

1999

## Spiritual winter

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# SPIRITUAL WINTER

A Project Report

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Charles Eugene Serface

May 1999

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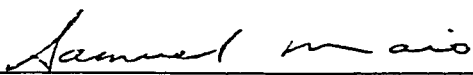
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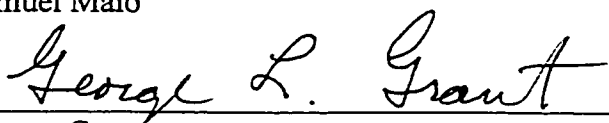
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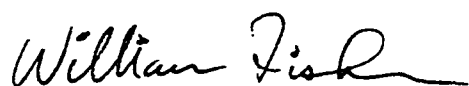
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## ABSTRACT

### SPIRITUAL WINTER

By Charles E. Serface

Spiritual Winter, a collection comprising twenty-four poems, explores themes of suicide, suicide prevention, and humankind's ability to exist in a loss-ridden world. Thematic inspiration for this project stems from theories formulated by A. Alvarez and Edwin Shneidman, and the poetry of Anne Sexton. All three identify the suicidal state of mind as separated from external reality, although Shneidman allows for a cause to suicidal ideation based on loss.

Artistic inspiration comes from Dana Gioia, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Robert Browning, whose works provide examples of lyric, dramatic, and characterization styles that expand the possibilities for artistic expression of suicide themes beyond those offered by the confessional mode of Anne Sexton. Spiritual Winter contains three sections, entitled "On the Job," "Callers," and "Nora" respectively. Each section deals with suicide in a way to bring the issue beyond individual experience to human condition.



## Dedications

To my parents, Verle and Lorraine Surface, who have often raised their brows, but have never halted the explorations I've found necessary to living.

For J. Ken Nishita Ph.D. and John Empey. Here's one promise I was able to keep, John.

To my best friends, the Fentons, and the rest of the Tri-Valley/ East Bay tribe. Go Amador!

To "Mr. 4000-plus," who supplied an indirect inspiration to Part Three, and everyone else who freely undertakes the existential queasiness of suicide prevention. *Amor Vincit Omnia.*

To Drs. George Grant and William Wilson, who allowed my presence in their literature courses and supplied their energies to this project. To Dr. John Engell as well, for agreeing to read this project "for fun."

And lastly, to Dr. Samuel Maio, who mines for potential while I insist on continual doubt. The student will never outshine his master.

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## Critical Introduction

Spiritual Winter, a collection of twenty-four inter-related poems, explores various issues related to suicide and suicide prevention. This collection's title comes from A. Alvarez's critical study of suicidal themes in literature, The Savage God, in which he uses the term "spiritual winter" to define the suicidal state of mind:

A suicidal depression is a kind of spiritual winter, frozen, sterile, unmoving. The richer, softer and more delectable nature becomes, the deeper that internal winter seems, and the wider and more intolerable the abyss which separates the inner world from the outer. Thus suicide becomes a natural reaction to an unnatural condition. (103)

Using symbolic language, Alvarez defines suicidal ideation as a relationship between the external and internal worlds. Something or some occurrence in external nature often creates a need within an individual. The more difficult it becomes to meet that need, whether it is material or spiritual, the greater the possibility for internal feelings of suicidal depression. Alvarez's definition rebuts the myth that suicide is caused by "bad weather" (102). Most in society take it for granted that suicidal depression increases during Christmas, a time of snow and dismal weather. However, the correlation lies not with the season's external bleakness, but instead with the celebrations that increase the despair and isolation for individuals who cannot produce festive tones within themselves (103).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, suicide has become thematic grist for poetry, particularly for poets belonging to the “Confessional School.” Among this group – which included Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, and Anne Sexton -- were poets who wished to communicate their own suicidal longings. Confession involves a personal revealing in a first-person voice that reflects the poet’s authentic reality. The poet asks that the reader assume the poem’s voice is the poet, not a persona, and this would seem the perfect mode to express the nature of suicide. But Samuel Maio questions this assumption, using the example of Anne Sexton, who wrote poetry attempting to represent the suicidal frame of mind to the world:

If we accept [Sexton’s] theory of composition (her unconsciously being directed to reveal images which provide answers regarding her conscious self), then we cannot accept her as authentically confessional. She used the method of the creative process to exhibit a self-consciousness, one formulated by the restrictive conventions of poetry. (Maio, 72-3)

Beyond making confession, Sexton manipulates her experience to create a voice to explore themes arising in her life, one of these being suicidal ideation. Personal sharing is important, but Maio’s emphasizing Sexton’s art provides inspiration for a more general consideration of suicide themes. For example, Diana Hume George believes that Sexton’s poems, “translate into understandable idiom the language, so foreign to most people, of the suicide” (21).

The opening lines of “Wanting to Die” represent this effect: “Since you ask, most days I cannot remember. / I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage. / then the

almost unnamable lust returns” (Sexton, 1-3). Sexton’s speaker continues to announce “I have nothing against life,” but “suicides have a special language” (4,7). At the poem’s midpoint, the speaker admits that “suicides don’t always die,” but she, the speaker, knows death is waiting for her (19, 25). Suicide is not inevitable, though the lust for death permeates the speaker’s reality. Through poetry, Sexton characterizes inexpressibility, that feeling of alienation that Alvarez defines, creating a language special to suicidal individuals disenfranchised from the world. But again, any effect Sexton’s poetry has on the reader relies not necessarily upon its confessional elements, but Sexton’s artistic skill.

A thinker from a discipline outside of literature, psychology, provides further consideration on the issues of Spiritual Winter. Edwin Shneidman, reflecting on a lifetime of work in suicidology, finds that variables such as age, economic status, sex, or race relate poorly to suicide (51). Like Alvarez, Shneidman focuses on needs within an individual, and how unfulfilled needs create “psychache”:

By its very nature, psychological pain is tied to psychological *needs*. In general, the broadest purpose of most human activity is to satisfy psychological needs. Suicide relates to psychological needs in that suicide is a specific way to *stop* the unbearable psychachical flow of the mind. Further, what causes this pain is the blockage, thwarting, or frustration of certain psychological needs felt by that person at that time and in those circumstances to be *vital* to continued life. (52)

Suicide, then, is an individual’s act to alleviate his/her frustration, to reduce the tension created by obstructed needs (52). This fits well with Alvarez’s notion that suicide is “a

natural reaction to an unnatural condition” (Alvarez, 103), that condition being some form of irredeemable loss.

For example, if a man’s wife dies after many years of marriage, her sudden absence would be unnatural to his condition. The only way he might see to adjust that condition – the psychache of grief – is suicide. But Shneidman’s emphasis on loss provides something beyond the individual mental states defined in Alvarez and Sexton, a way to see what causes suicide in general. And furthermore, as even Sexton’s speaker admits, suicide is not always the outcome of loss. With this in mind, suicide-prevention techniques operate upon the premise that allowing open expression of painful emotions surrounding loss provides a possible way around Alvarez’s unnatural condition and Shneidman’s psychache.

The poems in Spiritual Winter react to the definitions of Alvarez and Shneidman, and the confessional poetry of Anne Sexton. By adding the elements of loss as a general catalyst for suicide, this collection hopes to show how suicidal ideation is not relegated to a special population. Anyone can become vulnerable to the losses that challenge existence. Spiritual Winter examines this phenomenon through first-person voices, whether the speaker is the central speaker or another character.

The first section introduces an unnamed speaker who works the graveyard shift on a suicide prevention hotline in an unnamed city. Keeping the speaker and the setting anonymous produces an “everyman” effect, allowing the reader a better chance to fully experience how suicide relates to humankind at large, not just to the speaker alone.

Furthermore, these poems introduce the speaker's motives for doing such work, and dramatically portray his interactions with coworkers as he learns the job.

The second section includes mostly dramatic monologues in the voices of hotline callers suffering from individual losses and different levels of suicidal ideation. Each monologue takes different metrical forms that emphasize the callers' situations. For instance, a woman suffering physical abuse from her husband speaks through a villanelle, a form whose refrains poetically enhance the repetitive, cyclical nature of domestic abuse. In each monologue, or hotline call, the collection's central speaker becomes the intended audience. He merely listens. However, other poems in this section – a prologue, interludes, and an epilogue, are in the central speaker's voice. In these, the central speaker recounts events that occur in his life when not at work, but that comment on the collection's overall themes.

Finally, the poems in the third section present the central speaker confronting his own loss, the suicide of his lover, Nora. Here is where Spiritual Winter summarizes its themes. In most of the poems included, the contemplation of the collection's themes occurs through characterization and action, but not necessarily through the advancement of time. The third section, however, dramatizes some passage of days as the speaker copes with his lover's suicide.

Formally, Spiritual Winter exploits a variety of formal techniques. Since the collection's thematic vision involves a social view of suicide, not just an individual one, Anne Sexton's confessional style becomes inadequate, because it does not allow for multiple characterizations or dramatic content. For this reason, Spiritual Winter contains



many short-lyric forms that interweave into a dramatic and episodic whole. Inspiration for this broadened view primarily comes from Dana Gioia's call for a middle ground between the epic and the short lyric in poetry (27). To this purpose, Gioia emphasizes using the long poem:

Of course, our theoreticians have not banned all other kinds of poetry, but the critical emphases of lyric and epic have been so strong over the past seventy years that to poets and teachers alike they have become the distinctive forms of both the Modern and the Postmodern periods. The long poem has nearly died as a result. (27)

By "long poem", Gioia means those lengthier poems that follow one continuous metrical form. But the use of narrative qualities – characters and actions, for example – developed through interweaving poems to deliver many sides to a theme widens the possibilities for meeting Gioia's call.

More formal inspiration comes from Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, a medieval example of how various metrical forms can blend into a larger whole containing the narrative qualities defined above. But beyond this, Chaucer creates an interplay of metrical forms and language patterns that help develop characterizations and the dominant themes of his work. Donald R. Howard addresses Chaucer's style in this regard, noting that "it is sometimes argued that the tales themselves are all in the same style" (108). By "style," Howard means Chaucer's reliance on iambic pentameter. Howard, however, argues against critics who would focus too much on uniformity in Chaucer's style:

But isn't it true, too, that the Wife's discourse can be distinguished, at least in some characteristic particulars from the Knight's or the Reeve's? If style cannot be separated from content, each pilgrim's choice of a tale already recommends a certain style appropriate to that choice, as we have tales within a tale, we have styles within a style. (108)

Language patterns distinguish rude characters, such as those in the Miller's Tale, from loftier characters, like those in the Knight's. Furthermore, Chaucer strengthens these different language tones by presenting both sections in rhyming couplets. By reviewing a portion of these character's tales, readers can note this effect. In a passage for the "Knight's Tale," a woman leading a group of mourners addresses King Theseus:

She seyde, "lord, to whome Fortune hath yiven  
Victorie, and as a conqueror to lyven,  
Nat greveth us youre glorie and youre honour,  
But we biseken mercy and socour.

Have mercy on oure wo and oure distresse! (915-9)

And in the "Miller's Tale," Chaucer presents a lower level of character, Alison, John's wife and the lover of Nicholas. At one point, Alison encounters a third man, Absolon, who anoints himself a lord in the process of trying to woo her:

This Absolon doun sette hym on his knees  
And seyde, "I am a lord at alle degrees;  
For after this I hope ther cometh moore.

Lemman, thy grace, and sweete bryd, thyn oore!”

The wyndow she undoth, and that in haste.

Have do,” quod she, “com of, and speed the faste,

Lest that our neighebores thee espie.” (3723-9)

Chaucer’s Knight portrays a mourner who respectfully seeks spiritual mercy from a king, while his Miller has his “lord” seeking sexual mercy from an adulteress. The mourner addresses Theseus as the recipient of Victory, which adds a respectful quality to her voice. On the other hand, Alison’s imperatives, “Have do” and “com of,” are not terms one would use with a king. Both passages are in couplet form, but the differences in character shine through in how they use language.

In the end, Chaucer relies heavily on an interaction between metrical form and language patterns to craft his larger narrative and generate characters that comment on the themes within The Canterbury Tales. For Donald Howard, all the tales interweave to explore the theme of obsolescence in the Middle Ages. By “obsolescence,” Howard means “the experience of things not yet obsolete about which it is feasible to predict an end” (90). The Knight’s respect toward royalty is ridiculed by the Miller, and Chaucer shows this social degeneration by presenting both tales in the same metrical form and by creating different class-revealing language structures in each. Similarly, Spiritual Winter uses an interplay of metrical structure and language patterns to differentiate characters and actions to highlight its overall themes of suicide and suicide prevention.

Robert Browning's dramatic monologues provide other formal inspirations to Spiritual Winter that address a blending of characterization, lyric, and dramatic techniques. Isobel Armstrong outlines Browning's creative design for his monologues:

The dramatic monologue is literally two things at once, lyric and drama concurrently. The risk-taking element in this double form, and risk is always necessary to Browning, is that each poem within a poem, lyric and drama, has a dangerous edge of ambiguity and instability, so that the interface is never clear – it is never quite clear where lyric is displaced into drama, or where drama is dissolved in lyric feeling. (141)

Historically, the monologue form contains one voice revealing something about him/herself, either consciously or unconsciously, to readers. But Browning adds a lyric-dramatic ambiguity to his monologues that stems from adding an internal audience. The presence of an audience internal to the poem's actions lends drama, but that the poem has only one voice makes it qualitatively lyrical as well. Lastly, the reader outside the poem silently witnesses the speaker's monologue too, becoming drawn into the poem's drama, and sharing the internal audience's emotional reactions to the speaker.

In "My Last Duchess," Browning's speaker, the Duke of Ferrara, speaks to an internal audience, an unnamed betrothal agent from the Count of Tyrol (Abrams, 1190n.). The Duke describes a painting of his last wife, now deceased, and offers comments on her nature that reveal more about himself than her:

Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,

The dropping of the daylight in the west,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace – all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush at least. She thanked men – good! but thanked  
Somehow – I know not how – as she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift. Who'd stop to blame  
This sort of trifling? (25-35)

Through his comments, the Duke reveals himself as cruelly jealous, which should startle readers as much as it should the agent negotiating a husband for his master's daughter, especially if the readers have daughters. The dramatic monologues included in the second section of Spiritual Winter, as described above, employ Browning's technique, using the central character as the internal audience with whom readers sympathize as they do with the agent in "My Last Duchess."

Spiritual Winter draws upon poetic tradition to illustrate its themes of suicide prevention and humankind's ability to exist in a loss-ridden world. The theories of Alvarez and Shneidman, as well as the craft of Chaucer and Browning, move this collection toward becoming a statement about suicide as it impacts humankind in general, not just about how it resides in the individual mind. While confessional voices like Anne Sexton's are excellent artistic representations of personal suicidal ideation, they do not

allow the variety of characterizations and dramatic effects needed to depict how suicide manifests itself in society. Diana Hume George comments on Sexton's suicidal representation in "Wanting to Die," noting the improbability of the poem's speaker understanding the effect her suicide would have beyond herself:

The final stanza is an attempt to assure the addressee that the speaker has no illusions about the effect of her death on either the world she leaves behind or the one she goes to. No guitars playing, no kiss from her mother's mouth, no major disturbance in the natural world . . . or the man-made world . . . . (29)

The characters, actions, and metrical styles of Spiritual Winter hopefully will illuminate the external world of suicide as well as the internal one, increasing everyone's ability to use a special language to foster hope instead.

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## **Part One**

### **On the Job**

A suicidal depression is a kind of spiritual winter, frozen, sterile, unmoving. The richer, softer and more delectable nature becomes, the deeper the internal winter seems, and the wider and more intolerable the abyss which separates the inner world from the outer.

Thus suicide becomes a natural reaction to an unnatural condition.

-- A. Alvarez

The Savage God

In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountains start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.

-- W. H. Auden

“In Memory of W. B. Yeats”



## **The Magic Carpet Ride**

Our trainer strokes his barber-tended beard,  
Acknowledges our choice in helping those  
Who otherwise might entertain their deaths  
Alone. Young faces seamlessly regard  
His words, enraptured altruism seated  
On pillows, Indian style. The room seems right  
For hotline volunteers, not those like me  
Receiving compensation. Placards match  
The trainer's intonations. "Emphasize  
Each caller's pain. Be brave enough to let  
Them settle out their own predicaments  
Without enforcing yours." This, he feels,  
Allows for open dialogue, the method  
Assuredly best for maybe saving lives.  
The hippie leitmotifs continue when  
He starts a "magic carpet ride," a guided,  
Internal meditation where we ponder  
A major loss, something missing we  
Can bring to suicide prevention. "For  
Without our handling private losses, how

## **The Magic Carpet Ride (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Do others benefit when with us on  
 The phones?" He dims the ceiling lights, cues up  
 Some Ravi Shankar, has us focus back. . . .

All experimental lab decor include  
 A Skinner box, assorted mazes. Windows  
 Opaqued with Hefty bags, ascertain  
 Our rats maintain our schedule, not the sun's.  
 Sprague-Dawley infants come still natal pink,  
 Prepared to mature at scientific  
 Whim. Half the litter goes into a tub  
 Designed to limit food, the other half,  
 Ironically, becomes "controls," allowed  
 To feast like Tudor kings. A research aide,  
 I monitor each rat's progression, use  
 A rectal probe for temperature, a tape  
 To measure tails. Professor Schnell admires  
 My data crunching, wants my applications  
 Resplendent with experiences he's given  
 Me. "Graduate work requires hard discipline,"

## **The Magic Carpet Ride (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

He says each week at office hours. "And dress  
Your part. Network among your betters." Why  
Was he surprised I'd choose to jump the maze,  
And barter fame for life among controls?  
"With people," Schnell debated, "You'll fill a job.  
Experimental work will boost you past  
The medium hoards. . . ." Perhaps. Until I find,  
Spent in his corner, "Subject Number Three,"  
Engorged on urine-tainted shavings, his  
Intestines burst. Of course I would accept  
A broader table over measured fare,  
An overnight position answering calls  
To handle others' crises while avoiding  
The slow progression toward my own consuming. . . .

Fluorescence settles back upon my eyes.  
The trainer helps our slowly rising forms.  
"Let's summarize. Imagine it's okay  
To love yourself in spite of expectations,"  
He says. "Too much resides beyond control."

## **The Supervisor**

### **I.**

My supervisor models excellence  
From any wood available. He says  
“Produced-in-factory” goods all lack a sense  
of custom pride. Along the way, I test  
His works, the curve of handles, depths of spoons.

Preferring nights, he takes to sharpening knives  
Between our calls. His other project, me,  
Awaits the feedback breaks he signals most times  
By shaking his knife and starting, “Let me see. . .”  
As if we’re not alone inside the room.

“Remember,” he instructs, “A pistol has  
A safety switch. Revolvers don’t. Most folks  
Remain untutored here. So always ask  
About the switch to verify a joke.  
A semi needs one. Fires off much too soon.

### **The Supervisor (Continued, Stanza Break)**

“Just Vicadin won’t kill you. M and Ms  
 Will off you quicker. Tylenol will burn  
 Your stomach, though, as if ingesting them  
 With kerosene. Dilaudid always turns  
 The trick. Enough will bring an easy doom.

“So tell me. Why read textbooks? Chandler gives  
 A better intervention lesson. Read  
 How Marlowe treads his ugly city with  
 A skeptic’s gait while managing to see  
 Through liars until he struggles out the truth.

### **II.**

Adjusting to a graveyard schedule takes  
 Not only sleeping days, but finding ways  
 To occupy my nights off. Walking brings  
 Relief. At 2 A.M., I rule the streets,  
 Bisecting normally busy intersections  
 As if to flaunt my arrogance before

## **The Supervisor (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Imaginary crossing guards. Some nights,  
I meet another God has chidden from  
His realm, the woman sitting with her sign  
Outside the movie house where late-show viewers  
Deposit dollar bills. They can't resist  
A failing actress, as her sign defines  
Her, "PALIMONY SUIT AGAINST BRAD PITT  
STILL PENDING." School-yard fences never bar  
My path, the moon unloading special blessings  
Upon her favored son. "Invincible,"  
I told my supervisor. "Doubtful," he  
Replied, a safety cynic, though I only  
Explore suburban streets, where nothing's harmful.

Now, how I wish I'd listened to him as  
One covers me, demands I put my hands  
Back down. The other razes through my pack,  
Asks, "What's your access code? You move, my boy  
Will smoke you." Old, their pistol might reveal  
Dutch Schultz's prints under a dying bulb.

### **The Supervisor (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

But no, since drivers-by neglect what seems  
 A friendly, sidewalk meeting by streetlight,  
 Prosaic next to fantasies of home  
 Most likely, where I should have stayed tonight.  
 Hard-working cops pull over every male,  
 No matter age or size, not seventeen,  
 Crack-addict slim, with sports insignias on  
 Two-colored jackets. Finally, my intentions  
 Engage their curiosities. “Why  
 Walk out at night? You better tell us if  
 You had ideas.” Well, no more walking now.

My supervisor crawls for tingling stories, which  
 House shakes with steamy noises, drugs the kids  
 Are selling out of parking lots. I can’t relate  
 Much interest now, just infomercial  
 Impressions, since I never leave my room.  
 So soon, the supervisor brings a stick,  
 Some verdant string, and posits, “Cops don’t like  
 Concealed defense.” He whittles off the bark

**The Supervisor (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Around the top, and twines the string in layers.

Its tone highlights the oak's inherent darkness,

Accentuates its inner strength. When done,

He hands it over, saying, "Oak protects

Against the creeps. Go out again. Be safe.

My gift assures you'll never walk alone."



## The Documentary Maker's Milieu

His Eurotrash ideas infect my mood  
 Like eczema. Gauloise exhaust digresses  
 In *sprezzatura* tendrils while he drawls  
 Distractedly about his "vision." Shades,  
 With Vuarnet frames (of course) ensure we're not  
 Entranced completely by his Balkan fame.

"O lucky beauties! Proffer thanks my work  
 Includes your service, that your 'role-play training  
 Techniques ' assure this project has a bold  
 Believability, although my name's  
 Enough, because I'm BBC endorsed."

His directions supply my motivation. "Since  
 You labor nightly, you're the caller. Give  
 Me Kurt Cobain, the passion segregating  
 Destructive genius from the bourgeoisie.  
 I know! You're on a ledge. You want the world  
 Aware of alienation, lonely death."

### **The Documentary Maker's Milieu (Continued, Stanza Break)**

I try. However, drifts of passers-by  
Elude my inner vision filled instead  
With lonely beaches, engineers, wives.  
Does self-destruction only tempt the best  
Among our kind? Such questions work to block  
My focus, and I fail to catch a star.

The director tells me, "Better luck next time,"  
Just like a nameless caller did last night.

## Center Stage: The Anti-Hamlet

Shot through with buckshot hormones, teenage minds  
Can't process any information, save  
That Spring consumes itself outside. Their days  
Are numbered here. The learning curve denies  
My chalkboard stats. A speech on suicide  
Prevention equals wind for seniors making  
Out graduation gift lists. Far away  
Resides the thousand natural shocks of life.

The teacher snuffs his cigarette, says, "Thanks  
For coming," goes back in to finish class.  
Halfway removed myself, I almost miss  
The slighted girl whose adolescent angst  
Confronts me near my car. "My father asked  
For sex last night." So much for nascent bliss.

## Part Two

### Callers

The phone rang again. I made a sound in my throat and put it to my ear again, not saying anything at all.

So we were there silent, both of us, miles apart maybe, each one holding a telephone and breathing and listening and hearing nothing, not even the breathing.

Then after what seemed a very long time there was the quiet remote whisper of a voice saying dimly, without any tone:

“Too bad for you, Marlowe.”

-- Raymond Chandler

The High Window

## Prologue

It seems I only counsel the undead,  
Their pain abiding like a relative  
Whose visit burns supplies until what's left  
Is just enough to keep one barely living.

Although my lullabies provide no cure,  
I comfort souls who may, by day, appear  
Immune to losses, humankind's enduring  
Reluctance to admit our common fear,

When what's no longer there awakens us  
To suicide, a way for some to end  
The spirit's draining. Still I'd like to trust  
They'd rather live, as maybe proven when

I substitute for naked razors ranged  
So quickly over wrists. Unlike them ambles  
The Euphrates, endless river unchanged  
By time and passing moons. Not like this man

**Prologue (Continued, Stanza Break)**

Whose new-world shriving pacifies their tidal

Upheavals. Overwhelmed, how can I learn

To sort the voices not despising life

Per se, but wishing they'd had more rehearsals?

### **Caller One: Ready for a Kiss**

Oh no. Are any women working now?

You're sure? I think that guys don't understand,

That's all. It's not worth going postal over. . . .

I'm sure you're trained and all. But women know.

I didn't call your fucking hotline wanting

A fight, I just don't feel all right with men.

Well, if I must. This girl I know from Math

Was throwing a party, right? Invited me,

Drusilla, Sally, other girls, but guys

Would be there too. It sounded really cool.

This girl, she lives up in the hills, and lots

Of people know her parties rock. Her folks

Vacation endlessly. I couldn't wait.

For sure there'd been a party drought. We took

Drusilla's mother's car. I wore this hat,

But Sally made me take it off. She said

I looked like "fucking Annie Hall." But Sally

Had style. All black, with taffeta around

**Caller One: Ready for a Kiss (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Her waist to show it off. I'll never get  
To dress like that. Not . . . no, my folks don't care.  
That's not the point. I thought you'd said you'd listen.  
This girl's backyard is *huge*. They've got no fence,  
So kids were going everywhere, uphill  
And through the woods. Some guy Drusilla knows  
Had buds, and rolled us up a doob. We smoked,  
Got buzzed while hearing voices from the shadows,  
Some bumps. A girl said, "Don't." We heard some fool  
Break out with major swearing. Sally laughed,  
And started cheering, "Cock Block! Cock Block! Yeah!"  
When Sally's shit got old, I started bugging  
About the time. Drusilla, way-damn drunk  
Beyond belief and driving, had to crash  
Inside the parents' room. Drusilla's friend,  
An older guy with tribal tats around  
His arms, was *hella* fine. He had this bike,  
And offered me a ride. I didn't know  
Him well, but Sally said, "You dork. Just go."



**Caller One: Ready for a Kiss (Continued, Stanza Break)**

We blew along the mountain roads. I hugged  
Him tighter when he let the throttle out.  
Then Eddie, that's his name, pulled off into  
A little field along the reservoir.  
He said a local Goddess cult had used  
It, danced beneath the moon, until the cops  
Began responding to complaints. We sat  
On blankets Eddie kept in saddle bags.  
He seemed to like me, asked a lot of things  
About me, talked philosophy. One guy,  
Spinoza, Eddie really liked. "Inside  
All things," he said, "resides a piece of God.  
It's . . . pantheistic, right?" I got confused,  
And wondered what he meant. He snorted, shook  
His head. Oh, God. I felt so stupid, but  
He leaned in toward me, ready for a kiss. . . .

The doctor says I've only got two weeks  
Before the legal cut-off. Eddie's left.  
You'd vanish too, I bet. "The choice is mine

**Caller One: Ready for a Kiss (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Alone,” says Doctor “Talk-A-Lot,” who gives  
Brochures to “healthy moms.” A better life  
For me and baby? How about the choice  
A mother makes that no one talks about?  
To please us all, I’ll just abort us both.

## Caller Two: Mama's Boy

The slightest gasp had brought him to her bed  
With tissues, pills, health regimens prescribed  
*Ad nauseam*. Still she mimicked life, imbibed  
His youthful fuel while staying "almost dead."  
Adults had questioned why he'd never wed,  
This tweedy neuter always moored beside  
His wasting cause. He could have thrived,  
But chose to be a mama's boy instead.

His image comes back through the years, as now  
My mother mutters long-dead names. Her wails  
Disturb my sleep, and dreams dissolve like salt  
On wounded tongues. Remembering always how  
Their taunts assumed he'd had a choice, I pray  
The world will think of duty, never faults.

### **Interlude One: Holiday Shopping**

“It must be cherry, not some tacky oak.

My daughter wants the finer wood.” A vein

Extends along her temple, running like

The river Jordan through a Sunday song.

“I’m sorry, madam,” says the clerk. “We’ve sold

Them all, but oak stands out in rooms as well . . .”

“I’ve heard enough!” the woman shouts. “Just know

You’ve ruined my daughter’s Christmas!” As she leaves,

Discord’s created where she parts the crowd.

Unsettled, I’m shifted near enough to see

A tiny spasm move across the clerk’s

Left cheek become a gentle pulse, and then

The numbness martyred saints deplored.

More throngs

Of shoppers clog the mall, their deadened sights

On merchandise they can’t afford nor want

To buy. A brightly murdered tree belies

Forgotten things the ancients knew about

The true importance Winter Solstice holds.

When Earth grew cold, the pagans danced within

### **Interlude One: Holiday Shopping (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

The woods, holding hands, together bonded  
To symbolize their faith in great rebirth.  
For knowledge that our world would journey back  
To times of common bliss, I could perhaps  
Resist my woeful mood and dance with hope  
The sun's return would burn away the gross  
Decay, and end these post-Thanksgiving blues.

Depression brings on hunger, so I cruise  
The food court, but a "Steak Supreme," some fries,  
A soda, barely balancing my tray.  
I reach my table, bend to drop my bags,  
When, angling hard, some kid shoots past my knees.  
My soda tips, and sugared fluid pours out  
Across the floor like liquid streamers thrown  
To cheer my need to hurt the little shit.  
Before I start the chase, a hand rests lightly  
Forced revival on my shoulder. Amber eyes  
Flourish behind a front of peppy curls,  
Above a probing smile, and freckled cheeks.

**Interlude One: Holiday Shopping (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

“Vidal Sassoon” is script-embossed upon  
Her ivory cosmetician’s smock. “It’s no  
Big deal,” she says. “It happens all the time.”  
She gestures past me toward the counter.  
“They’ll let you have another one. Just ask.”  
  
Her message sent, she blends into the crowd.

### Caller Three: Economic Factors

“Today your life begins again,” the boy  
Had said. Applause, applause, then junior lifts  
This golden watch out of a box. He hands

It over, smiling big. “A simple gift,  
I know. But since you’ve got it all, what *could*  
We get you? Speech!” Inside my mind, I sifted

Through years, thirty-five in all, like wood  
Stacked against an antique barn, left to rot  
Because the Earth no longer gave the goods.

At twenty, Signing on till someone bought  
My book, I’d planned a hasty stay. “Soon fame  
Will end my wage-slave days,” or so I thought.

Promotions came, along with perks, to claim  
My dwindling time. My wife demanded more;  
My children longed for shoes with famous names,

**Caller Three: Economic Factors (Continued, Stanza Break)**

The ones endorsed by jocks to old to score.

Like Africanus, fresh from Spain's defeat,

I quickly passed the ranks. I opened doors,

Created markets, always there to meet

My corporation's goals. How could I know

That economic factors would deplete

Once loaded vaults? "Why don't you take it slow?

Retire before your bones give out." They meant

To say, "We're cutting back – it's time you go!"

Of course, those creeps ignored my speech. They'd spent

Their afternoon digesting buffet fair,

And swilling over-watered drinks. Young gents,

All college boys in costly suits. Who cares

About my sentiments? They merely want

It done. You want to hear my speech? To share



**Caller Three: Economic Factors (Continued, Stanza Break)**

The pain? Here goes. “Now, never being fond

Of long good-byes, I’ll make my statement fast.

No need to thank my friends, the *ubi sunt*

Of business types I’ve met in years gone past.

I’d hoped to clear a different, foolish path,

But too damn bad. You all can kiss my ass.”

### Caller Four: Renaissance Man

. . . so then I said, "That brings to mind the debts  
 Incurred by Edward, King of England, how  
 The Bardi and Peruzzi almost met  
 Their ruin for loaning him such large amounts."  
 I tried to help him, but he never gets  
 It. "Old-world financiers could make it out,"  
 I'd offered while he rolled his eyes. "And so  
 Can you." But did he want to listen? No.

Not like his mother, no. I met her on  
 The Ponte alla Grazie, by the way.  
 I used to lunch in Santa Croce, wander  
 Where *le murate* once were walled away  
 Until a mercantile desire had pawned  
 For naught the souls of city lords not swayed  
 By spirit. Bargellini had it right,  
 You know. All poetry gives way to blight

Unless, of course, you happen by the fringe

**Caller Four: Renaissance Man (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Resisting progress. Like that aging man  
Whose haggard coat unsettled as he pitched  
His line into the Arno. Quite a fancy,  
Believing fish still swam beneath that bridge.  
“Italians feel senectitude commands  
Respect,” this woman posits, coming out  
Of nowhere. “Dotage brings a certain clout,

A sense of earned unraveling, don’t you think?”  
This woman. Blythe. Her family’d come from Boston,  
A summer tour . . . what? Yes, I’ve had a drink  
Or two tonight. Chianti. Don’t be cross,  
All right? Not like my son. I chose to ring  
Because . . . well, Castiglione says the cost  
Of age convinces us our youth comprised  
A golden time, but do our memories lie?

Of course, I married Blythe. But first I made  
Her my assistant. Her Italian outshined  
My own, and Salutati’s letters take

**Caller Four: Renaissance Man (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Exquisite skill to translate. Scholars find  
 His contradictions daunting. He'd praise  
 Republics in his correspondence while,  
 In de Tyranno, monarchs get his best  
 Assessment. Sorting this proved quite a test

While writing out my dissertation. Blythe  
 Not only helped me work, but helped release  
 My driving tensions too, suggesting light  
 Excursions, Lucca during olive season,  
 Or Prato. Leonardo's Virgin, Child  
And Saint Anne comes to mind. She always seemed  
 Like Anne. That peaceful smile. Aha! You know  
 About the artists? Michelangelo?

Who cares that Burkhardt studied Medicis,  
 That Brucker loved the Florentines? *My* heart  
 Indebts itself to history, how the Greeks  
 Supplied us Reason and Desire. The art  
 Defining the Renaissance, the fight between

**Caller Four: Renaissance Man (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Consuming lust and higher virtue, started  
With discourse. Blythe believed that too, until  
She died. We'd argued it throughout her illness,

But still my son won't listen. "Dad," he says,  
"Let's sell the house. You're tenured. Mother's gone.  
Uncomplicate your life." Oh yes, he'll get  
His way, work to disengage my fondest  
Attachments, spend his whole inheritance  
To pawn the future, breeding other debts.  
I'll grow forgotten like the names that vanish  
With time, my hope for rebirth finally passing.

### **Caller Five: A Consequence of Bringing Business Home**

The record shows I've earned my aching bones,  
Accruing sales and things that some might call  
A consequence of bringing business home.

Last week, I moved a dozen Broncos, sold  
Six Lincolns too. That's great? Well, after all,  
The record shows I've earned my aching bones.

Men wouldn't know, but heels are hell. I go  
Through seven pair a year out in the stalls.  
A consequence of bringing business home,

My throbbing feet, just kills the chance I'll know  
What peace is. Still, I've sold the most this fall.  
The record shows I've earned my aching bones.

Perhaps my husband's right. Although we both  
Should work, my job's become a constant brawl,  
A consequence of bringing business home.

**Caller Five: A Consequence of Bringing Business Home****(Continued, Stanza Break)**

Before, he'd kept the bruises down below

My neck. Tonight, it's lucky I can crawl.

The record shows I've earned my aching bones,

A consequence of bringing business home.

## **Interlude Two: Descent**

My niece could shift my self-perception, move  
 Obliging doubt, convince the world all ponds  
 I cross outsize the Hellespont. If I now  
 Begudge her, as her father did, who'll step  
 Inside the target, idolized and sold?  
 Parading through a father-daughter dance,  
 Distributing "Vanilla Golds" for Scout  
 Troop 99. "No task too small," commands  
 The uncle's creed, or so I'm always told.  
 But then she offers up a sales brochure  
 That advertises trips beneath the Earth. . . .

Stalactites pet my helmet as our guide  
 Directs us to the "Lower Grind." For hours  
 Our group – devolved by darkness into small,  
 Erratic lights – had wandered through the Earth's  
 Internal coolness, washed alive within  
 Adventurous spite for those we'd left above.  
 "Spelunking's not for wimps," explains our guide,  
 Referring to a cleft he calls "an entry."



## Interlude Two: Descent (Continued, No Stanza Break)

“Prepare to meet the Grind.” Our helmet lights  
 Augment his pleased-to-serve-you smile. He dives  
 Like Esther Williams, sure we’ll follow suit  
 Behind him, synchronized, a perfect team.  
 No water slices, easing passage through  
 The brine. My arms are locked above my head;  
 My fingers thirst to scoop the biting grit  
 Sashaying down my face.

The tunnel hooks  
 Inside a tepid puddle. The direction  
 Shift lets my knees move up to meet my chin  
 Until the path extends my form again.  
 Small, sharpened stones move down my back.  
 (Old lovers’ voices rise to meet the pace  
 Of digging nails demanding greater thrust.)  
 My body inches in the shrinking coils.  
 (Employers squeeze my living juice to feed  
 Their leashed machines.) What’s real or not combine  
 To tease all conscious effort towards the freeing,

**Interlude Two: Descent (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Berserker pounding – jags of skin torn off

Instead of rock dividing. Libya, Great

Gibraltar, moved apart for Heracles;

Why not this God-forsaken pit for me?

“Keep moving,” says my niece. “My helmet light’s

Gone out.” She wraps her hands around my foot.

“I need your help. Please get me out of here.”

With this, I pull us through the other side.

**Caller Six: Tomcat F-14 Flyer**

Last year, I ranged at thirty-thousand feet,  
My hand rock steady, tracking twenty four  
Distinctive sites. But since I clean my guns  
Left-handed, shoot left-handed, no elite  
Techniques are needed now. Maybe I'll bore  
Myself to death before I get it done.

I love to work on cars. In high school, guys  
Would want a little "something-something," but  
I wanted in their hoods instead. I'd juiced  
My boyfriend's Mustang, pushing it to fly.  
I'd added Holly manifolds, adjusted  
The carburetor. What a sweet-ass beauty,

That fastback 302. What balls. Some days  
I'd let it out on mountain roads, my fella's  
Complexion nearly puce until I knocked  
It back to second. Such a puss. I fail  
To understand his reticence. Why challenge  
Design? Some cars are made to race the clock,

**Caller Six: Tomcat F-14 Flyer (Continued, Stanza Break)**

But nothing like the F-14. The first  
I'd heard of it was when a pilot brought  
A simulator to our school. I jumped  
Ahead in line, got seated, almost bursting  
Inside. Although the ride was fake, I caught  
The bug. Who'd ever believe this'd get me pumped

On college, man? But when my fingers wrapped  
Around that stick – like those engaged above  
An eager lover's G-spot – both machine  
And pilot entered mach with welcome rapture.  
A simulation. Still, I'd felt enough.  
My senior year was hell. I started thinking

About enlisting, getting BOOST to help  
Improve my piss-poor chances for admittance  
Into the Academy. I raised my grades,  
Surviving "Tail Hook" attitudes, "Don't Tell"  
Philosophies, and graduated fifth.  
I'd die or merit Naval Aviator.

**Caller Six: Tomcat F-14 Flyer (Continued, Stanza Break)**

Flight school, Goshawk training time, and sweating  
 Through “Integration Training Systems,” years  
 Of hellishness. Thank God I made my rating!  
 The awesome part was flying nights. We tested  
 Our tracking, fired the Vulcans. Once, I’d veered  
 Off course too quickly, scaring Nick, my Radar

Guy . . . Combat? Sure, I guess. I’ll never know  
 That feeling though. On leave, I went to visit  
 My folks. My brother’s car, an aging ‘Vette,  
 Had vapor lock. He was revving it to show  
 Me, when the hood slammed down, right on my wrist.  
 The sound resembled Autumn branches, wet

Enough to promise bending only. The Navy  
 Supplied a desk, my hand still twitching from  
 The nerve decay. I think my left will work  
 Okay, my right still good for holding aim  
 This close. I see myself. A pilot coming  
 On deck to hit my foe right where it hurts.

**Caller Seven: 295.30**

. . . It seemed so simple really, how it came  
To me. For years, they'd foisted off the blame  
On chemistry. "The voices," said my doctor,  
"Don't exist. Your brain concocts  
Delusions." Now, however, I won't hear  
Them bother me, my doctor *or*  
Those nasty persecutions! See? I've formed  
This plan that took some clever engineering.

So simple, and unlike with Clozaril,  
I'll never have to suffer nightly chills  
Or let some nurse recheck my white-cell count  
Again. Last Spring, I'd wandered out  
Because I couldn't sleep. (That's nothing new  
With medications.) People's lawns  
Throughout the neighborhood had posters all  
Endorsing candidates or measures. June  
  
Was voting time, which helped my scheme take flight.  
Experimentally, I took a sign,

**Caller Seven: 295.30 (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Threw out its stake, and tacked it to my ceiling.

I stopped my meds, of course, to seal

Off any chance of bad results. Convinced

The voices couldn't reach me when

I stood below the first, I gather ten

A night until I'd papered every inch.

Their slogans, mingled incantations, instilled

A thickening power into my walls that built

As colored letters layered like votive wax.

The voices, pissed they couldn't nag

Me into death, aren't speaking anymore,

Which demonstrates my mind's well being.

November's here, so what I really need

Is space to store the extra signs I'll hoard.

### **Epilogue: The Wedding Toast**

The guests were slightly peeved, because the heat  
Had roused the neighbor's dog whose tinny whine  
Played heavy counterpoint to "Here and Now,"  
The bridal song. I hadn't minded though.  
It helped me focus past the sweat that ran  
Like liquid soap into my eyes and kept  
Already antsy guests from noting how  
My broken pants were slipping down below  
The cummerbund not meant to hold them up.  
How special seemed the chance to wed outside,  
Surrounded by the vineyards, cradled fruits  
To match the promise made between my friends  
Today. Who knew that working nights could drain  
Resistance to the sun? "The Best Man's just  
About to boil," someone whispered. Sure  
Enough, I left the altar, walked the aisle,  
And all went black until the Maid of Honor  
Gave up her cherished bottled water. Now,  
The nervous guests refuse to look, unsure



**Epilogue: The Wedding Toast (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

I'll make it through the toast. Each glass is filled,  
But here on stage, I know I'll disappoint  
The crowd. No acrobats or tumbling clowns  
To test the rules of ceremony, but  
Some thoughts to summarize, I hope, why ordeals  
Like mine are worth the risk. Each glass is raised:

"A summons to a muse is standard form  
In wedding verse, but recollection pulls  
Me back to May. The groom and I were mourning  
Our sordid youth, the lazy nights we'd killed  
With eager lays whose hands had lightly poured  
Across our backs like soothing buttermilk.  
We'll never wonder why we've shed those ways,  
Though. Not when now begins his better days.

"Back then, endless parties dulled my heart  
With hackneyed scenes, the wrinkled sheets  
And half-remembered names. I worked the part  
Self-loathing always picked for me. I'd feel

**Epilogue: The Wedding Toast (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

The analgesic beer work daily charms  
Inside my mind and knew I'd never be  
The kiss that pledges more than casual sin.  
My time on Earth will be what could have been.

“Ambitious lovers, model how to shake  
Out from the inertia-laden single life.  
Together, broach maturity. Please make  
A muse. Help all around you realize  
The choice to love is ours. Guests, entertain  
The usual blessings, not the doubts, and find  
Enough within yourselves to covet two  
So newly joined. Let's toast the bride and groom.”

## Part Three

### Nora

Her obsequies have been as far enlarged  
As we have warranty. Her death was doubtful,  
And but that great command o'ersways the order,  
She should in ground unsanctified been lodg'd  
Till the last trumpet; for charitable prayers,  
Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her.  
Yet here she is allow'd her virgin crants,  
Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home  
Of bell and burial. . . .

-- William Shakespeare

Hamlet

## **The Open Door Insomniac Decree**

Not many policies define our shift,  
 But some relieve the otherwise unending  
 Ennui innate to graveyard settings with  
 Two workers, one my supervisor. When  
 He implemented rules, desiring to give  
 Our tedious lives a boost, I quickly agreed,  
 As with his “Open Door Insomniac Decree.”

We welcomed every sleepless volunteer  
 Our slogan reading, “IF YOU’RE AWAKE, WHY NOT  
 ENJOY ANOTHER’S PRESENCE? NEVER FEAR  
 YOUR LONELY NIGHTS AGAIN.” Our invite brought  
 Surprising numbers. Some came once, but clearly  
 A few found sanctuary. Who could blame  
 Their weariness with single-person games?

For instance, Roderick loves his cribbage more  
 When beating someone else besides himself.  
 “Combatants should remain securely moored  
 In opposition. When the cards you’ve dealt

## **The Open Door Insomniac Decree (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Yourself are crap, who wants to keep the score?"

So Roderick and my supervisor try

Each other's cribbage skills, no end in sight.

Jerome believes his pastries could seduce

The most devout reducer. Chocolate filled

Eclairs had merited a long review

Of mental anguish from his ex, "a built-

Around-the-hips bulimic." Substitutes

Assemble nightly, though, forgiving meanness

When fresh-baked cherry pies give off their steam.

A broker, Nigel often honors Mitch,

His friend who skis K2. "The debutantes

Desire new ways to trifle off their riches

On Mitch," he moons, "while Mitch ignores their wants."

I'm certain Nigel wishes Mitch existed

Outside his lonely mind. I do as well.

Some fantasies confirm an average Hell.

### **The Open Door Insomniac Decree (Continued, Stanza Break)**

But Nora stays my favorite. She comes  
The nights Geselle, her daughter, spends  
Away from home. With Nora comes a jumble  
Of video equipment, strapped against  
A carry-cart, with endless movies, some  
From countries off the map. "They free my mind  
From custody concerns, the hectic times

When Ted, my ex, pursues Geselle in court."  
To questions, she replies, "Shut up and watch  
The film." But words belie the worried scores  
Around her sable eyes. Whenever caught  
Near tears, she aptly billows out the door,  
Her cotton dress and calla lilly scent  
Inviting hope against her trite dissent.

## Geselle

It's strange, of course, to bring a child along  
On dates. But separation fiddled much  
With Nora's nerves. She only got the girl  
Through Winter, every other holiday,  
So did I dare suggest a baby-sitter?

Geselle aspires to place herself upon  
A plundered throne by seventeen. She'll brush  
Aside complaining natives, take the world  
Like Alexander, though she's only eight.  
"He might be Great, but I'm Geselle the Better."

Her blondish curls defies their braided bonds,  
Museum halls the running lanes she rushes  
Down, choosing works to populate her pearl  
Encrusted castle in Ceylon. She'll take  
Monet, unlike her mom who favors bitter

Motifs, morbid themes. Her favorite songs  
Were written after 1990, but

**Geselle (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Old country brightens Nora, sadness hurled

Seductively, like Patsy Cline. Debates

Abound. Geselle creates a verbal litter,

Unceasingly contrary to test her mom,

Perhaps to help develop future thrusts

She'll use towards global conquest. Total worlds

Might fear her presence. Nora only hates

The absence when her father comes to get her.



## Aftershock

Attentive, I explore the spaces where  
You've posted talismans to mark your past,  
Anxiety by Munch provokes contrast  
Through calmness with its figures' endless stares.  
"I Fall to Pieces" cleanly strokes the air  
With pliant thrums. At dinner, curried lamb  
Had practiced magic, and I thought, "At last  
My perseverance bested your despair."

Demandingly, a neighbor's infant cries,  
And steps approach to moderate its needs.  
Here, tears assault my chest. An unexpected  
Reaction, surely, after love, just like  
Your saying, "There's no place on Earth for me."  
Assuredly, when spoken from your bed.

## Medication

The supervisor wonders why you've missed  
 Your shift. Today, Geselle moved in with Dad,  
 But Touch of Evil, truly classic bliss,  
 Consoled you while I'd helped her pack. "Perhaps  
 She's ill," I wonder. Buying chicken soup's  
 A handy check-in tactic, knowing you.

Ebulliently, the deli owner sprinkles  
 Abundant pepper in the soup. "They say  
 Is good for cold." His Slavic accent brings  
 Believability to this saw like praise  
 Delivers hope to challenged self-esteem.  
 "Don't spill," I plead while driving up your street.

If sick, you'll thank me for the lovely thought,  
 Allowing me to dish you soup and NyQuil.  
 If well, we'll hash out Orson Welles. You've taught  
 Me much of noir and pre-war German silents,  
 Ramon Navarro, Clara Bow. So let  
 My sustenance relieve your achy frets.

**Medication (Continued, Stanza Break)**

No answer meets my summons once I use  
My key and call your name. The quiet moves  
Foreboding on my spine, inspiring excuses  
Within my mind for abandoning the food.  
The outcome lingers in your bath, outlined  
In tainted suds, foregoing final rites.

## The Other Man

A floral grouping covers where they've closed  
 Your wounds. Ironic, really, how the only  
 Effective measure of your life, the way  
 You knew to cut up, not across, remained  
 Unmentioned in the pastor's sermon. "Nora's  
 Obstructed path to God," he keened, "was not  
 Her fault, but still it gives us all fair warning.  
 Rise up, my children. Realize that faith  
 Provides the only safety." Summarized,  
 His eulogy begged a looking up to God,  
 Not across to those who suffer too.  
 Which method, razors or our prayers, will lead  
 To quicker death? Direct your questions upward,  
 Not toward the back-pew occupant who catches  
 The nonplussed glances of the other mourners,  
 Who barely hears their queries. "Oh? That's him?"  
  
 Some aunt had picked the coffin, basic pine  
 With brass details. Your husband couldn't do

### **The Other Man (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

It. Much too painful, really. Once, I'd asked  
You why the marriage crashed. You didn't answer,  
But played a film about a mountebank  
Who kept a man asleep inside a box.

This man, Cesare, possessed no will beyond  
His master's, Caligari, aimless spite  
Ascendant in his eyes, his goatish hair  
Protruding from beneath his stove-pipe hat.  
With wand in hand, he delegated schemes,  
Commanding, "Rise, Cesare!" Dark-eyed and lithe,  
The sleeper studded awake to slay the wizard's  
Opponents, blighted teeth and famished stare  
More frightening than the knife he used to work  
The shoddy whims his keeper orchestrated.  
But Caligari couldn't keep his thrall  
From love's influence, the hero's chaste fiancée,  
Earmarked for death but causing interference  
To Caligari. Poor Cesare expired,  
The distant point within a three-way tryst

### **The Other Man (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

His capabilities contended fiercely  
To comprehend. "I must be like Cesare,"  
I'd guessed. "The woman's you." "No," you'd said.  
"My husband's Caligari. I'm Cesare,  
And you, my other man, would be the woman."

The aforementioned aunt selected your  
Apparel, while your husband prepped Geselle,  
Still young enough to lose the imprint Mother  
Had made upon her life, unlike myself  
Who'd scoured the bloodstains hardening in your tub.  
(The cops removed the body, but your landlord  
Demanded someone either clean the mess  
Or cover the deposit.) Geselle addresses  
Me, royalty in training. "Sir, we meet  
Again." "Oh, yes," I answered, "as we did  
At Alexander's court." She disagreed,  
"No, sir. I think the king was Constantine."  
But Auntie sets it straight. "Now, now. Young ladies  
Don't talk to strangers." Which, I guess, I am.

**The Other Man (Continued, Stanza Break)**

The relatives invest their boards with shades

Endemic to ambiguous styles, diverting

Away from mothers craving suicide.

“Too bad the marriage faded, but the child

Has her father still.” The other man

Will store the more eccentric work until

The critics understand her rightful worth.

## **The Supervisor's Report**

Let's see. We overheard him screaming, "Get  
A life! At least your wife's alive, you shit!"  
He slammed the phone down, and Jerome approached  
To offer lemon squares. He snatched a handful,  
Shot off some curses, splattered lemon filling  
Along the walls, across our cribbage board,  
Then letting silence run. "We miss her, too,"  
Jerome extended, but he mumbled back,  
"I wouldn't, friend. Some people die because  
They hate it here." He left, of course, without  
Another word. With this, I must suggest  
He not return until his grief is handled  
Right. Surely people can't let others grieve  
Until admitting death controls them too.



## **The Bartender's Report**

The usual crowd tonight, except the guy  
Sequestered by the jukebox, bumming coins  
Forever playing "Didn't We." Annoyed,  
A fellow asked him, strongly, if he'd mind  
Selecting something else. The kid says, "Right,"  
Goes through the list. But then the stupid boy  
Just shrugs, plays "Didn't We" again. Roy,  
An all-too-frequent con, was here tonight  
To celebrate his freedom after time  
For armed assault. I think there'd been some noise  
About it in the streets, how good old Roy  
Had carved some hapless bastard into tripe,  
Because he'd been too loose around Roy's bike.

I came around my bar, said, "Let's avoid  
A fight, my friends." Besides, I hate that cloying  
Sinatra shit, all doo-bee-doo and crying.  
But, hey, the kid seemed out of sorts, not tightened  
Around the lobes. I warned him, "Never toy  
With guys like Roy." Then I tried to join

### **The Bartender's Report (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Him, but he lumbers up and walks to right  
Where Roy is playing pool. The greenish light  
Above the table made his glare more pointed,  
As did his force when plunking down his coins.  
“Next game,” he says. I worried Roy would rifle  
Him up the ass. I pushed the kid outside,  
All while he's screaming, “Let him use his knife!”  
  
I've never seen a stronger wish to die.

## 5 A.M.

Too quiet now, this house. The neighbor's cat  
Gave up its heat-induced sonata hours  
Ago, and children everywhere survive  
The jangling claws imagined from their beds.  
Demanding something for distraction, I  
Eviscerate the box you've left, extract  
The films you'd gathered like protective spells  
Against your naked life. A modern Shakespeare  
Release eternalizes Branagh as  
The king ready to contend against despair.  
"What's he that wishes so?" I do, my king.  
I do not think I'll witness Agincourt.

My walking staff composes rhythms in  
The neighborhoods where they've developed watches,  
Because I'm never sleeping. Once, a friend  
Aroused my indignation against a girl  
Refusing his submissions. Swedish, blond  
No less. A visitor to curse our boys,

**5 A.M. (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

Her Bergmanesque essence as far removed  
From passion as her native sun. I near  
The swimming club where, on a Saturday,  
A certain Swede's affair was hamstrung when  
Staccato egg grenades exploded yolk  
Into the pool. The bastards never caught  
Us, and I like to think our comradeship  
Forestalled my buddy's plans, as later on,  
We tripped across a crevice-spanning trestle.  
I see him still, a drunken shade four steps  
Ahead, pirouetting madly, challenging  
  
Despondency. I lean my staff against  
The fence, and launch myself up over the top,  
Where razor wire deters less bumptious felons.  
My skin and clothing pull along the edges,  
Each passing like a junkyard mongrel's swipe.  
But still, I'm needing more than whetted splits,  
My body slowly dripping blood upon  
The polished stones. I stagger toward the pool,

### **5 A.M. (Continued, No Stanza Break)**

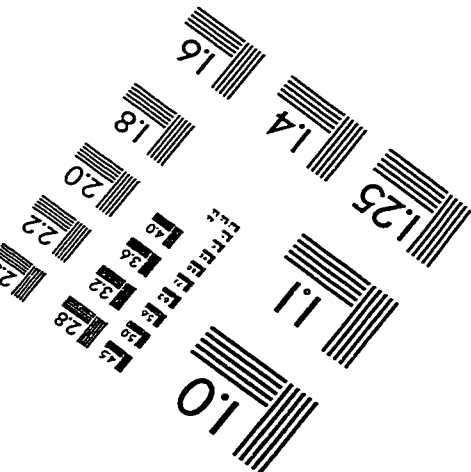
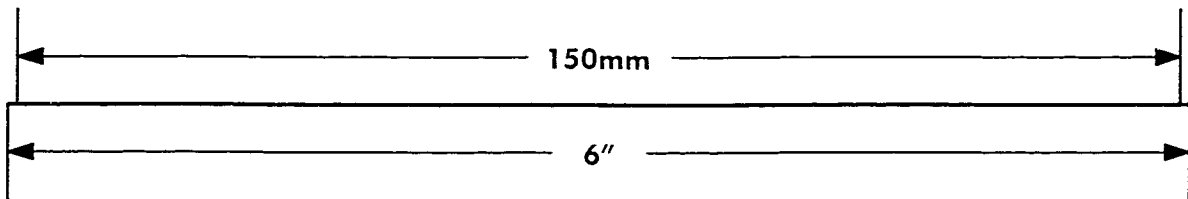
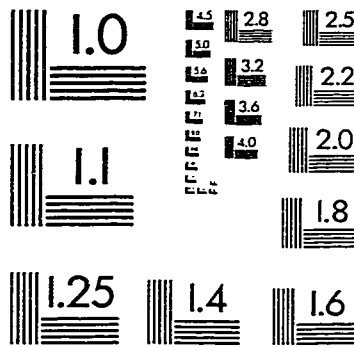
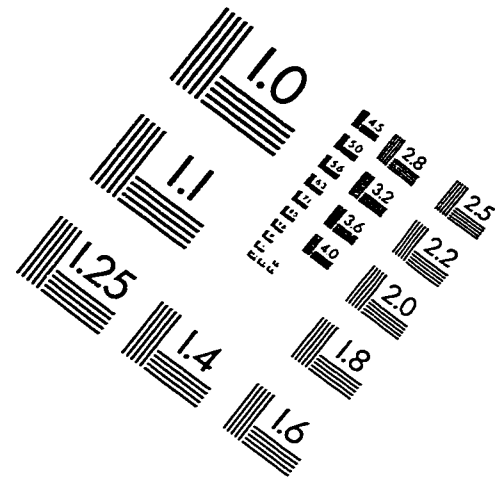
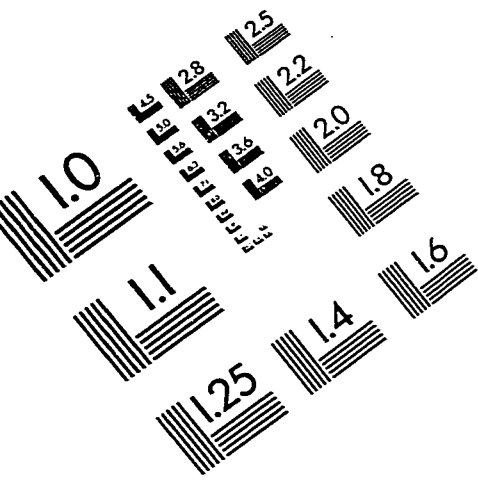
Plunge in, and chlorinated water burns  
My wounds. But near the bottom – longing. Was  
It like this, Nora? Did the scented beads  
Inside your bath excite the cuts along  
Your arms? I doubt it, given the peaceful temper  
Your face possessed, surrounded by a reddish  
Anointing, like the froth ascending toward  
The morning as my lungs confront the need  
For air, to scream in protest that I WILL  
NOT FOLLOW YOU! Instead, I thrash my arms  
And almost slip down farther on the tiles,  
Until a struggling grip bunches my shirt,  
And pulls me upward toward the blinding light.

“Are you all right?” the watchman asks. The dawn  
Reveals the shock he’s earned from finding me.  
“I can’t complain. At least I’m still alive.”

## End Piece

For months, my therapist conducted tests  
Designed to measure my ability  
To work. Whatever parasites had grazed  
My mind now frequent richer dining halls.  
The desolation months have slowly wasted.  
My friendly supervisor winks as I  
Resume my station, waving Mildred Pierce  
To signal later viewing. The telephones  
Are newer, but the rest endures. I add  
A necessary touch, a snapshot Nora  
Took outside a movie house, her arm  
Around a cardboard Errol Flynn. At last,  
She has her place on Earth, reminding me  
How losses seed compassion over time.

# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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