

Bastard Review 5/6

death and desire

Adam Klein

The Medicine Burns

I see my pitted skin reflected in the tinted window of the airport limousine. Outside, the flat, white fields appear endless; my reflection is an overlay of holes. The landscape has other blemishes, dead trees here and there, an old farmhouse half sunk in the snow. Beneath the snow, I can just make out the dead, wiry stalks of corn combed back across the land, parted, it seems, like frozen hair.

We enter town as the lights of Old Capital are turned on. I see its gold dome from a distance. The driver points out the English and Philosophy building from his window. It is an old brownstone and unlike anything I've known in Miami. We drive up to the front of Stonecourt Apartments, I am overwhelmed with disappointment. The building is far from the campus, off the side of the highway. It looks like a dorm; less attractive than the dorms he'd pointed out on the way over here. I want to ask him to keep driving.

There's an information area near the banks of elevators. The attendant greets me eagerly, as though he's hemmed in by the counter.

"You're very lucky," he tells me as he slides the rental agreement over the counter, "the tenant before you mirrored one of his walls so you have the only different apartment in the building."

As I sign my name to several sheets of paper, he leans over and whispers, "The guy who lived there was kind of kinky, I think."

I look at him, disinterested, and return the papers to him. There is nothing outstanding about his face; it is as common as the faces coming off the elevators. I find it both pathetic and enviable. Some people look like they belong, even in places like this.

"I live here, too," he says, and I notice his braces for the first time. They don't surprise me on children, but on him they're shocking.

"Maybe I'll check up on you later," he warns, "just to make sure you've got everything you need."

The mirrors are cheap tiles affixed to the wall next to the bed. My first instinct is to pull the bed away from the wall. I can't imagine rolling over in the morning and seeing myself right away.

I am not looking into the mirrors as I make my way around the foot of the bed, but I detect an image from the corner of my eye, darting across the mirror, hunched over, almost hiding, and wearing a blue shirt.

I meet Lawrence on the first day of class. He's smoking in the hallway,

dressed beautifully, sure of himself. I ask him if this is where Theory and History of the Avant Garde will be taught. He nods. I look out the window at the slick walkways and I can feel his eyes on me.

"Is this your first semester?" he asks, more curious than the question permits. My face can do that sometimes; encourage curiosity. He has the striking beauty of a face you see in a magazine; looks, I am sure, that enable him to have whatever he wants.

We sit together in class, in the last row so we can talk while the professor shows slides. He asks me where I'm staying and when I mention the Stonecourt Apartments he whispers, "I'm sorry. There's a suicide there every winter," then, "if I had to live there, I'd jump too, but from the penthouse."

When the lights are off, he seems relieved and leans back in his seat. He leans in toward me and whispers, "Brancusi's *The New Born*." The projected sculpture is perfectly smooth. The professor extracts a long, silver pointer from what looks like a pen. He cannot resist its surface and absently traces it while he lectures.

"He's passionate about his subject," Lawrence says, sounding ironic, jealous even of that work of art.

"You must have had him before?" I ask.

"Oh, yes," he says, "too often."

I look closely at the professor. He is thin but distinguished with a shock of gray hair at the front of his part, which someone, my mother probably, told me had to do with kidney dysfunction. Between him and Lawrence, I begin to suspect a conspiracy of elegant, wealthy men sprinkled through the general population of students, but their function seems as difficult to discern as art.

On the break, Lawrence tells me his full name, Lawrence Coolidge III. He must be joking, but I don't question it; there is something about him that makes me think, cynically, of the word "breeding." He tells me that he is a painter and that his family lives in Chicago; he has been a student here in Iowa for two years. I've never been to Chicago, but I imagine it from my memories of reading *Sister Carrie*.

"I'm in the English Department," I mention. I decide not to tell him about my own failed attempts at painting. Even simple figure or perspective drawing is profoundly difficult for me. I don't trust my eye enough; I am always embellishing.

Maybe the secret club of beautiful men is there to cast light on the ugly ones. I can imagine Lawrence and the professor shrunk down and in a glowing halo at the corner of my room watching me slide out of bed after I've attempted sex with the information booth attendant.

He looks so haggard under the standing lamp near my bed. He sits on the edge of my bed in discolored underwear and nylon socks, his brittle yellow body slumped with a shame I cannot rid him of.

I suppose that is what I am trying to do. I continue to disgrace myself in making him feel wanted. I'll often beg him to deliver his tongue to me through his wired mouth. He obliges me with a power

he is unaware of. He is even more powerful when he doesn't oblige.

He is a codeine addict, and I've spent the afternoon driving around with him filling forged cough medicine prescriptions. There are three sticky bottles in the garbage can, one half full on the night table. When I look at the red ring on the table, I can practically feel it on my skin. It feels like his presence, but though I'd like to be rid of him, I have my own addictions.

He flicks off the light, and until my eyes adjust, there is only the sound of him scratching his skin. He does this obsessively. My only relief is not seeing it.

"I wish you'd let me play my Hank Williams, Jr. record for you," he says sleepily. "I think you'd like it."

"How many times have I told you I hate country music and country people?" I ask rigidly in the dark.

I see his hand sliding from the side of the bed, searching out his guitar lying on the floor. The first two nights he spent with me, I had mistakenly told him I liked his playing. He told me he liked to sing me to sleep, and so I'd pretended with my eyes closed. But he could go on singing for an hour at least.

I grab his hand and twist it until I hear him whimpering. "No playing tonight," I say through clenched teeth.

He finally falls asleep while I sit propped against the opposite wall. I'm so tense I can't sleep. I concentrate on matching my breathing to his so that I can forget he's there.

I vow that I won't sleep with him again, and stretch out on the floor without cover or pillow. But my vow does not dispel my closet of skeletons, ugly burdensome men I've crossed every taboo to meet. They hang there, as patient without me as they were with me. I am a bad medicine, I think. I do not heal them, and they discard me even when they are terminal cases and there's nothing else.

They hang there: the old ones, the amputees, the mentally retarded. I'd like to cut their ropes so they could fall; fall with all the suicides of this building in a sordid heap at the lobby doors of the Stonecourt Apartments. Their bodies, like a barricade against the doors.

Lawrence invites me to his apartment which is a large one bedroom in a wooded area behind the campus. It's a quaint setting with a wooden bridge which crosses a landscaped ravine. We stop for a moment on the bridge, and look down at the thin brook trickling over black stones.

"Almost like wilderness," he says, "but they can trip floodlights and light up the whole set." He points out some of the lights, discretely positioned behind trees. "A woman was raped here a few years ago. Now the place is like a laid trap."

"I'll watch where I step," I assure him.

I distrust the moonlight that makes his features take on the strange, alien quality of the man-made brook. It makes the thought of touching him seem odd and cold.

He opens the door to his apartment and ushers me inside. There is an awkward feeling as we stand, hesitant, in the doorway, as though he was housesitting with instructions not to bring in guests. He takes my coat and the warmth of the room envelops me.

"Have a seat," he says, aware of my awkwardness. I sit down on an elegant, forest green couch. He tells me he'll get coffee and turns the radio on before he leaves the room. It's the classical music station playing softly Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia On A Theme*.

"Do you know this piece?" I ask him.

"No," he calls out from the kitchen, "I don't really like classical music."

This is the apartment of someone established, I think, not a student. The room is rosy and wood-rich, too designed, too considered even for a student with wealthy parents. When he returns with coffee, I can't help but admire the way he moves around the place so comfortably, like an impostor.

"There's a man I've been seeing since I first moved here. He pays the rent on this place. I had him over last weekend. This is the radio station he likes to listen to. I don't listen to the radio when I'm here alone," he says nonchalantly. I notice, though, that he seems to be looking for a response, either shock or forgiveness.

For a moment, I don't know what I feel. Maybe envy.

"Do you love him?" I ask.

Lawrence looks at me as though I'm insane. Then his eyes soften a little. "I respect him," he says.

Lawrence insists on taking me by his studio. "It's on your way home," he says, and gathers his coat.

He is one of the few students with his own studio in the painting building. The others stand in a large, open area at easels.

There is a padlock on the door and his initials, minus the third, painted on the wall. Inside, the space feels crowded with canvases. Two of them are hanging on the wall, illuminated by a clamp light. I walk up close to them, surprised both by their accuracy and their beauty. They are self-portraits, simply and elegantly rendered. In one of the portraits he is looking into a mirror the way I never could, searching it as though it held the truth.

I turn to him. "They're beautiful," I tell him, and it's easier than admitting it's him.

I stand at the center of my apartment in disbelief. Practically nothing has been opened or arranged. I begin cutting the tape on an earlier life comprehensively packed and already musty-smelling and foreign.

I am uncomfortable putting out the books and records and posters. They seem frighteningly self-conscious now, as though I had gone out of my way to compensate, by way of taste, for a lack in appearance. The whole life is made up. I'm afraid that Lawrence will see through my obsession with the grotesque in film, my collections of criticism and philosophy. He will just see an ugly person filling in the holes.

I leave the boxes packed, the clothes neatly folded. I stand before the mirror tiles, stretching out my skin until it looks almost smooth. My hands move section by section over my face; I cover it all except for my eyes, peering out between my fingers.

I remember when I couldn't touch my face. It was two years after I had discontinued a violent dermatological therapy. My face was so red and disturbed I had grown afraid to touch it. The last doctor I saw, at the tearful request of my mother, was an old, Jewish hunchback who had an office in downtown Miami.

He took me into the bathroom and stood behind me and taught me how to wash my face. He held onto my hands and gently guided them over my cheeks and forehead. All along, I made him promise not to inject anything into my skin, not to use chemical peels. He stood behind me whispering, "Only pills, no pain."

In my room, the ghosts rise from the boxes like dust. I feel my parents hands on my throat and feet. They, too, are pleading.

"Can't you do something about your face?" my mother asks disdainfully. "Wash it again," she insists, "you've got time."

"But I have washed it." I want her to notice that I'm wearing my new blazer and tie. But she sees only my face, stinging and burning from the medicine that puts holes in the pillowcase.

I close the boxes and start to pack them away in the closet. I sit down with the last box, though. It's packed with books. I draw one out and open it on my lap. It is a poem by Rupert Brooke, and I begin to recite it quietly to myself.

*And I knew
That this was the hour of knowing,
And the night and the woods and you
Were one together, and I should find
Soon in the silence the hidden key
Of all that had hurt and puzzled me —
Why you were you, and the night was kind,
And the woods were part of the heart of me.
And there I waited breathlessly,
Alone; and slowly the holy three,
The three that I loved, together grew
One, in the hour of knowing,
Night, and the woods, and you —*

Lawrence is at the door. I tell him to come in quickly, fearful the attendant might be loitering in the hall.

"I think I've been drinking," he says. I have him sit on one of the two rotating chairs that the apartment came furnished with. The chairs are covered in loud, flower-printed vinyl and look like hotel liquidation from the seventies. "Don't you have any chairs that sit still?" he asks.

I offer him coffee, and by the time I bring out a mug, he has found his way to the mirrored wall.

He opens up to me recklessly, "I'm sleeping with our professor, you know."

"Really," I ask, "Is he good?"

"Lousy," he says, "he treats me like a work of art, touches me with a white glove, centers me on the bed and asks me not to move."

"He asks you not to move and doesn't have the decency to tie you up?"

"No way," he laughs, "he won't even use a collar on his dog."

"And he's not the one who pays your rent?" I ask.

"No," he says, becoming more serious. "That's Ray." He swoons a little, the alcohol showing. "I'm starting to worry about their paths crossing. Last weekend, while Ray was over, the professor kept calling, saying he knew I was there."

"Boy," I say, my voice sounding surprisingly mocking, "what a mess."

"I was counting on your understanding," he says conspiratorially.

"Shall I seduce him?" I ask.

Lawrence laughs, "He goes for the pretty boys," he says in a way that makes me think I shouldn't feel hurt.

It dawns on me suddenly that he sees me as clearly as he does himself. He is beautiful and I am ugly. How could I have ever imagined those lines between us blurring?

"What do you want me to do?" I ask, knowing his answer. He wants me to play the ugly role.

Just then I hear knocking at my door. "Oh God," I say under my breath.

"Please let me in," the attendant says through the chain.

"Get lost," I say bitterly.

"I know you have someone over. I just need to come in for a minute," he croaks.

"What for?" I ask, reddening.

"I need to get my cough medicine," he says.

"I'll get it."

I pick the gluey bottle up from the night table and uncap it. I stick my hand out of the crack of the door and pour the red liquid over his hands and on the rug. He stands there startled as though it were blood. When I look over at Lawrence, he is laughing.

I'm freezing out here, crouched in the shadow of the bridge. I see the professor's car driving slowly up the path, and sink lower into the brush, pulling it over myself like a blanket. I do this carefully, suddenly remembering the banks of lights trained on me. I imagine tripping the system and the ravine flooded with light, but there are only two beams quickly extinguished when he pulls into the driveway. My breathing seems to me too loud, and even though I try to calm myself, it is all I hear in the woods. And then I hear his door open, his feet on the gravel and up on the wooden porch. I crawl up closer to see him under the porch light; he stands there looking down at his

feet after he rings the bell. He looks so gentle and patient and in love, I think, waiting to be let inside.

He steps into the doorway and it is as if a meter begins to tick away. I recognize it then as my heart. Lawrence pulls the shade down, and as we agreed, I begin to move towards the door, opening it quietly and letting myself in. I feel them instantly with the acute senses of an animal. Lawrence spots me from the bedroom (did he see me too soon?). I begin talking over the chaos.

"Oh my God," I say shocked, "I can't believe this."

Lawrence looks at me stunned (it is not very convincing, but the professor isn't looking at him. It is my moment.)

Lawrence asks, "Why didn't you knock?"

"I just didn't," I say, beginning to feel real agitation, "I didn't expect to catch you in a private tutorial."

The professor is in his pants already, sliding on his glasses. He looks at me with wide, frightened eyes. It is our hope that he'll recognize me from class, but I don't see any recognition in his eyes. Only fear, as though I am a monster, some Bigfoot that lives in the ravine.

"I have to go," he says nervously. He is still looking at me when he says it. He starts to leave without his tan jacket. I hand it to him at the door. I am feeling so powerful, I give him a little push from behind. He turns angrily toward me.

"You've got nothing on me," he says, voice trembling, looking into my eyes. Then he must have seen something there that made him turn and go.

I think my face has changed. Not healed, but settled. Reinforced. Lawrence calls my face scary. He says there is something intimidating about it, and he loves to recall the way I looked on the night with the professor. "It was almost like a jealous lover had walked in," he says. "It's been a week since you've heard from him," I say, "so I guess it worked."

"It worked beautifully," he says, "I wasn't complaining." But he looks at me sharply, and it seems for a moment that instead of me, he's looking at a small flaw on the couch.

"Ray's wife is leaving town for the next month," he says, "and Ray's asked me to stay at his place to help him work on the nursery. Rosemary's pregnant and Ray's already acting like a proud father."

"What's he grooming you for? A nanny position?" I sound like that scary person Lawrence finds amusing. "Why is he moving you in?" I ask, grasping.

He talks to me with his back turned, going into the kitchen. "He has a big, beautiful house. While she's gone, we're going to use it." His words sound so simple; it is like he is explaining it to a child.

"I wonder what it's like," I ask, "to have someone take care of you."

Lawrence calls out casually from the kitchen, "I didn't think you were the romantic type."

Why, then, do I feel excluded from him? Why do I feel left out of

the happy family: Lawrence, Ray and his pregnant wife?

But he emerges from the kitchen with a bottle of sherry and two glasses for us. Either to calm the panic he hears rising in me, or in genuine appreciation, he toasts to our friendship. I look into his eyes. Strangely, the closer he gets to me, the more remote I find him. I wonder if that is how it works with Ray.

It's gotten so that I can't think of Lawrence without Ray somewhere in the background. It's like when you know someone with cancer, how it's always there. It's not like Lawrence talks about him, about what they do, or how they feel about each other. It's just his name with a time and place written next to it under a magnet on the refrigerator, or his voice coming from the phone machine in Lawrence's bedroom. Whenever the phone rings, I always ask "who's that?" as though it's me waiting for his call.

Lawrence explains that I can leave messages for him and he'll call me from Ray's house. "I'll just be a few blocks away," he says, comforting me. But I can't seem to rid myself of the chill of that ravine, knowing this time I'll be locked out without a plan.

It is by chance that I spot him and Ray tonight coming out of The Mill. I would walk up to them and shake Ray's hand if they weren't so engaged in talk. Lawrence just keeps looking over to him, as though he is never going to see him again, as though he is trying to memorize that face.

I follow at a great distance. They walk together without touching until they start over the railroad bridge; then Ray takes Lawrence's gloved hand and guides him across, and it seems as natural as a father and child.

I am terrified of heights, and the bridge is no easy feat for me. It is not a footpath, merely an old railroad track that runs over some support beams. There is nothing to hold onto, except the track itself. I cross it on all fours. Far below, the water is frozen, certain death if I slip.

It takes me so long to cross the bridge, I feel certain I've lost them. Then, cutting across College Green Park, I see them again entering a sky-blue, wooden house on the corner. The snow is lightly falling, and the perfect, little house looks like a Christmas card.

I wonder what it is like to be pursued by an admirer, to be watched, investigated, loved.

Did Lawrence ever have to pursue anyone? Lawrence doesn't need to do anything, I tell myself, but I need to do everything.

Suddenly, the front door opens. Ray comes off the porch and looks up at me momentarily. I'm leaning against the oak, in the snow, with my ski hat on. I stand there casually turning a stick in my hands. He locates my eyes and glances away.

He pulls up the door of the garage and opens the passenger door of his truck. I see him removing a large roll of paper from the seat, then he takes a plastic bucket out of the back of the truck and carries

them back into the house.

The garage is wide open. I stand there for a while looking at it. I am already walking out of the park and crossing the street. I've done crazier things, I assure myself, and I conjure up the feeling of power I felt pushing the professor out into the cold.

I glance over all the windows of the house, no movements, no one looking out. I hurriedly walk up to the garage. I feel safe once I'm inside, and begin to look over his things; his work table and saw, his tool box and the coils of extension cords hanging from hooks in the wall. It's a regular shop in here, I think, wondering if there is anything small I can take. I turn my attention to his truck, and there, as though offered to me, are his keys dangling from the lock in the passenger door.

The moment they're in my hands I feel spooked and have to leave.

Lawrence finally calls. He's been at Ray's for two weeks, but he's alone tonight. He talks about the snow and how it makes him feel like a child, the one that felt trapped in his parent's house, an old Chicago house full of rugs and clocks and his father's pipe smoke. While he talks, I look out my window at the highway stretching north and the snow passing over all of it, the kind of lonely sight that makes people jump every winter, and I say, "It sounds safe and warm in your old house."

"That's why I never left," he answers.

We've come to Pete's, a small bar with pool tables and wooden booths, where it's not hard to be anonymous, especially this late in the afternoon when there are just Pete and the two of us.

He's wearing jeans and a down jacket that is obviously not his. I remember us laughing about down jackets and how they looked like pot-holders. I don't mention it.

"It's difficult spending so much time at Ray's" he says thoughtfully, pouring beer from the pitcher, "I'm afraid I might get used to it."

"He wouldn't want that, that's for sure," I say. "Not with Rosemary coming back in two weeks."

There's a brief look of hurt in his face, and I wonder what it would be like to reach over the table and touch him. I am thinking that he does not want this to go on, and I know what he is asking me to do. I know what he is afraid to ask me to do, and I reach my hand into my pocket and feel the keys there like a charm.

"I understand how you feel."

"How could you possibly understand?" he asks, as though he's the most miserable person alive.

Tonight I saw Ray and Lawrence go to the Bijou for a screening of Fassbinder's *In The Year Of Thirteen Moons*. If I could have, I would have warned them about it. I don't know how they could sit through that movie without feeling very uncomfortable; the lead character

having a sex change to satisfy a rich, straight man who doesn't care about her. It's no wonder she tells her life story in a slaughterhouse.

It helps to know where they are and how long they'll be gone. I could probably turn on the lights. But I know this house by heart already, and besides, I like the feeling of being a shadow here, keeping away from the windows, touching everything with these gloves, Rosemary's gloves which I'm now sure I made the right decision in taking the first night I came here.

There are two places I always have to check for clues, the bedroom and the nursery. I don't know what it is that I'm looking for, I guess I'm just interested in whatever it is they leave behind. I've only felt compelled to take a few things out of here, but they are like inexplicable treasures to me.

The bed and windows are heavily draped, like a neo-classical bedroom to which the wicked son is always returning. I sit on the edge of the bed and draw the cold, white sheets up to my face. And it really is, for a moment, like entering a painting, like feeling so completely where you should be, as though you were positioned there by an artist.

Ray and Lawrence would feel it too; the limiting, perfecting structure of our interaction.

It was no surprise when Lawrence, five days before Rosemary's return, called to inform me that Ray had asked him not to stay at the house any longer. Time itself was conspiring to that end, but I was surprised by Lawrence's breathless weeping which made it hard to comfort him. I asked him over.

I look around the apartment and it seems as though I have moved in at last. The boxes are unpacked, some of my favorite postcards are taped to the wall behind my desk, the mirror tiles I've taken down and stacked inside the closet. The room and the fixtures themselves are ugly, but there is the feeling that someone lives here now, that someone is making do.

When Lawrence arrives, he concurs. "I feel more at home here than even at my own apartment," he says. He looks exhausted.

"Well, I guess so," I say, handing him a glass of wine, "Ray pays your rent."

He sits there silently drinking.

"I don't know what happened," Lawrence says, "he started accusing me for things that I don't know anything about. Little things that were missing, that he couldn't turn up. Some of Rosemary's jewelry which I'd never take." He looks so humiliated, as though he is accusing himself.

"Why would he think you did that?" I ask him.

"I don't know," he says angrily, "but he kept asking me if I was angry about Rosemary, and how I felt about him having a baby. I told him none of that mattered, and it didn't. But I think Rosemary took those things with her, or nothing's really gone and he's just finding a way to get rid of me."

"Maybe he doesn't find you compatible with his new family?" I ask. "I didn't ask to stay at his house," Lawrence says, "I would have been content to have kept things the way they were."

"Well, that's how things are now, right? Back to the way they were?"

"No," he says, "he hates me now. He's politely asked me out of his life. Not even politely."

"He's afraid of you."

"I don't know why he thinks I would ever steal from him or try and disrupt his family."

"That comes with being the lover on the side," I remind him.

I don't know which one of us introduced the idea of mischief. Our desires seemed to cross then and run concurrently. By the end of the evening, we are sitting on the floor with a bottle of wine between us, laughing and crying with ways we can terrorize Ray.

"Let's make a baby," I suggest. I am thinking of the boxed baby clothes and the baby bounce swing I have in my closet.

"What are you talking about?" he asks.

"I found these baby clothes at the Salvation Army drop box. I can't imagine what else to do with them but make a little baby for him. It will be the one you couldn't have."

"Rosemary's Baby!" he shouts. We both roar.

We tear the plastic wrap from the boxes. On the collar of the little pink nightie Lawrence writes "Rosemary's Baby" in black magic marker. We stuff the clothes with an old, gray pillow, leaving it bursting from the collar as a head. I draw in two weeping eyes.

I think how excited Ray must be about his family's return. He has come so far with the nursery. The wallpaper has cheery yellow balloons, the seams are perfect. The whole house smells like glue.

I wonder how he will feel about these stolen baby clothes showing up again.

Lawrence is busy drawing in the mouth.

"Cut it in," I say, our prank becoming a mad kind of Voodoo. I hand him a knife I'd lifted.

He cuts through the pillowcase and pulls the dirty stuffing up out of the lips.

"Let's make them red," he suggests.

I don't have any paint, so we stain them with Mercurochrome.

Lawrence suggests we keep the knife buried in its head. We sit it up in the bounce swing like that. We hang it from a nail and stare at it. I force myself to laugh at its ugliness. Lawrence can't.

"Maybe we shouldn't," he murmurs.

"What did you expect? The Hardy Boys?"

"But I care about him," he says, confused.

"There'll be others," I suggest.

"I don't think you understand the way I feel. I don't think you could understand it."

"No," I say, "Probably not. It's too subtle for me." And I begin to

think how they tried to make me beautiful, how anything attractive in my face was put there by the doctors. They really wrestled it out of me, extracted it, but at such high cost and such great pain.

"I want to understand," I tell Lawrence.

They laid me on the table and gave me two rubber balls to squeeze. They were chewed up with nail marks. I rotated them slowly.

A German nurse with soft blonde hair dried her hands of sterilizing liquid. She asked my father, "Will you please hold your son's legs."

I felt his hands loosely holding my ankles. He looked at me, miserable. My mother stood small in the doorway.

The nurse lowered a bright light over my face. I looked into it. At first there was nothing but whiteness. I thought of the infant I had seen lying on white pillows. Then I saw an eyeball floating between two lights.

"This is a magnifying lamp," the nurse explained. I saw the eye blink on the other side.

I imagined what she was seeing. The cores of blackheads, a violent chemistry in the cyst, here and there a black whisker shockingly cutting its way through the thick skin.

I saw the doctor enter through the glow of the light, radiant, and drawing a rubber glove over one hand. In the other he held a needle. He pushed the sweaty hair off my forehead and began pressing the cysts along my cheek.

He worked silently.

Finally he said, "This will hurt. But when you're well, you will thank me." I saw the nurse nodding, reverent.

With the first prick, blood flashed across the dull green wall. My nails sank into the red balls. I felt his fingers pressing down the boil.

"It is the problem of evil," I thought I heard the doctor say.

I remembered the video we all had to watch in the crowded lobby. The doctor's only child born with cystic acne all over its innocent body. The German doctor mournfully narrated, "My wife and I wept when our child was born to us with cystic acne. He screamed constantly as an infant, unable to lie in one position for very long."

Hundreds of before and after photos of patients were flashed on the screen while the doctor talked his theory of enzymic reactions, pustules, scarring. Everyone was standing around the TV with their arms folded over their chests; they were secretly looking at the faces of the others, measuring the severity of their problem against every-one else's condition.

I remember staring constantly at a mirror. The mirror was like skin, always healing itself, always getting better. Though I wanted nothing but the truth about my face, the mirror could never reflect it accurately; I saw only the desperate effort to heal.

My eyes were searching the doctor's. He was the only one who saw

my condition the way I did, and he was punishing me for it. I saw my blood arc across his coat. He did not stop at my weeping. He did not hear my screaming. If he heard it, it was a tiny scream; I sounded like an infant to him. He would have strangled me if I didn't bear that resemblance to his son.

The nurse saw I was about to pass out. Perhaps she heard it in my breathing. If there was a soul in there, I physically forced it out.

The doctor peeled his glove off. As I slowly began to sit up on the table, an assistant entered the room and snapped a Polaroid.

There is a light drizzle, so we put the baby, swing and all, into a plastic garbage bag, and carry it to the house. I make Lawrence carry it, it's his gesture.

I stand up in the park, behind the oak tree where I'd first seen Ray's home. We both wear ski masks. Before Lawrence takes the baby down to the house, we look at each other, and it seems that for the first time we can really see each other, desperate eyes and faces sheathed in wool. The drizzle persists. I wish I could feel it on my face, but this mask lets nothing through.

I watch Lawrence furtively make his way up to the door, strip off the garbage bag, and hang the baby up under the porch light. It swings eerily and misshapen as Lawrence comes off the porch.

We stare at it from the park.

"Let's get out of here. Let's go to my studio."

When we enter his studio, he grabs both my hands. "Can you believe how that thing looked?" he asks excitedly.

"So beautiful," I assure him, "his beautiful little baby."

Lawrence puts up tea. While I sip it, I think about Lawrence staying here until he finds another place. It is small and smells like paint, and it's cold but nothing the space heater couldn't improve. I would put him up too, if it comes to that.

Suddenly, there is an oppressive weight all around us, as though the walls of the studio are closing in, and I notice we are sitting, facing one another, our knees touching. Lawrence's face is twisted with confused sadness. Maybe it's our touching, our close proximity that enables me to feel it, too.

"He'll know it was me?" he asks, as though everything had suddenly dawned on him.

I feel his tearful shaking rising up from my knees, like we are two old trees that have grown together.

"How will I ever explain it to him?" he asks, clutching me.

And though I know it will never suffice, I draw him close and forgive him.