the attic?"

"I wouldn't snitch on them, but I don't want to see you terrified. The attic's haunted. One of the ghosts came out of my reflection and grinned at me with a mouth full of golden teeth. That's why I smashed that mirror—"

"You broke Grandma's mirror? Shennin!"

He showed his wound. Blood trickled thinly between his first two fingers. "A holy stigma, dontcha think? No, I don't suppose you do. I have to make a phone call." He showed Auntie his rear, a sight he figured she'd enjoy. He twiddled his underpants. Underpants. He had never called Brandy's house.

If Kate Brandekker didn't answer the phone, no one answered the phone. Whimsically, Kate reminded herself that she was the only Brandekker at home. She wrestled her load of soiled clothes through the doorway at the bottom of the back stairs. In preparation for Monday wash she collected laundry on Fridays when she cleaned bedrooms. Most of the laundry belonged to James and Meg. Kate found only this awful gingham shirt trampled on Jimmers' closet floor,

not deposited properly in his bathroom hamper. She found only three yellow socks and a pair of filthy undershorts in his hamper. She reminded herself to have her talk with Jimmers about his personal hygiene.

The phone rang a third time.

A moose. That figured. He sounded like a moose over the phone. He had been reading too much Thoreau. She had mistaken him for Brandy's buddy.

Shannon had sat next to big, blond, Polish John Paulson between directing yearbook photos of the junior varsity Homecoming game, and, after John recovered from the dread of sitting next to a teacher, Shannon and the boy spent the fourth quarter cracking jokes about a bowlegged tackle. Shannon went home with visions of the rites of Ishtar performed on Astroturf. "Is Jim—young Jim—home from school?" He sounded officious, and, he hoped, effeminate.

Kate watched through her kitchen window. Usually this time of afternoon she saw Jimmers crossing the yard, coming home through the cemetery, that striped shirt of his like a circus tent in the sun. If Jimmers wore that shirt many more times without laundering she would smell him before she saw him.

"No, Jimmers is not home from school." Where was Jimmers, anyway? Probably dawdling over mischief in that cemetery, or floating on that lake by the mill with no clothes on. Kate would rejoice next spring when James demolished that mill. "I expect Jimmers to float in any minute."

Oolala, Mrs. Lifebuoy, do all we faggots float? Or only Dove boys like

[&]quot;Brandekker residence."

[&]quot;Mrs. Brandekker?" A young male voice—definitely nervous.

[&]quot;Moose?"

Brandy, with his body of Ivory Soap? O tell me truly, Muma B, does your boy bubble for abnormal Zest?

"Who's calling please?"

"This is Shannon O'Donnelly, Jim's Physics teacher."

If Jimmers persisted in his tardiness Kate would recommend that James padlock the gates to Pumpkin Hook. Jimmers would have to walk around the cemetery and greet his mother properly at their front door.

Kate recalled the weekends she stood guard over Jimmers to be sure he stayed in from roughnecking to study for tests in grade school. Her vigor had been rewarded. He entered St. Agnes a straight A student. "Is Jimmers experiencing difficulties in his accelerated program?"

Shannon sweated. His head throbbed in the thickening humidity. He needed an aspirin. He jittered. He would never be able to open the childsafe cap. He would be glad for the coming storm. Why didn't Auntie open a window? Of course, she was too occupied staring at his ass. "Nothing odd. But something has happened."

"An accident?" Jimmers had been injured! Probably in that foolish Physical Education class the high school made boys participate in! Bad enough Moose had talked Jimmers into going out for football, with his bad stomach! Probably a roughneck had stepped on his privates and now Jimmers would never father his own son. "Has Jimmers been taken to the hospital?"

"Jimmers has not been harmed." Shannon felt a swift pleasure, calling the boy Jimmers. The name smelled like the boy: like honey; like daisies in a meadow. "He has been the victim of a prank in Phys-Ed."

She had known! Athletics! Intramurals! Squat, hairy, simian fingers trussing young boys in cruel contrivances to humiliate their tender modesty. Bad enough she had to sign that consent form allowing those coaches to put Jimmers through a physical examination for that

football team. Competition!

"Someone stole something from his locker." Auntie pressed up against Shannon, clattering down plates and coffee cups. She lingered, like a backwards species who had only mastered a portion of her kitchen tasks. Shannon gagged the phone. "Your eggs are burning." Auntie carried their plates to the stove. "Someone stole his underpants," Shannon said into the phone.

Jealous pranks! Who made these roughnecks play their jealous pranks on a boy their obvious superior? Kate hated to see Jimmers made to suffer, but she could rest secure that these eventualities made him stoically determined to march forth from the petty ranks of other boys, like a lonely soldier fighting madmen. "What makes these roughnecks play pranks on Jimmers?"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Mrs. Brandekker, but other boys have made up a rumor about Jimmers." He had stepped into the whirlpool of the coming storm.

"And what vicious rumor have these roughnecks fabricated?"

"Other boys believe Jimmers to be homosexual." He stood in the eye of the storm.

"That's not possible! Jimmers doesn't even know the meaning of that ugly word!"

Shannon let possibility break over him, gathering like clouds. "I have discussed this rumor with your son, and I am compelled to ask you if there is even the most remote possibility that someone could have witnessed Jimmers engaged in even the most meaningless homosexual activity?"

"Do you mean to say that you give credence to this mean-spirited rumor?"

"Jimmers mentioned a boy at summer camp "

"My son and his penpal have a wholesome relationship! Few fourteenyear-olds have the keenness to maintain a prolonged correspondence. My Jimmers is not like these mongrel boys who make up vicious rumors. Who could have started this rumor?"

"Donald Wilkes, I've been informed."

"I'll speak to Donald's mother."

"I've spoken to Donald."

"I will speak to his mother. Shame on Donald, implying that my Jimmers has been involved that way. And with another boy! That is not possible!"

"Boys and girls in high school face these silly notions of possibility daily, Mrs. Brandekker. All of my students are seniors except for your son—"

"Are you blaming this rumor on his accelerated program?"

"I would never want you to withdraw Jimmers from my class. Quite the opposite. Your son has the ability to interpret his circumstances far in advance of ordinary freshmen. Possibly he has advanced beyond his peers in other—private—possibilities of his development?"

"The private portions of my son's development are none of your concern!"

O let me examine his development Let me number his hatching hairs. Let me measure his motility. Let me boost him a leg-up to reach the tip-top apple on the forbidden tree! Let me be his original sin!

"Possibly his concerns are not your concerns, Mrs. Brandekker."

"That's impossible! What possible concerns could Jimmers have that could be different from the concerns of his mother?"

"The differences between your son and other boys made these rumors

possible. I believe your son writes poetry because he cares about the possibilities of himself. Those possibilities made him who he is, but his concerns make him different than who you might want him to become."

"My son is what he will be! He's become what he has always been! He's James Crispian Brandekker—" Kate stopped herself by proclaiming his family name. Half her son belonged to her husband, by birth, even by name. Could she—Could his father?—possibly know his most private concerns?

"I have never seen as many possibilities in one boy as I see in your son. Your Jimmers has become my best student. Naturally I give my best students my—special attention—"

"Do you mean extra credit?"

"Jimmers needs to explore his possibilities with a teacher who is especially concerned for him. I believe I see a possibility for putting an end to these rumors. This concerns me. I can't have my best student victimized by meaningless pranks and false rumors that could jeopardize his performance. If Jimmers had even sold his quota—"

"Jimmers promised his father to take on the responsibility for that quota himself!"

"I know your son is concerned about how he appears in you and your husband's eyes, but a raffle ticket quota is trivial beside your son's private responsibilities. He has a responsibility to become himself—"

"How can you feel so responsible for Jimmers?"

"I take my best students for nature walks—Profound Walks, I call them in class. This gives us an opportunity to explore private possibilities. This way my most perspicacious students more fully comprehend their personal responsibilities."

"When do you want Jimmers?"

Now and forever!

"I'll see him tonight. Shall we say seven-thirty? and Mrs. Brandekker?"

Kate heard the side door open and slam.

"Don't be too concerned about the possibilities of this rumor or this prank. Your son feels too responsible for this himself."

"Jimmers will see you at seven-thirty, Mr. O'Donnelly. I'll see to that myself."

Kate hung up quickly, not to be discourteous but if she didn't get off the phone before Jimmers went sneaking up to his bedroom none of the family would see him until dinner, and mealtime did not offer the proper setting to talk to young boys about their unkept promises, or their underpants.

"Jimmers!" she called to arrest him. "I need to speak to you!" She caught him already turning the knob on the door of the backstairs.

He dint say nothing. He did not face her. He dint take his hand off the knob.

She held his shoulders. He took big, anxious breaths, making his skinny back work. He smelled sweaty, of heat and grass stains. Blots of mud discolored the seat of his jeans. She put her fingers under the hem of his dirty shirt, and tugged on his belt. "Your jeans need a washing as badly as this filthy shirt. Honestly, what do you do in them? Give them to me and I'll throw them in the wash. You need to shower, Jimmers. Do you want me to start your water?"

Jim slumped. "I gotta pee."

"Let's not supply gutter language for all our bodily functions."

"I gotta study before dinner."

She looked for, and did not find, his schoolbooks. Perhaps he did need

special attention. Perhaps he was not only fibbing, perhaps he was not fulfilling all his possibilities. "Jimmers," She tidied the long hair caught inside his shirt collar. "I heard about your—loss—"

Jim groaned. Who could've tooken em? Probably Wendy the whore. She'd get on the phone to Meg with the six o'clock news, twirling his underpants on the tip of her middle finger. *Guess what? I copped your Baby Brother's skivvies. Tell him he can have em back if he'll come outta his closet for me Saturday night.* "Has the whole world been told?"

"Certainly Meg has heard."

Jim made miserable sounds with his sneaks. Four of his sisters were married to professional men. One lived in Ann Arbor, one in San Francisco, one in Rouen, France, and one in Corpus Christi. "Meg'll tease the heck outta me."

"You're too dramatic."

Jimmers collapsed down on the bottom step, the open door thumping against the door frame of the back hall. "This—this whole thing means something—"

"You've had pranks played on you before. Why should this one hit you so hard?"

"I'm scared of what this means."

"This is like that time in sixth grade when that roughneck stole your speller—"

"This means more than a speller, Ma."

"You have a whole drawer full of underpants upstairs."

"Underpants are private—"

"Oh, Jimmers, what do you mean, private? All the boys wear

underpants."

"Uh uh. Not all boys. Some boys don't."

"Jimmers! Only roughnecks refuse to wear underwear."

"Moose don't—"

"I'm surprised at you, young man!"

"I seen him! Every boy sees other boys in the locker room—"

"Why are we having this conversation?"

"Because you don't see what this means!" Jim could see that somehow his ghosts had grown up under Ma's bed. "You only see me your way." Jim looked away, his face poppy red. "Maybe this is because you're a woman—I thought. Then I thought better. Some women see."

"See?" Suddenly Kate saw the possibility that Mr. O'Donnelly had found so difficult to convey. Sex. That word rang, the last word in the sentence pronounced over her son on the Last Day. *Ring the bell Close the book. Extinguish the candle.* "Do you need to talk about privacies Jimmers?"

"Sometimes."

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable talking to your father about this?"

"Dad doesn't wanna hear how I feel."

"Feelings! I see! You're in love! That's grand! What's her name? Do I know her mother?"

"Oh, Ma, you don't see what I mean."

"Then may I ask you what I do not see?"

"You can ask, but I won't tell."

"Jimmers! Don't be childish!"

"If you know me you know! You don't have to have guesses!"

"You will not keep me in the dark!"

"I'll tell you clues! My b.o.'s not my problem, and I don't got jock itch
_"

"You will not play these nasty games with me!"

"I don't wet on my dreams, and I don't squirt myself off—"

"Such language!"

"I got swollen nipples, but that Dr. Suzanne says I'm not turning girl
_"

"Do you mean that doctor who saw you for your team physical?"

"Yep, she saw me. She saw all of me."

"Shame on St. Agnes, allowing a woman to conduct such private business. Where was Dr. MacKenna?"

"I got the new doctor on his team. And she's good. She saw what this means."

"This doesn't have meaning, Jimmers. This was a prank."

Jim sat in a hot little heap on the bottom step, all elbows and ribs, his tough fists tangled in his yellow hair. "This means I look at boys, Ma."

"You look at boys?"

"Like Sappho. Like a girl who looked at other girls."

"Look at yourself, Jimmers! Look at you! Do you know what I see when I look at you? I see a boy who has gotten himself lost in the dark! This isn't my Jimmers you're showing me. Who made you act this way? Who are you?"

"I'm suspended," was all that Jim could say.

Housefires broke out in Ma's eyes. "Do you mean suspended from school?"

"That's the only place that can suspend a fourteen-year-old kid like me."

"You're awfully glib about a suspension, young man! Don't you realize that your high school years will determine the feasibility of college?"

"A Monday outta school isn't gonna keep me outta college."

"You don't realize that behavior problems may be demonstrative of an emotional disturbance embedded deeply in the adolescent mind—"

"Oh, Ma, stop talking like you're reading about me in a book."

"Wait until your father hears you've been suspended!"

"Dad'll just preach me a silly sermon." Dad should write a double-thick book: *Severe Sermons to Hurt the Feelings of your Son*.

"Why were you suspended?"

"I said a word Father Haarman doesn't want boys to say."

"What word!"

"A little word. Four letters."

"What word did you say!"

"The kids in school say gross stuff to me. All-a-time."

"Say the word to me!"

"You know the word as best as anybody else." His ghosts played kickball with his heart. "I'm not gonna do what I don't have to do."

"Let me tell you what you have to do! You have to march upstairs, shower, and change that filthy shirt. Your father will see you after dinner. Your father will straighten you out!"

Jim slouched, snatching his gingham shirt from Ma, as if he dint want Ma to touch his merest possession. He stuffed his hands deep in his front pockets, his shirt stuffed between his wrist and hip, like the suddenly defeated Cross & Stars. He leaned way forward, his lower jaw thrust out over his upper teeth, and shouted over his shoulder, standing above Ma on the stairs. "I told that Dean what I'll tell you! Fuck you, Ma! Fuck you!"

"Jimmers!"

But her Jimmers was gone, and way-up-high, at the top of the old high house, Kate Brandekker heard her son slam his bedroom door.

"I'm taking a Profound Walk after dinner, Auntie." Auntie pushed past Shannon and put their plates on the kitchen table. "You and your goofy walks."

I'm walking with one of my students."

"You spend all your time with little kids. Don't you ever want to spend time with me?"

"Eggs again? Don't we ever eat meat?"

"Abstaining won't hurt you. Think of your religion."

"I forgot. Christ, too heavy for his cross, went on a crash-fast prior to Calvary. Skin and bones against our sins!"

"Don't blaspheme in this good Catholic household!"

"Bless us our Lord!"

"Don't you care about me at all?"

"Apathy is the root word of our age, Auntie. Uncare. Who cares? Do you care? I don't care. Nobody cares."

"But I ain't a thing, Shennin, I'm a person."

"A noun is a noun is a noun—"

"We're living together! We could be so close!"

"I shall sell my bed this evening! We'll spend all our nights together! Good to the last drop!" Auntie had probably poisoned his coffee in her slowhand way. He would develop hydrophobia, and she would pen him in a doghouse until he ruptured his spleen.

"I'm not talking about sex, I'm talking about love!"

"You're a perfectly celibate saint! You're so horny you could cut yourself with knives! You don't understand love, Auntie; you and all the people I see!"

"That's the excuse of all you boy geniuses! You're fakers! When you see something you can't see in yourself you have the whole thing declared invisible!"

"You're mentally ill!"

"I used to watch you read those double-decker books, like you were trying to be wise as God."

"What do you know about wisdom, Auntie?" Wounds of the heart leave wisdom when they heal "You're dumb as a goddamn bird!"

"How do you know how I am? You hate me, and I make you real mad

cause I still love you."

"Spare me!"

"For what? So you can keep your big mouth flapping? You're so smart you should draw cartoons for the funny papers. But the funny papers are too lowbrow for you, ain't they?" Auntie came at him uselessly, and he uselessly retreated. "I don't hear you! Why ain't you telling me that everything that normal people love is too lowbrow for you! Are you too big for any girl? Is that how come you got nothing but problems with Suzanne?"

"AhHa, back in my pants again, are you?" He yanked down his cutoffs, his underpants twisting around his erection. (Now he gets an erection.) His penis slapped his belly with a meaty sound. He thrust his pelvis at her. "Is that what you want? A good show; an afternoon of long shots and triple plays? We'll fuck right here! Right here on the kitchen floor! You just want what Gil Raine had! Years ago!"

Auntie looked her nephew in the eyes. "Pull your pants up, honey. How could I get jealous of a guy who diddled schoolboys?"

He fled her house, an angel falling.

Wounds of the heart leave wisdom when they heal

 $oldsymbol{A}$ MAN HAS GOT TO DO what a man has got to do.

James Brandekker opened the door to the bedroom at the top of the backstairs. "Son? Can I see you for a second?"

The skylight was cold and blue. Her son had not turned on any lights. His highboy and the rolltop desk Farfar had bequeathed him were a

hush of shapes in the blue. That desk did not belong in this room, too big for her son, but her son was stubborn—about the desk the way he was stubborn about all things—and he wouldn't allow the desk to be stored. Only Farfar could remonstrate in such absolutes. A man has got to do what a man has got to do.

James snapped on the desk lamp. Her son lay on his bed under the eaves. Sound asleep? His bluejeans dangled from the desk chair, the left leg wrapped around the spokes, the belt trailing from the loops, the prong like a brass fang. That red-and-white jersey her son wore too many times a week lay squashed on the seat of the chair, the chair leg crushing a sneaker. James rescued the shoe, and knocked two books off the desk, a thin white hardcover, and a thick paperback marked with the wrappers from three Snickers bars. James retrieved the books, and crumpled the candy wrappers. He snapped on the ugly clown that had belonged to his mother that her son still used as a nightlight.

Good Lord! Her son was naked. He lay on top of his blue Searscord bedspread, his pillow clamped between his legs, his eyes closed—but not in sleep.

James turned his back on her naked son. He read the titles of the books. *Nothing Book*, the first book threatened. *Wanna make something of it?* James inspected the paperback. Walt Whitman: *The Complete Poems*. He flipped a few pages. Her naked son had filled the margins and the inside cover with notes scribbled in a green Ultrafine Flair. So this is where her son gets his ideas to lay around naked. What if his mother had come in here? The heavy book fell open to the end. Her son had copied a poem on the back cover in the neat round curlicue handscript that the boy had inherited from his mother. James read the ending

Admirer that I think I am

Of stars that do not give a damn

I cannot now I see them say

I missed one terribly all day

If all stars were to disappear or die

I should learn to look at an empty sky

And feel its total dark sublime

Though that might take me a little time

Odd stuff for her son to copy with such diligence. *If he's odd he's your son*. He would tell her that when he went downstairs. James remembered reading Whitman at college. A psychiatry student he had dormed with told James: Whitman lived a sonless life, a deluded self-promoter, a male nurse. Likely schizophrenia; erotomania possibly—possibly worse. Not an author for a boy as impressionable as her son to strain his eyes over. James opened the cover of the *Nothing Book*. Her son had covered the entire flyleaf with one name written margin to margin with the same green felt tip

all the way down the page. And her son had drawn a heart on the first page, labeled with the initials

CH+JB

And below that heart her son had drawn an almost biological depiction of an erect penis. Good Lord! James closed the book and faced the bed.

Her son had opened his eyes—but he did not look at Dad —Of course not! Dad only fed him, and let him buy his silly used jeans, and paid his tuition so he could learn a few values!—her son looked at the *Nothing Book* in Dad's hand. "What happened to your clothes?"

Her son dint glance at Dad. He swished his long blond bangs outta his eyes—Haughty! Proud to be naked!—and smiled that perfect, spoiled-rotten smile. "I took em off."

"I can see that!"

Jim would be no one now. He wouldn't be James Crispian the Sixth Brandekker in line, or Jimmers Ma's Son, or Jimbo the Baby Brother. He wouldn't be Jim the Mister Student, or even Jim the Brandekker. He would lie in his bed and be nothing. There he would lie from worse to Eternity. Imageless. "Then how come you asked me what happened to em?"

"I asked because I expect an answer, not a sassy mouth." James could see her son doing his nasty drawing from life, sitting on the toilet seat in his bathroom, his jeans and his underpants pulled south, his tongue plugging his cheek, like a kindergarten kid busy with blunt green-plastic-handled ducky scissors, turned on the way boys these days say turned on. James regarded the pillow her son had between his legs. Her son masturbates. Her Jimmers pumps pillows. Hah!

James held out the *Nothing Book*, the spine steepled on his middle finger. "Your diary?" *I Alone Have Lived This: Handmade Adventures of Boyhood Left Behind by the Fistful on Pillows, in Closets, on the Toilet Seat, in the Washbowl, in the Bath Tub Ring, in the School Lavatory, in a Privvy at the Rest Stop along the Expressway on Vacation. Her Jimmers whacks off. Hah!*

Her son shook his head. "I write the things I make up. I can only remember the things I make up."

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"Do you write stories?"
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[&]quot;Nope."

[&]quot;Poems, then?"

[&]quot;More like poems than stories."

"But this isn't your journal?"

"I write my wishes."

"You're keeping a record of things you want to happen?"

"Those're them. Wishes."

"I see." James did not see.

Her son swung off his bed, keeping the pillow between his legs. "Can I put my *Nothing Book* away now?" He had nothing but this *Nothing Book*. Jim had nobody left but Christopher; nobody but that gone boy. And that boy belonged in a *Nothing Book*; that boy was no boy at all. Maybe Jim should've done like that crook and snitched a pair of Christopher's Fruit-of-the-Looms for himself to use on himself.

Dad showed the flyleaf to her son. "Christine's a pretty name."

Jim stared at the telltale heart. "I guess."

"Is she good-looking?"

"Chris—looked good to me."

"Does this Chris know you care for her?"

Her son shrugged. Dad stopped her son from thrashing in a teenage squirm over this girl who was not his mother. *Let's make love!* He begged her. *No.* She insisted. He lost once; he will lose each time he asked her; each time he asked any girl. He will be nothing more than her son, and she will never be more than his mother.

Dad showed her son the second page of his *Nothing Book*. "What were you wishing for when you made this drawing?"

Her son lolled his head and pouted. He might do what other boys do. He had nobody but his body. "That's just a big green arrow." "Looks more like part of the human body to me."

"O yeah?" Her son switched the loll of his head. "Which part?"

"I can't say—politely—but you and I have one, your mother and your sisters don't."

"That's not what that is!" Moose told Jim the names. Pull the kids outta school. Pump to a hundred and come. Shake his pod. Spank the bad monkey until he means business. Tickle the baby until he needs lotion. Manufacture a little sneezing. Diddley pink. Figging. He tried. He got naked in front of his *Nothing Book*, reading what he wrote, and he tried to squirt over Christopher, but he had nothing to make it up with but a name in a *Nothing Book*; nothing but how he had seen Chris once, then seen him gone.

James opened the top drawer of the highboy and handed her son a pair of underpants. "Dinner's ready."

"I'm going to bed. I hate today."

"Tell me about this prank."

"Somebody took something outta my gym locker."

"Your underpants?"

"Yep."

James sighed, uneasy in the deepening blue. Shadows were longer, corners were colder, and darker, and lonelier here than in any other room in the old house. "Pranks are part of the game. Somebody pulls a prank on you, and you play a prank on them. That's the way memories are made that make a boy feel good after he becomes a man. You screwed up in gym today, didn't you?"

"How'd you know?"

"These pranks follow a pattern. Did you finally sell your quota?"

"Do we have to talk about those tickets?"

"I organized this Festival, son. This entire development depends on my involvement. How do you expect people to believe in our family if my own son won't do his part?"

"You shouldn't expect nothing from me."

"You're my son! I expect plenty from you! I expect you to behave like you're part of this family! I expect you to behave in school. Your mother tells me you've been suspended from school."

"I used a swear word." Her son shot his underpants at the window like a slingshot.

"You attend a traditional Catholic school. Those priests are bound to get angry if you swear at your teachers."

"Well, how about stealing? Don't those priests think stealing is wrong?" Her son dropped the pillow, and showed himself to Dad. "That Dean probbly took my underpants hisself!"

"If this is how you behaved in school the Dean had a right to suspend you!"

"Oh right, that Dean has all the rights and all my rights are wrongs! I can't even say how I feel!"

"That's your whole generation! That's you all over! You're a headstrong, spoiled little Momma's boy! You hide up here in your bedroom with no clothes on and you're not even ashamed of yourself. All you care about is how you feel. Were you telling your Mother how you feel when your swore at her?"

"What, Dad? When I said fuck you?"

"That's enough!" Dad made a grab at her son, but her son ducked off his bed.

"Ma deserved that word! Maybe the whole world needs to hear that word from me! The whole world's made that way! Who made me made me that way!" Jim shouted out the window at the made world. "Fuck you, world! Fuck you!"

James yanked her son away from the window and threw him back across his bed. "Enough! Too much!"

Her son lay on his belly, sobbing. James put a hand between his scrawny shoulder blades. Her son simmered, as if his heart were an inferno, boiling him alive from deep inside. James sat on the foot of the bed, anger running out of him like thin blue electric current. "What's bothering you, son? Please. Tell me." The boy looked submerged, a nude boy diving deeply into whirling water the color of despair. "Is something wrong in school?"

Jim turtled his chin over the edge of his bed. "Dunno about school."

"Do you feel all right?"

"Sometimes."

"Have you felt all right lately?"

"Not for some time." The boy pouted at the ruins of a private joke. "I don't like Indian Summer." Her son scooted off his bed, and stood below the skylight, staring up into the fads of the sky. "Do you think the stars'll be out soon, Dad? I wonder when we're gonna have the next full moon?"

James looked down at her son instead of in the same direction her son was looking, up into the sky. "The sky's too cloudy for you to see the moon. We'll have rain before morning."

"I like stars, too." Jim danced. "And the moon's a be-you-tea-full lady dressed in white. I bet honest-to-God lost boys live on the moon."

"We watched astronauts walk on the moon. We listened to Walter

Cronkite and watched television from the moon."

"No real lost boy is gonna let himself get seen on t.v. Lost boys blend right into shadows when somebody else is trying to see em through a camera. Astronauts are too busy peeing in their spacesuits to see lost boys."

"You read too many poems."

"Remember when I couldn't read? And Farfar used to tell me that story about the beautiful lady who fell asleep after some nasty queen put wickedness on her spindle? You used to tell me stories, too. You used to make up those real good stories about dragons. Stories about dragons are my best stories. How come you never tell me stories about dragons anymore?"

"You're grown up. My stories about dragons would bore you silly."

"Ummm Ummm. Not true. I still have dreams about dragons. And about that beautiful lady wearing white veils with no underwear on under em. And I'm a brave soldier—Lord Brandy—or sometimes a name like that—and I ride a white stallion that can gallop faster than rockets to the moon. I carry a sword, and I'm so brave that people in town sing ballads about me. I feel whole as the wind—and I rescue the Princess, but I never get to look under her veils until I kill that dragon. Honest-to-God, Dad, that dream gives me bone chills. I get ready, and I get set, and I know I'm supposed to, because that dragon's evil, and he steals what other people care about, and he keeps what he steals, even if nuns and little kids are starving, but he's got these wise eyes—eyes like I want my best friend to have—and he looks at me like he can see me down to my bones. I won't kill dragons. I want to see the dragons get bigger, and better, until the city can't hold em, and nobody hurts em, no matter how they feel."

James could not touch her son.

"Sometimes I feel like nobody cares about me at all."

"Your mother cares."

"Ma only cares about my baby shoes."

"God cares—"

"I'm talking about people, Dad. Sometimes things happen between people that makes me sad." "What—things?" "Sad things." "?"

"Sometimes people make me care about em. And then I never see em again. Even if I write em poems they don't answer. Sometimes I wanna —do stuff—Dad. Sometimes I wanna do— boy stuff—"

"I suppose you want to have our little talk."

"We gonna talk about boy stuff a little?"

"I'll tell you about the stuff that makes you a man. Where would you like to start?"

"This started at summer camp, Dad. Even before."

"That's just about the right time for the funny tinglings to start when you look at girls."

Her son tucked his knees up under his chin. "Not just girls-"

"No, I suppose you might feel these tinglings when you look at women."

"Dad, can I ask you a question?"

Dad dint say yes, but he dint say no.

"How old were you when you did sex the first time?"

"I waited until I was a married man."

"Did you ever think sex when you weren't a married man?"

"Once or twice."

"Did you ever think sex when you were my age?"

"Boys your age think about sex."

"Did you even want to do sex real bad when you were my age? So bad that you were like rock salt."

"Son, did you get some girl in trouble?"

"Would that make you proud, Dad?"

"Uh, no, son, of course not."

"Well, I dint get any girl pregnant."

"You sure?"

His ghost snuggled Jim with blue. Wicked little sinning boy! Gay as gay can be! Do you think Pop loves you? Nosiree! Say something irreverent and jaggy. Do a little boogie, maybe he'll help you paint your toes. Get old Dad mad, he'll call you by your proper names: flit and powderhead.

Dad knew. The whole world knew Farfar in his blue hereafter knew He talked to Dad-the-Father-Almightly nightly. *Alpha Alpha Nought Nought One. Hello, Eden exchange? Gimme the Good Lord, please. I got another gross report on my grandson's dirty thoughts.*

"Dad, what happens if two boys wanna make love?"

Dad's gonna explode. His head's gonna blow up any second, and take the whole Brandekker house with him.

But Dad would not speak. The ghost of his father stood in the corner, glooming above the bed of his grandson. *A man's got to do what a man's got to do*. He would tell his mother that when he went downstairs. "You've got to do what you've got to do." Then James did

not know if he spoke, or if the ghost spoke for him. James clinched his heart. The ghost retreated, made of nothing but fog and betrayal. "You have to see your teacher tonight."

"Who?" Jim looked right then left. "Me?"

"Didn't your mother tell you that Mr. O'Donnelly called?"

Her son somersaulted off his bed. "My best teacher called me!"

"Yes, and you've got to see him."

"But John Paulson is throwing a party tonight. A course, I dunno if I can go? I mean, I got suspended." Her son started talking to himself. "Maybe Mr. O'Donnelly can take me to Moose's party!"

"You have to do what you have to do."

Ma took her house key and went up to his bedroom. Let her husband and her daughter start eating without their son and their brother. Kate could never feed herself until her children were fed. And her son had always come between her and her husband, the way she had always come between her husband and his father.

The birth of her son had been the final, not the first break, between Kate Aherne and her father-in-law. At first the business of Pumpkin Hook passed smoothly to James after their marriage. Farfar even acted retired for a season, spending time in Denmark, and visiting friends, and puttering with his telescope. The trouble began as James improved the cemetery. He moved acres of graves, allowing the city to cut a road through Pumpkin Hook. Even the Brandekker family crypt

had to be moved. "Why not pile your mother at the curb for a city truck to haul away?"

James dismissed the caretaker—a longtime friend of his father—and left his room in the old mill vacant, and hired a schoolboy as a part-time groundskeeper.

"This boy is inexpensive."

"Cheaper, my own son has the attitude that's ruining this country!"

Farfar grew more stubborn daily, unchangeable as the granite and marble in Pumpkin Hook. He glowered at Kate across the dinner table, his timber wolf eyes getting keener and deeper each time she gave birth to another daughter.

The nativities of five granddaughters clinched his uncertain world. The old man brooded in his king wicker chair on the veranda, infantile as a neglected god, smoking his clay pipe, skipping meals. His temper and his weight loss worried James, but Kate knew his burning contempt for her made him thrive. James became furious when she dared suggest a nursing home. Kate could never forget that summer solstice.

Kate and her husband went for a walk in Pumpkin Hook, to escape, not settle, their argument. She sat on the grass by Cassidy Lake, beside the old mill, not speaking to her husband, simply looking at him. Under the heart-shaped lilac leaves, on the threshold of the mill, in the rainy daylight that could only bring the making of boys, they lay, husband and wife, as one body with two hearts. They came back late to the old house in the pattering rain, arm in arm, and laughing, like the first two children witnessing the newest rain.

A thunderstorm beat on the windows. The lights in the old house had gone out.

"James?" Kate held the white door frame of her new nursery. (The only room in old house to have the original walnut woodwork ripped out. Kate had always seen witchy faces in the woodgrain. "No more of

my babies will sleep in these tombs!" She snubbed Farfar, who stood in the way of the workmen, glaring at them tearing out the wood, plaster chips settling like relics on his coat sleeves. James crouched beside his Father, begging excuses that nobody could hear over the hackle of the workmen.) Kate wiped her hand over her crisp white freshly plastered wall. This was a good room, with the wicker cradle and the storyteller's rocking chair. "James?" The volume of her voice surprised her, louder than the thunder. "My baby—"

The night passed like a watercolor in the rain. The boy child opened his eyes in the morning, and, in the cleansed light, a pair of morning doves settled on the nursery window sill. The neighbor ladies brought a tub of cooled warm water and Kate bathed her son. He had comsilk hair the yellow of helligkeit, and she could have told them his eyes would be blue. James lifted her son from his bathwater. "What shall we name the baby?" he asked, a sass of sunlight in his eyes.

Kate entered the bedroom at the top of the backstairs. He had laid out his navy blue corduroys, and that dirty gingham shirt. She heard the shower running in his bathroom. Did Jimmers always shower with his bathroom door open? "Jimmers? Will you be out soon?"

The water stopped running, and Jimmers spread himself wide as heaven in his bathroom doorway. "Don't your Jimmers got a decent body?"

"Jimmers!" Kate staggered, not sure if she should approve or leave his room. "My goodness!"

"Dr. Suzanne says I should be proud of how I am."

Her Jimmers had the body of a boy born to be the master of the sun. Childhood had been good to him, adolescence had been better. She followed the decent lines of his body, from the even spaces between his teeth, around the double creases of his dimples, over his Adam's apple, winging his collar bones, to the pudge of his nipples, to bump down his ribs, and roll over his belly, to the garland of boyhood between his legs. A flush of pride, not merely maternal, warmed her, like honey in milk. Jimmers tossed Ma his towel. "Ma, will you dry my back?" He pinwheeled.

Kate went to him. Slowly, gradually vigorously, she rubbed his neck and shoulders.

"How come you come up here, Ma? Not that I mind. I hear I gotta see my teacher tonight."

His skin had the softness and scent of an infant's. This tender boy had never had acne, not one single cavity. She buffed his big boy halfmoons. "I brought you my house key."

"How come?"

She burrowed under his arms. He already had a few springy yellow hairs in those warm snooks. She dried his chest from behind, taking care around his nipples. And she dried his tummy, and stopped, unable to touch him below his waist. "Your father tells me you've been invited to a party this evening."

He looked over his shoulder in his big way. "I gotta see my teacher, I hear."

She met his hand with her key "You'll need my house key."

"I got all I need, Ma." He had even transplanted that little blue packet from Dr. Suzanne to the hip pocket of his cords—if not for her reason than at least to keep that gift outtasight of Ma.

"And here's a fresh pair of your unmentionables."

Jim accepted his underpants—and a twenty dollar bill fluttered out of em.

"Now how do you suppose twenty dollars got inside a pair of your underpants? Have you been doing naughty dancing?"

"Ma, you can't gimme twenty dollars—"

"I told you to keep your money in your underwear drawer. You see why we're told to do what our mother tells us to do?"

Jimmers reached for Ma and found her there—he always found her there.

Ma spanked his bare bottom. "Now that's not for foolishments. That's money towards that quota."

Jim pulled on his underpants right in front of Ma, and twisted into that dirty gingham shirt.

"Jimmers! Wear clean clothes!"

"This is the best party shirt I got."

"That's why I want you to have my house key. You need a good time tonight."

"I won't need a house key. I'll be home early." But his eyes were unquiet with wishes.

Jimmers did the splits, holding onto the door knob at the bottom of the backstairs.

"Let's not break the walls simply because we're tearing the house down," Dad said.

The telephone rang. "Phone call!" Jim darted into the back hall. "Hello?" Jim saw Wendy sitting with Meg at the dining room table.

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"Didja eat yet?"
Jim pouted. "Who's this?"
Wendy noticed his cute frown and winked.
"You can't work out on an empty stomach."
"Who'm I talking to?"
"Randy."
"Randy from Physics class?" Jim turned his back on Wendy —and his
hip pockets got hot. "Did you call to talk about poems?"
"I called to tell you your Special Order has come in."
"You got my Sappho?" Jim shouted at Ma in the kitchen. "Hey, Ma,
Wellington's got my book!"
"If you want, I'll buy your book, and you can come over, and pay me
back."
"To your house?"
"I'm off work at seven. We can work out."
"What'll we work out?"
"We can lift weights, stupid."
"I'm not stupid!"
"Ill pick up your book and you can come over to my house and pay me
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back."

"Ask."

"I gotta ask."

"Lemme ask." Jim wrapped the phone cord around his body, twirling into the kitchen. "Ma? Can I—go out—"

"Out? Where? You are going out, Jimmers. You have to see your teacher, and you're going to a party. I gave you my house key-Jim rattled the receiver, like the dancing charm of a spooky people. "S'Randy Biswanger. He says hell pick up my Sappho and I can bring him money at seven o'clock and that'll work out."

"Your workout book? I thought you were going to Moose's party? You have to see your teacher?"

Jim snapped his fingers, o yeah. "I gotta see Mr. O'Donnelly."

"For Crissakes, why?"

"I gotta go take a Profound Walk."

Jim felt Wendy come up behind him, rubbing up against his hot hip pockets. "Is that Randy?"

"S'Randy"

"Is that Wendy?" Randy said.

"Wendy's here. You wanna talk to her?"

"No, I don't wanna talk to her!"

"Tell Randy that me and your sister'll take you to Wellington's for your book." Wendy made the offer to Ma, not Jim. "And then we'll drop Jim off at his teacher's, and then Jim can meet us at my brother's party."

"That's very thoughtful of you, Wendy. Thank you."

Jim pouted at Wendy over his shoulder, and growly. "Yep. Thanks a heap."

"You want me to pick up your book or not?" Randy said. He sounded

hot, too—but because of anger.

"No. My sister and Wendy are gonna be real thoughtful. But, hey, I'll see you in a second for a minute, Randy"

"Joy"

Jim gobbled his beef barley soup in big grabs.

"Don't slurp your soup, Jimmers." Kate watched him eat. He looked beautiful in the evening. How had she and James made this boy? He bottomed out his bowl and let his spoon skate around the rim.

Jim wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "Hey, Dad, could you shoot a couple of baskets with me before I go?"

"Your Mother will need help with the dishes."

"My men need an opportunity to talk."

"Outstanding! I'll get the ball outta the garage!"

The boy scampered out the side door.

"You know," Kate said. "Looks to me like Jim is growing up."

"Boys change," James said. "We'll see about Jim."

"Yes, I don't think we'll have any more problems with Jimmers."

James polished off his coffee.

"His Physics teacher told me he sets big possibilities in our son."

"We'll see." James strolled to the side door. The boy wanted to play

basketball. Her son wanted to play ball. James heard the ball thumping on the drive. Jim had started to play, to beat the dust out of the ball. James had gotten Jim the basketball for his birthday—which birthday? Must have been his ninth or tenth. The ball was immensely useless now. A guy had to keep interrupting the game to pump up the ball, and no matter what the ball never dribbled properly. Basketball had been his game in college. When the ball had been new James played Jim into a sweat in scores of games. Or else they would wrestle, or put on the boxing gloves and take clumsy pokes at each other, Jim learning how to spar and keep his head.

James looked out the door, watching his son, the last of the sunlight crowning the boy's blond head. The boy had gotten on the school football team. James smiled. His friend Moose had gotten Jim interested in sports. This interest had become a healthy thing. That interest might save Jim from himself. James stepped out onto the porch. Strange how the hinges didn't squeak; bizarre how the brake caught the door this time, every other time, every other evening, the wind blew the door angrily away.

James yelled something friendly at Jim, trying for the happiest sound he could make. The boy turned, and sailed the ball at Dad. James turned, turning into the wind, catching the ball, bouncing the ball three times, then spinning the ball towards the net. His shot missed by inches. Jim came out of nowhere, from under the hoop, pinwheeling his arms, his hands living birds. He took his shot before the ball hit the ground, and propelled the ball up through the net. James dove for the rebound, but the boy moved silverfast, his hands like rain, scoring again and again. Her son danced, an outstanding boy, the newborn master of the cartwheel and the jig, happy on the holiest whole-body joy. Jim puffed the calliope air, his shirt billowy. James met the blue eyes of her son, and light sealed them with glory Jim rushed Dad, a windy creature, thrilled with tintinnabulations like a bell. James hugged Jim, then set Jim gently on the earth.

[&]quot;Jim," James whispered. "Jim."

[&]quot;Dad—I gotta tell you— her name—"

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"Her name?"
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The cuckoo clock on the dining room wall crowed six as Jim crashed through the side door.

[&]quot;Her name. Christine. Her name is Christopher."

[&]quot;Jimmers, you have another phone call."

[&]quot;I'm too popular!" Jim slipped into the back hall and lifted the phone from the little shelf. "Yep. Hello?"

[&]quot;Hey, little Jim!"

[&]quot;Hi, Moose."

[&]quot;You sound outtabreath."

[&]quot;I been running."

[&]quot;I thought I caught you fucking my sister."

[&]quot;Cmon, Moose, don't start."

[&]quot;You're the guy who hasn't started."

[&]quot;Cmon-"

[&]quot;I just called to make sure you're coming to my party."

[&]quot;I dunno, Moose. Maybe. Maybe not."

[&]quot;Where you going with my sister?"

[&]quot;She's taking me to Wellington's. With my sister."

Wendy grinned, and Jim frowned. Now Wendy knew Jim was talking about her.

"Christ, Jim, you can't bang her at a bookstore. And she can take you places you've never dreamed—"

"Randy called and told me my Sappho book came in—"

"Make out, you mean. Do you want to get molested? That kid's a fem."

His ghosts sang to hear that word: *Priskfishyboy*, why not sail away to a pink peppermint wonderland! Leave all your clothes at home! Anon! Tutti-frutti comes, with his lace undone, licking the sidewalk behind your heels. Lay down! He'll worship your zipper for glee! For free, boy, for free! He'll whisk you away on butterfly wings. We triple-scoop-dare you to venture out on such an ice-cream-fairy invitation!

"Look, Moose, I gotta go-"

"I told you to guarantee your rep, Little Jim, but that kid's a guaranteed fag—"

"Hey, no more cracks about fags. Okay?"

Crack? Cracks! You're back'll snickersnack! He'll bander-snatch your ballsack! You'll sing of pink feathers; plead for alate things.

"Well, I got another invitation for you, little Jim. We'll just move our party to the fem's house. I'll see you."

"You'll see me? Wait a second. What am I supposed to tell Randy?"

"Tell him to expect company. He wouldn't have invited youover if he didn't want company."

[&]quot;Randy? Biswanger?"

[&]quot;Cmon, Moose. He just wants to work out."

Dad threw the ball at her son.

Jim skipped the catch.

"Please, James, let's not roughhouse."

"Who was that on the phone?"

"Moose," Jim told everybody. "He's moving his party to Randy Biswanger's," he told Wendy.

Wendy looked curiouser.

"So I guess I can workout with Randy after all."

James studied her son. Jim looked bright with strange glee, his hair as light as dandelion fluff, his voice girlish. Moose had talked Jim into going out for football. Football—a contact sport. Boys huddling with each other, rolling around in the mud with each other, slapping each other on the butt after scoring touchdowns. And now some senior wanted her son to strip down to lift weights. That's why her son had gotten on the football team. On this warm night, if the boys scrimmaged they would take off their shirts. Her son would watch their chests stream. Gleefully he would sqirm out of his own shirt, and press his bare flesh against their flesh. After the party this senior would entice her son home to spend the night rolling in a pup tent. Her son would come home with illegitimate purple moonlight in his eyes. "You really think you should be going to a party this close to the Festival game?"

"Moose is moving this party so's I can still work out with Randy."

Her son whined. Pleading looked disgraceful in a boy. Figures her son would plead. Moose must be aware of her son's condition, and he spends his Friday nights fixing cuddle nests for her son and some

adolescent male victim of venereal disease. "You can't afford to—strain yourself."

"Oh, Dad, I dint get on that football team!"

"What?"

"What do you mean, Jimmers?"

"Dr. Suzanne sees I'm too little."

"Oh, my poor Jimmers! No wonder you're disappointed!" Ma made to hug Jimmers again.

Jim stepped aside, but Ma caught him anyhow.

"He's disappointed?" said Dad. "How long were you going to wait to tell us that little secret?"

"I'd've told you. Now or never."

Ma rocked her Jimmers, her own little boy.

Jim pouted over his shoulder at Dad. "I never get to do what I wanna do!"

"Now, son, that's not true. Farfar put me to work before I was fourteen. I only got out on weekends—"

"This is too a weekend—"

"—with my girlfriend."

"Don't you fret, Jimmers. You're going to your party."

Jim squirmed, hot in Ma's hug. "And don't forget, I gotta see my teacher tonight, too."

Wendy touched Jim's arm.

Now Jim got the chills.

"We'll take Jim to Mr. O'Donnelly's, then he can drop Jim off at Randy's for my brother's party."

Jim wriggled free of Ma, and pushed free of Wendy "Well who howsomever, I gotta see him."

Dad shined, in a sweat of worry. "Don't let anybody— bother you. You know? Son?" Dad said.

"I-know!"

Wendy steered Jim towards the door with her hand in the small of his back. "Let's go get Jim his book of poems."

Dad glanced at Wendy. "Will you be at this party, Wendy?"

"I'm not taking my eyes off Jim."

Randy beeped out the price of the dictionary, and the customer paid, and he bagged the book, and thanked them. "Hey, Dave, you mind if I take my break?"

"I guess you better. You leave in less than an hour." Randy unpinned his name tag from his knit shirt and started down the aisle, swiftfoot, not looking to either side.

"Say, Randy, can you help me?"

Before Randy realized he recognized the voice from school, he turned and confronted his English teacher. "Well, I never expected to see my English teacher in a bookstore."

Ralph chuckled blandly. "Can you help me for a second, Randy?"

"For a second. I'm going on break."

"Have you got any books on being gay?"

Randy smiled like the moon would smile. "In Stickford, Mr. Bejin? You're close, but you're not in Ann Arbor."

"All right, you're right, but you must have something."

Randy twanged the pin on his name badge. "Here. Over here. Take a look over here." He led Mr. Bejin down the side aisle to Sex Education, and pointed out a shelf. "See if these books interest you." He grinned.

Ralph tried to return the grin. He would feel better if his student caught him slavering over T & A. "Thanks Randy; thanks for your trouble."

"Just gimme an A in English class and I won't cause you any trouble."

Meg started the car. "I think Baby Brother should go on stage," she said. "He could do a dramatic locker room scene. I can see him now, strutting across the footlights, his little buns powdered but shining. Who stole my underpants?"

Wendy looked at Jim over the backseat. "Didja tell your sister?"

Jim sat behind Meg, not Wendy. "She's telling the whole gross thing." He bet they spent the hour before dinner making nudie cut-outs outta his pictures in the family album.

"I'm gonna sleep with your Baby Brother," Wendy said. Meg hit the brake hard.

Jim bounced. "Cripes, Meg, will you learn to drive?"

"Does Jim know?"

Jim punched the back of the front seat. "Don't you listen at school, Wendy? Other boys say I'm fruity."

Meg looked at the reflection of her brother in the rear view mirror. "You gotta admit Jim's a fruity kid."

"What's fruity about him?"

"He looks fruity."

Wendy leaned over the seat. "Well, why do the kids in school call you a fag?"

"Because I don't date girls."

"Why don't you date girls?"

"Because."

"Because you're a fag?"

"Because I'm a fag—okay?"

Meg spun out; she stalled the car.

"Your Baby Brother will feel different once I'm on top of him in bed."

"Ooo, Baby Brother likes to be on the bottom!"

Jim kicked Meg through the seat.

"Some boys start slowly, but slower is better. Remember that. Go slow. And don't push harder when you get really turned on near the end—"

The car bounded into Wellington's parking lot.

"You wanna go all the way, don't you, Jim?"

"Yep. I do." Jim opened the door before the car stopped moving. He ducked out, landing hard on both feet. "I do." He put his head back in the car and spoke to Wendy, face to face. "But I wonder if you and me wanna go in the same direction?"

Randy latched the door to the employee job before he turned on the light. His reflection stopped him just inside the doorway. I'll see you in a second for a minute. Joy. Randy trickled cold water across his wrists. He made a pool in his palms and let his smaller reflection drain away between his fingers. The young blond image drifted, then darkened, and faded. Randy splashed his face, and wiped his forehead with his wet hands. He sat on the edge of the lidless toilet seat. Joy. When he slit the sealing tape on the box from U of C he didn't think anything about the weird orange book inside. He never thought about receiving books. Receiving was the best job at Wellington's because he didn't have to think. He was free to imagine. He imagined seeing that blond kid book after book in way after way. He had seen him in Wellington's many times, too, when he came in with his mom to buy poetry, or order weird books. And Randy didn't think about the weird poem book he received—until he saw the name on the Special Order card. His heart flickered at all the weird chances. I'll see you in a second for a minute. Joy. The Blond would swish in in a minute for a second, his hair like daylight, looking good as Indian Summer squeezed into a pair of jeans. Randy thumbed his zipper. He would bounce around Info in his swift red shoes. Hi, Randy, howzit goin? Randy unzipped his jeans. He latched the waistband of his Jockey shorts under his scrotum, and got a good grip, breathing in on the upward tug, out on the downward pull. He imagined the smarmy lemon of his hair, his tough kid poise, his stickout elbows, that tiny whitehead pimple about to pop on his jaw by his ear. In a minute, in a second, Randy came.

Jim dint look up until he stumbled up against the Special Order desk

with the rubber toes of his red shoes.

"Can I help you, young man?"

"I gotta special book to pick up." Jim rolled the twenty Ma had given him around his baby finger inside his front pocket.

"Do you have the title?" The man stooped behind the counter and shifted through the books stashed on a lower shelf. "Can I have your name?"

"I'm Jim Brandekker." Jim tiptoed to see inside the counter. "That's with two ks."

The man took the third book from the shelf. "Archilochos, Sappho, Alkman: Three Poets of the Late Bronze Age" The man looked happy, happily pleased. "Heady stuff."

"You never read Sappho?"

The man rang up Jim's book, and wrapped the book in brown paper. "Maybe in college."

Jim hopped. "We'll never read Sappho in school. For the same reason they keep parts of Walt Whitman a secret in school. Because Sappho liked girls the way Walt Whitman liked boys."

"The Greeks were like that."

"I know, you know. And you know what? I'm gonna be the Sappho of boys."

"Don't believe this kid, Dave, he says that to everybody."

Jim frowned too fast. Randy stood behind him, smiling.

"You got your book?"

Jim flapped the package at him. "Thanks for calling. And you know

what?"

"What?"

"I'm gonna get to work out with you."

"You're—kidding."

"Jim?" Mr. Bejin, his English teacher, brought a book from the back of the store. "Jim Brandekker?"

Jim waved from his hip in his small way, his thumb hooked in his belt loop. "Hi." He read the title of the paperback Mr. Bejin brought to the counter. *Straight Answers about Homosexuality for Straight Readers*.

Randy read the title, too. "You find what you're interested in?"

Mr. Bejin nodded, looking at Jim. "I found exactly what I was looking for."

Jim thought of that word on that blackboard.

Mr. Bejin handed his book to Dave. "Tell me, Jim, do you have to see Mr. O'Donnelly tonight?"

"Me and him have gotta take a Profound Walk."

"I have a suggestion," Mr. Bejin said.

"Look out, Jimbo. Our English Prof is about to be suggestive."

Jim considered the title of the book the man handed Mr. Bejin. He thought again of that same big bold word this teacher scrawled across the board. "I wonder what he's suggesting."

"What do you mean? What do I tell my brother?" "Moose is moving his party to Randy's anyhow. Mr. Bejin's giving us a ride." Jim counted nouns on his fingers, first places then people. "First to Mr. O'Donnelly's, then to Randy's for your party."

"Well, you tell Randy to expect company!"

Shannon watched his feet walk along Waterloo Road. Brandy had large, swift feet, curiously shaped from his growing years spent running into his mother's arms.

Weaving olden dance

Mingling hands and mingling glances

He read those lines in Brandy's notebook on a Tuesday in late September. Shannon had his students playing with mirrors in his darkened room. He aimed a penlight into a mirror a girl held up in the opposite corner of the room. Each student had to try to bounce the light into one other person's mirror, to try to connect the reflected lightbeams all around the room. Shannon stood behind Brandy, shining the beam over the boy's shoulder. Brandy looked up, solemneyed. "Mr. O'Donnelly, can I be excused?"

Shannon nodded, too intent on watching the boy cruise out of the room to speak. He picked up the boy's notebook after the boy left the room. He could feel the hot sweaty imprints his hands left in the open page. Brandy had big hands for a fourteen-year-old boy. (Big above, big below—the girls joked at MSU.) He had the hands that Michelangelo imagined for Good King David, laden with compassion. Shannon broke the beam to read the page with his penlight.

We chase the frothy bubbles

A poem? His own? Or had he copied the younger lines of an ailing poet who wrote a careful packet to instruct an expatriate fellow poet, windbeaten at the end of a long crusade to descry the cause of war.

If only Shannon had his own apartment, then he wouldn't be forced to choose between the confines of his classroom and the worse constrictions of Auntie's house. He would have spent the last summer redecorating. He would have painted the walls white, with each window frame a different pastel. Pink in the living room (so he wouldn't give himself away) he would use trusty Robin's Egg Blue in the bedroom and peach in the bath—the peach of the wild fruit that supplanted the conservative apple orchards. Cloverleaf green in the kitchen. He would have seen a way to begin if he had his own apartment. Here's my new linoleum. I heated the squares on the stove to trim them to fit. Brandy would laugh. Some lunch. I cut my hand on the linoleum knife. Brandy would worry, until Shannon showed him the little white scar. *Here are the cushions Auntie made for my couch.* Here are the cases I built for my books. Cripes! You're even a carpenter! And here! You must see my bedroom! Here's my Amish quilt on my bed—a black border with blue and yellow and red surrounding a green green center. Here's my eiderdown pillow from Austria. Edelweiss! Edelweiss! Brandy would croon, the purr in his voice betraying his tension. Shannon would pass his hand behind the ghostshapes of the sheer white curtains (where a spider would live) and his hand would move like a ghost in the heat above the radiator (painted white with spray Rust-o-leum) and would catch the fess and lower the window shade. The boy would stand behind his teacher while his teacher would undress without a word, without a sound. How would he undress Brandy? Tenderly, he would unbutton him. Brandy would be a child laying on his back on his teacher's bed, wearing only those childish briefs, his erection, almost a man's, embarrassing him, tempting him with the fullgrown world on the other side of his fly. What words would release him?

Come away, O human child

Shannon would bend over the boy, bending like the earth free of

winter, with a great green movement at the very center. Brandy would bend to ride him, rowdy, wildboy, his thrusts as male as he could make em.

With a faery hand in hand

Would Brandy yelp the first time? Would the amount of sperm surprise him?

Mr. Bejin drove with Jim in the front seat and Randy in the back. He made the boys wait in the car while he went up to The Ravens door.

Jim jumped from the front seat into the back, then he saw Randy frown, and crawled back up front.

"You gotta take a piss, kid?"

Jim tented his eyes on the dark window, to try to see what his English teacher was up to on his best teachers front porch. "How come he's making us wait in the car?"

"How come O'Donnelly wants to see you alone?" said Randy.

"How come you think he wants to see me alone?"

"Did he invite company?"

"Oh, Cripes, company!"

"Do you think Mad O'Donnelly's—lonely?"

"How come he wouldn't want company if he's lonesome?"

"How about you, Jim?" said Randy. "Are you lonely?"

Jim knelt on the front seat, facing Randy. "Sometimes."

"You know I'm—lonely," Randy said. "You think Mad O'Donnelly's as lonely as you and me?"

"Sometimes I hope so."

Jim dint see Mr. Bejin until he opened his car door.

"Is Mr. O'Donnelly ready to see me?"

"Mr. O'Donnelly is not at home."

"But we've promised to take our Profound Walk at my dad's festival!"

"Don't be disappointed, Jim. Now you and Randy can get together."

"I'm sorry, Mr. O'Donnelly, but her son has gone to see you."

The man on the veranda looked as young as his students. The young man smiled: he never stopped smiling.

"You know, Mr. O'Donnelly, her son has been suspended."

"No!"

James checked over his shoulder for his wife.

"You don't have children, do you, Mr. O'Donnelly?"

"No, I'm not married."

"I have six. You know, no matter what anyone say, sons are harder to raise than daughters."

"I don't believe most fathers would agree."

"Other fathers never had to raise her son."

"Is there something particularly hard about your son?"

"She's blind, his mother. She refuses to see her son as he really is. Sometimes when I talk to her about her son I feel like we're talking about two different boys."

"Mr. Brandekker, you don't understand. Jim is one. Jim will be won"

James looked at O'Donnelly. He smiled, then he laughed.

"He's one? He's one, all right. He's one wasted boy."

The Biswangers lived east of Pumpkin Hook, in a 1960s hangover from Frank Lloyd Wright—a white house with harled walls and square convex windows that muted light but let the sun warm the rooms. A skylight wheeled around the drainpipe in the middle of the bowled roof.

"I'm a latchkey child from the days before the system became a status symbol."

They dint wait for Mr. Bejin to pull away from the curb. They went in through a side door, through a roomy kitchen with a low ceiling, and into a square living room. A tundish fireplace stood in the middle of a conversational circle of white floor tiles. All the rooms were painted in neutered colors.

Jim stood beside the fireplace, making comfy fingers at the long, low-backed sofa that circled three walls. "Nice house."

"My Dad thinks we're futuredwellers."

Jim sat on just the edge of the sofa. "Nice but different than mine." A

brass clock on the opposite wall said: seven-thirty.

"My Dad specializes in gypping rich old ladies outta their excess stock dividends for Oriental art." Randy tugged his knit shirt over his head. "I'm gonna get changed." He draped his shirt over Jim's shoulder, and louped up the curvy stairs.

Jim toweled his neck with Randy's shirt. "I'll wait on the sofa."

"Don't you wanna see my room?"

Randy whisked em down a long white hall with lengthy strides, steering Jim by his shoulder to the third door on the left. Randy had a simple room as white as the rest of his house, with built-in cabinets in the wall opposite high windows. The ceiling had big square skylights built in where the windows joined the top of the walls. A guitar lay on the low white bed.

Jim went and stood by a brass telescope. "You got a nice room." He took his hands outta his pockets, and picked up the guitar. "You play guitar, Randy?"

"Sure."

"Hey, you know, I learned in a poem book that those poets who used to troop around in olden France made guitars to look like ladies." Jim strummed the guitar, pointless but with a good noise. "Sorta does look like a lady, the body I mean. Sorta."

"Yeah? Joy." Randy unhitched his bluejeans.

Jim turned the telescope, turning his back. He heard that sound: metal shearing metal, and Randy came around to the windows, deliberately cutting in front of Jim, to show Jim his body in nothing but his underpants. Randy wore sweatshirt-grey Jockey shorts trimmed with a white Y in front.

Jim turned his back on Randy again. "Cool bed."

Randy set his hands on Jim's shoulder blades not on his shoulders. "Water bed."

Jim took an incomplete step towards the bed.

"Ever try a water bed?"

Jim snooped a look under his arm to see between Randy's legs. "I never tried a normal bed, neither."

Randy circled Jim, and, facing the built-ins, took off his underpants.

Jim watched Randy's big-boy butt move, firm, and with a wiggle. It went stiff in a quicksilver second. Randy stepped from foot to foot, opening one drawer, then another. He pulled on a jockstrap, then those tight lemon shorts he wore when he jogged, and got out a black t-shirt before he faced Jim.

Jim had missed his chance to see him. He could've just stepped around in front of Randy and looked. Randy wouldn't mind. A course, if he felt as different as Jim how come he dint show himself to Jim? Maybe he could smell a different boy seven miles off, and he had Jim come over because he abused faggy blond boys for a hobby, twisting their thumbs into Chinese puzzles unless they danced for dirty videos. He's probably insane.

Randy pulled on his black t-shirt. BOY read the tag on the outside of the collar, and the front had a silhouette Atlas supporting a globe that spelled the big O in a bigger BOY.

"Let's make tea," Randy said.

They scampered downstairs.

"You—you need help, Randy?"

"You can keep me company."

"Cripes, company." Jim strayed out of the kitchen. The dining room table stood just a couple feet off the floor, surrounded by heaps of cushions in four colors plus purple. Jim slouched down on a green cushion, sorta crosslegged. "Speaking of company."

"You want Chinese tea?"

"Chinese's outstanding."

"Hey, outstanding by me, too."

"Guess we can't get more compatible," Jim said. "We can drink outta the same cup."

"Good basis for frenching."

"Frenching?"

"French-kissing?"

"Oh, long kissing."

Randy gracefully unracked a copper teakettle. Water splashed in, fast and happy. He popped on the front burner of the stove. "You ever french with anybody?"

Jim's eyes were snattocks of glass. "Not me."

"You gotta find a willing girl."

"I guess."

"You gotta become master of your body, Little Brother." Randy stood in the doorway. "*If a man does not have order in him how can he have order around him?* The rule of Chinese kings."

Jim sniggered. "You're going as far east as your Dad."

"No way! My old man's worth a bundle but he's just a rich jerk."

"Do you really have a younger brother?"

Randy split his first two fingers. Was he flashing Jim that he had two brothers? Or protesting for peace with an outdated sign? "Order's something to think about."

"Not for a poet."

Randy brought two blue and gold china cups to the table, sitting crosslegged with exquisite balance. "Then why should a poet write poems?"

"Simple." Jim took his empty cup between two fingers and two thumbs. "Celebration."

"And should he tap dance, too?"

"Don't make fun of me!"

"You're the boy who says a poet should be the clown of God. What do you celebrate?"

"I celebrate who I can't see."

"You're not getting freaky about Jesus or something? You sound too serious."

"A poet has gotta be silly and serious at the same time." "Gimme an example from your infinite experience of double standard poetry."

"I can."

Looking up to see stars I know as well

That for all they bet I better go to hell

"Shakespeare!"

"Listen!"

Cause on earth our difference is the least

That makes us scared of being like beasts

"Yeah. You're nothing but the boy animal."

"Will you listen!"

What if all those stars all burn

With angerish passion we can't return?

"Hard to fuck a star, oh yeah."

"Don't get screwy. Listen! I know how to say this part because I heard a teacher say so."

If equal affections just can't be

Let the more loving one be me

Randy held still, even his eyes. "That's—beautiful."

The teakettle whistled from the stove.

The sound of steam reminded Jim of Physics class. The Raven had been close, then, and then The Raven got closer. Jim had hope then, now Jim had—indifference—

Randy went to make their tea. "I'm into stars."

"Astrology?"

"Astrology's bullshit. I'm into astronomy." Randy poured boiling water, a mushroom cloud of steam bloomed above the blue and gold pot that matched their Chinese cups. "Did you write that poem?"

"I wish. That's my new poet I copied down today. That's Auden." Jim had a hint of iron in his smile. "He was—lonely." He pulled his

gingham collar low, as if he could reveal his heart by showing off his skinny-boy chest. "You know—homosexual."

"How do you know?"

Jim winged his arm, his hands clapped together on the back of his skull. "A teacher says so."

Randy brought the teapot from the kitchen and filled their cups. "Who?"

"Mr. O'Donnelly."

"How come Mad O'Donnelly told you who's gay?"

Jim held onto the top of his head. "Who knows?"

"Why did you want to know who's gay?"

Jim let his bangs cloak his eyes. It got hard. He scooted forward, and shifted on his green cushion to turn the angle in his jeans.

Randy sipped his tea. "Go ahead. Use your hands. You might as well celebrate your zipper."

Jim frowned, then caught himself smiling. He wobbled on his knees, sticking both hands in his front pockets to glamp it straight behind his zipper. "Cripes! I'm horny!" Jim leaped, banging his kneecaps on the table, upsetting the teapot, splashing Randy's BOY shirt.

"Drink your tea, Jim Horny. And tell me if that's how come your dick goes up like a switchblade when you mention gay boys."

Jim fidgeted. He played with his lips. "I refuse an answer on the grounds that make me a teenage criminal in this state."

The basement of the Biswanger house had a white plastic door with a

chrome knob smack in the center. Randy pressed on a silver light switch with his palm. The stairs spiraled off a platform landing. The plaster walls were painted white. Square white tiles were laid over the poured concrete floor, covered at the foot of the stairs by a polar bear skin rug. The hexagonal Jacuzzi stood along the wall beyond a built-in swimming pool. A bench press and a rack of barbells filled the space to the right of the stairs.

Randy twisted off his t-shirt. Jim tried hard not to look at the big shape in Randy's skintight lemon shorts.

"Balance is the point of lifting weights." Randy rolled a barbell from the corner, changing weights. "Isn't balance an important part of writing poems?" Randy took off his lemon shorts.

Jim played with his fingers. It felt bigger seeing Randy with nothing but a jockstrap than it would feel if Jim saw him with no clothes on. Randy had a suntan smack up to the pinch of his thighs. Even the moons of his butt looked tanned.

Randy modeled his strap. "The body is best observed with a few simple lines."

"I-see."

"You have to concentrate on the points of stress."

"I-do."

Randy hoisted the barbells onto the supports. He lay down on the bench, straightening his back, his feet flat on the floor. He grabbed ahold of the bar. "Speed is not your intention." He lifted the barbells to the full extension of his arms, held a minute, rested, then lifted again. "The amount of weight is not your motivation. The idea is order—you gotta order the motion of your body."

Jim sat at the foot of the bench press, his elbows on his knees, hugging himself. "Looks easy to me."

Randy pumped the weights evenly. Sweat glistened on his arms and neck He set the weights on the supports. "Your turn, Jimbo."

"I like to watch."

"Seeing isn't even believing anymore."

Jim shrugged. He dint take off his clothes, if that's what Randy wanted him to do. He stretched out carefully on the bench. Randy positioned his shoulders and hips. Jim wiggled, tickled when Randy touched his hips. He sensed Randy looking into his zipper. He took a huge breath, and grabbed the bar a hand at a time.

"Wait a second. Lemme change those weights."

Jim thrust out the teeth of his lower jaw. "I wanna lift what you lift."

Randy drummed on Jim's knuckles. "Stop if they're too heavy. A hernia will keep you from fucking for a good long time."

Jim huffed. He pushed, arching his back, balanced on the heat in his zipper. He raised the weights an inch on the left, three inches on the right. They tottered. Jim lifted em an even six inches, the right side swinging to nine.

Randy caught the bar, and guided the weights back onto their supports.

"I'm never gonna lift these suckers—"

"You'll juggle em in half-an-hour." Randy unloaded the weights.

Jim jutted his stubborn chin. "I can't—"

Randy threw a weight at the wall. The weight crashed and rolled like a flipped dime. "Don't say you can't! Don't ever say you can't!"

Jim made his eyes huge as the moon, his mouth hugely narrow. "You know who else says you can't say can't!" Jim snapped his fingers. "The

Raven!"

Randy shook him, clunking his skull against the bench. "You started talking to birds?"

Jim nodded, a swollen tear rolling down his zygomatic arch. "Worse, I guess." Jim scrubbed his salty eye. "I started to listen."

Randy stooped beside the sunken tub to monkey with a valve. A dragon breathed red fire along the wall, made of splinters of blue and yellow and lotsa green glass outlined in gold, luck in his opal eye. Water surged from stainless steel spigots. "You like hot baths?"

Jim blinked in the hissy steam. "You gonna take a bath?"

"You can join me. Two in the bathtub is more fun than one.

Jim watched his reflection swirl in the deepening water. "I like to watch."

"Then look and wonder." And Randy pulled off his jockstrap.

Jim saw it. He had wondered about Randy since he first took his seat beside him. Now he saw it. Randy had a good penis though Jim only got a glimpse. Randy turned his back, and turned a knob, and plunged into the tub as the bubbles became alive. Randy limbered, unhugging himself. It blurred under all those bubbles.

Randy splashed Jim. "I want company"

Jim squirmed, hot in his shirt and cords. "Cripes, company."

Then Jim heard the knock on the door.

"Who's that?"

Jim giggled. "Remember how you mentioned company?"

"Glad to see us get here, Little Jim?"

Randy made Jim answer the door (while he put his clothes back on and ran the water outta the bubble tub.)

Moose stepped right in, like he owned every place, surrounded by three girls. More girls followed those girls inside, then finally a couple of boys. All the kids with Moose looked older than Jim by two grades or more—some of the foxy girls might even go to college. Jim snooped a look at the street. Flashy fast cars and borrowed family cars were parking every-which-way, in the drive, at the curb, and at the curbs across the street. Stickford police would write tickets galore when their traffic copter spotted these swarmy cars.

Jim followed Moose into Randy's living room, as if Moose was his host —a course he was, really, but this party had gone weird.

"Where's the fem?"

"Cripes, Moose, this is where Randy lives."

"Hey, my sister's looking for you."

Randy came upstairs. Other kids passed him, fanning out through his house. He sure had sorry eyes.

Moose slapped Randy on the back and made him choke. "Hey, Bigwanger, crank up the stereo! Break open your old man's stash! Escort me and my ladies to your best bed!"

Jim did his best to grin. "We're moving in a party, Randy"

"Joy."

Moose dimmed the lights with a dial he found on the wall. He dragged

Randy away from Jim. "Now, if you show me to the booze I'll see that you're properly bedded." He glanced back at Little Jim as he took the fem into his family room. "If you seek a pleasant companion look about you."

Useless

and a long walk home

Thunder burbled, low as stone. No rain fell.

"Hey! Need a ride?"

Shannon looked up, following the headlights to their source.

"Which way you going, big guy?" said Ralph.

Shannon lolled his head. He louped around to the passenger door and got in the car.

"Where you walking, Shannon?"

"I went to see Jim Brandekker, but he was not at home."

"Well, young boys don't want to be seen with their teachers. And, you know, Shannon, you're better off if you only see that Brandekker kid in public places."

They drove with no direction. "Can I take you home?"

"Take me to the Festival. I have to see your sister before I go home."

Jim found the quietest corner and sat to watch the party crowd the white rooms. The white bribed Jim with pleasure. The air sweetened with mindbenders, every permission for sale cheap. Jim parted a white drape and looked at the sky. Rain-clouds thickened, but lights from other houses cut white squares outta the black, his own old

Brandekker house a minor white square beyond the limestone wall surrounding Pumpkin Hook. His ghosts napped in cloudstruck heaps, buttoned up against seasonless love in the same little coats. They locked hands in a beggar ring, and surrounded the privacies below Jim's belt buckle.

"Hi."

A feminine voice starded Jim. He looked up with just his eyes.

Wendy bent over him, spinning insignificant charms with her smile.

Jim opened, then shut his mouth. "Hello." He crossed, then double-crossed his legs. He inched his hip up against the arm of the couch.

"How's Jim Brandekker doing?"

Jim frowned, bitterhard. This girl wanted to play the same game as Randy; the same game only different. Jim could read clues in her eyes. If Jim made a wrong turn, or rolled doubles, he'd have to take off one article of clothing.

Wendy eased onto the couch at the distance of one cushion. "Sometimes I hardly recognize you."

Jim toyed with his thumbs. Jim had to say something. He had to find some way to make her see that he saw through her catty tricks. "How come?"

"You're different every time I see you."

Jim loosened his shoulders just a widget. His hand strayed towards her across his cushion. This girl had even told his sister she wanted to sleep with it. And when girls sleep with boys it don't do much sleeping. "That's because. That's because of my poems."

"I didn't know you were a poet."

"Poetry's my best thing."

Wendy smiled that toady smile that adults smile when they're about to tell you something they think you don't know. She slid onto his cushion, pressing her hip against his hip.

Jim rolled his eyes over the empty white room. His hand shook. He clutched the arm of the couch. His hand wondered how come he dint touch her hair—maybe just a little.

Rain quickened at the window.

Jim watched her. She swirled a beer can. He spiked his thumbs to his knees.

She moved in close as breath. "You're lucky."

Jim blinked his eyes.

"And the girl that gets you gets lucky, too."

Her words cloaked him with body heat.

She swigged her beer.

Jim followed the beer can, not her eyes.

"Do you want a beer?"

"Can I have a sip a yours?"

Wendy held the beer can to his mouth, like Ma giving him Gerber breakfast juice from the pumpkin's-eye-hole the opener made in the cold little tin can. Jim shut his eyes. He took seven long swallows. He nearmost gagged. The beer tasted terrible, bitter, like witchy brew made in bedrooms where the mattresses needed to be turned. Foamy, amber bubbles dribbled outta the corners of his mouth. Jim jigged his tongue. He took ahold of the bottom with both hands and Wendy let him guzzle. He drained the can. Jim burped.

She twittered.

Jim wiped his mouth on his bare shoulder, because his gingham shirt had slipped off his shoulder. He sputtered, looking for his collar without looking.

The party had gotten into the low white room. Music brimmed beyond the windows, making his ghosts jibber. A chord of particular luster got in his head. The harsh lights cooled. His body temperature climbed two degrees toward tranquility, and, unseeably (Jim hoped) it stiffened. "Hi!" He gulped, like a boy coming up from a long time underwater.

"Well, hello."

"I'm Jim Brandekker!" He spoke as if reading the signature of some other boy.

"Hello Jim Brandekker!"

He felt a touch, not his own, on the private side of his thigh.

"How are you?"

Jim squirmed. "I'm ticklish."

Tickles danced below his belt buckle. He sniggered, and uncrossed his legs.

Wendy shored her head with his shoulder. "Do you want another?"

"Huh?" He had a helmet over his voice.

"Do you want another beer?"

He shoved his arm around her neck. "Ho-kay!"

She opened the can, dropped the tab inside, and pressed the second beer into his hand.

His wrist sagged.

"You'll spill beer all over us." She led the can up to his mouth. He drank in his deep young way.

The second beer tasted good as ice cold sugar, fulla malt. Foam coated his chin, and neck, wetting his collar. The light flickered, then dimmed. He pulled her closer, her neck crooked in his arm. "I—like you—Wendy."

"I like you, too, Jim Brandekker." She worked her fingers in small circles at his crotch. He had a real beaut, straight up behind his zipper.

Jim rattled the beer can. "Did you drop the tab in here?"

"What?" He paid no attention to her busywork. He was still a child, a baby-blue-boy playing trucks in the dirt. He would do nothing for her. He didn't know how.

"Did you drop the tab in this can of beer?" He spoke precisely, crisply.

She groped for the tab of his zipper. "Uh—huh."

"Will you drive me?"

She found the tab bent upwards at the top of the seam. "Where?"

"Will you drive me to the hospital if I swallow this beer can tab?" Somewheres he heard that sound: metal shearing metal.

He belonged to her, his body wide open.

"I wonder how they do that?"

She plucked at his underpants. "What?"

"Fish beer can tabs outta your stomach. I bet they use a Fishin Magician and a magnet. I used to have a book on magnets." His voice trebled. "Did I ever tell you *that?*" He punched the air, one finger pointing, one punch for each word. She only shook her head. Why do boys wear such tight underwear? If he got much harder he would

cream his underwear.

"My Ma bought me my magnet book one Saturday. At the little department store." He swayed his head to each word, his body ignoring her. "Somebody tored down the little department store. How come nobody leaves best enough alone, like my Dad, and our old house, and his dumbo Festicle." He resettled his shirt. "Boy, I'm hot in here." He squirmed free. "Hot—"

She laid her hand on his belly above his open zipper. "That —that blue shirt looks good with your eyes—"

"I picked this shirt out for myself. This and my rugby shirts." He winged his elbows, his hands on the back of his head. His scent moved away from his body in a wave. She could taste him. "My Ma hates my favorite shirts."

She stroked his inseam. "Navy cords look good with your blue shirt."

Jim looked down, his chin on his chest. "Cripes! My zipper's down!" He turned over against the arm of the couch to zip his cords. He burped, and tasted unswallowed beer. "You're not real happy, are you?" he said to Wendy.

She touched his hair, fine as cobwebs; perfect as a single silk thread. "There ain't nothing to make me unhappy!"

He basked, and drooled. "We don't say *ain't*, we say *isn't*" He pawed her breasts. "Woo! Woo!" She batted his hand.

She turned to salt. She wished somebody would bounce rocks off Jim Brandekker's head.

"Well, how's he doing?" Randy sprang outta nowhere; outta one of these white walls.

"Randy—" Jim nodded his head in a circle. "Hell-o Randy—"

[&]quot;You okay, Jim?"

"I'm better'n okay, I'm lucky."

"I'm back in time and everything."

"Home on time and anyhow. Ho-o-ly Cripes!" Jim zoomed his fist across Wendy's knee. "Vroom! Vroom! I'm playing trucks in the dirt!"

Wendy caught his hand.

"I call! I get to be the steamshovel! I used to have a storybook about a steamshovel. *Steve the Steamshovel, Mover of Many Tons,* or some truck named like that." Jim pointed at Wendy with his thumb. "Wendy can fuck fags and anyone."

"She can, can she?"

Jim cannonballed off the couch. He skipped over the window and looked out. The surrounding hills and houses looked empty, but not serene, like dwellings depopulated by plagues. If Jim looked in their windows he would see nobody but ravens and dragons asleep with one eye open, lounging like bloated pirates on tops of t.v.s, telephones, wedding rings, underpants . . . "I'm horny," Jim said with half his voice.

Randy laughed. "Naturally you're horny. You're horny. I'm horny. Wendy's horny. This is Little House on Horny Corners."

"But I don't want to be where everybody's horny."

"You can't help that. If you weren't horny you wouldn't've come here."

"Well I got a better promise to go to the Festival and I still wanna go."

"The Festival? You wanna go?"

"I—still—wanna—go!" Jim repeated like a cheer.

"Kid, you're amazing."

"I amaze me! I'm a luckout!" Jim startled the white room. "Everybody wants me! Everybody loves me! Think I'll suck on worms!"

Wendy gave the wall her undivided attention.

"Big-bad-wolfy worms! Eeny-peney-prickly worms! O how I'll suck worms!"

Her hands were motionless, white as barkless poplar.

He said yes.

He remembered nothing after he said yes. He didn't even remember putting his clothes back on. He didn't even check to see if Mad O'Donnelly got killed or wounded. Course who would blame him? He escaped the second before he would've become a victim of rape. Fag rape! *Good for you!* Adults would say—especially his Dad. Or would they? Or would adults crowd around him in a worry. *You said yes?*

Donald stayed in his room until Mom called him for dinner. He didn't tell Mom and he didn't tell Dad. He didn't call the police.

"Are you all right?" Dad asked.

Donald said yes.

Donald looked into the camera he had snuck into his room and hidden under his bed. There were pictures of him inside this camera on this film. He should expose this film. Who else could've said yes? He bet Jim Brandekker. Yes! Brandy for Brandekker. Cute. Fag to fag. Donald should expose Mad O'Donnelly and Jim Brandekker.

Donald got his mother. "Is Jimmy home?"

"Jimmers has gone out for the evening."

"Is this his mom?"

"Who is this please?"

"Donald Wilkes. Where's Jim?"

"Jimmers has gone out for the evening."

"Did Jimmy go see his teacher?"

"I'll tell Jimmers you called."

"Is Jimmy queer, Mrs. Brandekker?"

"You are the roughneck who's spreading this ugly rumor!"

"Is Jimmy dating his Science teacher?"

"Shame on you, young man! Let me speak to your mother." "You don't have to answer, Mrs. Brandekker. I'll see for myself."

"Donald! I want to talk to your mother!" "I'll see for myself."

Jim looked right then left, surrounded at the ring toss, Wendy to the one side of him, Randy to the other.

"Win the prize you ring! Step right up and try your luck! Three rings

for the selfsame silver coin!"

Jim stepped right up (mostly to get out from between Randy and Wendy) and the barker pointed a red can at his nose.

"How about you, gentle young sir?"

Jim kept his hands stuffed in his pockets. "I'd like to win some prize for my dad."

"Wouldn't you like to present one of these finely simulated gems to your sweetheart?"

"Which?" Randy said behind Jim.

"Think of the amorous hours she'll spend in your arms thanking you! One slim quarter is all you require! Twenty-five in-God-we-trust pennies bound in one silver coin!"

"The quarter is mostly copper these days," Wendy said.

"Don't be a wiseacre, Little Miss." The barker spat a rich plug of tobacco into the sawdust. "Let Lady Luck welcome you."

Wendy put her arm around Jim. "He'd rather welcome Mister Lucky." Jim pulled away.

"Will she really let me?" said Randy.

The barker leaned over the rail, bulging his sequined vest.

"Will Lady Luck really let me fuck him if I win her ring?"

The barker looked away, his beefy neck throbby, a gummy sweatdrop tracking his nose. "Sorry, buddy. I can't hear you, kid."

A man sat quietly at the first booth making names. Shannon got in line

behind two freshmen boys. The man squatted on a milking stool, his broad shoulders hunched under fringed buckskin, his flesh the color of the earth. For two dollars the man would stamp a name onto a leather strap, staple on a brass snap, and kids went home wearing their names on their wrists. One of the freshmen held out his arm, his wrist limp.

His buddy kicked him in the butt. "Fag."

The first boy giggled.

The man growled, in a pigiron accent. "Hold still so's I can measure you. You want your name or not?"

Shannon pressed close to the boy.

The boy held Shannon away best as he could with pointy elbows.

"How does he do that?" Shannon said, too loud.

The boy had feathery brown hair, the brown of a wren, and the pull of his belt nipped the front hem of his Bad Boys jersey, revealing the waistband of his Hanes underpants.

A wipe of rusty stain over the leather band finished another new name bracelet, and the boy paid (all in change) and Shannon had his turn.

"What name do you want?"

"Brandekker."

The man scratched a bristled mole with burry fingers. "That's more than a mouthful to get down on leather." He plucked a stub of a Ticonderoga from behind his ear and dug out a newsprint tablet. "Better gimme that spelling."

"B-R-A-N-D-E-K-K-E-R"

"That with two ks?"

Shannon nodded. Now he would be named when he used his souvenir.

Randy bought a bag of popcorn and chewed a few salty kernels. He won a stuffed pink penguin by being the first to break a balloon by squirting a stream of water onto a trigger inside the mouth of a plastic clownhead. Wendy took a chance against him on his second try, this time for a pink Kewpie doll. Her balloon burst in a spurt of bright plastic and water. She grinned, and Randy scowled, and switched to the clown next to hers.

Both of em ignored Jim Brandekker.

"I'm gonna beat your ass, Little Boy," Wendy told Randy.

"What do you want to bet? What now? Money? Goldfish? Jim Brandekkers underpants?"

Jim frowned like thunder, and he stormed away.

Neither Wendy or Randy went after Jim.

Wendy made her toad face. "If I win you gotta show me."

"Ill-show-you-mine-if-you'll-show-me-yours, huh?"

"Or don't you have nothing to see?"

"You're the one who won't show me nothing."

"I'll show you what boys want to see."

The bell rang and Randy and Wendy fired.

Randy couldn't get any water pressure, even though his aim was dead on. Wendy smiled, all the while her balloon swelled, while his hung limp. Her balloon exploded first.

"Where do you want to go, my house or yours?"

"I'll show you where to go!"

"You lost your bet. You have to show me, Little Boy."

Randy flipped her off. "That's what I'll show you." He stomped off to look for Jim Brandekker.

"Hey! Yeah!" Wendy followed him. "How about tonight?"

Something was about to happen; something ruled by the childgod Chance. Had he recognized a boy in line for the Ferris Wheel? He took a second look: a short, skinny, freshman, in navy blue corduroys, with long blond hair hanging down past the collar of this blue gingham shirt: hair the yellow of cornsilk, almost white.

The moon cheered, and the moonlight scored a bull's-eye between Shannon's eyes.

Blue and yellow neon made the Ferris Wheel look more than real, coloring Jim Brandekker with the blue of his eyes and the yellow of his hair.

"Sorry, kid, you can't ride if you don't have a ticket."

The ride looked filled. Impatient kids in the top cars drummed their feet. "I almost got enough money."

"Almost is never enough."

"I just need a nickel. Can't you lend me a loan of a nickel?"

"Whose moon are you from, kid? Normal people don't give away money."

Randy and Wendy surrounded Jim a second time.

Randy grabbed Jim by the arm. "Hey, wait up."

"We've been looking for you," Wendy said.

Jim pouted. "I'm not looking for you, and I don't wanna see you, and I don't wanna be seen with you. I'm going home as soon as I ride this Ferris Wheel."

"You're not riding without a ticket, you're not."

Wendy waved a dollar at the ticket taker. "We've been looking for the Blond and here he is waiting to treat us to a ride on the Ferris Wheel."

"You can't just gimme a dollar and get on the ride. You gotta have tickets."

Jim fought to get his arm away from Randy. "Lemme go! Lemme go home!"

Randy held Jim by his shoulders. "Cmon, that's the last car on the ride."

"Lemme go!"

Wendy closed her hand to keep from taking back the dollar. "Can't you see we're eager to ride the Ferris Wheel?"

Jim pulled Randy around in a circle, kicking Randy in the shins.

Randy grabbed Jim hard. "Who you kicking, frosh?"

"Ooo, tough guy senior! Walk outta this, Randy! Pee off before I spit in

your eye!"

"You pissy little fag!"

"True! I'm a fag! I'll prove you're true!" and Jim kissed Randy hard but clumsy on the mouth. "You see? You see me? I'm a fag! I am! But so's my boyfriend!"

Randy spat in a fake way He pushed Jim away—and right into The Rayen!

"Hello, Brandy."

Jim stood still, blinking, clenching and unclenching both fists. He spoke rapidfire. "I went to see you! I did what you said! I dint subtract my promise from myself! You weren't home for me to see!"

"Don't get hysterical, Brandy."

"I'm not! I won't! I believe you believe me! I just thought. I dunno. I just thought maybe you dint wanna see me."

"Why wouldn't I want to see you?"

"I dunno. Because, maybe. Because I dint get on the football team, maybe. Because I got suspended."

"You're suspended. I'm suspended. We're all suspended in time between dying and birth—"

Jim giggled.

"This is seriosity, Brandy. This is poetry and wisdom. This is almost *toilets* spelled backwards."

Jim smiled. "I understand you less than I understand myself!"

The Raven handed the attendant a strip of tickets. "Well, now that I've found you I can invite you and your—friends—to a ride on the Ferris

Wheel."

Wendy slapped at Jim and Randy. "I'm not taking a ride with these two fags!"

The attendant intercepted Jim's puny swing. "You can't pick a fight with a girl!"

"He doesn't care! The little fag—"

"You say nothing!"

"Seems a shame, his big dick wasted on a fag—"

Brandy punched at her, shadow boxing. "You say nothing! You say nothing about me or my dick!"

"He's a vulgar child! Isn't he a vulgar child, Randy? I never saw what a vulgar child he is!"

The ticket taker tried to interrupt. "You guys will have to continue this, uh, discussion, someplace else."

The Raven curled the tickets around the attendant's middle finger. "Open the car. Or do Brandy and I seat ourselves?"

The swivel hinge squeaked, scraping off flakes of yellow paint. Blue nylon tape crackled on the vinyl car seat. The Raven swung aboard. "Coming, Brandy?"

"Don't he wish!"

"Block your ears!" Jim hooted at Wendy. "Nobody's got nothing to say to you!" He put his foot on the footrest and pulled up his yellow sock. The Raven took Brandy by the hand, and Jim looked up, surprised, and The Raven got him aboard the Ferris Wheel.

Jim pressed the warm island of his hip against The Raven's bare leg. "I know we're just teacher and student, but I thought we were gonna be

friends. I thought we might be more than friends."

"Maybe you could adopt the little fella?" Wendy jeered.

The attendant slammed the safety bar, and tested the latch with a calloused thumb.

Jim sat like a thistle, wondering what to say or do.

"Do we still have our bet?" Randy asked Wendy.

"Some bet, I bet," Jim said.

"I lost our last bet, but we both lost our real one," Randy said.

"Three bets and you're out!" Jim said.

"Hey, that's right!" Wendy said. "Maybe we can be losers together."

Gears clattered, and the blue and yellow Wheel raised Jim and The Raven into the sky. The cluster of neon and canvas turned into toys. Circles of light ringed each pool of rainwater.

His ghosts sang: See, Boy, see! O see what you say! He's come! You'll come! Your heart's undone! He's come to ride you on the gold-lapis ring. You're trapped! Gift-wrapped! Go feel his lap! Fall on the floor and he'll maul you!

Their car rose, trivial but high, and the Wheel stopped at the top, leaving Jim alone with The Raven.

Fops and mops, this Wheel's done stopped! Alone with your pinkness at the very tip-top! Clip off your jeans. He'll go chop, chop, chop!

The wind brooded, anxious with alien comfort.

Jim gazed at the stars.

Find a star you like! Something pink and bright! A nebula aglow with abominable delight! Go to Mars and sing your wee green songs! Welcome to a new spot, by your own navigation! You've never been this near before. This bird will feel you out for sure.

"What's your name, anyhow?" Jim asked, meek as a lamb.

"Shannon."

"That's a girls name!"

"Sometimes."

The Wheel revolved, falling forward, tempting gravity, then rolling up to sparkle with the stars.

"I wish I had a sometimes name. A name for people to remember. All I got is plain-old dull-old three-letter Jim."

"You were christened James, weren't you?"

"My Dad doesn't want me to use that name. He knows I'll use his name for wrong purposes."

"Brandy, I have a surprise for you."

"Prizes? For me?"

"Hold out your wrist."

The boy obeyed, and Shannon snapped on the new name bracelet.

"How about that?"

"How about that! What is that?"

"Brandy! That's your name!"

Jim held the bracelet under his nose. "How about that! My pissy

name! Right down to the spelling! Hobgoblins! What a name to make!"

"And I have a present for you."

"Another prize? For me?"

Shannon patted his front pocket. "You'll just have to reach in and feel."

Jim smirked. His timid fingers bugged the tight front pocket of Shannons cut-offs. They found the prize—and wiggled out a square velvet burgundy box. They got the box without touching something else.

Shannon unclasped the box.

Gold and a diamond glittered in the submarine light.

"Is that a for real diamond?"

Shannon nodded, solemn as rain under pines. "An engagement ring."

Jim shivered, and Shannon slipped the ring on his finger. The ring flopped around his knuckle, but a real diamond sparkled in the collet. "This ring's for me?"

"Your finger will grow."

"But a person gives the person they—love—a diamond ring." Jim made slitty snake eyes, heat seeping up his legs from his socks. "Are you one of those fruity fellows?"

Shannon crumpled inside, like a leaf of fine paper on fire. "Do you remember that prank today, Brandy?"

Jim sucked his bottom lip, holding on tighter to the safety bar. He stared along the Wheel, thinking of more lovingable boys to be, wishing to be better than just Jim Brandekker. "How come you call me *Brandy*?"

"That's your sometimes name. You said you wanted one."

"I thought maybe you wanted me to have a different name."

"Brandy, do you remember that prank?"

Jim blushed, creeps of heat inside his thighs. The ground reeled, and Jim got dizzy. He spun in the opposite direction from the Wheel. The earth felt near then far, near then far, near then far away. He felt crushed, then inflated by the Spirit of Gravity. The future could be an unmade bed, a tower, a fleshy rhythm, two hotly beating, boy-animal hearts.

Faith is your own fault, and hope is a hole, and love is a dove that shits on her kids!

Jim gooned his hands, his boney thumb pivoting in his right palm. "I remember."

"I stole your underpants, Brandy."

"You?" Jim wanted to scream, like that wounded dove falling. You you O you.

"I wanted something close to you—"

"You took em?"

"I needed something for when I looked for release all alone—"

"You mean that masturbation?" Jim sank. "Did you steal my underwear to do masturbation?"

"Yes."

"You're my teacher! Teachers don't do masturbation! Teachers are—married, or something."

"I'm not married, Brandy."

"I don't even do masturbation. That is gross that masturbation—"

"You're younger but wiser."

"How come you do lonelysome stuff? I don't even feel lonesome when I'm with you—"

"Who made this up, Brandy?"

"And in your class? Sometimes in your class? I feel like we're the only two people looking at each other, you and me—"

If you make this speech you'll not escape! If you try to flee, he'll answer rape! If you talk falsetto hell peal your ass, he'll win; he'll waste your sin!

"I stole your underpants because of a dream, Brandy."

"Did you dream a—sexy—dream?"

By bedsprings and strings he'll hump you for sure! You're as dumb as a silver! Twice dumb as they come! Skull-fractured boy, you're deaf as an ember! Sing no apologies for this bang to us, Son of a Worm!

Shannon looked away and he did not look back. "Good Christ, Brandy, at least Randy Biswanger admits he's gay. Even Wendy Paulson admits she's selfish. But I'm an impostor. What do I confess for your sake? How can I teach you when I'm a liar? I've even lied to myself. I took you for a harlequin, Brandy; a boy-player who anyone could take advantage of and then abandon. But I'm the clown. I've been had. I tricked myself.

You're real. You're so simply yourself that you're profound. You create me, Brandy. You make me be. Being's a verb, you know, Brandy—a word that has someplace to go. And I have something to tell you. Human beings cherish these words as if they are the only words with meaning. Saying these words doesn't come easy to me. I don't give these words away cheaply—I could never sell these words. You're the

first person I've ever said these words to—so, please, at least listen. You can hate them, and society will let you hate me, because I say them to you, because of who and what you are. These words make me vulnerable, but being honest is better than being a fortress— and speaking these words can never make me weak. I'm not asking you to do anything but listen to these words, and believe them in your young way. Then you can go home, or take that girl, or that boy, back to their bedroom, and do what you have to do. I'm not taking, I'm giving, and I'm not even asking you to receive if you can't accept. I've tried to justify my feelings, but I'm playing games. I can't say why. Ask God why; ask my childhood; ask my genes. There is no reason for a grown man to fall in love with a partgrown boy, but I'm homosexual, Jim, and I love you."

"You love me?"

"I love you. Yes! I love you."

"Do you want to do sex with me?"

"Who cares if someone as confused as I am has a moment of perverse pleasure? All you've lost is a pair of underpants. Can you do tricks with a pair of underpants? Can your underpants do anything but keep your zipper from pinching your penis? Remember your Good Book? If someone asks for your shirt, offer them your underpants as well! Do you want my underpants?"

Jim smiled. "What if I said yes!"

"I want you to say yes!"

"No. What if I said I want to get at your underpants?"

The Ferris Wheel skipped a cog, clogged with grime, and the car bounced backwards, jostling Jim off the seat, and knocking Shannon's hand under Jim's leg, and Jim dropped down on the seat to sit on Shannon's hand. Jim tensed, and tendered, and Shannon drew a luscious stroke along the inseam of his jeans.

Jim trembled. "Omigod! You love me and I'm not straight!"

"You're not straight?"

"We're not me-student, you-teacher. We're a fag and his boyfriend!"

And then Shannon saw Suzanne waving at him from the foot of the Ferris Wheel.

Jim steepled his chin on the seat between his teacher and Dr. Suzanne. The quiet in her car after all that talk on the Ferris Wheel made his stomach slushy. The air way-up-high had cleared his head but he must be one drunk kid to get in this car after that ride. "I'm gonna walk home." Jim made himself yawn. "You two don't need three here."

"I'll have you home in a jiffy, Jim." Dr. Bejin nudged Shannon. "And then we have important things to discuss, don't we, Mr. O'Donnelly?"

"You can call Shannon Shannon in front of me," Jim said. Jim flipped the bangs off his forehead, his eyebrows high, waiting for Shannon to do the talking like he said he would.

"Important things," Shannon said, looking at Jim.

Jim bounced, and clapped his palm over Shannon's mouth. "You say nothing, Shannon! Not with me in this car!" Jim took his hand away before Dr. Suzanne touched him. He sniffed at the good plaster of spit left on his palm. "You gotta be scared of me!" Jim said to her. "Scared to death!"

"I barely know you, Jim," Dr. Suzanne said.

"That's cause, too. If you knew me better—if you knew me best of all—you'd know because."

"Because is not a reason. Because is a preposition."

"Because is a word enough for me. Because is too much."

Dr. Suzanne turned to Shannon. "When did you meet Jim?"

Jim hunkered his chin between the seats and inbetween em. "Shannon went to see you, but he wanted to see me." He rocked back into the back seat. "Tell her, Shannon."

"I can't tell her, Brandy!"

"You told me! Once upon a time you couldn't walk!"

"What can't you tell me?"

Jim kicked both of em through the back of the front seat. "He can't tell you what he told me on the Ferris Wheel."

Suzanne reached for Shannon.

"He can't tell you about his lonesomeness."

Suzanne trembled. "Do you think Shannon is lonely the way you are lonely, Jim?"

Jim plucked a scab of dry water outta the corner of his eye. "He's not lonely since me." He touched Dr. Suzanne on the cheek.

Suzanne looked at the boy's hand. A diamond ring sparkled on his skinny finger.

"And neither am I lonely since Shannon," the boy said. A tear trickled over his fingertip.

She took him to her house, where no one was at home.

She stood in the bathroom in front of the full length mirror affixed to the back of the door. She undid the buttons of her shirt, letting her breasts peek out. A bra made her feel confined. She took off her shirt. Her jeans snugged her hips. She studied her reflection. The best memory of the boys she had known lived behind this reflection. She let her jeans down to her ankles, and stepped out of them. She pealed off her tight white schoolgirl panties and stood naked in front of her reflection. She felt clean and empty. She unlocked the bathroom door, and slipped across the hall to her bedroom. She went in, and closed the door.

He sat on the foot of her bed looking pale. She went to him without a word, and he leaned away from her with an unbearable exclamation, and she lay down on top of him, exploring between his legs. She clawed his shirt off over his head, and pushed down his yellow shorts. His eyes were hot. She straddled him, and he groped her, growing over his strap. He entered her.

"Brandy...." She called him, as he came like the god of anger. "Brandy."

"That you, Shennin?"

Shannon rolled his eyes towards heaven. Brandy smirked, and Shannon warned him silendy not to giggle. "Auntie!" he yelled, and his voice came back to him off the kitchen ceiling. "Do you remember how you were saying we never talk?"

Auntie sat in her usual chair by the window, the room dark with the television finally turned off after the Evening News. "I don't wanna argue, Shennin. I'm tired." She looked for a swig of beer, but she obviously found her bottle empty.

"And do you remember how you said you wanted to get to know my friends—"

"Do they all have big mouths like you?"

"I thought you didn't want to argue?"

Jim peeked around the kitchen door frame, and waved in his small way. "Hello, Missus Dibble. How're you?"

Miss Dibble wore a quilted duster, the color washed out of the sunflowers and grapevines. Itty-bitty brass safety pins chained the collar. Her elbows protruded in a darn of pistachio thread. She didn't have her false teeth in, tops or bottoms.

Auntie perked. "Hi." She did not recognize this young blond boy. "Hello. Shennin, who is this?"

"This is one of my students."

"I'm Jim Brandekker."

"You're Jim Brandekker? Course you are! Everybody in Stickford knows the Brandekkers. You didn't tell me you taught Jim Brandekker."

"I saw this boy at the Festival, Auntie, and I didn't want our evening to end too soon. I'm sorry to disturb you. I thought you'd be in bed."

Jim smiled bigger. "Shannon dint wanna let me outta his sight."

"He ran out of places to hide."

"Nobody hides on top of a Ferris Wheel."

"Did you ride the Ferris Wheel? I always liked the Ferris Wheel. Was the Ferris Wheel a big ride?"

"I never went for a bigger ride in my whole life," Brandy said.

"Not yet," said Shannon.

Auntie quizzed.

Shannon carried three beers to the coffee table and twisted off the caps.

"Shennin! You can't give beer to a little kid."

"I had a beer—or two?—tonight, I think."

"Well, you're not drinking beer at Auntie's house, Jiminy" She dusted past her nephew. "A boy like Jiminy has gotta eat cookies and milk. That's his proper food."

Jim wiggled. "What I gotta do is go to the bathroom."

Shannon grinned. "You really did drink two beers, didn't you?" He directed Brandy to the top of the stairs.

"What do you think of him, Auntie?"

"Who? Jiminy?"

"Do you think he likes me?"

"Do kids ever like their teachers?"

"1 believe I frighten him."

"Teachers frighten students."

"He won't even let me hold his hand

"Shennin—" Auntie snorted. "Do you— like —Jiminy?"

Jim found the smallest bedroom at the top of the stairs. He flipped the switch, but the light did not come on. Jim stumbled towards the big shape that must be the bed. He felt the darkness until he found a metal lamp. He pulled a little chain with round links and the lamp came on. The room smelled like dust in the doorway, and like books in the corners, with a crisp snap of pencil shavings by the simple table by the wall. Shannon had a narrow iron bed painted white. Shannon sure dint make his bed. The blanket and the sheet were scrambled up with the pillows. Jim went around the messy bed to the one spindly chair by the window. The chair looked weirdly prepared. Jim sat down, and set his hands on the mushroom caps on the arms, and rested his head on the second slat from the top of the ladderback, and looked up to the right, then up to the left, at the finials that rose like little frozen candleflames above his ears. He remembered how his ears flamed when The Raven brought him that runaway ball, and then again when The Raven talked so truly on top of that Ferris Wheel, and now Jim's ears burned as if those little wooden cones were real candles. Jim settled, the tape seat grabbing his buns. He looked around. The bed was the only messy thing in Shannon's bedroom. A small unvarnished pine bookcase stood along the opposite wall. The bookcase looked handmade. Sitting up in the chair, Jim could see the bottom shelf held a pair of ratty bluejeans, and a row of books by the same author: Thoreau. On top of the jeans Jim saw three pair of underpants.

Shannon came into the room. "AhHa, you've found my Shaker chair."

Jim wiggled, as if to get more comfortable. He couldn't get more comfortable. "This chair doesn't shake. This chair doesn't even creak."

The Raven tucked in the tail of his white shirt, and the light by the bed glinted on the button of his cut-offs. "That's the design. That's a Shaker chair." He stood at the foot of his bed. "The peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it."

Jim smirked. "I'm no angel." He shrugged in his small way under his roomy shirt.

"You're close enough."

Jim leaned back, his chin haughty, his pelvis thrust forward. "A boy can't get closer to his teacher?"

"Close as you like."

Jim narrowed his eyes. He could feel only heat; he could see only shadows.

Shannon crouched and set his hands on Brandy's knees, then he pressed his fingers together, tip to tip, an inch or less from Brandy.

Jim looked down along his nose.

Shannon twisted his fingers, targeting. He planted his thumbs in Brandy's thighs.

It jackknifed. Not even his ghosts could sing. "Close enough." Jim clapped his knees together, punching Shannon mildly in the chest with his kneecaps, and springing Shannon's hands. He pointed at the wall, resting his arm along Shannon's neck. He felt Shannon tense, then relax, like he expected Jim to hug him. "I seen your underpants."

"What?" Shannon stood, with Brandy's hands locked together on the back of his neck.

"I seen em. On the shelf. By the wall.".

Shannon gathered the boy out of his Shaker chair, and twirled him, and flopped him down on his bed.

"Are your sheets cold!"

"Cotton."

"Cotton like my underpants."

"Haven't you ever crawled between cold cotton sheets on a winter's evening?"

"I like to hide and sneak under my covers to read my poems with my flashlight."

"AhHa! Your poems! Your poem drooping and unseen in the privacy of your night! That wild, untamed, half-animal poem common to men and boys! Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems? Stop this night with me and you shall possess the meaning of all poems!"

Jim lay rigidly down the middle of The Raven's bed, his hands tighdy folded under his chin, his elbows pressed tightly together against his bottom ribs, crossing his ankles to occult his zipper. "Where are they Shannon?"

The Raven perched on the footrail. He thought Brandy would get excited by Whitman. "Lose something, Brandy?"

"Where are my underpants?"

Shannon tugged on Brandy's cuff. "I hope you have them on under these navy blue corduroys."

Jim propped himself on his elbows, sitting up to get his cuffs away from Shannon, squishing Shannon's pillows. "Where are the pair you swiped to be close to me all alone?"

Shannon brought em out of their hiding place under his own underwear.

Jim looked em over. The waistband had been stretched out in the rear, rippling the twin red stripes. The On-Track tag hung half-off. Maybe Jim better report to Miss Sullivan, and roll her out of her closet too. "Yeppers. Those're my underwears."

Shannon stretched open the waistband, and modeled em in midair. "You want these back?"

"Well, my Ma's gonna get mad at me, letting somebody see the color of the stripes in my underwear." Brandy rocked on his teacher's pillows. "Didja do masturbation with em?"

Shannon crushed em in a fist. "I stopped."

Jim could see sweat glisten on Shannon's upper lip. "What stopped you?"

"I stopped to get at the meaning of the poem their owner keeps in cotton."

Jim scooted towards the foot of the bed. "You mean—"

"Yes!" Shannon pounced at the boy. "White meat of chicken!"

Jim wiggled away on his knees. "First I'm an angel, second I'm a chicken!"

"And you don't know your homosexual slang!"

"Ooo, homosexual!"

Jim fell off the bed—Plop!—on his butt. He made a big baby face,

clenching a grimace. He tucked in his ballooning shirt, catching his breath, and thinking out loud. "That's really what you wanna do, huh? You want you and me to be— homosexual?" The boy sat silendy, his arms crossed limply, his elbows on his knees, his legs open. He spied out the bookshelf under the crook of his arm. "I want you to keep my underpants." He dusted up, snatching a pair of underpants off the bookshelf. "And I'm taking a pair of your underpants. To get at the meaning of your poem."

Jim scampered out of the bedroom, and Shannon heard Brandy slam the bathroom door.

Jim set his teachers underpants on the washbowl, and raised the toilet seat. He unzipped, and wiggled it out through his fly. He let his shirttail hide it, but it sure felt calm. How come it shouldn't feel calm? It didn't have a mind all its own. Only Jim could make it do what Jim wanted it to do. Jim burped. Those two beers sure filled his bladder. Surprised he dint slosh when he wrestled The Raven on his bed. How come it dint get excited then? If Jim really wanted to do sex with other boys, how come it dint naturally get an erection then?

Jim looked at the underpants on the sink: white with a double row of pale yellow stitches at the edge of the waistband. He could see the tag, and he squinted to read the maker's name: Fruit-of-the-Loom. Men's Small. 30-32. Golden Blend Briefs.

How would The Raven look, nothing on but his Golden Blends? Jim tried to imagine. He would be husky and hairy, a fullgrown man, not a partgrown boy. It arrowed out. Jim made it jump, spanking the nasty tip off his cold belt buckle to get it calm once more. Jim made it pee with a boner. If it dint go for boys, it sure went for Shannon!

Jim sat at the dining room table, munching cookies, looking too innocent to ever be ashamed.

[&]quot;Shame on you!"

"You're his teacher! You can't have sex with a little kid!"

Jim wiped his moustache of milk on his wrist.

"You can't expect a fourteen-year-old boy to pay attention. Not like that. Not like sex. He's got other things to do. He's got guitar lessons, skateboarding. He's gotta change the water in his goldfish bowl. He's gotta ride his ten-speed. You can't expect sex from a little kid. Even if he is pretty."

Jim smiled with pleasure. "Am I pretty?"

"He may be pretty, but he's pretty young. I'm saying he's pretty young. And sex is a big thing. And you sound like you've been saying pretty big stuff to Jiminy. And you expect him to do something serious. Do you even know if he goes for boys?"

Jim snapped a cookie in two and nibbled. The tall jelly jar of milk looked ridiculously huge in his hands. "I go for peanut butter cookies."

"You see Shennin! He's a little kid! Did you expect this kid to say Hey, how-do-you-do, sounds like fun, c'mon, jump on me?"

Jim sucked crumbs off his bottom lip. He rotated his glass, watching the white bubbles turn and ellipse. "Cripes, nobody told me sex could get this silly."

"Silly or serious, you're too young to think about sex! And no boy is old enough to have sex with his teacher!"

Shannon sat in his own shadow "Brandy, let me give you a ride—"

"Yeah!" Jim let his shirt collar fall half off his shoulders. "Gimme a ride!"

"Let me give you a ride home."

"I think we're alone now," Jim Brandekker said. "There doesn't seem to be anyone around." Jim watched The Raven with all his attention.

The Raven started his Volkswagen.

Jim pouted sorrowfully. "And my Ma gave me a house key and everything."

His submerged ghosts had come alive in the undersea light of the dashboard.

They drove in silence. They dint even sit together—not side by each, the way Jim heard two people sit together when they really liked each other. They dint talk.

Shannon only stopped a minute to open the back gates to Pumpkin Hook, and in a second his headlights spooked the big white gosh-awful Brandekker crypt. In a moment Jim would really be home.

Jim jumped. "Stop this car!"

Shannon hit the brake so hard Jim bumped his nose on the windshield.

Shannon hauled him back aboard the seat by the shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right!" Jim grabbed Shannon by both shoulders.

"Didn't you enjoy yourself?"

"I don't want to *enjoy myself!* I thought you wanted to enjoy me! I thought you enjoyed fourteen-year-old boys!"

Shannon did not breathe for whole minutes. He combed the one oddly long strand of Jim's bangs out of his eyes. He traced a cheekbone. Jim smiled. He wore a halo in the underwater light of the car.

Shannon let his hand go wandering, ruffling Jim's shirt collar. A third button popped open as the circles he drew on Jim's shirtfront increased in circumference. He slipped his hand inside. They were petting. He stroked Jim's ribs, and belly; tagged his bellybutton, his palm coming to rest over the boy's heart. He pressed until his fingers heard his heartbeat. "Ummm, inside Jimmers' boy shirt."

"Don't." Jim squirmed. "Don't call me Jimmers. My Ma calls me Jimmers."

Shannon lavished Jim's pectoral with caresses. He could smell the boy —richly sweaty, a smell like grapefruit, hay, and spilled salt. "Suits you."

Jim pumped his legs. "Better'n Brandy?"

Shannon thrumpled a nipple. "You smell like a Jimmers." He put both hands inside Jim's shirt, sweeping his collar bones.

Jim grabbed Shannon's wrists. "Don't."

"Why?" Shannon's hand floated over the front of Jim's corduroys.
"Erect?"

Jim blushed. He rubbed his feet together, delicious, and hot all over under his clothes. For the first time, he really wanted to take off his clothes.

The edge of the elastic of Brandy's underpants dented the fingertip Shannon hooked over the rim of his cords. "May I check?"

Jim pushed Shannon's hands out of his shirt. "Don't ask me stuff like that, Shannon." He scooted towards the door.

Shannon took the boy in his arms.

Jim hobbled his chin. His eyes were pavid.

Shannon rubbed Jim's pogonion.

Jim trembled. His hinty smile faded, then returned and did not fade. Eyes open, Jim Brandekker kissed Shannon O'Donnelly.

Firstly, they just touched lips; simple easy The teenage hairs on Jim's top lip bristled. Faintly, Jim opened his mouth, and Shannon slipped his tongue between Jim's beaver teeth. They really kissed—a long, wet, sloppy, boyish first kiss—full of pucker, and tongue, and slobber—with a finale of teeth—leaving the taste of ptyalin, sugar, and fire.

Jim's penis was a javelin. "Would you like to tease my privacies?"

Shannon probed Jim between his legs.

He found it. He found it pinned at a bad angle in the snook of Jim's thigh. He grubbed it straight up behind Jim's zipper. He would not let it be. He made a fist of corduroy, cotton, and elastic around it. Shannon would never let it be. And Jim let him have it—hold it—rub it—on and good—for what seemed like the best hour it ever had inside his pants, inside his underpants; though his teacher couldn't have held it for more than a minute; more than a minute or maybe three—

Jim thrust.

Jim never made a move like that before, so hard, so boy, so male —"Cripes Almighty!"

Jim struggled, and pushed their mouths apart, and Shannon jumped back, more than surprised, and Jim grabbed behind his back, and popped the door open, and rolled out of Shannon's car—

"Brandy!"

Jim somersaulted onto his feet, blind in the dark.

Jim Brandekker ran.

"Would you state your name for the court, my boy?"

"Jim Brandekker. James Crispian Brandekker—the Sixth, if I gotta say that."

"May I call you Jim?"

"Oh yeah, please."

"Good. Good! Tell me, Jim, what does your father do for a living?"

"He develops big ideas. And he runs Pumpkin Hook Cemetery."

"Pumpkin Hook has been part of this community for many years. Your family must have been in Stickford a long time."

"Oh, for sons and years."

"That's an odd way to measure time, by suns and years."

"Well, I'm an odd kid. And I mean sons, boy children. My dad thinks being my dad is somebody to be."

"You mean your father is proud of your family heritage?"

"Yep. And I'm his son in line."

"And when you father a son you will likewise name him James Crispian?"

"Nope. No, Sir."

"But why, Jim? That's the natural thing to do."

"I don't want a little kid named after me—at least not down to the last letter. Sometimes I don't even want people to know my name. Other times I really want people to see the way I am."

"Is there something about you that's not apparent?"

"Everybody sees how I am. Least ways everybody in school. And that's the biggest part of the world that sees me."

"Are you treated badly in school?"

"They don't chase me down the halls or nothing."

"What school do you attend?"

"Saint Agnes."

"What classes do you take?"

"Oh, normal stuff. Algebra. German."

"What about English and Science?"

"When that Dean got ahold of my entrance exam they made me do an accelerated curriculum."

"And those were your English and Science classes?"

"Yep."

"Who were your teachers?"

"Mr. Bejin taught me English. I'm best in English. Because I'm a poet."

"I see. You're a passionate boy."

"A boy doesn't have to be this old or that smart to know who he is."

"You're passionate, indeed. And what is the name of your science

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teacher?"
"Shannon."
"Shannon O'Donnelly?"
"That's his whole name."
"You call your teacher by his first name?"
"That's his real name. Sometimes I call him The Raven because of his
black hair."
"Order!"
"Did you ever see Mr. O'Donnelly other than in school?"
"I seen him at the Festival."
"Did you speak to him?"
"He paid for my ride on the Ferris Wheel. I guess I spent too much
money taking a chance to win stuff for my dad. Those booths had sure
got great stuff to take a chance on, you know, the stuff that's great to
give a dad."
"That was very kind of Mr. O'Donnelly to pay for your ride."
"Oh, Shannon liked my kind. He was kinda like me."
"When did you find out your teacher had been arrested?"
"I-seen-him."
"You saw Mr. O'Donnelly get arrested?"
"I was nearby."
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"Do you know what Mr. O'Donnelly was arrested for?"

"Undecent implosion. Something. Something worse."

"When did you find out why your teacher had been arrested?"

"Next morning."

"Who told you?"

"Somebody."

"Did your mother tell you?"

"Nope. A Missus Dibble."

"Who is Missus Dibble?"

"She's a aunt."

"Who's aunt?"

"She's Shannon's aunt."

"Didn't your mother or father see you first the morning following that arrest?"

"I dint go home after I saw Shannon get arrested. I went to see Shannon's Aunt."

"Why did you go see Mr. O'Donnelly's Aunt?"

"I—I took big steps. I dint know who else to see. I walked, ducking outtasight, until morning. Nobody saw me, and nobody heard me, neither, because I dint even have my sneakers on, I was in my socking feet. At last, I went to see Shannon's Aunt. I thought she'd be sad. I wrecked my socks.

"The shades were pulled down, but Auntie had the front door open, and I could see inside if I made binoculars on the screen.

"Auntie said she dint expect to see me. She said she was glad to see me because I could help her do a job. She took me up to Shannon's bedroom. She had tooken down Shannon's bed. She had slumped the mattress against the wall, and she had tooken down his bookshelf, and piled the planks like a big asterix in the middle of the floor. She said she did some heavy duty cleaning in Shannon's bedroom. His bedroom smelled like a medicated lemon. And Auntie asked me to carry a dozensome Hefty bags to the curb, seeing as how the next day would be trash day, she goes.

"I asked Auntie if she heard a word from Shannon, and I asked her if he knew she was cleaning out his room, and she goes, Who needs permission from her nephew to clean house? He had a lot of junk, she goes, and she had to clean up his junk. Then the bag tore! When I carried the bag downstairs I tripped on the bottom step, and I fell on my butt, and the bag split.

"How could Auntie do that? I still dunno. How could she throw out his junk?"

"What did those trash bags contain?"

"His—-junk—his clothes—his books. Shannon would never give permission for Auntie to throw out his Thoreau books! He even read those Thoreau books to me! I took home those Thoreau books! I took home his clothes! I took em home. I'm gonna save em."

"Did you ever see Donald Wilkes and Mr. O'Donnelly together?"

"We saw Donald on Halloween, Shannon and me."

"You saw Donald Wilkes and Mr. O'Donnelly together the night before your Science teacher was arrested?"

"Donald came to see Shannon and me, if you gotta be snoopy."

"Where?"

"At his house—at Shannon's house."

"What were you doing at your teacher's house on Halloween?"

"Well, I dint see Shannon for an eight-day week and I felt—lonesome __"

"Didn't you see your teacher at school?"

"Ma made me stay home from school."

"Were you ill?"

"I got sick of school. I got sick of staying home, and staying in my bedroom. I had to sneak out to see Shannon, even on his birthday on Halloween. My ma wanted me to stay home for keeps. She wanted to keep me as far away from Shannon as possible. She wants to keep me away from the whole world. I had to see Shannon for his birthday. That's how we seen Donald. Me and Shannon were having his happy birthday, and passing out BetterMade Potato chips for Auntie, and Donald came by trick-or-treating, dressed like a girl, you know. And Donald goes to Shannon. He bet Shannon would like to see me dressed like a girl. And Shannon looked like he was gonna chase Donald down the street. Then Donald told me and Shannon about the pictures."

"Were these photographs significant?"

"Me and Shannon dint want nobody to see em."

"Why?"

"If you were Shannon would you want the general public to see pictures of you making love with a boy?"

"Order!"

"Why did Donald tell you about these photographs?"

"Who? Me? Am I his reason?"

"I pose you a possibility. Possibly Donald Wilkes told you about these photographs because possibly you are the boy who made love with Mr. O'Donnelly?"

"How? How come?"

"Possibly you can tell us why."

Jim had run a long way in the rain.

He fell downhill, like that Shaker angel falling. He scuttled on his hands and feet, stemming his fall in the sand by the lake, hiking up his shirttail as he slid, getting his belly gritty.

The mill! Jim sprinted. A Brandekker place for sure!

Almost at the mill, Jim tripped. He tumbled over the broken threshold, skinned his knees, skidded on his elbows, creeping into a corner, drenched and sweaty. How come he ran? He couldn't believe that Shannon dint follow. Running had withered it, weak as a twig in a sudden cold snap.

The door banged, open then closed. "You—you're fast—" Shannon willowed the doorway, bent out of breath. "You're a fast runner—"

It sprouted. "Go slow, Shannon. Slow is better!"

"This is my place apart—"

Jim budded.

Shannon searched a rafter for a bottle corked with a candle. A match flared, and revealed a box of Rosebuds trapped in the wax that had dripped down the neck. "We have wine—We have light-Jim opened his arms, his hands flat and windy, like poplar leaves applauding with no

noise. "Just go slow. Slow is better." He watched Shannon through one eye. "Slow will be best enough."

Shannon brought the light to Brandy, and crouched between Brandy's legs. "Brandy, why did you run away?"

"I'm not gonna do stuff in your car!"

"I shouldn't have kissed you! I shouldn't have touched you!"

"I don't want my first time in a car!"

"I've wanted you since the first time I set eyes on you. I've wanted to be you—but I can never succeed—"

"You know what people say first if you don't succeed—"

"If at first I don't suck seed I'll keep on sucking until I do!"

"You wanna suck on me?"

Shannon pulled his tennis shirt over his head, the collar piping around his neck. He unzipped his cut-offs. (The button had come undone in the car.) Jim heard that sound: metal shearing metal. The Raven stood in front of Jim, nothing on but a pair of those Golden Blends, like that man Jim imagined less than an hour ago. A smidget of black hair frizzed his chest, and tiny black quills fringed his nipples. Sweat glistened in the valley between his ribs, and sheened his furrowed belly. Black hair curled his bellybutton, the peak of a bigger coppice inside those Fruit-of-the-Looms.

Shannon crouched in front of Jim. "Take your clothes off, Brandy."

"Oh!" Jim shrank, his teeth grindy. "Please!"

Shannon toyed with a lace in Jim's red shoe. "Brandy, take off your clothes."

Jim knocked his head from side to side.

"What, do you need help?" Shannon untied Jim's shoes.

Jim yanked his legs away, and sat on his feet. "You'll see!"

"Goddamn you, Brandy. Do I have to fucking rape you?"

Shannon slapped Brandy in the face. He ripped open Jim's shirt, from neck to navel. Shannon quickened, seeing the red stripes of the boy's underpants peeking out over the waist of the boy's cords.

Jim balled up his body.

The adolescent scent stirred Shannon, quietly exciting.

"You don't have to rip off my clothes!" Jim struggled to untangle his arms in his suddenly buttonless shirt. "Can't you just molest me?"

"I am not a child molester, Brandy!"

"And I'm not a child! I just want to make love! Can't you at least see that?"

Then neither Shannon or Jim said another word.

Shannon kissed Jim. And Jim kissed Shannon back, for keeps. He kissed Shannon the way he kissed Ma, in his small way Then he tried his first lesson from his teacher's car. He kissed Shannon on his mouth. He moused his chin, and cabled his neck, and snogged his chest. He tasted a nipple, a salty prickle. He nuzzled Shannon under his arm. His armpit smelled secure, like Jim's own dirty rugby shirt in the hottest sun. Jim didn't close his eyes. Was Jim supposed to close his eyes? Shannon kissed Jim with real skill. He hugged Jim everytime he kissed Jim on the lips, but he kissed Jim everywhere. He kissed his earlobe, snuffled his earwax. He smooched the peachfuzz on Jim's cheeks. He popped that white pimple on Jim's jawbone with a kiss. Shannon snooped his collar, then sickled the honeysuckle yoke. He nibbled the two buttons left at the top, and tweezed the threads left from button three. He whiffled Jim's armpits, licked his belly.

Brandy smelled like the New World during Thanksgiving: roast wild turkey with slivered onions and paprika, gingery pumpkin, popcorn with butter and peppercorns, sage and apple stuffing, pickles in brine, sour cream, yeast, spilled hard cider.

Shannon corkscrewed Jim's bellybutton, sluicing his ribs. Shannon unbuckled Jim. He chewed the triple seam of his cords, sneaping his balls through the roughneck fabric with his teeth. He unbuttoned the stud. Jim clasped the knob of Shannon's neck. Shannon bit the tab of Jim's zipper.

Shannon unz

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zzzzz zipped Jim Brandekker. Jim heard that sound: metal shearing metal. He watched Shannon open his zipper.

Shannon had wanted to watch Brandy uninnocently, to see Brandy while the boy was aware he was being watched; to look the boy over while the boy knew he was being looked at sexually. He couldn't wait to see Brandy in his briefs. He pulled down Jim's corduroys.

His underpants were white—white like doves could be; white like Ivory Soap, the white that befit a virgin boy—but his business had stained them, a crease of nitrogen in the swaddle, a dot of pee on the fly. His briefs were a size too small to cope with his major rut of teenage innocence. Shannon coursed the waistband with a finger, skimming sand off the inside of the elastic. The maker's tag clung to his fingertips. Cool sweat bagged the rear. Shannon gruffed his chin over the boy trunked by those briefs. Jim twinged, porcupined by whiskers through the skintight cotton. Lightly Shannon frisked the fly and hung his fingers from the edge of the waistband above the twin red warning stripes. He arked the boy. He slipped both heaven-freeing hands under Jim's underwear, slipping his hands up the legholes, peeling Jim's underwear away from his skin. He cupped the hollow muscles of Jim's hips, and the round bones of Jim's legs.

"You're inside my underwear—" Jim whispered.

Shannon did not touch Jim frontally. He cored Jim's thighs with his thumbs, like a potter leaving impressions that would remain in those sockets. Shannon slid his hands to Jim's knees, then back up to his underpants. He crimped Jim's swaddle, and unhusked Jim's balls, one out each legband, like peachpits in a silky coop, a few yellow hairs

springing free. Out seeped the smell of honey and barm. Shannon snuggled em.

"Don't squeeze em!"

His teacher disobeyed. He squeezed em, hot and sessile, best as he could, in their sling.

"Is that how to hold em?" They felt pinched and galled, like a taste of sour grape.

Shannon put his hand down the front of Jim's underpants.

Jim arched his spine. "O, yeah, Shannon! That's my penis! You got me by my penis! That's me! That's mine!"

It felt like moist wood, less animal than arboreal; more like freshly fallen wood than young, growing boy.

Maybe Shannon couldn't believe that Jim wanted him to grab his bare erection because he didn't rub it. He only groped Jim for a second, and, in a minute, took his hand out of Brandy's underpants.

"Pull down your underpants, Brandy."

"Who?" Jim looked right then left. "Me?"

"Brandy, pull your underpants down."

Who would Jim make Jim Brandekker if Shannon made Jim pull down his underpants? If Jim pulled down his underpants for Shannon Jim could never again be Jimmers, Ma's Mister Boy, or James Brandekker, Dad's son-in-line. He could never again be a Baby Brother if he pulled down his underpants. He could never be seen as the whitest boy of Stickford's first family. He could never be elected president of these United States.

Jim smiled like a boy who believed a new gospel. He hooked his waistband with plucky thumbs, and pulled down his underpants, like a

boy peeling bark off the Tree of Life.

Shannon saw Jim. The boy was as big as autumn, as long as spring, his boyhood as natural as stone sculpted by rain. His penis had overgrown his body, like a pumpkin in October outgrowing the vine. The smell of Bethlehem, the House of Bread, flooded Shannon; the smell of the manger of a newborn boy-child; the smell of wheat and wine; of toasted homemade bread buttery with honey, barley soup, nutmeg, and adolescent sugar. It was the pale blondpink of pearwood, nested in a bosk of milium hair. Shannon touched it. It felt as alive as living lilacwood, its outerflesh rosepetalsoft, thick like the dewy roots of new mown grass, its inscape stiff, but supple; pliant, but not serene; firm, but not cool, like a dandelion at noon, not in the morning sun; haulmed with capillaries, a pouty vein below its cute heartbud. This boy made a perfect virgin. He would be a good lover, too.

"Puberty becomes you, Brandy."

Jim made it jump.

Silver air whistled between Shannon's teeth. "You sure you're only fourteen?"

Jim tossed back his hair, his torn open shirt bunched around his neck in a candyland of sweat. "Make me come—"

Shannon clowned with Jim's testicles, toyed with his penis. "First a hand job, just to see Brandy dance." Shannon masturbated Jim. He jacked him as if he were every boy he ever dreamed he would jack.

A freshman boy squats on the back porch, huggermugger with his homework, he sips his Kool-Aid. His mother checks his polynomials, fluffs his hair, protects his cute ass with jealousy. Sunday afternoons he curls up in a wrist and ankle ball in the rainy daylight of his bedroom, and pretends to read a cheapthrills paperback. The Sunday favorite roast beef sticks between his teeth. He wears a milk moustache. Dinner ends, and so does the rain. He smuggles himself out into the cemetery He slouches a sneaky kid shoulder through the

peach tree saplings. A car winds down Waterloo Road, headlights cutting white rivers across the gravestones. He makes for the clump of willows where he likes to play with himself, dreaming of virgin girls (doubtlessly, doubtlessly). He intends to keep his promise to himself this time and strip slowly, even though he sweats to unzip swiftly, and get tender in a rush. He toes off his left shoe, and cuffs off one yellow sock. He sneezes. A nightbird calls. He strikes a tombstone pose, afraid of unseen eyes. He storks on his bare foot to undo his right shoe and roll off his other sock. The grass squishes. Mud seeps between his toes. That nightbird screaks a second time. He's gonna worship his own hero. It's mine and I can wash it as hard as I like. His red-and-white rugby shirt clings from his lemon water nerves. He tugs the hem topside, and frees his skin-n-bones elbows from the twisty sleeves. Sweat streams between his ribs, and between the nubs of his spine, hurricanes his nipples, and soaks the red-and-white waistband of his underpants. He gropes his own zipper. The teeth grin as he unzips, and unbuckles, and unbuttons. He yanks his bluejeans free of his knees and feet. He plunges both hands under his underpants and pushes em down by the crotch. He wads em, sniffs em, chews em, and tosses em into the air. He leaps, and scrambles in the wet grass, his boner jumping, abandoning his clothes. He's one free boy.

Shannon jacked Jim in a tough kid style, learned on the streets. Kid Pom arrogantly displays his sex, pinches down his zipper. He practices, pumps spunk in alleys, under naked GEs, behind the snow tires in the garage, a boy New York once coveted. He hangs out beneath a street lamp, conceals his shank, wears a chain on his empty wallet, a leather jacket, a torn jersey, smelly jeans with a missing hip pocket, one knee ripping, sneakers victims of the Ten Plagues, a moth flutters around his greasy hair, a splotch of acne on his chin, blackheads in his enlarged pores. He boards aloft in a smoggy rathole, he sweeps fallen plaster off his Salvation Army cot, he sits on melon crates. He puffs sweet Columbian, burns his last ZigZag, flips the bird at prowly squad cars. Pick him up, love him up, leave him in the rain.

Shannon jacked Jim with blooming shyness. A huckleberry boy, heavy into puberty, squats in the duckweed by the brown river. He unpockets

his stolen kitchen matches and lights his raw tobacco. He chokes. He rolls over on his belly, the good of the riverbank against his cod. He bucks, perplexed, then knowing, suddenly a real older brother. He thrusts, like he rides an unbroken horse. The river comes by smooth as the bronze mirror of the Pharaoh that teacher says those primpy Egyptian boykings used to comb their hair. His Maw will cluck over the yellow spots on his linen.

Shannon jacked Jim like a suburban boy. The newsboy collects, his Free Press bag slung on the butterfly handlebars of his red girls Schwinn. The sprinkler on the new mown lawn wets his bald tires. The good day sun shines on his jet hair. Cut-offs snug his hips, his hooded sweatshirt unzippered to his navel, shows off his slinky gold chain. (He shoplifts his jewelry from Cunninghams, never sure whether or not he steals jewelry for a girl.) He knows what girls want. Last Devil's Night, behind the bushes, he showed his dick to a girl who asked him to pull down his pants. Too proud to let her touch it, though. He whacks off in the loft of the garage every Saturday after he cuts the grass. He likes the smell of his body. Once, he tasted his sperm.

Shannon jacked Jim like a teen superstar. He loses the game. He peels the grass-stained adhesive tape off his knuckles. His split finger starts to bleed again. Even the Coach has gone home. He slogs out of his Bad Boys jersey. His ribs ache where he caught an opponents kick. He strips off his filthy pants and socks and stands in cup and strap. He sniffles, adjusts the shower. Schoolwork had spoiled him, yesiree, that darned Chemistry midterm. His team had the game cinched the night before. He told that girl over the phone and she took him out. He lathers his chest, his bruised ribs. He soaps his gutter and crotch. He works his balls with a slick hand. She said she would if he won; all he had to do was win, and she would. He jogs it before he realizes he's started. Bolt upright, he thrusts into his fists. Funny how steam never made his eyes water before.

Shannon took care of business now. He held Jim straight down between his legs, sheathing it with one hand then the other, switching grips and speeds.

A high school clerk on the late shift at the cash register a joke on his name badge: C. Kent. He dresses preppy, grey cords, a LaCoste plaid shirt, his one-hundred-percent acrylic sweater stretched out at the neck and cuffs, fuzzballs on the ribbed hem, sockless under his Topsiders, a poor knot in his tie. (His mother stood in the bathroom doorway, and shook her head If only you would let me do that for you.) He takes his break at seven p.m. He smuggles this months Playboy into the employee lavatory. He locks the door before he turns on the light, and flips to the Bunny-of-the-Month. He squirms his sweater over his head, loosens his tie, undoes his cords, pulls the pouch of his Hanes underpants. He lips it out over his waistband, jerks the head, beating his legs. Where's the new kid? He hears his supervisor through the door. He's in the joh. He hears both girls giggle. He's been in there so long. He's probably masturbating.

Shannon pressed Jim's penis between praying hands, like a roseleaf pressed for a forgotten reason in the family Bible.

The altar boy serves six o'clock, the first Mass at dawn. He sings falsetto

Christ has died

Christ has risen

Christ will come again

And all the while he thinks of coming again. The Faithful receive their Lord in both bread and wine. Sunlight falls through the walls of saints in stained glass, one red streak across his alb, like the boy saint, St. Sebastian, pierced with arrows. He sings again with the full boys' choir

Lamb of God!

Lamb of God!

Yesterday, his father caught him at his own second coming. He forbids

his son to take Communion. His father makes him promise to confess following Mass. The Body of Christ. The boy holds the chalice. His hands are pure.

Shannon snaffled Jim.

Jim lushed. "Don't tease me privately anymore, Shannon! Don't masturbate me to climax—"

Did Suzanne teach the boy that word?

"Make me come your best way—"

Shannon bent in low, less than an inch from the boy.

His tussock smelled like bergamot, his turret smelled like dulse. Shannon spanned the final inch between them with his tongue.

"Cripes!" Jim flourished. He scrambled his wrecked shirt up around his nipples.

Shannon licked the glans. The brusk pores along its joint peppered his tongue. He tweaked the blem from its birthday snip. It pulsed. Shannon felt chyme rising in the boy like sap in a hot spell.

It felt like the flavor of *citron pressé chaud*, spiked with clovenails and cinnamon sticks. Spit creeked his pubic hair. Shannon sponged his tammy, gumballed his serviceberrys, harrowed his finiculous, tooled his rim.

"Cripes-on-a-Hillock!"

Shannon swallowed Jim Brandekker whole.

It tasted as sweetly as it looked and smelled, like occulted peace, and sexual distress.

Jim thrust, embarrassed to act so male. The good heat began like rust in iron, sweet as peppermint doped with whiskey, like the tubers of

living spearmint swelling in rain, like high C blown through his flute until he ran out of breath completely, even chirping *I can't* to bring up the air in the roots of his lungs, and fainted, absolutely enlightened. It flashed from tinder to wildfire, the lemon thrill overcoming his boyhood, climbing his spine, nub by nub, arcing his hips and collar bones, racing from ankles to wrists, elbows to knees, cruising from nape to tailbone, bickering his bellybutton, bubbling his eyes, blossoming in his yellow hair, bigger than his body, big as the sky.

Every moment Jim had lived to love, the yellow sun, the blue sky, awoke and was a dawn in him. He sneezed on chalk-dust, burst bubbles, kicked his feet in October leaves, smelled must in a broom closet, heard mice scream, hurt by bbs, waved sparklers on a pink evening in July, ran through sprinklers without his swim trunks, pulled ribbons off prizes, watched t.v late on Saturdays, spat bubble gum off an expressway bridge, broke the globe in History class, tore the seat out of his blue-jeans, thanked people for candy on trick-ortreat, read Peanuts and giggled, snacked on gingerbread, filled his pants on Christmas Eve, dribbled milk down his chin, he hit his teacher with a rubberband and got his paddy slapped, he played Monopoly and got sent to Jail, he crunched pretzels, he misspelled words, he peed on trees, he waved goodbye, he waved hello, he cheered, he shouted, he yawned, he muttered, he daydreamed, he pretended, he imagined he could fly, he stood still and was a tree amid the woods—

Energy, tension, sunlight, sound, leaf, sailors' knots, bicycle wheels, nickels, seagulls, dandelions, crickets, lemonade, geometry, willows, falling snow & falling stars, the Prayer of St. Francis; bubbles, icebergs, rain, basketball, watermelon seeds, Vernors, maybes, mostlys, moths, ashes, bleedy lips, birthday candles, moonwatching, dreams, Snickers Bars, sand dunes, poems and poems, whales, yellow, stars, blue, Leonard Cohen, limestone, rumors, the Lake, flint, crumbs, the waterfall, song, and sugar, and fire, courage, and comehither eyes, playing soldiers in the dark—

Jim burst with body heat. His bones were glass, his heart a prism, his

body motion breaking into the spectrum, from infrared to ultraviolet. The mill dissolved into gravity, and weight into midair—he gave his body to Shannon with one last thrust, tossed his yellow bangs out of his blue eyes, his body cast into light, his penis deeper in than the truest, most honest yes Shannon ever said, and—through all of his living and his history, with all the love of his boyhood, in the whole of his adolescence—Shannon made Jim Brandekker come.

"Ulp!" Jim yelped, his cry like a first breath. He squirted a great dose of sperm, his semen annointing the both of em, his last thrill like luciferous lightning cleaving a star.

The beistings of the boy overflowed his mouth, and Shannon swallowed.

Jim did not dwindle. He championed.

Shannon sat up, fire in his eyes, his freckles glistening, his chin coated. Jim reached for him, and they stuck their mouths together in a smutty kiss, creamy with celery soup, camomile, skireet, and fizz.

Jim had days tars in his eyes. "You sucked my penis!"

Shannon swabbed his mouth on Jim's shirttail.

"You sucked my penis! You settled your head athwart my hips!" Jim tended himself. "You made me come! And I still got my erection!"

Shannon pumped Jim. "Christ, he comes and he's ready to come again." He kissed Jim's penis, then pulled up Jim's underpants. Jim left his underwear sloppy, half-on, half-off his thighs. "How do you feel, Brandy?"

Blond hair quenched his shoulder. Jim answered in a second. "Free!"

Shannon uncorked the Cracklin Rose and trickled wax to stick the candle on to the floor. "Let's toast your new-found freedom."

Jim sat up, pulling up his cords, but leaving em open, and baggy

around his rear. His erection felt good, sticky and hot in his crooked underwear. "You got wine in that bottle?"

Shannon filled his mouth and shared a kiss of wine with Jim. He held the bottle and Jim swigged.

Jim released the bottle and wiped his mouth on his wrist. "I can't believe you, sucking my penis!" His voice was liquid, like a dove catching her breath.

"In the candlelight you looked good enough to eat."

Jim sneered at the smarmy remark. He rocked, crosslegged, his hands inside his open zipper. "Better to light my single candle than to curse my darkness!"

"The Bible, huh?"

"Huh?"

"Comes from the Bible, Brandy. Book of Proverbs. Means better to be a majority of one than to be silent."

"I don't think so. I think that means you can't see darkness in the mirror."

They sat crosslegged together, touching knees, Jim just unbuttoned and unzipped, Shannon in just his underpants.

"How come you don't call me Jim?"

"You'll always be a nickname to me."

"How come?"

"Because," Shannon tapped Jim on his nose. "You just might not be real."

"A course I'm real!" Boldsome, Jim led Shannon to the front of his

underpants. "Doesn't that feel real to you?"

Shannon could not speak. He pushed Jim down, and lay on top of him. His tears dropped into Jim's eyes.

"Don't be sad, Shannon—"

Shannon sat up, and sat alone. He stared into the candlelight to keep from looking at Jim.

"Shannon. What's the matter? I'm not going to call the authorities. I like how you sucked my penis."

Shannon did not wipe his eyes. "For the moment you're here, but when I look again I might find I imagined everything —even this darkness—even you—"

"I'm going nowhere, Shannon; and you sure dint imagine me—"

"We never know what will remain. I have an attic in my house, Brandy. I have always liked attics. Attics are the places our places go when they die. We'll explore my Auntie's attic some rainy afternoon. Auntie says Mother saved everything, but most of her things were lost in the fire that killed my father.

My mother's picture is up in the attic, and my grandmother's broken mirror, and a trunk full of props and costumes from my father's magic act, even his top hat. Of course, my mother didn't keep the crows and doves that survived the fire. Smoke—they said smoke killed my Father. So why did the goddamn birds survive?

"Let me put this in terms a child could understand. Don't get angry. I'm not calling you a child. I'm more of a child than you are, in many ways. But you're closer to the experiences that best illustrate what I mean. Did you ever play soldiers, Brandy? I don't mean on Saturday afternoons when you hid in the bushes with that girl you liked. Did you ever play soldiers in the dark? You didn't do battle with army men, or plastic machine guns. You chose a flashlight for your weapon. You

could hide anyplace. You could hide in the bushes again, if that girl you liked wanted to play, or in the garage, or under the neighbor's porch, or among the peach trees. And no one was on your side, and no one was on anyone else's. You played every-man-for-himself. You could shine your light in any direction, as many times as you liked, but if someone shined their light on you—if you were caught in an enemy's beam—you were killed; you were out of the game.

"And that's what we do. We blind people with ourselves. We blind people with our greed, or with our anger, or with our fear. We even blind people with our love. *You will be better. You will be better because I am better than you, and I am humbling myself to make you more like me.* We scream at the hearts of other people. *And then we shall have our perfect world.* We call this game of blindness love, and we will love our whole world according to our gospel of ourselves until our whole world sees how loving we are." Shannon sneered at the tone of his own voice, so hard he tore the flesh of his bottom lip, like a dog made mad at himself.

"We're playing a game without frontiers, and we take our turns too seriously. We forget the absurdity of our position—so small against the stars, so large against the sky. Soldiers are the most abused children of God on earth. They have no choice.

And that's how we live. We're the unchosen people. We follow orders too big for us, through a darkness larger than we'll ever be, guided by a drifting star, towards a harbor that's always unseen.

"We don't understand our Golden Rule. Don't let that modifier trip you up. Everything that people don't want to use they turn to gold. *Love your neighbor as yourself?* That doesn't mean love the other person because you love yourself. We misunderstand that preposition. We have to love the other person because the other person *is* our self. Love is not if no one loves."

His words made the candleflame flicker. The flame went out of focus for Jim, a blurry star: White Square on White Canvas.

"Brandy, do you ever wonder where does the flame go when you blow out the candle? Does the light enter another dimension? Join the Twilight Zone? Or does the light still ghost the wick, waiting for the next match to strike, waiting for the new fire to be kindled, and the candle to be lit again?"

Jim had light in his eyes. The crybaby tears made the darkness huge.

"And that's love, Brandy; love's the flame. The flame is the flame's reflection. Once you blow out the candle, the light is gone. Like love. . . ."

Of this love I too am guilty, Shannon told himself, and told the silence elsewhere and everywhere. I do not love. I'd love love to make me become this boy.

Jim turtled his chin in his sweaty collar, and let his tears fall. He could cry in front of Shannon, because Shannon cared. "My attic is my bedroom, and sometimes I go remember. I don't know how the mirror sees. I don't know about fires, and I don't know about flames. I don't know about light, and I can't see in the dark. All I know is I see myself best when I look in your eyes. And I'm glad I seen every second of you."

Shannon pulled Jim to him. "Goddamn you, Brandy, why don't you suck me?"

Jim scooted forward, half-in, half-out of his cords. "You want me to? You really want me to?" Jim hugged his chest to his knees to get close to Shannon. He narrowed his eyes. He could've counted the yellow stitches in the waistband. "I wanted to when I was a little kid last summer. Still do. I wanted to when a kid asked me to. When I was a kid. Still am. I may not do a good job—"

"A blow job—"

"Yep. I could. I could blow this job." Jim tested the front of Shannon's underpants with just a fingertip. Fierceness and heat made Jim shiver,

an angerish passion. Shannon felt like cedar under rotting bark.

Shannon blushed, unaccustomed to the tenderness of an inexperienced boy, an alpenglow rising on his face.

Jim wormed a finger up inside a legband, itching two goose-eggy testicles. Jim sniffed Shannon out, the strong male smell encouraging, the odor of rosewood, grass clippings, and deodorant soap. Jim settled his head athwart Shannon's hips. "Jesus, Brandy—" Shannon lounged in the sight of the young blond head working inbetween his thighs. Shannon had fed himself on fantasy. He had grown bitter on the fare. Night to morning he had stood alone, his remembered or imagined boys remote as monoliths pointing at the Pleiades, enigmatic as dead tongues. Now a living boy nourished him, more than memory, beyond images. Shannon handcuffed Brandy with his underpants.

Shannon made Jim blink. Jim had seen other boys, but Shannon made him blink. He looked huge. He was a whole-grown-man, his penis roughneck with veins, and with a funny rosy-blue tip. His balls took all the room in his flabby sack. Jim scratched that black crocket, and bunched those balls in a nifty grip.

"Pretend it's an ice cream cone, Brandy."

Jim looked up at Shannon, his face biffen, and shiny, his bangs gummed to his forehead. "What flavor?"

"Taste and see."

Jim nyahed him. Cripes, he was gonna start. He was gonna start sucking dicks. "I'll give it a long kiss—" Jim truckled. He touched the tip of his tongue to the tip of Shannon's penis, tickled under his arms, and around his collar, hot in his loose, roomy shirt. Touching it with his tongue gave Jim prickly heat. It didn't taste like ice cream (not Saunders store-bought or Farfar's homemade.) It tasted like a thunderblast of sudden hot summer rain in the crook of his arm, tingly and tumid, a true heave-offering.

Capable but timid, Jim got Shannon by his eikel. Shannon submarined. Gently, gently, easy and shy, Jim accepted him. Firstly, Jim gagged, hotly sweaty, but docile, still teachable, opening ah. Shannon was sour and thick. Jim swallowed, dogging his tongue. He sucked hard, like one tough kid. He grabbed Shannon by his bare butt. A thrill rose from deep against his tonsils. Natural light, like lightning, artificial light, like flash cubes, flashed off the walls of the mill. Jim sucked until he made Shannon have one of those ejaculations.

Jim slurped off, amazed, his heart thumping. He drooled, then glutched. Shannon tasted like school glue and clover; like soda without sugar, like the color of snow. Cripes! Jim had started sucking dicks! Some homework! "How'd I do?" He sounded snotty, like a kid coming up from blowing bubbles underwater.

"Only girls ask that question."

Jim squirreled the pouch of his cheek clean. He grabbed Shannon by his wrist and stuck Shannon's hand back inside his unzipped corduroys. "Does that feel like girl to you?"

"Why did you pull your pants up? I was just getting turned on again."

"You pulled my pants up! You want to go on? You want me to take my pants off?" Jim swatted his back pockets—and his fingers found that little packet from Doctor Suzanne. "Oh, Cripes, I'm not polite!"

"What are you talking about, Brandy? You didn't even spit out my sperm."

"Sperm! I forgot about sperm! I'm supposed to be polite with my sperm!" Jim showed the little blue packet.

"Trojan-Enz Lubricated." Shannon read. He chuckled. "You can't get me pregnant, Brandy."

"That's my condom, Shannon! That's like a private balloon that fits on me. Doctor Suzanne made me promise to put that on myself if I got to do sex!"

"Suzanne gave you a condom?"

"I'm supposed to squirt my sperm in there, because boys can't get a license!"

"Let's have a little lubrication, eh?"

"And I forgot! How could I remember? I did impolite sex! I bet my nuts fall off from green diseases!"

"Put your condom on, Brandy"

"But we did sex, Shannon! We did sex impolitely!"

"Put on your condom. We didn't have intercourse."

Jim blinked. "Is that possible?"

"I'll pick your cherry"

"You juiced my cherries. Don't you mean my nuts?"

"I want your absolute virginity."

Jim clipped his tongue under an incisor, turning the little blue packet between his fingers like a square wheel. "Do I just take all my clothes off, or what!"

"Take off your pants."

Jim blushed.

"And your underpants."

Some instructions from his teacher!

Shannon displayed himself, laying back, to watch Brandy; to let

Brandy see.

Jim chewed his bottom lip, feeling Shannon's sore-looking split lip as if Shannon's self-inflicted wound was his own. He stood, his knees creaky, and crept to a shadow to cricket off his cords by friction. He squirmed his feet free of his cuffs, his socks coming off with his corduroys. He left his cords crumpled on the floor, the zipper grinning. He screedled over the candle to swipe off his underpants, leaving em next to the wine bottle, the legholes marking out the figure 8 for forever. Coolness stung him down there. Jim knelt between Shannon's legs, nothing on but his plummy, ripped-open shirt, his own erection poking up, tall as it could get without a touch. "You know I'm even a virgin according to Webster's."

"Brandy, put on your condom."

Jim blinked at the little blue packet he held like a prayer. He held the edge under his nose, and tore the foil, sneakily, between two fingers and two thumbs. He wheedled out a fleshy rubber disk. "This thing is all yucky."

"Keep the yucky side up and unroll the condom over your penis."

"I better not."

Shannon steered his timothy hand. The shock of the grip made his penis a missile. Shannon capped it with the condom, like a weird little hat. He unrolled the condom the length of Jim's shaft. Jim purred.

Brandy daubbed the tip. "Ooo, boy jelly." He made it jump. He looked at Shannon, half in shyness, half in astonishment. "How do we do this?"

Shannon cobbed Jim, spreading boy jelly.

Jim pumped his knees. "Peanut butter." Jim giggled. He scowed his shoulders and hips, nimber and noggy. He starched his neck. "Don't you wanna wait until my sophomore year?"

Shannon drew Jim closer, more than beckoning.

"I'll have Biology then—"

Jim straddled Shannon, his gingham shirt veiling his ribs, like a picnic cloth tabernacle, with a fullgrown man standing inside. He braced himself on fingertips and toes, bridging Shannon. Shannon crossed his legs around Jim's waist, guiding Jim's glans, cupping Jim's testicles. Jim slid his penis up inside Shannon.

"Jeepers Cripes!"

Shannon opened his body, whole as morning. Jim dawned.

"I'm inside you!"

Shannon winged his big white hands on Jims chest, his thumbs touching below Jim's adamsapple. He hurricaned Jim's nipples with his baby fingers.

Jim eased it in all the way.

Shannon crushed Jim in a hug around his ribs under his shirt.

Jim let the hot goodness sink in and saturate him. He seized Shannon around his neck. He could count the blond hairs on his head and body. He had angels in his spine.

"Easy, Brandy. Ease it—"

"I'm easy—"

"You're hard."

Jim snickered, nuzzling earwax. He kissed a lobe and tendon. "Boy, am I hard." Goodness sparked his yellow eyelashes. Should Jim move? Should he pull it out? Jim wiggled, and the goodness quickened, better then best of all.

"Ulp!"

"What, did you slip out?"

"Am I too little for you to feel me?"

"You're a little inexperienced. Did you come?"

"I don't think so."

Jim nosed it in, inched it out. Shannon bore down, confusing Jim. He moved his hips in a circle. Shannon tightened, and Jim almost pulled it out of his condom, then Shannon relaxed, and Jim slipped it in and back inside. Jim made one more wrong move before he sized his thrusts according to Shannon. Then they went crazy on fusion.

Jim grew inside Shannon like a tree growing from seed to seedling, sapling to big timber. He kissed Shannon. He locked their mouths together, gooned on lips and tongues. Shannon lavished. He nogged Jim. Each downward plodge, each upward thrust, blessedly incoming, each tug wholly outgoing; each motion, each emotion, turned outwards from inwards, as natural as spring and autumn, God inbetween. Shannon surged, and, inside Shannon, Jim bolted.

Jim let hot blood pound at his heart, please his ears, gleam at the doors of his eyes, grace his smile. He collapsed against Shannon, a blond explosion on a dark shoulder. He let himself shrink free. Shannon cuddled Jim; twiddled Jim; fondled Jim, gingernuts. Jim watched Shannon luster. He listened to Shannon breathe.

"We fucked!"

Tm a victim of the jimjams. I shall never want another."

They nestled, dancing inside, not wanting, not needing, not a move, not a motivation.

Jim sat up slowly, a long last pleasure teasing him, pulling it out. His erection had wilted, his condom ruckled, like a leaky balloon, a goofy

pinky of cream nubbed up at the tip. "I don't ever want you to do a different boy than me! Let's fuck and fuck until we become one boy!"

Shannon masked his face for a solitary second. Pain that was the pain of love speared his heart, and pierced his eyes and ears. "We can't be together if we become one boy." Shannon slipped the sleeves down Jim's arms and freed the cuffs off his wrists and over his knuckles. "Silly Brandy." The boy's scent flooded the room. "Fucking with his shirt on."

Jim slapped his ribs. "Gosh to be naked in my boyfriend's eyes." He looked up, smiling. "I'm gonna write a poem right here!" He closed his body on the hand Shannon put between his legs.

Shannon scissored Jim one last time around his waist. They rolled over each other, and stood.

Jim shivered. "Here we are with no clothes on." He looked over his sleepy young body, then he looked Shannon over. "You gonna be sore?"

"Never, never." Shannon glimmered. "You're a natural."

Jim set his palms on either side of his penis. It bobbed, head down in its pruning extra skin. "What do I do with this?"

"Hold still." Shannon pinched off Brandy's condom. The latex collar snagged his hair down there and truly hurt.

"What're you gonna do with that?"

Shannon wiped Jim with his own underpants. "One deposit, no refill." He emptied the juice on the floor and tossed the rubber over his shoulder. "For luck."

"You're sneaky, you know, leaving our secrets on this floor. Other kids come here from school. They come here, you know? I bet if we looked around we'd see evidence."

"I'll fill the next one."

"That's right! You can do me! We can go on and on another time, like, over and over."

"Name the day."

"You gonna get more condoms?"

"I'll take you to the pharmacy, and I'll give you the money, but I'll make you do the shopping. Buying rubbers will embarrass you. And shy boys turn me on."

"You mean if I get bold and pee outside or something I won't turn you on no more?"

"Let's see. Let's piss outside."

Jim stood storkfoot and plucked up his underpants between his first and second toe. "Don't you want me to put on my small clothes? At least my underpants?"

"You see. You are a shy boy."

Jim darted. "And shy boys turn you on!" He giggled, and ducked around Shannon, and Shannon chased him out the door.

Chilly rain had ended Indian Summer.

Jim spread his body wide open, Glad Day. "I'm nude! I'm nude outside! Fucked boys nude outside at the end of a pretend summer!"

Rain from the storm had churned the clouds away.

Jim could see stars. "Can we see Serious?"

"Who?"

"The star above the Wasteland. You know. Keep that wrongo dog away

that's man's best friend, or else he's gonna dig you up again."

"You can't see Sirius in October."

"Betcha can. Betcha do. I betcha see that star somewheres this month of the year. Betcha see that star in Egypt." Jim wiggled his penis. "You know what's funny, Shannon? You wanna know what's funny? Funny how people got one of the things they do sex with, you know? One pussy—one penis— one mouth—one—you know—"

"You can say asshole, Jim."

Jim stood close to show Shannon his smile.

"What're you, smiling like an asshole?"

"You said my name. You called me Jim." Jim tented his nose. "A course, you also called me an asshole—"

Shannon peed. He shot Jim in the belly with his stream.

"Take that!"

Jim humped back, and peed himself. He squirted Shannon across the chest, then squirted him higher, on his neck, and on his chin. "I got you! I got you!"

They wrestled, wet each other, spun each other in a ring, just two kids making each other dizzy. They crashed down the easy slope with spooky heads. They fell in the lake.

Lightning astonished the harvest sky

They dunked each other, surfaced, submerged, then floated, paddlefoot, two good swimmers.

Jim waded the shallows, holding his dinkus.

"Don't hold yourself, Brandy."

"You sound like my Ma!"

"I like to see you—"

Jim piddled.

"Awww! Naughty Jimmers piss-a-bath!"

Jim stuck out his tongue, and flung a palmful of the lake at Shannon. Shannon grappled Jim, keelhauled him. Jim fish-tailed, his legs wrapped around Shannon, and Shannon churned Jim's penis in a waterlogged fist, head to nose with his own. Shannon came, and then Jim squirted. Jim tried to net their mingled sperm, to paint Shannon with sticky water.

They lugged each other ashore, sheeting.

Jim skedaddled back to the mill, naked as his goosebumps. Shannon scrambled in right behind Jim, liking the sight of Jim's teenage butt going before him with a wiggle.

The candle still beckoned, burning low. Shadows spooked the walls—long shadows that an hour ago Jim would have mistook for ghosts. Jim slipped into his briefs—because he was cold, not because he was shy.

Shannon put a hand on his shoulder.

Jim trembled, goosepimply, but warm, hot even, under that long white magic hand.

"How do you feel, Brandy?"

His white underwear starked the boy out against his milky legs and belly, and against the black shadow of the wall. His hair dried like gossamer, by increments. Shannon laved the golden-needles around Brandy's swollen nipples.

Jim lazed his hands over Shannon. Shannon felt dark in the darkness.

His skin stuck to Jim's skin, dampness mixed with sweat. "I feel like I never want to go home. I feel like we're home already."

"Why go home, then, Brandy? I have a suggestion."

"I think it may be too tuckered out to take more than a suggestion—" Jim laughed with a hollow noise, snorkled by Shannon's armpit.

Shannon snuggled Jim. "I have a question to ask you, Brandy."

Jim sniggered. "You gonna ask me if I like boys?"

Shannon frowned. "Why don't we run away?"

"Run away?" His voice made those words into three drumbeats, sorry and stony.

"We're late in the night. Why go home? We should run away."

Fishy chills squiggled over Jim. "Run away?" Jim meeked. That word beat like a summons to minutemen to get their guns to emergency. Rudeness and unbelief undermined that word. That was a cold cold lonelysome word, like a mountaintop in Maine, not nearly ready to be seen by men and women. "I can't run away!"

"Why say you can't, Brandy? I love you. And I have money. Let's go north. We can live on an island in the north woods. I could become a blacksmith."

"A beekeeper."

"Anything you want."

"But you don't want to live on an island, Shannon. You want to live with me in my old Brandekker house."

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"Did you make love with Mr. O'Donnelly, Jim?"
"We did."
"Order!"
"Tell us about making love with your teacher, Jim."
"Do I gotta tell? Do I have to tell what I liked, and how Shannon liked
me to do? Would you tell your private likes to a general audience?"
"Don't you want the court to believe your story, Jim? Did you fellate
Mr. O'Donnelly, for instance?"
"Did I inflate him in an instant?"
"Order!"
"If the court will permit me to use the colloquial, did you suck Mr.
O'Donnelly, Jim?"
"If I gotta tell, I did!"
"Order!"
"Shannon inflated me, too."
"Order! Order in this court!"
"Did you engage in sexual intercourse with Mr. O'Donnelly?"
"We used condoms."
"Order!"
"With boy jelly."
"Did your parents discover your sexual relationship with your
teacher?"
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"They saw. I dint have to tell. Shannon told my Dad the first Friday we made love."

"Order!"

"What did your parents do?"

"They dint know what to do with me. And I didn't know what they would do to me. That Saturday was the worst free day of my life. I didn't go out of my bedroom. I spent the whole morning, noon, afternoon and evening and night looking out my window watching for Shannon."

"Did you see your teacher?"

"I dint get to go nowhere but church that whole weekend. And I dint even get to go to church after that first Sunday, because I saw Shannon at church. He looked good in those colors of saints in stained glass. I knew he was sitting behind me because I could feel his heat looking at me. And after Mass my ma yelled at Shannon and told him he never belonged nowhere nowhen in church. He was sinning, and he made me a sin."

"Order!"

"Look, I been like being in the middle of a whirligig. I been a kid lost in the pinwheelpool. This whole thing's like a whirliwind wound around me. All I been wanting to say is figtree you, world! Figtree the whole of you! I been scared by other people—"

"What people?"

"Adult people."

"Do you mean your parents?"

"Yeppers, sure, but especially I mean the Dean, if you mean school. Ma took me to see that Dean on Monday after me and Shannon made love. She goes She'll go talk in front of t.v. cameras or somewhere public if Shannon dint get dismissed improperly today. The Dean goes He could see Ma's feelings like a fire in a tower. And Ma accused St. Agnes of keeping secrets about a teacher who liked boys at a Catholic school."

"Order!"

"That Dean asked to talk to me alone, but Ma goes She'd never see me alone with any of the men at that school, priests or not. So the Dean goes Did Mr. O'Donnelly ever look at me funny? And I said he looked hot. And I got hot when he looked at me. And Ma sobbed. And the Dean goes Did Mr. O'Donnelly ever talk to me about men and boys together? I said You mean with sex on his mind? He goes Say impure thoughts, Mister Brandekker. I guess I smiled, and I shouldn't've smiled, and maybe I laughed, and I should've never laughed. But that Dean got so serious he was funny. He made me have those thoughts that Dean thinks aren't pure, but those thoughts made me feel pure sex—"

"Order!"

"That Dean goes right out and asked me in front of Ma If Shannon assaulted me for nothing but sex."

"Order!"

"And the Dean goes Tough Love, Missus Brandekker. You will only save your son—meaning me—with Tough Love."

"What did the Dean mean by Tough Love?"

"That meant that Shannon got suspended from teaching, because of me. I couldn't go to school until the school decided how to solve their problem with me once-and-for-all. They made me stay home, and I could only be by myself when I went to bed. They made me drown in my hurt feelings like a real whirlpool. They made me freeze. I didn't see Shannon for an eight-day week. And I wanted to make love."

"Order!"

"How were you able to see Mr. O'Donnelly on Halloween?"

"I saw Shannon on a sneak-out."

"Do you mean you ran away?"

"You make me cross, you know? How could I run away? I only had the money left from buying my poem book. And I had to buy condoms."

"Order!"

"You purchased condoms for you and your teacher to use in your lovemaking?"

"A doctor told me how to use condoms to save myself from green diseases. And the guy at the drugstore counter dint wanna sell em to me without calling my ma. I asked him if buying condoms made me a teenage criminal in this state. He goes No. And I lied. I told him we were looking into the religion of sex at school.

"Shannon sure got glad to see me. I told him I dint get him a big birthday present. I just gave him the box of condoms."

"Order!"

"We shared em, me down to my rugby shirt, Shannon down to nothing at all."

"Order!"

"After we shared em—after Donald showed up with his ruinable picture story and made everything up go down—"

"Order in this court!"

"After all, Shannon still said he wanted me, and he wanted to see me. After all the troubles I made for him, Shannon still wanted to see me more than his own face in the mirror. He made me feel like one boy out of all the boys in the world. And that's when Shannon asked me a

second time to run away.

"I said I couldn't run away I said my parents cared about me. Shannon goes Right. Is that how come your dad hit you on the chin? He goes I can still see the bruise, he must've hit you pretty hard. I said my dad hit me because he cares about me. And Shannon goes Right. Dads always sock the children they care about. I said I'm no child. And Shannon goes No, I'm not some candy-ass freshman with nothing but bubbles in my head. I'm a real kid. And that was the second time Shannon called me real. And he said I could really go places if I went places with him."

"Did you agree to run away with Mr. O'Donnelly?"

"That same Halloween birthday night we agreed to run away and to give Donald money to get those pictures."

"Why didn't Mr. O'Donnelly pay the price for the incriminating photographs and run away with you?"

"Those weren't criminal photographs! I mean, maybe that's a crime how they got taken, but they weren't pictures of anything wrong."

"Order!"

"Why did Shannon take off his clothes in Donald's bedroom?"

"That made me mad, too, firstly, because, you know, I get jealous."

"Order!"

"But I guessed how come. This world made Shannon easily angry. He said angry things, in angry ways. He said g d you Brandy do this, and g d you Brandy how come we aren't doing that? And I dint know how come he got angry. I thought, we're doing stuff, how come he's mad at me? But I had a lot of thoughts while I spent those eight days in my bedroom. I dint do nothing but sit by my bedroom window and think. I thought myself into sweats. And I figured out how Shannon is just

angry. He had his angerish passion for boys for whole years. And he figured he would do nothing but make boys angry if they made out what he wanted to do with em. He figured that I dint wanna do stuff. He figured no boy did. He figured he might as well get angry with me, because I'd get angry anyhow."

"Do you think Shannon wanted to make Donald angry?"

"Shannon was angry at Donald. Shannon was already angry. Shannon was just angry, that's all."

"Shannon used his body as a weapon?"

"Shannon used his body real good—"

"Order!"

"I'd like to get Shannon to teach me to use my body that good!"

"The witness will confine his responses to the questions!"

"But do you think Shannon wanted to hurt Donald when he took off his clothes?"

"I guess. I guess if a boy doesn't wanna do stuff like me and Shannon did and another boy makes that boy do that stuff I guess that would hurt him. And Shannon would hurt anybody who hurt me. And Donald wanted to hurt me because I made love with boys."

"But Shannon isn't a boy, Jim. Shannon is a fullgrown man. Shannon is your teacher, and he's a fullgrown man."

"I'm almost grown. I'm daily growing. Shannon makes me grow."

"Do you feel that Shannon has made you do something that will make you grow up wrong?"

"I guess I'll have to write a book about myself to prove that Shannon did good for me. I'll call the book Froots, and I'll be sure to misspell

the title, so all the readers will know the book's by me. I can't grow up without Shannon."

"KATE, WILL YOU calm down! How should I know where Jim is! You're the one who made him take your house key!"

Kate Brandekker did not speak. She had not spoken for hours. And that made James angrier still. She walked the common room, shredding Kleenex, but she did not get hysterical until ten after three. "Where can Jimmers be? What if he's out all night?"

James almost missed the soft trudge of sneakers in wet grass. He yanked open the front door.

Jim stood in the square white shadow of the veranda, reaching out to grasp the door knob.

The boy looked unclean in the cold light. The boy actually smelled—he smelled like sweat; like something animal; something basically unnatural. He was soaked. He had walked a long way in the rain. His gingham shirt was buttonless, splayed open on his scrawny shoulders, showing off his skinny chest. He brushed back his drippy hair. A weird peace had collected in his eyes. He waved from his hip in his small way. "Hi."

A tall, dark young man stood behind her son. The brave stranger stepped into the doorway when Jim stepped into the stairhall.

[&]quot;Why? Why not?"

[&]quot;Because Shannon and me are in love."

'This is Shannon," Jim said, pointing to the stranger with the thumb of the hand he had hooked into his belt loop. "Shannon O'Donnelly He is my teacher, and now him and me have become best friends."

On an impulse James considered seizing O'Donnelly and using him as a battle-ax to kill her son. He grabbed the boy by the collar of his ripped shirt, dragged him down the stairhall, through the common room, and pitched him headfirst into the dining room.

Jim did not protest. He didn't make a sound.

James went in and slammed the dining room door.

James clenched his teeth. "Get up."

"I got it up." Jim dint get up.

Kate pounded on the door. "Jimmers? Jimmers! Tell your father to open this door!"

Jim looked around Dad, his head to one side. He considered for a second, then looked Dad square in the face. "Ma says for you to open that door."

James spit at the door. Stupid bitch. If she wanted to get in why didn't she go upstairs and come down the back stairs through her son's bedroom? James heard his daughter moving upstairs. Screw her! If she came down the back stairs to rescue her brother James would chase her back to bed, wielding the little bastard like a club. James looked at her son. "Get up, I said."

By some miracle, her son obeyed. He got up and he came and stood in front of James, like a dutiful son.

James hated her son. He hated the sneaky way he looked, the filthy way he smelled. He hated her son for standing in the middle of the dining room and getting the carpet sopping wet. He hated him for having ripped his clothes. James advanced, angry as a commandment.

"Where were you!"

The boy sniffled. "Out."

The boy would be suffering from more than a cold by sunrise. "Out! Where?"

Dad dint want to ask questions, Dad wanted to shout.

James raised a hand—to backhand the boy across his face. The boy did not duck. "I been at the mill."

His quick reply disappointed James. He had been looking forward to beating the truth out of her son. James gathered his rage, letting his question become a question before he erupted again. "What were you doing at the mill at three in the morning?"

Jim shrugged beneath the sloppy protection of his shirt, like an idle god who couldn't care less. "We made a little." The boy belched, interrupting himself. He grinned.

Dad got a whiff of his breath. "Have you been drinking?"

Jim burped again. "A little." He grinned bigger.

"You drank a little! You made a little! You made a little what?"

The boy lolled his head, like the last cornflower of the season. Jim knew a word: Jim knew a word: "Love."

"Love?" James seized the boy by the throat. "You made love? You made a little love? Ill give you a little! Ill give you a little love! You goddamn little—you little—"

"What, Dad? little what?" Jim smiled, showing all his perfect, evenly-spaced white teeth. "Were you gonna call me a fag, Dad?"

James stared at the brightening eyes of her son. He shuddered. His eyes were blue as glass. His eyes were glass. This boy was not real. He

punched her son with all his might on the jaw.

"Ulp!"

The boy cried out once, and once only, and spun backwards onto the dining room table.

"You made love with who? With who? Tell me with who!"

Kate rained against the locked door. James heard his daughter join her mother. He did not hear O'Donnelly. They were all too stupid to use the back stairs. James snatched a chair from under the table. "Stay out of here!" He threw the chair at the door. "You hear me, Kate? Get out of here!" The chair missed the door, but splintered wonderfully against the wall.

Jim balled himself up, like that dove under attack from that mean black cat. The hateful hands were fireballs.

"Faggot! Faggot! Do you want me to call you a faggot? Is that what you want me to call you? I ought to beat you until you can't walk!"

Her son cried hard, fighting off Dad with his own worthless punches, shielding his face, covering his eyes.

"You made love! You made love! Who made love with you!" He pounded on her son with no mercy, as if he were a boy made of straw and tar.

Her son whimpered, and rolled under the table. He lay face down on the floor for a second, then for a minute he tried to run away. He staggered, but he couldn't stand. He tried to crawl. He mumbled. Had Dad broken his teeth? He couldn't walk. Dad was true.

"James! James! What are you doing to Jimmers?"

"Dad! Dad! Is little Brother all right?"

Kate kicked the door.

"Keep out of this!" James pulled the boy to his feet by his long blond hair.

James held her son up against the wall by a fistful of that pale hair. He held her son against the window frame. Month by month, along that window, his Mother had measured her son's growth in ink on the walnut woodwork, from twenty-two inches at birth to just about five-foot-two. The boy would remain this size. He would never grow up.

James looked at her son. The boy had a bloody nose, and a bleeding lip. The purple bruises on his chin would be swollen by morning. He had small purple circles under his eyes, and smudges on his cheeks from crying and rain, and snarls in his cornsilk hair. *Ecce Homo* — behold the homo. He needed cool water. He needed peace. He needed a place apart. He needed to make love....

"Who made love with you at the mill?" James asked, serenely as if he had never entered this room. "Tell me, son."

"Let me tell him, Brandy!" Shannon O'Donnelly called from the foot of the back stairs.

One of em had finally figured out they could use the back stairs.

"Shannon!"

James released her son.

Jim stumbled, and let Shannon support him.

"I met your son at your Festival. We went for a ride on the Ferris Wheel, and I told him the truth. I told him I love him. We went to your old mill and we made love."

James held his eyes wide open. "You? Made love? With her son?" And Dad exploded—laughing.

Jim and Shannon blinked at each other. Jim lolled his head, and Shannon pouted. They had switched expressions.

"Wonderful! Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la! You're wonderful!"

Shannon laughed, too.

Jim tried to snicker, but his mouth hurt bad. This had been sneaky easy.

"Her son makes love with men! Wonderful news!"

"I'm glad I'm good news with Shannon." Jim slurred. "Because then you won't get mad when I tell you I'm giving Shannon our old family house."

God toppled, Father and Son. God fell through the Spirit of Gravity, smack into Dad's eyes. Dad looked at Jim Brandekker, face to face for their first time.

"I'm giving Shannon our old Brandekker house."

"I am not your father! And you are not my son!"

The Foreman rose, and unfolded the paper where she had written the verdict of the Jury. And she began to read

17 December 1976 - 4 October 1991

