Preface

A work of fiction is one made of many parts: characterization, structure, detail, language, and point of view. All five come together to form a unity, a clarity of idea and intent, that strengthen the story and make it a cohesive unit. Edgar Allen Poe in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition claims that all elements of fiction must always be in mind while writing in order to achieve a solid, well-developed story. "Nothing is clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its denouement before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the denouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention" (Poe, 793). So, Poe claims that every element of the story must take form within the author's mind before he or she can write a story successful in its intent and unity. With that in mind, here is a critique of the five elements of fiction as they pertain to this thesis.

Characterization

Characterization, perhaps the most important aspect of fiction, consists of many different elements. Appearance, credibility, history, purpose, action, desire, and fear, plus many more, combine to produce character. In the case of my thesis several different characters are presented, but I will begin by discussing the main character who presents himself to the reader as a nameless young man, but we will call him Thomas throughout the preface in order to avoid confusion. For the character of Thomas I wanted to create someone who was unsure of his own character, or someone who was trying to find himself. Therefore, I was able to develop him as a character somewhat slowly throughout the story, because he himself was developing as he wandered through the happenings of the story. John Gardner in his book *The Art of Fiction* says,
to make us see and feel vividly what his characters see and fell - to draw us into the characters' world as if we were born to it - the writer must do more than simply make up characters and then somehow explain and authenticate them (giving them the right kinds of motorcycles and beards, exactly the right memories and jargon). He must shape simultaneously (in an expanding creative moment) his characters, plot, and setting, each inextricably connected to the others; he must make his whole world in a single, coherent gesture, as a potter makes a pot (Gardner, 46).

And so I created Thomas with that and mind and tried to tie his character into the setting and mood of the story as a whole. I began by drawing a connection between Thomas and his mother, to help establish his feelings of loyalty, or to establish who he most identified with, for I thought that would help to define who he was as a person. I used little dialogue to help develop Thomas' character, because I wanted him to float through the events of the story, almost drug along by his own subconscious. So, the absence of lengthy lines of dialogue helped to keep his character shrouded and cloudy. And at first he is a bit of a misty character, but slowly through the story Thomas begins to become more clear and assertive. With Theodore he merely sits and talks. His actions are confined to his mind, but with the twins he reacts physically as well as mentally, and then finally, with Hannah, he reacts mentally, physically, and emotionally.

For the secondary characters I will begin by discussing the mother. I attempted to create a strong sense of who the mother was and what she meant to Thomas without having her bog down the story. She is presently only through memory, which I think helps to strengthen the effect she has on the story, because she as a character is completely created by Thomas, or he chooses to show whatever aspects of her he chooses to show through his memories. She is almost abstract, or not completely grounded.

Theodore Kruschevny is a more concrete character than the mother. I created him as an older, experienced man who is also lost to offset the newness of Thomas, to almost
mirror him. To create his character I relied mostly on description and a little on dialogue.
I tried to stay consistent with his weathered features and grainy voice to create an almost
sad and hopeless character. His character does seem to break, however, when he begins
to tell his story. But I attempted to build up to the moment by suggesting his many travels
and all the stories he's learned and experiences he's had. I decided to use the change to
present the old fisherman as a conglomeration of many different stories or personalities
because of his long life, again to mirror the different characters coming from Thomas
throughout the story as he tries to find himself.

The twins are created a good deal through dialogue, even though there's is also
limited. Their voices are in contrast to the rest of the story. Their rhythms of speech and
word choice greatly offset the scene in the bar with Thomas and also what is to come later
with Hannah and her mother. Their characters are created also through physical
description, but one is always connected with the other in description to maintain their
lack of individuality and create a giant mass of one character split between two bodies. I
chose to create the twins so closely connected to contrast Thomas' fear of loss of self into
the routine of drab life. They were created without history or future, which I suppose
makes them somewhat flat characters.

Hannah I created as a doppelganger of Thomas. Someone who is also experiences
loss and tries vainly to deal with it. All the characters throughout the story were created
specifically to correlate with the aspects of Thomas' character. Hannah was created
primarily through description of her appearance and actions. Her words are even
unimportant, up to a point, except for the way she speaks them.

**Structure**

On the most elementary level the structure of a story consists of its principal parts.
In this story there are three principal parts, or sections, through which Thomas travels, and
each section is set apart by whom he is in contact with. The first section of the story
involves Theodore, the second the twins, and the third Hannah and her mother. Another elementary feature of the stories feature are the memories that begin every section, which provide more information about Thomas as a complete character with a past and selected memories. But, when speaking of story structure one is concerned primarily with the three necessary features of a story, which are conflict, crisis, and resolution.

Janet Burroway in her book *Writing Fiction* states that "conflict is the first encountered and the fundamental element of fiction, fundamental because in literature, only trouble is interesting" (Burroway, 31). And so, in this story, there are many conflicts, but the main conflict, and the first presented is the loss of Thomas' mother and his inability to move on after that loss, his inability to live his life without that element, his mother, which was such an important part of his life. There are other conflicts in the story, though, which I will call secondary conflicts, because they arise from Thomas' attempts at finding himself. The first of the secondary conflicts arises in the conversation with Theodore. While talking to the old sailor Thomas finds himself unintentionally lying. He does so and cannot control it. It is a conflict within his own character, something that he himself does not wish to do, but does so anyway. This conflict is primarily mental. The second of the secondary conflicts arises from Thomas' interactions with the twins and the police. Thomas disrupts police business, which is the center of the conflict, and then decides to run away before being caught. This conflict is one primarily of a physical nature, for it is Thomas' presence that creates the conflict. And the third of the secondary conflicts come with his interactions with Hannah. Hannah and her mother present Thomas with an emotional conflict, as he must decide whether or not he can help them, whether or not he can gather himself emotionally to provide what they need him to provide. This conflict leads to the crisis and resolution of the story, but more on that later. So, throughout the story Thomas deals with the primary and secondary conflicts as he wanders about attempting to find something, he knows not what, that will allow him to continue his life. And so, I attempted to present Thomas, a character with no personal
acquaintances or loved ones left living or around, with conflict through the random connection of lives on a random afternoon.

The crisis of the story comes from Thomas' mind, but his attempt to decide whether or not to help Hannah and her mother. Burroway states that "in a short story any mental reversal that takes place in the crisis of a story must be manifested; it must be triggered or shown by an action" (Burroway, 39). In this story the crisis is triggered by Thomas' connection of his mother to Hannah's, and his understanding of the importance of letting go and moving on as Hannah has chosen to do.

The resolution of the story comes rather quickly, for once Thomas has moved through the crisis action, he is aware of his self, and therefore will be able to live his life again as he once lived it, full of emotion and thought. He is no longer a ghost floating through a story without feeling but a man aware of his own emotion. Therefore, I concluded the story rather abruptly at the end, without actually resolving the conflict of the third section, because the primary conflict of the story has been resolved. Thomas has decided to move on. He must let his mother's passing be but a memory, like everything else, so that his mind is prepared to live in the present and allow Thomas to be who he is. So, ultimately, the conflict of the story is one of man against himself. Thomas must overcome his overwhelming feelings of loss in order to continue his life, and he does so through his interactions with Hannah and her mother.

Detail

"Specific, definite, concrete, particular details - these are the life of fiction," says Janet Burroway. "Details (as every good liar knows) are the stuff of persuasiveness" (Burroway, 58). And with this in mind, I will discuss the use of detail in the story. Throughout the story I interspersed detail as the scenes were unfolding and developing. I attempted to appeal to every sense: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and even taste. The story begins with an image of the mother in her shop to relay the importance of the mother in
the story. But the scene is almost dreamlike. There are no concrete details given, just random remembrances, but from there the story moves into the action rather abruptly. The reader is thrown directly into the everyday life of Thomas in the storefront and from there I attempted to create a tactile world in which Thomas lives. From the shop to the bar to the photo gallery to the park and finally to Hannah's house. Several different locations were used throughout the story to make it comparable to a journey which Thomas takes as he attempts to find himself, and I attempted to create them all as palpably as possible.

The sense of sight is evoked through the flaky blue paint of the drawer rubbing onto the key. Through Theodore's heavy wool cap and tobacco stained mustache, and through the twin's overexaggerated laughing motions. The sense of hearing emanates from the chattering of children as Thomas walks with the twins. Through the clicking of the skinnier twin's clogs as he walks down the sidewalk. Through the gravelly voice of the sailor and Hannah's hesitancy in speech. Touch is evoked through the feel of the brooch in his hand and Hannah's mother's bed as he sits beside her. Taste comes with the coffee and the pie, and smell emanates from the dead October grass. Throughout the story I attempted to provide details that will draw the reader into the story and keep him or her there until the end, without breaking the consistency of the world. But, as Burroway states, "no amount of concrete detail will move us unless it also implicitly suggests meaning and value" (Burroway, 61). So detail must also have significance in order to truly enhance a story. So, instead of describing Theodore simply as an old sailor I describe him like this: "his heavy wool cap lay over his gray hair and sent it waving out over his large ears under the weight. I ordered a beer and he turned to me and held out his steady, wrinkled hand, a hand like my grandfather's." The details of the description, and the description that follows provide more information about Theodore's character than would have been provided had I described him merely as an old sailor.
Language

Jerome Stern in his book *Making Shapely Fiction* defines language, or voice, as "the writer's style as it is expressed in the character's speech and thought" (Stern, 258). I attempted to create Thomas as a character through language by keeping the sentences for the most part in the median between clipped, urgent words and long, flowing sentences. His thoughts are presented constantly throughout the story, and language, I think, is the largest part of his character. Since the reader is presented with but a few examples of Thomas' past or even of his life, he is created primarily through the mood evoked by the language with which he thinks and speaks. And this mood is created a good deal through prose rhythm. I attempted to create through the rhythm of the story almost a dreamlike state through which Thomas floats unattached. And he does so, until the end when he finally becomes attached once again with his own self and his own emotions. Burroway says that significant detail combined with language form a sensuousness for the entire story, and I attempted to create Thomas as a character through this sensuousness. So the reader ultimately formed a sense of Thomas' character that is not based solidly on his own life, since he himself only has a sense of who he is.

At one point in the story, the beginning of the final section, the language begins to shift to bring the story into a more intimate and serious feel. And it does so because at that point in the story Thomas is getting closer and closer to finding himself, and so his language becomes more intimate and more of his own. I also chose to alter the mood slightly to enhance the impact of the story.

Point of View

Point of view is the consciousness that tells the story. Thomas is the point of view character for the story, and he tells the story through first person in order to create a sense of immediacy throughout the story. But the story is told in the past tense, so the immediacy is somewhat diluted. But nevertheless, the immediacy is still more than it
would be if the story is told, say from the third person point of view. And I chose to have Thomas narrate the story in the past tense, because, as Burroway points out, this creates simultaneously a double character. The character who experienced the action of the story, who is Thomas, and the more mature character who relates the story, who is also Thomas. So, in the story, it can be argued that there are actually two main characters, two aspects of Thomas, which I believe help to enhance the theme of the story, the search for self. Presumptuously, then, the story is told by a Thomas who has already found himself, and so he is revisiting his sense of loss of self by retelling the story.

Burroway calls point of view the most complex element of fiction. She states that point of view is ultimately a question of relationship among the writer, the characters he creates, and the reader. Point of view involves many different elements, including choice of speaker, in this case the first person of Thomas, to whom, as if have said, to the self, in what form, a written story, at what distance, and with what limitations.

Authorial distance, says Burroway, "is the degree to which we as readers feel on the one hand intimacy and identification with, or on the other hand detachment and alienation from, the characters in the story" (Burroway, 229). I attempted to create identification with Thomas for the readers through the use of concrete description throughout the main action of the story, and to some extent through the memories of his mother. But I attempted to achieve a greater sense of distance during the memory sections of the story and to some extent in the final bedroom, because readers will not be able to completely relate with Thomas' experiences with his mother, or with Hannah's mother. They will, however, be able to relate to bars and photo galleries and park benches. So, throughout the story I attempted to fluctuate the distance with which a reader might read the story. An element of the narration that helps to distance the story from the reader is the temporal distance, since the story is told in the past. The reader is asked to read the story, not evaluating Thomas as he exists during the telling of the story, but during the action of the story, which again deals with the two Thomas'.
suggests are created through the use of the past tense. The question of limitations in a story deals primarily with the reliability of the narrator. For this story the challenge was to create a reliable narrator who narrated rather unusual events. But for the effect of the point of view to work its greatest magic over the story, I felt it necessary that Thomas be a reliable character, so that the reader will journey along with him, without questioning whether or not what happened actually happened the way it happened. The reader must believe Thomas when he says he did not intend to lie to Theodore, and that he truly wanted to help Hannah.
Bibliography


A Day in the Life of Thomas McKean

I

My mother always tried to fix the smallest things. If a necklace didn't clasp right she'd spend hours hovering above the chain with her magnifying glass before her right eye and her tiny tools dangling between her fingers. She'd work until she got it to clasp just right, and then she'd bring it out of the shop and put it in the display window. Always straight from the shop to the display window. "Right after they're finished is when they're the most beautiful," she'd say as she walked up the isles with a new necklace or ring, or bracelet cradled in her palms. She started the store when I was seventeen, and I had worked with her since then. It was in an unsuspecting downtown store, tucked between all the other downtown store, but ours was different, special, family. Or at least it once was. Lately it had been nothing but a chore. Once I looked forward to walking into the store early in the morning, before anyone was awake, pushing the dust across the hard wood floor. But no longer did I enjoy it. Now every morning I awoke slowly and walked slowly to work and swept slowly and did everything slowly. I was pantomiming my own life. She wasn't there anymore. She had died a few months before. She had been such a large part of everything, that after she left, I felt as if a black hole had formed in the back of the store, where her shop was, behind the heavy wood doors, so that the customers couldn't hear her grinding away. I worked the cash register up front, always. So I stared into the center of it. But there was nothing there. So every day I stood there behind the register, and every day felt the same. Like there was nothing there.

But that morning I had been there no more than two hours when the cash register broke. It was always breaking, and I could never fix it. I stuck my keys into the space that bordered the drawer and vainly tried to force it open, but it wouldn't give, and instead
I only bent my keys. The flaky blue of the drawer spotted the faded silver of my key and reflected, crooked and sporadic, the fluorescent lights of the store. There were at four people milling about with their heads twitching up and down like an owl as they searched the display cases for something perfect. The three in line stood with their arms crossed contemptibly. They were a wash of hair and squinting eyes as they sweat in the store front heat. The sun streamed through the ads that caked the window and turned the room to orange. They sighed audibly as they checked their watches with their elbows cocked high in the air and their eyes locked on me. They knew what time it was. I slapped the machine a few times, producing a barrage of wonderful jingles and clanks as the antiquated metal gears and rods jumped in the iron box. It rocked hard against the glass top counter that displayed all types of jewelry. Abstracted pendants of the crucifix hung with arms wrenched wide clinking slightly against concentric circles dangling from silver chains. Modest rings of multicolored stones took the light of the sun and lit the case like an amusement park. And on a shelf in the corner of the display case were my mother's favorite pieces. They were the special items. Those that she never wanted to sale, but did anyway. They were mostly rings, twisted and stylized, but not overly so. Almost organic. She made most of them before we even had the store. In the garage of my childhood home my mother would sit on a stool before a bench my father had cleared just for her. "Equal rights," he had said with a smirk. And I'd sit with her as she sanded, and filed, and heated the rings, molding them how she wanted. She'd use my twelve year old thumb as a gauge for ring sizes. She said it was the size of an average man's ring finger. But after a while the fumes would be so bad that I had to leave. And I'd go and watch TV but she'd still be out there, making her rings. She always spent a lot of time in her shop. We didn't start the store till later, though, not until after my father left us.

I searched the machine for a release lever. I looked everywhere, but I couldn't find one. I didn't even know if there was one. By then the people in line were growing restless and voicing their complaints, their muffled voices tumbling over the counter. They stared
at me with angry eyes and I shrugged in apology. But I didn't want to apologize, nor did I need to. It wasn't my fault they couldn't spend their money. It was the machine, not me. So I shut the store. They walked past slowly as they left the store, looking at me with contempt covering their faces, painfully overstated contempt that made them look like poorly drawn caricatures as they floated past me.

Finally after a stream of wrinkled noses and pursed lips they were gone. I switched off the lights and tried to lock up, but my key wouldn't fit. I tried bending it straight over my thumbs and even stuck it back into the drawer slot of the register to reverse the damage I had done earlier, but it didn't work, so I left the door unlocked. I would deal with it all later, I thought. I just wanted to go. I couldn't stay in the store any longer. There were too many ghosts.

It was only 10 o'clock. I walked along the streets and noticed all the things that you notice while walking down familiar streets with nothing in particular to do. I noticed the pale purple back wall of the dress shop across from the alley from the shoe repair store, how it shone above the brown buildings surrounding it and I wondered why I'd never noticed it before. After having walked down the same streets for so long it seemed like I didn't even have to walk anymore. I would just get there. So I decided to just go and get there, wherever there was.

It was November but it was still hot, and the sun was already making its presence known. After a few blocks I stopped at a bar and grill. The steps that led down to the floor of the restaurant creaked. No matter how softly I stepped they yelped, as if to let everyone know that I was there. And the closer I got the more I could feel the cool smoky air around me. I always loved that smell. The steps led into a long narrow room, all dark oak and red cushions, like a small town church, and a giant mirror hung behind the bar reflecting all the neon signs humming on the walls and the two exhausted faces drooping over empty mugs. A pair of pool tables stood clustered in a corner, unused and dirty. A few heavy round tables stood in the center of the dim, brown room. Most of
them were empty except for the couple who sat off to the side. They ate chips from a thatch basket lined with thin white paper soaked in grease and caked with salt. Their cigarettes balanced on the ashtray as they cupped the salsa in their chips and lifted them quickly but carefully to their mouths, and I wondered what they were doing there at 10:00 on a Saturday morning. They seemed a bit out of place with their healthy hair and shining smiles, despite the tobacco.

Along the bar sat two men. Their thick denim backs balanced on the wobbly stools. Their boots were caked with mud and they knocked them incessantly on the wooden legs of the barstool. I took a seat beside the older one. His heavy wool cap lay over his gray hair and sent it waving out over his large ears under the weight. I ordered a beer and he turned to me and held out his steady, wrinkled hand, a hand like my grandfather's. "My name's Theodore Kruschevny," he said, with his raspy breath floating, ghosts for words. I didn't understand him at first and asked him to repeat what he said. He looked at me with confounded eyes and said more emphatically. "My name's Theodore Kruschevny," and he once again held out his hand. And I took it, embarrassed that I had not understood him. "I'm Thomas McKean," I said. The name slipped easily, yet uncertainly over my tongue, as if I had said it a million times before but had failed to speak it forcefully, out of habit. But I had never even heard the name in my life. It was as if my subconscious had taken over for a brief second and created me as someone else. The bartender looked at me with his eyebrows raised. I almost panicked. I didn't know what to do. But as my eyes attempted to cut through the smoky air and focus on his wrinkled face I was amazed. I was amazed that the lie had so easily slid from my mind. I had not intended to lie to him, but there it was, thrust into the air between us, hanging awkwardly on the faltering tone with which I spoke it. And I waited for his reaction, wincing in anticipation. He smiled and reached for my hand, and with a slippery shake it was sealed. I was Thomas McKean.

"Can I call you Tom?" he asked.
"Sure."

He believed me. He had taken my lie for fact. But why shouldn't he. He had no reason to believe that I would lie to him. And I had no reason to lie, but it had happened, and it had happened so fast, and it had passed without consequence. I didn't even have time to think about what was going on before he began telling me all about himself. He was a friendly old man, and so I humored him, but wondered why I had lied. He was a retired fisherman who had moved to spend a little time away from the ocean, even though it was his first and only love. We talked about the advantages of living away from the sea, like how here one need not worry about hurricanes, which was a considerable advantage. "I'll tell you one thing," he said in all earnestness, his eyes narrowing as he spoke and his lips pursing between his words, "once you live through one of those nasty storms, you never wanna live through another." But for every advantage he had three disadvantages. He missed it all, I could tell. His motions were slow and forced. His glassy eyes hung painfully in his sockets, as if it hurt them to open and they reflected a shadowy image of the sea as he told me of the ships he had lived on. He told me about how the waves licked up the sides of the hull at night when he curled in his cot with the blankets pulled tight around his shoulders, and about his troubles with finding sleep here, in the still nights. He rambled on and on, and I sat, trying to listen. But I couldn't, not completely. I still couldn't believe that I had lied, and even though it was nothing obscene, it bothered me. I was getting a headache from all the smoke, and the couple in the back had begun to talk loudly, drowning his airy words. But they came endlessly. Some of them I heard, but most bounced off my preoccupied mind and fell away like dead gulls into the ocean of our conversation. He spoke of his various jobs on the ocean. The cargo ships, the passenger ships, the military ships. He had seen them all. He knew how every ship ever invented ran, inside and out, he told me. He told me to give him a name of a ship and any problem and he'd tell me how to repair it, but I couldn't think of any, and after several attempts he let it go. "I'm gonna go back as soon as I get a chance," he admitted, and I nodded in false
empathy with his longing. And then he looked at me in silence, pulling slowly at his ear with his hairy knuckled hand, and asked me what I did for a living.

"I'm an astronaut." And another one tumbled out of my head. Another lie. But more blatant than the first. Again I was astonished. I wondered why, but could think of no excuse. I had not meant to lie. But it had come so easily. It floated over my tongue. AS-TRO-NAUT. The three syllables were a delight to pronounce, and I even indulged in a guilty type of pleasure as I said the word, but as the naut connected my tongue to the roof of my mouth I shuddered. It was as if I couldn't tell the truth. I was unable to. My head was throbbing. I had prepared myself to answer him truthfully, and even had the words waiting in my mouth, waiting for him to finish his question before they tumbled out. But they had been circumvented and instead astronaut had come shining and loud. I was totally incapable of telling that man anything about me that was not a lie. Physically incapable. I could give no voice to the words I wanted to say. And once again I waited in pained silence for his response, my head a twitching nerve.

"Really," he said, "that's great. Have you ever been up on a mission?" I told him not yet. I was on a two week break from my preparation and had come to town to visit relatives and relax. And as I told him about the process of preparing for space travel I began to calm. He believed me, I could tell. So I continued, easily, seamlessly. And the lies came endlessly. It was like I was creating a character. And I relaxed in my creation. The headache faded away, and the throbbing was replaced by a sonorous hum, like a small fan that blew the words out of my mouth into the air between us. I talked about chimpanzees and weightlessness exercises where we would climb steeply into the air in our 747's and then upon reaching optimum altitude drop almost straight back to earth the wings screaming in protest, to achieve a few minutes of weightlessness. I began to tell him about childhood incidences which I had never experienced. I told him of my aunt Mary's tin foil ball which she kept in her bedroom window, and how, when I'd stay at her house in a tent in the yard with my cousin Geoffrey, we'd see her dancing about with the
ball held high above her head in the middle of the night. I told him we later discovered that she used it to cleanse the air around her bed before sleep, so that she could rest peacefully. And I told him many more stories. I made them up and he believed them all, and fed on them, I could tell, for he grew more and more energetic and giddy. His eyes and wrinkled hands began to dart through the air surprisingly quick for his age as I spoke of how I expected my re-entry into the earth's atmosphere to be. His fat, doughy palms slapped his knee to conclude every laugh, and he did laugh, almost continuously, from chuckle to guffaw to roar and then back to chuckle. All smothered in hot breath and wet coughs. He laughed at everything I had to say, funny or not, as if in his amazement at my stories he could find no response but laughter. And amazed he was. I could tell. His ears perked from beneath his heavy wool cap when I spoke about the probes we sent to mars, and what they really found, and his grin bulged from beneath his gray mustache, yellowed in the middle by tobacco smoke. He and I had something in common. Ted and Tom, two peas in a pod, he said. "You see, we're both explorers of the two final frontiers of mystery and discovery. The sea and the sky," he said, "that's where it's at."

He ordered us another beer, smiling, and stood to toast me with his heavy, mud caked boots solid on the wooden floor supporting his shaky legs. "Here's to our young astronaut," he said at the top of his weak voice. "May the stars in space be as bright and comforting as a baby's first tooth." And then, softer, to me, "or something like that. I heard that one in India. Isn't it the damnedest thing to say?" He sat slowly and we silently drank until he turned to me and said "You told me all about yourself and now I will tell you a story." He steadied himself on the stool, took a final drink of beer and then hesitated. "You know, nobody tells stories anymore," he said. "And it's a shame." He then cleared his throat and leaned close to me so he could talk softer and not strain his voice. He told me of all the stories he had heard, and how he had memorized them all. "It's a hobby of mine," he said. There were more people entering the bar, those coming for lunch, and they talked at their tables with their voices fighting to top the ever growing
din of noisy words that flooded the room. He told me to listen well. It was important. And so, beneath the reflecting face of the mirror he told me his story. And as he began to speak he did so with a voice not quite his own. Disguised beneath the gravelly voice and raspy breaths were the words of another's story, another's voice. It startled me when he began, but I soon grew accustomed to it.

There was once a young crippled boy, he told me, who lived in a village near Senata. He was well loved by all his family members, except his father, and they gave him the best of treatment and helped whenever needed, for his was a smile that could turn any sadness away. But his father would rage about his failure of a son. His arms would flap about like a duck and he'd waddle back and forth beside the kitchen table, quacking in anger. But the mother kept the father appeased. She would prepare for him the best cider anyone had ever tasted, and he would drink it by the fire, with his boots in a pile beside the hearth. But, even when appeased, he would not have anything to do with the boy. When they went to work in the fields, they would place him beneath a tree, with his crooked legs laying in the summer grass, and he would listen to the songs of the birds, and mimic them the best he could. And the family would sit around every night and listen to the song he had learned that day. And it became so that all his thoughts rested on the ways and means of being a bird. He studied the way they preened themselves with their jagged beaks raking across their chests, amazingly doing no harm. He watched the way they walk with their skinny bird legs hopping across twigs. And then there were the wings. Wings that flapped around him and encompassed him in a hot air balloon of hope. He loved the way their wings stood still in the rushing wind when they were gliding. It was effortless, he thought, and beautiful. After a few months he refused to speak. Rather he communicated with the shrill calls of the birds, which his father utterly detested. He began to grow more and more angry at the child. He had given him everything he could ever want, he said, shelter and food enough for twenty people. "And how did he repay me?" he'd yelp. "By conjuring up notions about flying away like a bird." The mother and the other children
were very distressed. They would attempt the persuade the father to quit his tirade. But he would feed him eggs for breakfast, to try to make him stop it all. To torture him. But he would push them aside and whistle and thrash his arms about until the whole house was in an uproar, caused by that little crippled boy who only wanted to be a bird. The father soon gave him his own room up in the loft of the barn. "It's a present," he said, a growl rumbling beneath his words. "You're very own room." It was dark and cluttered with straw, but he liked it okay. He crawled about and worked up some sort of nest for himself. He placed it just beneath the window, so that the sun would wake him as soon as it arrived, for he loved to watch the birds in the morning when they shake the dew from the slender wings, casting it about the leaves of the trees and forming a waterfall that wound down the branches of the tree. And he would sit and look out the window all day and call for his cousins to come and help. And one day they did. They came by the hundreds and huddled themselves into the loft. It was all cooing and feathers amongst the broken pieces of fence and barbed wire that littered the loft floor. And they stayed there for a whole day, from morning to morning, surrounding the child and passing him between them, taking him over, but never harming. When they left, they left the room warm and moist. Feathers clung to the walls and floated about through the dusty air. And the boy opened his eyes and began to set himself upright when he discovered an incredible weight on his shoulders and heard a great flapping as he tried to roll over. And as he craned his neck far to his right he saw there on his shoulders the place where his beautiful wings connected to his body. It was a gift from the birds. They had heard his song and come to his rescue. He was so excited that he pounded on the floor with his fists and screamed his loudest bird scream, until his mother walked slowly out of the house, wiping her mouth as she went. She ascended the stairs into the loft with a handkerchief held before her nose, her wiry hair sticking out in the morning sun. And the mother saw her son there before her with the most gracious and beautiful wings he had ever seen, pure white and soft. She began to call the others up to the loft when the winged cripple told her that he had a plan.
They were the first words he had spoken in months, and they startled him when he spoke, and he imagined that he was a brilliant bird who had claimed the power of speech. They were all to stand out front, he said, before the window of the loft. And he was to crawl out of the window and into the air and to glide on the feathers of his beautiful wings. So they stood out front, the mother with her apron still snug about her waist, and the daughter, whose sleepy eyes stuck shut despite her rubbing fingers. The father came out last and stood around them, with his giant arms engulfing him and the mother smiled as the father grumbled about the cold.

They saw his left wing first, as he stumbled out of the window, then his left arm, and head and shoulders. And he fell out of the window a mixture of beauty and horror. His wings spread wide in the open air, but he knew not how to use them. He assumed he would, but he didn't. But he hovered there for a second, just outside the attic window, with the heavy wooden shutters slamming open behind him, and he smiled. He smiled a smile that stretch the length of the horizon. And the whole family stood proud in that moment. Of course, one moment later he fell crashing to earth and broke both of his arms and bent his wings. For he wasn't a bird. He didn't know how to use his wings. The father plucked the wing feathers and used them to make blankets and pillows for the upcoming winter. The mother nursed him while he was bedridden, bringing him every day a bowl of soup and bread with a glass of water, which she sat methodically on the floor next to his bed and then began to feed him, since he could use neither of his arms.

"So, did you like my story?" he asked with his own words slowly returning.

"Yes." I answered. It was an odd story to tell, I thought, but I didn't actually give it too much thought, for I expended all of my energy attempting to discern his flood of harsh sounding words.

"I'm glad, I told it just for you," he said with a wink and a tip of his heavy cap. "His drinks are on me," he told the bartender motioning towards me with his crooked thumb.
Our little friendship was coming to an end, but I wanted to savor it for as long as possible, for there on that bar stool I had actually become another person. It wasn't me who was telling the stories. Instead I had created a character with a past, present, and possible future, from whose mouth I spoke. It was as if the whole life of the astronaut I had stretched before me like a train on its tracks, from whose cargo I could pick and choose whichever memory I preferred. And my two subconscious lies had turned into something. I had changed from myself into a lie, and then from there into another person. I had actually been an astronaut, but not only because I said I was, for at that point it was merely a lie, and one I had no intention of telling at that. No, I had become an astronaut because he believed me to be an astronaut. He, with his sea-sad eyes, had taken my lies and used them to paint me as a character new and shining, like oil paint lit from beneath by an erratic candle. I had become someone apart from me, someone whose life was not at all like mine, and the warmth of my creation, my new being, wrapped around me like a warm winter coat, and he, with his belief, had fastened the buttons, completely immersing me in my otherness. And I sat there relishing in the newness of my creation and my excursion from my everyday self. He bid me farewell, safe trip, good health, and stumbled out of the bar.

II

I left the bar revitalized. I had found a meaning for the day where before there had been none. For I discovered, thanks to Theodore, that I was not entirely limited by my own history. There were times when I could throw it aside like an old sweater and become reborn in a new character. My possibilities were endless, I thought. I had only to find another like Theodore who would talk to me and believe me to be whoever I wanted to be. So I left the bar and stepped into the afternoon sun without blinking. As I walked down the street the shop windows stood like mirrors all around me, claiming the light of the sun as their own and reflecting my smile back to me. But as I took a closer look, I saw in the shadows within my reflection my mother's warm features. She had been dead
for a three months by then, but I still saw her, everywhere. Her face was stitched into the fabric of every scene. It was like I couldn't get away from her, and I didn't want to. Her face was an umbrella over me. I worked in her store and sold her jewelry, and never once did I have to make a decision of my own. And I grew comfortable in my aloofness. I didn't really care, anyway. When she got sick she never told me. It made me so angry. I thought she would tell me, of all people, but she didn't. So I watched her wasting away, and never knew. I don't even know if I noticed. I wish she would have let me known, let me helped. But she never did. And in the end, when she was in the hospital, she'd drive me out of her room every time I went to visit. "Go," she'd say. "You're a young man, you don't need to spend any time in here with an old ghost. Go and make something of yourself." She would flail her arms about as she spoke, she wasn't that weak, I thought. Her eyes looked tired, though, and so did her face. As she sat there on the hospital bed she looked at me with her wrinkled face and told me to leave. She told me to make something of myself, but I didn't know what to make. The posters began to flap about like dying fish on the shop windows, creating a monstrous sound that rushed over the street. I would think about my mother later, I thought, I had a game to play, and I wanted anything to take my mind off her. It was getting windy.

I tried several different locations, but I could not find another like the bar, another that produced a person like Theodore. At the post office, beside the rock garden with bushes preened precisely and planted randomly throughout nobody bothered to stop and talk, or even acknowledged my existence. They all shuffled in and out, digging in their pockets and purses for loose change or sorting through their mail, throwing their unwanted articles into the garbage pail that stood at the bottom of the concrete steps. They were all too busy for me at the post office. So I tried other places. At the mall they walked past with bags slung over shoulders and hanging from their forearms. They walked noisily down the wide hall of the mall with their children scurrying behind them, trying to keep up with legs too short to do so. They never even looked at me. I sat in the
food court and drank a soda, but no one came to me and introduced themselves. So I left there, too. I went to and left almost every location in the city which I could think of. In front of the bank building, the tower of mirrors that stood at the center of downtown, it was as if I didn't exist. Like I was hidden in the shadow of my giant reflection on the side of the building. I tried to talk to a few people, but they all had their ears caught in their cell phones and didn't even raise a finger to me as they walked past, ignoring my words. I walked for hours about the streets, my feet shuffling through discarded newspapers. I walked for hours trying to find someone like Theodore, and as I walked I found myself spiraling further and further away from the busy downtown area. The streets turned from wide shop laden strips of advertisement to narrow, tree covered streets bordered by houses large and small. The cracked sidewalk slipped underneath my feet as I walked, trying to find someone, anyone who would talk to me. I grew more and more discouraged with every block I walked, sinking with the realization that I might not be able to find another person like Theodore. I walked and I thought, and I daydreamed about who I could become, given the right set of circumstances. I walked past barking dogs, gnarling at me through white picket fences. I walked past fathers mowing their yards atop riding lawnmowers wearing khaki shorts and pale blue t-shirts. I walked past children playing on their front porches and waved, wondering if they would allow me to become who I wanted, but I didn't approach them. They were too young and easy. They would believe anything, I thought. So I walked until my feet began to pulse with the heavy beating of my heart. I walked, lost in a daydream, lost in my quest until finally I was drawn back into life by the sounds of screams tumbling through the glass door of an old house turned photo gallery.

Intrigued I hurried up the sidewalk and through the door to find the gallerist, with his wrinkled hands on his bulging hips bent ominously over a small woman who was all mouth and teeth and bitter words. I walked past them quietly, not wishing to disturb the scene, and I hid and felt compelled to watch it unfold. So I went and stood in a corner,
pretending to look at the photographs that covered the walls, but actually I was watching them in the reflection cast by the glass cover of the picture frame. They argued about the validity of photography as an art form. They argued passionately, with their bodies poised, tense and ready, as if they were about to pounce on one another. Her skinny legs shook in anger as she spat out her argument. They went at it for a good five minutes, and I watched, guiltily, as I stood facing the faded, wall papered walls of the house. Finally, after an eternity of screams and gnashing teeth he took her by the elbow and forcibly removed her from the house. She kicked and screamed as he ushered her out the front door, but he succeeded in throwing her out. He returned flustered and steaming, with his wire rim glasses sliding down his prominent pink nose. He apologized and I told him not to worry about it. It was an incredible scene. I couldn't believe that I had witnessed it. I was awed, and wondered if I could become a character as good as her. She was dynamic. I wanted to be dynamic. My mother was dynamic, but I knew I couldn't be. I had seen her and my father fight a few times. Over things I didn't understand, or didn't care to listen to. He would stand beside the pale blue refrigerator with his tie loosened from his neck and his top three buttons undone, revealing his v-necked undershirt. She would sit at the kitchen table. He would pace and yell and she would yell back. The first time I heard her I was shocked. I didn't think she would, or could. But I always respected her more after I saw it. I was about to leave when I heard their voices float from the opposite corner, slow and dramatic.

"I should've got that on film," one said, "that was raw."

"Why didn't you?" his friend questioned.

"I don't know, it all happened too fast."

They stood across the room from me, one skinny and pale, the other plump and parasitic. The skinny one wore corduroy jeans and a black tee shirt. I could see below the sleeve line a tattoo of swirling black lines. The bigger one looked like a funhouse mirror reflection of the skinny one, and I could tell he wanted to be like him. He wore his hair
the same way, short and pulled forward and flat along the side of his head, jet black. And his shirt bore the same emblem of the skinnier one's tattoo. They talked alike, painfully slow and exaggerated and their words disappeared into the dusty air. The gallerist picked up a rag and began to wipe the picture frames that lined the room.

The twins ambled towards me, and I couldn't help but think of them as tweedle dee and an anorexic tweedle dum. They crossed the room and spoke to me out of the corners of their mouths as they circled me.

"Dude, did you see that?" one questioned.

"Yeah," the other exlaimated.

"Was that shit for real?" they both questioned.

They were giggling and holding their hands before their mouths as they spoke. I wasn't sure if they were speaking to me, so I didn't answer. They giggled some more and the large one poked me in the side with his pudgy finger. "Hey man, did you see that?" they repeated, I said yes and they laughed even more. "Wouldn't you have loved to have gotten that on film?" the large one said, again. "Yeah." I was a bit uncomfortable there between the two of them and I became disoriented as they circled me in a wave of giggles and jokes. "You a photographer?" the skinny one asked. I answered yes, and it had happened again. I realized that the circumstances were recreated. I was talking to someone who cared to ask who I was, so I told them. "Really, what do you shoot?" the big one asked, crossing his arms over his mammoth chest and tilting his head to look down at me with an interested look crawling slowly over his face. "JFK." They thought that was hilarious. They bent over at the waist in a coughing motion and let the laughter tumble out of their heads. "Are you for real? What do you mean, you shoot JFK?" they questioned in unison, as if reading from the same script. I told them I was commissioned to take pictures of famous grave sites by a couple from Florida and that I had recently done a shoot with the prince of Camelot himself. "I've never known an assassin before," the big one said with a laugh and then asked me my name. "Theodore," I said. I thought
I'd pay homage to my liberator. The man who had shown me my possibilities. "Well I'm Alvin and he's Simon," the skinny one drawled. "We should start a band."

The gallery was displaying a collection of WWII photos, and a collection of pieces by a 30's urban street photographer. The three of us walked around the rooms of the house moving from trench to cockpit and from cardboard box to welfare line. They made jokes the whole time and occasionally asked me something about myself, which I was more than happy to divulge, for I was once more transcending myself, I was becoming someone else, something other. And it was because of them. They, with their eager, giggling eyes, let me be whoever I wanted. And so I was Theodore, the photographer, in the company of my peers. It was somewhat unnerving creating myself a photographer in front of real photographers. I worried about slipping and letting myself be known beneath my created exterior. But it never came up. They weren't that interested in talking about photography.

They asked if I wanted to go get something to eat, and I said sure. "We don't have a car, though," they said. I told them I'd like to walk. So we set off down the street. It was already 4:30 in the afternoon, and we could hear the kids in their yards chattering and playing. They were the most perfect of all the background sounds used to create a scene, I thought, those high pitched yells and hollers that came bounding from backyards. And I was glad they were there. They made me feel comfortable. We walked and walked past countless blue houses and neatly mowed lawns. And it seemed that we were never going to get anywhere. They talked constantly as we walked, but they never said much. I wanted something to happen. I was satisfied with talk when I became the astronaut for Theodore, for even speaking about walking in space is exhilarating, but since I was just a photographer for them, I wanted something to happen. Something that wouldn't happen to me. That's what I wanted from it, from that situation, but it seemed that it would never happen.
The skinny one wore clogs with wooden soles. They clicked and shuffled down the sidewalk, almost in rhythm with the sound of the wind in the trees. The leaves were dead and falling to the ground, all red and yellow on the crisp brown lawns. We kept walking, and they led the way. I had no idea where we were going, but I went, because I wanted to see what would happen. After what seemed like an hour of walking the streets were no longer lined with storybook houses and circle drives. Instead they were lined with cement blocks of buildings that rose bluntly into the air. Pay phones stood on random corners and were always in use the whole time I was there. It seemed odd to see someone talking on a phone on the corner of a gray, dirty street with speed limit and neighborhood watch signs rising around them.

As we walked softly down the street, not wishing to disturb anyone they started to talk about music, and I joined in whenever I could. But I mostly just waited for something to happen, for my newfound character to provide me with some new experience. After another twenty minutes of walking a car passed on the street, speeding, with its compact body pulled tight to the pavement, all red and silver in the late afternoon sun. The lights and the sirens followed, a blast of noise and light that disoriented me. I held onto the lamp post and was rubbing my eyes with my forefinger and thumb when they grabbed me by my jacket and told me to follow them. We ran for two blocks until we saw the cars again. "Come on, man," they urged me, "we gotta watch 'em."

"We gotta watch who?" I asked.

"The cops. I have my camera, oh, this is perfect," the big one said and he pulled from over his shoulder a small video camera and turned it on as he walked towards the scene. The Camero had pulled into the parking lot of an apartment complex and the cop closed off his only exit. He probably thought that he was turning down a secret alley, only to find himself trapped. And so we watched as the cop crept up to the side of the car on his boots of pure black leather. We watched as the gravel crunched underfoot and the sweat formed on his furrowed forehead. "Look how pissed he is," the small one said.
"Yeah, I know," answered the large one, "it looks like he's all agro. Man I'm getting some great footage." We were standing on the other side of the iron fence at the side of the apartment parking lot. The cop didn't notice us until the large one spoke up. "Hey, didn't I see you on TV?" A large smile spread across his face as the little one added, "yeah, you were under investigation, weren't you? Why are you still on the streets? Menace." They both laughed hysterically and the camcorder bounced hard on the large one's shoulder. The cop turned to us slowly, and then, as if threatened he tensed even more and ordered us to stay back and to shut off the camera. The skinny one taunted him with a drawling question, "You think we don't know our rights?" I could tell he was proud of himself. He was definitely going to tell his friends about it later. The cop tried to ignore us, but he kept looking over, as if we were trying to ambush him. He looked like a tiger about to pounce, but didn't know which target to pounce on. There was a triangle between us, the cop, and the trapped speeder whose engine still hummed in the parking lot, waiting for something to happen so he could go. Children stood along the walkways of the apartment complex with their arms and their legs wound around iron railing. A few mothers stood with infants on their sides. And I was completely swept away by the experience. I would have never thought to watch a cop while he arrested someone, but it was ingenious. We were watching the watchers, as it were, and it was an odd situation. The tension and anxiety ricocheted off the cement sides of the apartments. The cop cocked his chin and slanted his eyes at us, like he was trying to remember something. Something was gonna happen, I knew it, and I waited.

"Now son, I told you to shut that camera off," the cop said with pleading eyes beneath his yellow sun glasses and furrowed brow. "I'm just trying to do my job here. I don't go about watching you do whatever it is that you do, do I?" he asked. "Yeah, you do, man," the big one shouted. "I've seen you before, haven't I?" the cop asked. There was a sense of sadness in his angry voice. I felt sorry for him. "I don't know what you're talking about," the big one said with a shrug. "No, I know you. I know." He held his
arms out from his sides in the middle of the street as if he were being attacked by all sides, with one palm turned towards the parked car now revving on the gravelly lot and the other turned towards us, straight to film. His hair stood on end in the evening breeze, and his teeth peeked from between his lips as he drew in quick, short breaths. He told us we were interfering with police business and the big one laughed at him, shaking the camera on his shoulder. "We're not doing anything, man," he retorted and laughed some more. And then, as the cop stood there in the middle of the lot as if in limbo with his prowler closing the entrance and exit, the red Camero, growling in the gravel, came to life and spun its tires sending sheets of small stones onto the walkways of the apartment complex, showering the children in dirt. The car lurched forward and clipped the tail end of the cop car as it squeezed through the gate, sending the cop car careening into the street. They shut off their camera and ran, laughing as they jostled down the streets. "Sucker," they yelled at the cop as they ran. The cop called for me, he told me to stay. "What's your name?" he questioned, trying to retain some composure. "I asked you a question. What's your name young man. Stay right where you are." He started to run through the gate and around the fence and yelled as he rounded the corner. "Don't you dare move," he said. "I'll shoot. I swear." I ran, and I ran fast. The buildings whipped by my sides and I felt as if I were flying down the streets. I didn't look up. I just watched the cracked sidewalk and hoped that I had lost him, but I could still hear him yelling down the streets. "Stop and identify yourself or I'll shoot. I swear."

III

I ran until I couldn't breathe. I ran like I used to run with my brother down the streets of the neighborhood. His heels would kick high into the air as he'd race past me, every time. And he'd stand at the finish line, breathing lightly, smiling, and asking me if I wanted to go again. And I would always go again. My father would time us some nights. With his stop watch wrapped about his neck he would stand at the end of the block and
raise his right arm into the air. He would hold it high, like a flag and make us wait in the ready position until he would blow the whistle that he clenched between his lips as he lowered his arm and clicked the button on the watch. My mother would stand at the end of the block with glasses of water in her hands. She was always thinking about us like that. And I would run as fast as I could, nipping at my brother's heels, but I could never catch him, no matter how hard I tried. My father would holler and jump and congratulate my brother on his time, slapping him on the back. Chuckling he would turn to me with a serious face and say to me "Now, why can't you be more like your brother?" He didn't expect an answer, and I never gave one. But mom always stood there with a glass of water regardless. "It's alright," she'd say, "you're just not a runner." I didn't know what I was.

I ran until I almost forgot what I was running from, and when I stopped, I was lost. The streets were orange and alive and strangely bright. I stood on a top of a hill that overlooked a small park. at the bottom of the hill was a playground and the absence of children's voices arced like an opaque dome over the park. I walked down the hill, stumbling and out of breath, and collapsed onto a bench that stood before the pond. I think I fell asleep, for the next thing I remember was a man poking me in my shoulder with his finger. "Hey, have you seen a young woman come by here?" he asked, checking his watch as he spoke. I told him I hadn't and he shrugged and looked around, squinting his eyes. His denim jacket hung off his shoulders and blew in the breeze that leapt off the pond. He stood there silent for a few moments and then turned and walked away. I sat upright and was overcome by a nauseating headache that stomped from my stomach to my head on shoes of hot lead. I sat there attempting to remember the events of the past hour, and pieced it back together, the way you piece together a dream after awaking and shattering it. I sat there exhausted and marveled at the events that had unfolded. "Had it really happened to me?" I questioned. It seemed odd, like I had only been a witness, and not a participant. But either way, participant or witness, it had happened, and I had
something to do with it. I rubbed my eyes and tried to remember where I was, and remembered that I didn't know. "You always gotta know where you are," my mother used to say. "That way you can let someone know if they want to find you." She'd laugh and rub her hands every time she told me that. I never thought it was that funny, but she did. I don't know where she heard it the first time. She probably remembered it wrong. She was always doing that, but I guess it only made it funnier, or better, like she was making everything her own.

She approached me from behind, a voice on the breeze that tickled at my ears. "Nice day, isn't it?" she asked as I sat balancing on the warped wooden planks of the park bench, watching the cattail pond, with its hundreds of bobbing brown heads, as it vomited foam, aluminum cans, and cracked plastic cups onto the chalky shore. "Nice day, isn't it?" she repeated with a tentative energy that died away as the four words fell from her lips. There were no nice days that fall, they were all much too hot, but nevertheless I answered affirmatively, not wishing to spoil her hallucination. She mumbled an agreement and circled the bench, tip-toeing into view. Her eyes were lethargic and resigned. Never once did I see them shine. Always downcast they hovered like twin gray ghosts above her moon cheeks. Her pale forehead furrowed slightly, as if she were attempting to grasp the words that floated in her head and force them out of her mouth with a voice that wept like a bowed hacksaw. But her lips only parted silently, like two heavy curtains billowing to the side of a blank stage to begin a play. She stood there at the end of the bench fidgeting with the folds of her dress and swaying in unison with the crisp brown leaves that hung from the brittle branches of the dying oak trees that spotted the park. Her fingers worked constantly about her head like thin fairies, tucking her frayed hair behind her ears and wiping the thick air from before her curled nostrils. They were a flurry of motion before her stolid face. She turned her eyes on mine and I realized that I had been staring. I
lowered my head in embarrassment, and she returned her eyes to her lap with her pale cheeks blushing pink. She wore on her chest a brooch of silver. A bird with a green jeweled eye that sparkled on the field of her black dress. Its legs caught eternally in the pre-flight crouch, with its toes spread wide. The brooch was oddly familiar, but I couldn't remember where I had seen it before. So I sat, waiting for her to speak, unable to do so myself, and she stood there at the end of the bench, with the material of her dress sagging beneath the weight of her brooch, shuffling her feet. And the rumble of the expectant, unspoken words swum around my ears, until finally she whispered,

"It's a lovely view, don't you think?"

"Yeah, you can see all of downtown."

The dead October grass reeked of dog urine and cheap perfume rubbed from the arms of young lovers. The haze choked my eyes and stuck in my nostrils, making it hard to breath. Towers of smoke rose from the oil refinery east of town, and the downtown buildings rose out of the pond like shards of glass that tore at the evening sky as it shed its skin from afternoon white to evening orange. It was by no means a lovely view, and was not particularly even a pleasant place to be. Secluded picnic tables were clustered among the trees and played mischievously among the evening shadows cast by the branches as they swayed in the wind. With their rusty tops and broken legs the tables emitted a sense of looming violence, as if something was about to happen all the time, but never did.

I was exhausted, but still intrigued with what had happened earlier in the day, and I played with the idea of creating for her another character, just to see what would happen. But there was something about her, something that hung about her sad face that told me she was different. I could tell by the way she approached me, by the way she talked, and ended her questions with a qualifier (don't you think?isn't it?), as if they didn't exist until I approved of them, that she wasn't like the others, that for her I could be something more, some undiscovered else, something beyond who I had created earlier that day, and definitely something or someone beyond myself. She was cautious, as if feeling my
responses for permission to continue, and she wanted to continue. I could tell by the way her breath caught in her throat when she waited for my answers. I didn't know what it was, but she, with her words caught visibly on the end of her silent tongue, was different, I could feel it.

I asked her if she'd like to have a seat and she nodded as she floated to the bench, as if she were relieved that I finally offered, fanning her skirt as she sat. Her thin knees jutted into the air beneath her black dress. And she sat stiffly, smoothing the creases from her lap, bringing order to the lilacs that cluttered her dress. I could not read her. For the twins I created a character influenced by their own personalities. I attempted to create someone they would talk to, but with her I couldn't do that. Her face spoke of an otherness that I could not decipher, some emotion I had never before encountered, something that did not belong to the light dress or heavy brooch. She seemed a collage of several different personalities. Like she was dressing herself up in a costume, attempting to mask the sadness that dripped from her eyes. She pulled me out of my exhaustion and drew my curiosity into a devilish dance that played about my head. And I wanted to become someone for her. And I felt as if she had come so I could become someone for her. As if she had come fore me. And between us I spun a spidery bond of snuck half looks and uncomfortable coughs that held us apart and together loosely on that evening. I cannot even now explain what it was about her. There was a mysteriousness that kept her always hidden from my full gaze, but I wanted to see it all. Her profile stood one of many layers and fields of view before me. So much to look at, but it was all hideous, except for her, and I could not help but stare. Her hands had hypnotized me. And I stared into her apprehension until she held me captive in my own curiosity and exhaustion. But she noticed nothing, I could tell. Or if she did she made no outward sign of it. So I stared without consequence at her and waited. And then, suddenly as if awaking from a dream she turned to me sleepily and introduced herself to me as Hannah. "You're William,
right?" she asked, and I couldn't help but answer yes. "Good, I have a friend who told me you could help me. Her name's Elizabeth. She said she met you here last fall."

She needed me to be someone. William. She needed me to be William. She had expectations, which must be allayed with actions, and I knew that I had to perform those actions. It seemed odd, but I did, and I know not why. It was as if my whole day had led up to her, had prepared me for her, and I couldn't stop. Theodore and the twins had provided me with templates upon which to sketch my early works before creating my masterpiece for her. So I was set up to act, I thought. And I was excited. And I couldn't let her down, I knew I wouldn't.

"I think I remember Elizabeth," I said.

"Oh, Good."

She always followed her statements with a long silence that blanketed our jagged conversation, as if the silence was part of her response, and I had to wait for her to finish. The wind was beginning to rustle the few leaves about our feet and sent her already whispy hair into convulsions. But her hands worked through it all, endlessly, vainly attempting to tuck her hair into its proper place. And she sat there unsure of how to continue. She lapsed into a semi-conscious state of concentration, and the clouds cluttered the orange sky as it quickly changed gray. I watched her all the while, trying to find clues about who I should be. For I thought, that if she really wanted me to be a definite person who could actually help her, she would radiate with an aura of expectancy that would tip me off in some way. But she gave me no sign. She was like a blank page before me. I wanted to be who she wanted me to be, but she wouldn't tell me who she wanted me to be, for she believed that I knew who I was, and that I knew how I could help her.

So, stuck between paralysis and action, between excitement and release I sat, feeling the air go stale beneath the rain threatening clouds, and I asked her if she'd like to have a cup of coffee with me, or something, so we could talk. I was ready to become who
she needed me to be, and I was ready to help her. She said she'd like a cup of coffee so we left the park through the playground, around the curly slide and monkey bars, and then through the horseshoe arena with the grass crunching beneath our shoes as we climbed the hill that led to the street. We decided to go the cafe on Chestnut street across from the Baptist church, and I was glad to leave the dismal scene of the park.

But no sooner did we get to the cafe than I realized that it was merely a synthetic replacement for the organic hideousness of the park. The tables that spotted the room stood with the dying pride of the oak trees, sticky with syrup and wobbling on their uneven legs, with sugar packets stuck beneath the off balance leg to keep it from rocking. And the booths lay along the wall, bathed in the dirty sunlight, reminded me of the scummy surface of the cattail pond. We selected a booth in the back, and as soon as we sat she began to talk, but with the same timidity, in a barely audible whisper. But the words came endlessly. "I apologize for just approaching you like that, but Elizabeth said you could help, and when I was that you were actually there I was a little afraid, but I just blurted it out..." and she rambled on and on, becoming more flustered as she went. I told her I understood but she continued, until graciously our waitress came and took our order. She hardly even looked at us as she scribbled in her green scratch pad, chewing on a stale piece of gum that stood resilient between her yellowed teeth, like a rubber ball. We both ordered a cup of coffee, and I also had a piece of pie, I was hungry. And as soon as the waitress left with her thick hips swaying beneath the straps of her apron my companion again began to gush a simultaneous apology and explanation of her boldness, but she skirted around the reason she had come for me, as if the words would pain her to say them. But all the while, through every word I did nothing but enjoy the fact that she believed me to be someone else, and that I was that someone else. I tried my hardest to be believable and just enjoyed my time with her, for had I remained myself, I would have never met her and would have never been presented with the request she had for me. And she believed it all, I know, for the entire time I watched her eyes steadfastly, and never
once did I see any hint of doubt. They stood constant upon her solemn face. She spoke the entire time we waited for our coffee but she never told me exactly what it was that she wanted. And I began to grow restless, like a child whose parents dangle a toy before his eyes but refuse to let him play with it. When our waitress returned with our coffee, she reverted to the silence she had presented me with in the park. I couldn't figure her out, still so I stirred my coffee slowly and listened as the silver spoon clinked against the porcelain cup. She sat across from me with her forehead once again furrowed in quiet concentration. And I decided I couldn't wait. I asked her what it was she wanted of me. She startled at my question, as if she had forgotten why we were there. Her face had twisted painfully as I put the question to her. And her eyes searched me for a minute, scanned me for reassurance. But she didn't answer immediately. I worried that I had upset her. But what had I done? She had come to me for help, I thought it only reasonable that I asked her what she wanted. But she sat there silently. I realized that I had to work slower. There was something about the situation she was not comfortable with at all. And besides, I decided I needed to savor every moment of my foray into the foreign. If I was to really enjoy my time with her, and enjoy the challenge with which she presented me, I knew I had to take it slowly, I had to take it all in, every nuance of our interactions. So I sat back in the bench squeaking into a comfortable position and let my arms fall across my chest, crossed. She began to answer a few times, but stopped before she got too far into it, apparently deciding that she needed to word it differently. So I sat there and waited for her to answer, and I was content in the waiting. I sipped the burnt coffee and the heat coated my tongue. While I waited I glanced around the diner. 

In a table across the room sat the twins. The big one had the camera to his eye and focused it on me while the little one grumbled in a low menacing voice. "Turn that thing off, son." And then they burst into a cloud of giggles above their half eaten pancakes. They pointed at me and laughed and filmed me as they walked down the isle and out of the diner.
Their being there in the diner distracted me, but as soon as they left I returned to her and remembered the task at hand, and that she had not yet answered my question. She hadn't even noticed the twins, lost in concentration. I looked at her and repeated my question and she answered slowly. "I don't wanna talk about it here," she said and her words fell softly into her lap from her downturned head. "I mean, I think you should meet her first and then make your decision. It's all for her, you'll see." Her words were cryptic and serpentine, and they wrapped around my head and I knew I had to follow through, to decipher her, to understand what she wanted, what she needed, and to provide it. I wanted to get going. She had excited me, had promised me some adventure, but seemed to be stretching time in order to put off the inevitable.

"Here," she said as she unfastened the brooch from her dress, pressing her chin against her neck to see what she was doing. "I can give you this now, in payment for taking up your time. You can keep it even if you decide you can't help me. It's real silver. If you decide to do it I can pay you more." She placed it carefully on the table, with its green eye burning bright against the red background of the table top. And I remembered where I had seen it before, in the display case beneath the register at the store. It was one of my mother's pieces. I couldn't believe she was giving it to me. And I had probably sold it to her. Then with her thin fingers lilting beneath the steady gaze of her despondent eyes she tenderly pushed it towards me. "Thank you," I said and put it in my pocket.

She asked me if I'd go to her house with her. She'd tell me all about it there, she said. I agreed and we rose awkwardly out of the booth and I stretched as my shoes took hold of the tile floor. I was anxious. What if I was unable to help her? The thought crept into my mind suddenly as I walked behind her out the diner door. It hadn't occurred to me before, that I might not be able to follow through, that I might just be leading her on. But I knew I had to do it, and it felt good doing something for someone who needed me to do it.
"It's not far from here. We can walk if you want," she said. The clouds had grown even more ominous while we were in the diner, and the air smelled like rain and bacon, but I agreed and we set off to her house, side by side.

The walk was painfully long. She didn't say a word as we pushed through the streets with an eager anticipation of what was to come. We turned down a side street, strewn with garbage bags sitting heavily on the sidewalk, their black sides bulging. She maneuvered through them all with a grace I had failed to notice before. Her feet slipped softly over the cracked sidewalk, and there was a point in the middle of her stride, when her legs were stretched before and behind her, where it looked as if she threatened flight. But she never took to the air and only floated over the ground lightly. She walked before me hauntingly, neither giving way to the others walking down the sidewalk, nor forcing them off their path. She walked like an apparition ambivalent to the seemingly arbitrary elements of her neighborhood. She didn't notice when those who sat on the concrete stoops of their apartment complexes waved to her with friendly hands. She kept her eyes before her and ignored the stench of the garbage. I felt like I didn't belong there, like I was a spy sent into the neighborhood to observe the everyday occurrences. I felt as if I were conducting an anthropological field study. But I took comfort in the awkwardness, because it was different. I was experiencing things I would have never experienced before. I walked through streets I had never seen before, and saw them through an eye I had never before seen through. And she, ushering through the streets was making it all possible, for she allowed me to become this other person, who would experience these things. And it felt wonderful. I longed for the moments when the downy hair of her arm would graze against mine as we walked. I had no worries, I only lived, and walked, and breathed. My mother was with me. She always was. It was as if I were dreaming while awake, for her face was always there hovering beside mine. I took comfort in it, always, like she was watching after me. And I couldn't wait to get to Hannah's house, for her to tell me what she wanted and I couldn't wait to try to provide it.
We walked past indistinguishably different apartment complexes, all deteriorated with the paint peeling from the window sills and the bricks stained with years of dirty wind and rain. She showed no signs that we were nearing her house and I was beginning to think we would never get there when she turned abruptly into a yard, through a broken green iron gate with one of the doors hanging limply from its single hinge, threatening to fall free at any moment. "Well, we're here."

She led me up the thin walkway that led to the tenement. The courtyard was filled with dying bushes and flowers that stood like corpses before the gravestone that was the building, which was somber and gray and seemed to sigh a painful sigh with every step I took towards it. Some bikes were thrown carelessly about the front steps, rusted and small with near flat cracked black tires. The front door was green like the gate, with strips of paint arcing into the air from its face. She opened it laboriously, pushing against the ground with her thin ankles bending above her light feet. It scraped a white line across the concrete as it opened and she motioned for me to enter. "Welcome to my house. Wonderful, isn't it," she said with mock pride. I nodded and stepped into the hallway.

"The elevator's broken. We'll have to take the stairs," she said and began to climb. We were almost there. I was about to achieve complete otherness. I was about to discover who she wanted me to be, and I couldn't wait. We walked up endless stairs, all carpeted with a thin layer of stiff fabric that looked and felt like we were walking on textured cardboard. The railing was covered in dirt and left my palms black and grainy. The clasp for the brooch in my pocket had come undone and it poked into my leg with every step, but I could not slow to adjust it for she moved quickly up the stairs. Then she finally took a door that led from the stairwell into a small hallway, dimly lit and lined with brown, faded doors. We walked down the hall with the ceiling bulging above us, brown and sagging from water leaks. A single fluorescent light flashed on and off at the end of the hall.
She took her keys from her purse and unlocked the door. She asked me if I'd wait outside while she went in to make sure everything was all right. And as soon as she left I realized what was odd about her. The brooch and the dress and everything about her didn't match the surroundings, didn't match the apparent drabness of her life. They were splashes of color and light on a canvas of dirty gray. She too was trying to be someone else. She returned after several minutes and waved me into the small living room of her apartment.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked. I said no and she said she would like one and went into the kitchen. The room was sparse. I sat on the couch that lined the back wall. Before me a broken coffee table wobbled on its crooked legs and a worn chair stood next to the wall on the side of the room, orange with dirty white stripes. Carved wooden hand rests jutted into the air from the ends of the threadbare arms. A single lamp stood next to it glowing dull yellow, changing the white walls into gold. She returned with a drink in her hand and collapsed into the chair. A single painting hung on the wall, a landscape of a lake tucked neatly between trees dripping with vines of drab green. A young couple lounged beside the lake on a red blanket with a basket between them.

"Would you like to meet her?" The words came from nowhere. They snapped me out of my daydream and back into focus on the matter at hand. I had almost forgotten that I was there to help her I was so preoccupied with my surroundings. Preoccupied in devouring my new experiences. It was as if I were sampling different lives, that day, trying to find one that fit. I began to feel the coldness of the room like an iron bar on my back and I realized that it was time to act. I nodded and she rose slowly and led me through the tiny living room, down the dark hallway and through a door that stood slightly open. The room was dark save for the sickly light of the street lamps that fell through the curtainless window next to the bed. And on it lay a still form in the lamp light, immobile beneath a light night gown. Her wiry hair stood out from her head like a thousand
crooked white wires. The skin hung from her bony arms and pressed against the bedspread. The air was tinged with the smells of old age. She didn't move when we entered the room.

"This is my mom," she said. She stared at the old woman as she spoke. I didn't know how to respond. I moved closer to her to introduce myself but she gave no notice of me and I stood with my arm outstretched and my mouth hanging silently open. "She can hear you," she said. "You can introduce yourself if you want." I didn't know what was going on. What could she possibly want from me? And what could I do for that poor sickly old woman? My legs were suddenly weak.

I told the mother my name was William, and that I was there to help her. I asked the daughter for a chair and she brought one from the other room, a small steel stool with a stiff, cold back and no arms. I put it beside the bed and sat, resting my legs. I watched the daughter as she, with her body full of a reluctant hope that was so strong it was palpable, stood next to me with her hand on her mother's.

"She's been real sick," she said. "They say she doesn't have long to live."

I didn't know what to say.

"Is she in much pain?" I asked.

Yes was her answer.

"That's why I came for you. It's about the pain. She can't take it anymore."

I couldn't believe what was happening, but I couldn't leave, because I was physically unable to. The fear washed over me slowly yet powerfully like the incoming tide. And it made me nauseous in its unfamiliarity. I wanted desperately to run, but I couldn't take my eyes off the old woman. Hannah explained how her mother had been deteriorating for years. She never left the room, and hardly ever rose from the bed. She had lost her voice years ago. She told me how her mother would lie there motionless for hours with her eyes staring blankly at the ceiling, hearing and feeling everything but lost in a dream world to escape the pain. She told me how her father had left her mother, alone and aged, after his death. They had tried hospitals, she said, but they all told her it was
unavoidable. I listened to it all sitting in the room with its low ceiling and dingy walls pulsing with my heart, closing around me. I listened, and her words lulled me with their sad sing song pattern. And all the while I expected heaving shoulders and tears, but she remained composed, almost businesslike. She lit a small candle and set it on the bedside table as the room became completely enveloped in the night. She took a seat at the foot of the bed and rocked gently back and forth and looked at me. I caught her eyes and she didn't turn them away. I held her there with my gaze and she seemed to gain strength through it as she continued. "She doesn't want to live anymore. She knows it's time for her to go." She paused, as if for dramatic effect. "Can you help us? She says she can't take the pain anymore. I can pay you. I have money saved. She just can't take it anymore, and I can't do it for her. I just can't. And she can't even do it herself, either, even if she could physically."

I looked at her there with her only good dress draped around her like a costume. Her mother lay in the bed, unconscious and barely breathing. I couldn't believe I had ended up there. She seemed so innocent when I met her there in the park. I never thought she would ask that of me. But I had to help. Because it felt so real. It was real. It wasn't a game. I was scared and she was sad and we were there, reacting as we only could, as I only could. I had no choice. I rose from my chair and paced back and forth before the bed.

"She wants to be suffocated," she said. I couldn't believe the words came from her mouth. "Can you help her?" I wiped my clammy palms on my pants and nodded slowly. She reached under the bed and handed me a large, red pillow. I took it in my hands and held it before my face. I held it so close that I could see only the pillow. I held it in front of my eyes, so that my field of vision was a wash of red. I lowered myself onto the bed and straddled the old woman as she lay there, waiting for death. All that was before me was my fear. It was my fear. I could feel fear, and anger. I hadn't felt fear and anger in a long time. And I watched as her sightless, sagging, lashless eyes twitched in the corners,
sporadically, like the wings of an injured hummingbird. And I felt empathy and remorse. I felt it all. I wanted to run away and to stay and to help and to cry. I wanted to do it all, but I couldn't decide which to do first. But I knelt there above the old woman with my back straight and strong, like I was supported by some unseen force. Like I was remade, strong. So I held the pillow and I listened for her breath as it died away before me, deep and labored, like the breath of my mother pushing the metal shaving across her workshop bench. I sat for countless hours with her in the garage as she worked on her jewelry, as she fixed with a steady hand the shining stone, with its shards of light piercing the air between us, to the cold, hard metal. She told me the stones never shone just right until they were fixed to the metal. She told me that they weren't focused, and that the lack of focus diluted their brilliance. She told me how the light shines everywhere, sporadic and random, until its focused against the band of the ring.