

# THE Briar Cliff REVIEW

Founded 1989  
Volume 13 Spring 2001

Editor  
**Tricia Currans-Sheehan**

Assistant Editor  
**Jennifer Bechtel**

Design Editor  
**Chrystal Bonner**

Assistant Design Editor  
**Laura Myers**

Student Editorial Staff  
**Jennifer Dykstra**  
**Paul Flemming**

Fiction Editor  
**Phil Hey**

Poetry Editor  
**Jeanne Emmons**

Siouxland Editor  
**Lyle Franzen**

Nonfiction Editor  
**Paul Weber**

Art Editors  
**Jeff Baldus**  
**Karen Chesterman**

Copy/ Text-Entry Editor  
**Pat Kizzier**

Assistant Copy Editors  
**Brittany Bochmann**  
**Aubri Casey**  
**Leslie Duling**  
**Jeremy Hall**  
**Sarah Kohles**  
**Kim Long**  
**Theresa Myres**  
**Lyndsi Price**  
**Alicia Struble**  
**Chris Thomas**  
**Nicki Yackley**

Publisher  
**Briar Cliff College**

Printer  
**Pacific City Graphics**

Rate \$10.00

## FICTION

Strict Rules, <i>by Christine Phillips</i>	4
The Glove, <i>by John Lofy</i>	17
A Cold Climate, <i>by J. Annie MacLeod</i>	54
Act of Contrition, <i>by Ken Wheaton</i>	73

## POETRY

Veterans Day, <i>by Twyla Hansen</i>	6
An Early Fall, <i>by Margaret J. Hoehn</i>	8
The Tower of Babel, <i>by James Doyle</i>	14
Fire, <i>by Susan C. Ly</i>	15
Skid, <i>by Don Stinson</i>	15
Your Home in the City, <i>by James Cihlar</i>	24
Loneliness, <i>by Lee Ann Roripaugh</i>	30
Your You, My You, <i>by Mary Crow</i>	32
Playing Opossum, <i>by Michael Carey</i>	34
Nothing Special, <i>by Mary O'Connor</i>	34
What You Don't Know, <i>by Virginia Schaefer</i>	35
Elm Crest Hills, <i>by Karen Jobst</i>	35
Backyard Ballad, <i>by Askold Skalsky</i>	36
Mona Lisa, <i>by Amy Potter</i>	43
Endings, <i>by Glenda Legore Long</i>	47
Answering Adolescence, <i>by Jackie White</i>	48
Denouement, <i>by Annie Spates</i>	53
Viewing the Hieroglyphics, <i>by Pat Underwood</i>	64
The Mystery of the Black Dog, <i>by Dan Rohde</i>	66
Saving Alex, <i>by William Rudolph</i>	67
Summer Evening, <i>by James Silas Rogers</i>	78

## SIouxLAND

Buffalo Bill in Siouxland, <i>by Leslie Duling</i>	37
Wild West Show Sails, <i>by Ann Struthers</i>	39
Buffalo Bill at Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, <i>by Ann Struthers</i>	40
Spirit Mound, <i>by Michele Linck</i>	60

## REFLECTIVE I

The Fishpond, <i>by Jeanne Emmons</i>	26
Politics Schmolitics, Who Cares?, <i>by Angela McDermott</i>	45

## COMIC RELIEF

Real Men Eat Veggies, <i>by Ryan Laudick</i>	50
Your Lying Eyes, <i>by Mark Taeusch Gifford</i>	51

# THE Briar Cliff REVIEW

1999 GOLD CROWN AWARD  
1998 GOLD CROWN AWARD  
1997 SILVER CROWN AWARD  
1995 PACEMAKER AWARD  
1994 GOLD CROWN AWARD  
1993 GOLD CROWN AWARD  
1992 SILVER CROWN AWARD  
All-Columbian Honors for superior  
achievement in concept, content,  
design, and creativity  
Columbia Scholastic Press Association

## GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

We want quality poetry, fiction,  
humor/satire, Siouland history,  
essays on academic topics, thoughtful  
nonfiction, book reviews, and art:  
line drawings, cartoons, photos (clear  
b & w), woodcuts, computer graph-  
ics, and/or art work.

Submissions accepted from  
August 1 to November 1.

Unsolicited manuscripts will not  
be returned unless accompanied by a  
self-addressed envelope with suffi-  
cient postage affixed.

*THE BRIAR CLIFF REVIEW* is  
an official publication of Briar Cliff  
College. © Copyright 2001 by Briar  
Cliff College, 3303 Rebecca Street,  
P.O. Box 2100, Sioux City, Iowa  
51104-2100.

Telephone: (712) 279-5321

All opinions expressed in *THE  
BRIAR CLIFF REVIEW* are those of  
the individual authors and do not nec-  
essarily reflect the views of the edi-  
tors or Briar Cliff College.

Briar Cliff College continues its  
historic policy of non-discrimination  
against students, student applicants,  
and employees on the basis of race,  
color, sex, age, religion, national ori-  
gin, sexual orientation, marital status,  
or physical disability.

**Editorial & Business Offices**  
**THE BRIAR CLIFF REVIEW**  
Briar Cliff College  
3303 Rebecca Street  
P.O. Box 2100  
Sioux City, IA 51104-2100

## ESSAY

- Getting Untangled From the Net, *by David Chorlton* 10  
Interview with Lee Ann Roripaugh,  
*edited by Jeremy Hall, Sarah Kohles, and Nicki Yackley* 28

## BOOK REVIEWS

- Vivian Shipley's, Fair Haven, *by Phil Hey* 70  
William Gibson's, All Tomorrow's Parties, *by Paul Flemming* 71

## ART

- Untitled, *by Mitch Lillie* 9  
Untitled, *by Erin Mumm* 12  
Written in Red, *by Amber Mohr* 13  
Tabularusta, *by C.J. Landers* 13  
Three, *by Janet Origer* 16  
Untitled, *by Jameley Levich* 20  
Emily, *by Chris Thomas* 42  
Perennial, *by Nan Wilson* 65  
Rainy Days, *by Jay Chesterman* 68  
Origin Series, *by Gary Bigbear* 69  
About Blue Stones, *by Cathy Beard* 72  
Green Valley, *by Pauline Sensenig* 79

## PHOTOGRAPHY

- Hope, *by John M. Anderson* 3  
The Grace of Floyd & Dace, *by David Sanford* 7  
Whiting, Iowa, *by Michael Crowley* 11  
Sand Feed Mill, *by Michael Crowley* 25  
Taj Mahal, *by Ron Johns* 31  
Thai Monks, *by Doug Burg* 33  
Her Majesty Queen Victoria at the "Wild West,"  
*courtesy of Buffalo Bill Historical Center* 41  
Hinton Elevator, *by Alyssa McCulloch* 44  
Grandfather's Fishing Boat, *by Donita McGregor* 46  
Iris #16, *by Doug Burg* 49  
No Parking, *by Janet Origer* 51  
Gypsy Fishing Village, *by Doug Burg* 52  
Spirit Mound, *by Jim Lee* 60  
Compass Flower, *by Mark Wetmore* 62  
Eye of the Beholder, *by John M. Anderson* 63

Number of copies: 750. **Binding:** Perfect Bind. **Cover:** 80# Dull Cover. **Film and Proof:** Duotones.  
**Text Paper:** 80# Dull Text. **Body Copy:** Times New Roman. Headlines and subheads include: Book  
Antiqua, Bookman Old Style, Times New Roman. **Software:** Microsoft Word 6.0 (word processing);  
QuarkXPress 4.0; QuarkXPress 3.32 (page layout). **Hardware:** Gateway 2000 333 PCs; Power  
Macintosh 7200/120. Output and proofs by Pacific City Graphics.

FICTION

# A COLD CLIMATE

*J. Annie MacLeod*

Leonard wakes in his too-small bed and feels old, creased and cragged and almost forty. Today he will meet Sara at her own apartment, a place he's only seen from the outside. They fixed it on the phone last night. Huddled and mumbling in the downstairs office, he'd sneaked her a call, the cord wound tight around his leg. He will be alone with her for eight hours, alone in a place with real walls and soft carpet and room enough to stretch his basketball legs.

Something inside of him clenches at the thought, and the dark metal of his mouth tastes like lust, new sweat on old skin. Four until midnight — eight long hours. He knows it will be perfect.

Moving to the cool part of the sheets, Leonard watches clouds through the bedroom window. It will rain. He thinks of Sara sliding open the door of her apartment, Sara in a cheap, red teddy, its slick fabric curling at her breasts like in an old B-movie. He remembers reclining on the grass with her in Grainer's Park, Sara in a baseball cap and ratty sweat-shirt, slapping the late-fall mosquitoes with dead accuracy. But he also knows her in the little pleated skirt from church, top leg swinging curves to the hymn, opening and closing her thighs with tiny blessings. He makes a mental rummage through his own clothes: tweed jacket, green t-shirt, tight jeans. The jeans are dirty from happy hour with his staff — they smell of smoke, bitter corners where spilled beer is never wiped. But he can't face slacks, not today. Today is not for smoothing and watching puddles and rattling change in his pockets while making adjustments. Today he needs to be snug, held fast and sure.

Leonard rights himself on the edge of the bed, spreading his palms square against the mattress. Six in the morning. Sherry is already gone, rouged and sprayed and changing IV's at the hospital by now. How many hours of sleep has he had? Four? Five? He knows how he will look to Sara: thirty-eight, weary, horny as hell. There will be smudgy half moons under his eyes when he shaves. Just a nip and tuck, he tells himself as he heads for the bathroom. A nip and tuck, a rub and a stretch is all you need, big guy. Then you'll be good as new.

Outside the morning is fierce and cold. The big firs and oak, maples and peeling birch remind him of fall mornings on his grandfather's farm eighty-two miles from here — clean, so clean, and hushed as if the Iowa sky is listening. As he drives to the University's Veterinary School, he works his face in the rearview mirror, drawing the wrinkles around his eyes and

checking his teeth. He has one of those breath-taking, glossy smiles worn by truly gorgeous people. It is something he saves, shores up under a pair of steel-rimmed glasses. He hopes to smile Sara into a slipping humor, put her at ease with his lemon-yellow grin. She is, after all, a fretting woman. Even at twenty-three, she has all the trappings of Type A. She's been so worried about her husband finding out she won't even write anything to him, won't risk a paper trail. Leonard's taken to calling her his neurotic numbskull. When she hears it, Sara nibbles her cuticles, sucking at them like sugar.

As Leonard walks to the office, he calculates the day: scan slides of bovine retinal diseases, give a lecture on common cat ailments, e-mail a couple of old-school blowhards, and meet with three students who are failing his lab. Each task knots him up, a tight thing he has to finish before his eight hours. And Sherry. He will call Sherry to check in before she leaves the hospital to pick up the kids, apologize again that he won't be home until late. When he'd told her about staying up late tonight to incubate petri dishes, Sherry hadn't even twisted her neck from the sink. She'd sliced each dinner plate through a stream of water, stacking them on the counter in a heavy, slick pile. Looking away at the sight of all that running, glistening waste, he'd hated her all over again. He'd wanted her to snap with quick suspicion, asking, "Oh and will Rebecca be helping out?" or say, "I see. I suppose Malinda will be assisting you." Instead, nothing. Sherry folded eighteen years of jealousy into herself, eighteen years of being suspicious at any woman within Leonard's eyesight right when he was ready for her to throw it in his face.

Opening the door to his still and tidy office, Leonard's lungs twist. Smack in the center of his desktop lies a roaring red envelope. A close hand has printed, "Dr. Leonard David, Veterinary Pathology," on the envelope's front. Sitting heavy, he leans far back in his chair to prop his feet. He waits, smelling the paper, teasing himself with what she might have been willing to say. Then, using a scalpel from his desk drawer, he carefully slices it open. Ruby-red heart and snowflake lace, the card is for schoolgirls.

"Sweetheart" is scrawled at the top in wide loops. Sara's inscription begins, "Honey," and Leonard closes his eyes, breathes full and out. So many times in the last few days he has imagined them in her apartment, naked and blurry as in a badly made home video, all dots and grays and shadows. The space, he thinks, all that clean, solid, ranging space. He is

sick of public parks, of rubbing her breasts through cotton, of that one time the two of them twisted up in the backseat of his minivan, semi-clothed and breathless, his ankle knocking against the door handle. And because this is the first time they will have sex, he covets the space. He needs the space to take her from behind, grip her soft waist as if feeling himself up inside. Leonard's throat clicks as he reads the rest, one hand inside his jacket at the slight roll around his waist. He wishes hard for four o'clock.

"I've been thinking," says Sara. Her eyes trace the fruit border along the Village Inn placemats. She wants to tell her husband something of value, something to make her fear unravel like smoke. "We should go away this Christmas, south of here. You know, a place with sand instead of blizzards. A yellow Christmas."

"Why'd we want to do that?" John asks, looking up from his potato chips long enough to search her face. Sara looks away, afraid he'll search too close and find hunger. "You'd miss your family. You'd miss a regular Christmas. Christmas just isn't Christmas in a swimsuit."

The two of them stare at their cups, an inch of cold coffee in each. The lunch hour buzz is winding down; two maitred's stand smoking in back of the glass dessert cabinet. Sara has to get back to the office, and John needs to leave for a half-day conference in Cedar Falls, but they linger, Sara tapping her cup, John lighting a cigarette.

"But wouldn't it be nice to get away? Do something different? I'm so tired of this weather." Sara tries to see how John looks at her, if it's a look she can sense in her stomach.

"There's the rain. And it's so cold all the time." She doesn't feel pretty enough for an affair. Compact, yes, with a shape and face she'd heard John call perky once or twice but always thought of as pinched to herself. Her best feature, she knows, is her eyes—big, golden things that catch and hold light. She knows they sparkle more in the yellow lights of this place, lights that plump everyone's face with kindness. She wants their shine to make her look happy instead of nervous.

"I tell you, Sara," John says, tapping his cigarette twice. "I don't want to go to this damn thing. I can't believe the bank's paying me to go sit in a chair all afternoon and listen to some jerk tell me about employee satisfaction and total quality bullshit." Sometimes Sara can't get over how completely average he is, like his name. Straight B's in college, racquetball three times a week, a row of solid-colored ties hanging in the closet. And, God, white jockey shorts. All their married life, he's never had anything but white jockey shorts in neat stacks on the left-hand side of his sock and underwear drawer. He even smokes like a banker, measured and close.

Still, it isn't that Sara wants to sneak around because John's too normal—at least that's not everything. She needs to look at a man's face and see longing around his eyes, see the hollow under his cheekbone and think, I wish I could kiss him

there, right there. John's hands right now, flicking the bottom of his cigarette and drumming the table, are hands she can feel on her body, moving from her shoulder to her breasts to her stomach, squeezing once at each point, clutching at her like a phone or a Kwik Shop coffee mug.

"You'd better leave pretty soon, anyway," Sara says, fiddling with the plastic gold buttons of her on-sale suit. "I don't want you late and driving like a bat out of hell. Cedar Falls is a good hour and a half." To Sara, Leonard is anything but average. The first day she really met him, she was at the beat-up practice piano in the basement of the church, plunking around an out-of-tune F in the accompaniment piece of a Hindemith flute Sonata. Leonard had stopped in to sift through some old guitar music, and when he found Sara trying to hum F's for her D minor chords, he had laughed this gentle laugh. When he asked her where she worked, she'd told him as a secretary up in the Plant Pathology Department, and he'd stretch his face into one of his Robert Redford smiles, all sunlight. "Well," he'd said, "my dead fauna should meet your dead flora." And because he was softly bright and so nice to look at, so different from her John, she'd said, "I've always been one for weed salad and swine soup. We should have dinner."

Outside the plate glass windows, a thin, cold rain glitters and blows. Sara wishes it would get cold enough to snow. She's always believed a good hard snow is payback for bitter weather. It's the only part of her childhood in Nebraska she carries with her, a strange comfort. "With this rain you'll have to take it slow," she says. "It could freeze." The restaurant itself is stifling, hot air from metal grates. John's cheeks are barn red. Good ductwork, thinks Sara. She wants her own place someday, a coffeehouse instead of a restaurant, an old one with built-in bookshelves and wooden booths like pews. She wants a serious, warm place in a foreign town, a place where she speaks French to her staff. But that's never going to happen in Ames, Iowa, she knows, and knowing makes her speak low. "What time do you think you'll be home?"

"I dunno. I'll have to schmooze with the boss after it's all over. Let's say around one."

"Just make sure and call if you're going to be late." At the sound of the word "call," the white fear rattles in Sara, scraping. Will she have to leave the phone on tonight? Listen for it to ring? Should she tell John a specific time to call? These past weeks with Leonard, time has taken on square-cut edges, making things telescoped and sharp. If she's not holding Leonard in Grainer's Park, she's replaying it all in her mind; how she smoothes the hair at his temples as he rests his head in her lap, how the Iowa sun sets, October red, and the orange of the sky makes Leonard much too beautiful. Her desire for him rocks her; it reminds her of something, and she tries to remember what it is, because if she can, she's sure she'll understand all this. "In a few weeks you'll be down at that conference in Texas," she says. "That'll be better. At least



you can drink margaritas between sessions."

John twitches the napkin from his lap before putting it over his plate. "Another reason to stay here over Christmas. I'll be bushed after all that." John winks at her. "And I'll already have a tan."

Sara holds her lips as if she needs to spit. It's not the sun she wants but sticking to John with heat and damp, with bits of loose sand between them, listening to his heart through her own ribcage. But John is clipped and tucked, no bones. When Sara married him, she learned how to drink coffee across a morning table with a man, got used to calm, sensible talk. Now their days are packed rolls of fat. The thing is that she still knows her husband is the man she will see every morning, the one whose eyes will wrinkle and fade with her own.

Inhaling deeply, John blows smoke, sets his eyes on her.

"Look, if it's that important to you, we'll check airfares. You have to break it to your mom, though. Don't expect me to do your dirty work." John checks his watch and crushes his cigarette, the period to end his sentence.

Sara feels wolfish and hot. John's about to leave, and she's down to three hours. She already ordered a bouquet of red flowers from the Hy-Vee this morning. Then she soaped her hair with a new bottle of Herbal Essence shampoo, shaved her legs — even the tops of her feet, and painted her nails. Now she's eaten the only meal of this day, a half-finished chicken-strip salad, and is just deciding to call in sick to work this afternoon so she can go home and change the sheets. Taking on a momentum of their own, her previous decisions collide, gain speed.

"You'll call me, then," she says, reaching for one of John's hands. Even though she can feel his skin slippery against her own, she can't look at him. "Before you head back."

Sara tells herself she'll have to take the phone off the hook until Leonard goes home. Her mind's checklist is running, a floating day-timer she imagines in front of her eyes when she's rushed or flustered. Running her thumbnail over her bottom teeth, she mentally writes, "phone, off hook" under "wine, expensive" then add "work, call in."

As they step into the rain, they are the color of old women. John grasps her upper arm. Like an afterthought, he hugs her with unusual force, looping his arms around her raincoat and pulling her close. When he lets go, Sara walks stiff to her car as if she's someone else, stiff so that John's eyes at her back won't matter.

If she looks close in the bathroom mirror, pulling the skin of her cheek up and tight, Sara sees the beginning of tiny red dots. Hot flashes. Before she'd ever spoken to Leonard, ever felt his fast breath on her ear, she'd get these dots when she thought of affairs. Renaming files and typing mailing lists leaves Sara loose voids of time to imagine shivering bodies. These daydreams spin whole episodes, starting with shy glances before changing into the actions of desperate people.

In the daydreams, the sex is arched hips and twisted arms; it's like looking through a kaleidoscope where one body part repeats twelve times in red and green and white.

Even after three shades of cover-up, her red dots still show a little. My scarlet marks, she thinks. How silly. It's after three o'clock, and as she pulls clothes from her closet, Sara tries to pinpoint John at his conference. She can almost trace his body with her thumb: he's sitting by the door, slumped so his head rests on the back of the chair, left leg crossed over right, hands making a steeple at his mouth. Some PR princess is talking up the corporate shtick, but John is ignoring the speech, noticing instead her tight jaw muscles, thinking about his late drive on a cold night when the rain could turn to ice or whether he'll have a beer with his boss after dinner, if that would be too chummy. Sara wonders what John is to other women — bank women in lawyer suits, sassy skirts under double-breasted jackets. Do they want to know how he moves beneath his wool trousers? Is he strange to them? Sara can't imagine John as anything but stable, a bold outline in sharp strokes.

She settles on a casual look for herself, cabled sweater and sand-colored chinos. Clipping her hair back from her forehead with a tortoise-shell barrette, she hopes she looks fresh, not brittle and painted like adulteresses on TV. She can't be a thing to break and discard. Leonard will wear jeans. Every time they've met in the park, he's worn the broken-in Levi's of a teenager; she's half expected a ring of chew in the back pocket. Leonard doesn't look thirty-eight, not to Sara. Holding his face in her hands, she's focused on his eyes and tried to imagine him watching the birth of his children. It makes her wince a little, those pale blue eyes having seen so much. They're flint with hard knowledge, love in a cold climate. He works in death, she knows, in specimens shipped to him from veterinarians all over the world, but it's the births she keeps returning to, the idea of Leonard stooping to see what wriggled between his wife's legs. She can't quite get over it.

Now that it's almost four, Sara must hurry. She piles clothes on the floor of her closet, rechecks the fridge for wine, picks a brown leaf from the bouquet on the table, unplugs the phone. Then she thinks, what if John calls, says he's coming home early or staying in Cedar Falls because of weather. She plugs it back in, flicks the ringer off and leaves the answering machine on.

Angling her profile in the bathroom mirror, she dabs one last drop of concealer over her dots. At last she pours herself a large glass of wine and sits on the kitchen counter, legs swinging, the fingers of one hand in her mouth. She trains her eyes at the door, hail pelting a roof, trying to sting through its wood. It's time, she thinks. It's time. It's time.

Leonard is stuck at a traffic light, a thin drizzle spattering his windshield. He's humming "Sweet Jane" to the swish-swish of the wipers. The call to Sherry didn't go well. On an

oncology floor, patients die every week. You smell that sweet, rancid butter smell on a patient's breath, and the next day you're changing linen for a transfer from Des Moines. Space is a premium, the hours are lousy, and an act of charity is asking before you change a catheter. But Sherry takes each death as an affront, proof positive that there is no God. Today she lost Shirley Johnson, a woman who's battled a brain tumor for seven years and gave Sherry a recipe for Marshall Field's cookies. "She was in a head-bandage that makes them all look like Turks and saying how God had seen her through this far and God would continue to be there for her as a source or strength and light and blah, blah, blah. It was pitiful. All I could do was hold her hand while the other nurse changed her IV for seven more mg's of morphine, enough to keep her breathing until her body gave out. I can't stand it. I'm sick of this shit."

Leonard has tried to talk through this reaction with Sherry before; he's tried hot tea and backrubs and even warm, slow kisses. But Sherry just shakes, red, her hands tensing into balls. Sometimes she throws things — a mug, a plate — but usually she just blames him. Today she said, "If you would get a job with one of those drug companies, I wouldn't have to be doing this. I wouldn't have to work in this hell-hole, see this horrible shit. Why do you have to teach, Leonard? Why can't you just quit, and we'll go East, get a job with Pfizer? Get the hell out of Iowa." Since Leonard has no response she hasn't heard before — he doesn't believe in turning a buck off multinational drug companies; he doesn't accept the corporate exploitation of animals; he doesn't like big cities — he said nothing. "You're a bastard," she said, slamming the receiver so hard he winced.

Now he makes a left turn from Duff onto 13th, heading for the northern end of Ames, the place where silos stand across from newly developed lots. The path to Sara's apartment complex rumbles up from the floorboard like a solid sound, the sound of houses pink with insulation, aluminum nail heads, thick rolls of sod and seeded lawns. He's never cheated on Sherry, and now he wonders why. For eighteen years he's split his life between career and the kids. Sherry's been a ridge of shadow in his bed — a red thing when they fight about money or work, a heavy white thing when they don't. He's been swallowed, whole, into the belly of her whiteness. The first time he spoke to Sara, he saw a woman who saw him, who laughed at his jokes and was interested in what he thought. That first day in the basement of the church, Sara asked him to play his guitar — something Sherry would never do, would never think to do. It's trite, he knows, but Sara's colored-in, a kid's color book done in 64 shades of crayon. Bauble blue, sunflower yellow, spitfire orange, candy apple red, Leonard knows nothing but that he wants to be wrapped up in Sara's brightness, smell her hair and nuzzle her neck. Pulling the

rearview mirror over one last time, Leonard checks his teeth and takes off his glasses, leaving them in the glove box. Then he steps from the car with a slow stretch of his legs and walks to her apartment.

When Sara opens the door, flushed and happy, Leonard is surprised at how normal she looks, a polished schoolgirl.

"Hi," she says, standing wide in bare feet, leaning on the door.

"Hi," he says. He has nothing to do with his hands, so he jams them in his front pockets, a kid on a playground.

"Are you going to let me in?"

"I don't know yet. I'm thinking." Sara laughs, throwing the door wide. "Now this is my place, so you can't put it down, okay?"

He steps over the threshold and is faced with a Degas reproduction, the fleshy back of a woman pinning her hair over a bath. To his left is a kitchen with an eating area, on his right a family room. There's no entry way and everything can see everything else. "Open," he says. "Lots of room."

"Beats the backseat, doesn't it?"

Sara's playful; he knows she needs to tease when she's nervous.

"Make yourself comfortable," she says. "I'll get us some wine."

Leonard sits on the couch, extending his legs as far in front of him as he can. The room has lots of thick wood pieces, pine and oak stained shades of honey. The walls are green, making the space even darker. It's not what he had thought; he'd imagined white-painted wood and gingham curtains. Another Degas hangs over a fake fireplace, this one a string of dancers, tutus spread like lilies. He watches Sara bend and pour in the kitchen. It's as if he's spying.

"Here you go," she says, handing him a wine glass. She sits on the couch with

him, wrapping her legs under her body.

"So what do you think, old man?"

Leonard smiles, sips his wine. "Awfully modern. Definitely for the young." All these weeks, she's never stopped joking about his age. It's become their foreplay.

"I guess I should bring your son over then." Nevin is only seven years younger than Sara, and being fifteen years older than she himself, Leonard doesn't quite relish the joke. "Oh, don't worry," she says, slapping him lightly on his arm. "I'm not the one who's the cradle-robber. And besides, you said Nevin's dyed his hair all black. Forget that."

Knowing he shouldn't, he asks, "Have you heard from John? Did he make it to the conference?" Talking spouses is not sexy. But he doesn't even know what John looks like, if he's a sports fan or a great reader or a man who knows his restaurants. Leonard has trouble thinking of him as a man, really, more a gung-ho kid, a strapper with lots of teeth and Iowa

*He watches Sara bend  
and pour in the kitchen.  
It's as if he's spying.*

muscle. He imagines John as a boy with a clear, wide face, a face that doesn't look over its shoulder much.

"He's fine, you worry-wort you. Let's pretend he's on Mars, okay?" Sara's fidgeting with her pants leg, rolling it up with her free hand. "Not Cedar Falls, but Mars. Maybe he'll never come back. Maybe he's lost in orbit."

"Desertion wishes are not allowed," says Leonard. He puts his wineglass down and touches the sleeve of Sara's sweater; it's rough. He wants to peel away her layers, open her up. There's a script to this, one that's dark and ancient and there if he'll just listen.

"I'm scared," she says. "I've never done this before. I mean we've never been able to do this." Her hands are every place, to her hair, her mouth, her ear. She's almost squirming.

Leonard smiles his slow smile, unfolding it with care and measure. He touches her bright hair, her cheek. "You are lovely." He waits, stroking. He doesn't mind taking a long time to get ready.

Sara closes her eyes and breathes out as if she's about to meditate. "I'm okay," she says, eyes closed. "I'm ready." When she opens her eyes again, she looks right at him, steady and sure. "Why don't you kiss me."

Leonard turns out the tableside light, reaches over and takes one of Sara's hands, placing it on his thigh. Sara sets her wineglass down and leans her head across the couch too fast, fast like she's embarrassed, and kisses Leonard just under his jawbone, her eyes closed tight. Laughing, he puts both of his hands on her face, slows her down, makes her look in his eyes. He unclips her hair, getting a little stuck on the barrette, so she helps him, shaking her hair loose so that it spills over his face, spreading its clean smell across his eyes and nose and lips. Pulling Sara to the floor, Leonard takes off her sweater, bunching it up to tuck under her head. Her stomach is white in the half-light, and he presses his mouth against its warmth, listens as she breathes. Sara's breath is deep and fast, and Leonard wonders why she doesn't moan or say his name, why she turns her eyes and tenses her body beneath him. It's as if she's waiting for him to do something. He could bite her, he thinks, he could shake her or split her, break her apart and then connect her back together. He wants to spread out, turn her over, press himself everywhere and anywhere in the big room with no barriers, laugh out loud, laugh the kind of laugh that rattles in his throat when he's tickled or surprised, or just chant her name — Sara, Sara, Sara — chant it with force and belief. But Leonard's movements are surprisingly slow and quiet, like wind on water. He's almost too careful, as if Sara might break with hairline cracks. So he feels for the broad outline of her body instead, pulling himself in, keeping his legs and arms close, warm and smooth against her skin. He kisses her forehead, her eyelids, shakes and sighs above her face. And Sara wraps her legs around the back of his calves, pushes her nose into his neck. He tries not to think about her silence, her rigid

arms and quick sighs, but searches for a feeling — the kind of feeling he barely remembers, one he thinks of as youth and color, of knowing where you are in the world and being confident that things will go well, and believing that whatever happens to you was meant to happen, that unhappiness is just a phase, like the flu.

When it's over, Leonard rolls on his back and pulls Sara on top of him. She presses her face in his chest, won't look in his eyes. He covers the back of her head with his hands, breathes slow, looks at the ceiling. Burying his nose in her hair, he smells a trace of something maple and tart, a sweet smell with a bite, and Leonard shuts his eyes, feels the cheap carpet prick his back, hears the wind bend the window in its frame, a hollow sound. He smiles to himself, a grin in the dark. Sara is his most valuable thing.

Seeing Leonard out, Sara feels a twist of separation, the snap of a wishbone. Bombardier blue and faded, his eyes rest on her. The eyes of a tired man. In the light from her front porch, he looks older, his wrinkles deeper. She can't think of a thing to say, can't tell him that it's all right or that she'll see him tomorrow or that she loves him. It's almost midnight, and Sara's thinking of John, his elbow propped on his knee, steering with two fingers, wishing he were spooning up against her in the dark.

Once she shuts the door on Leonard, Sara yanks off her sweater, jamming it deep in the well of her clothesbasket. Almost sprinting to the bedroom to get a drier-clean sweatshirt, she pulls off her chinos and underwear, tugging on a pair of leggings, then picks up the empty wineglasses with her right hand and hits the flashing button of the answering machine with the other. Weary and small, it's John's voice, of course, telling her that he forgot his calling card and only has a buck-eighty worth of change to talk, that he's beat to death, that he'll be back no later than one-fifteen, that he's hungry, and he misses her, and he can't wait to get home.

Sara turns off the answering machine and sits on the floor, arms hugging her knees, the wineglasses crossed and clicking in one hand. The light in the living room is still off, and Sara scans the whale-belly, blue-black sky through their front picture window, one opening on an undeveloped field. She has the sense that she's in the country by herself, sitting in an old farmhouse instead of a brand-new apartment complex. The rain has stopped, but there's hardly any light, no stars in the blackness, and her skin has a bluish tint that makes her arms look fuzzy. Surreal.

The view reminds her of a time when she'd been sixteen, wasted on whiskey and driving alone, already late coming home from a friend's party. Her friend had lived way out beyond Lincoln's city limits, a posh housing development with a man-made lake and saplings wrapped in white strips.

On her way back, Sara got lost on a half-mile track of dirt road. It was a narrow, black strip sandwiched between acres



and acres of plowed soil-fields broken only by the hulking silhouettes of silos and grain bins on the horizon. Winter and cold, in Nebraska the land was frozen furrows, the kind of earth that folds you in and won't let go.

Sick from Jack Daniels and a sting of fear, Sara pulled herself from the car, the air slicing through her sweater and stiffening the jeans against her calves. Still she walked away from the road, over icy rows and pale stalks of dead corn, heading east, away from the hum of the city lights. When she couldn't feel the tip of her nose anymore, she stood still, almost drowsy with the cold, head tilted to the sky. There was no change in the indigo light surrounding her, no rapid-moving clouds to peek the moon out now and then. She felt crushed up between the black sky and the dead field, entirely alone and unable to do anything in such a wide scene. She knew she was the only living thing for miles, the only moving, breathing, reaching thing, and yet the land held her fixed, a sort of human tree trunk, leafless and brittle and rooted.

So Sara laughed. Pinwheeling her arms and whooping as loud as she could, she started to dance, silly and reeling. She laughed to the point of screaming, shouting the names of every boy she'd ever kissed, every girl she'd ever envied. She yelled at her mom for not buying her a new dress at Homecoming, at Mrs. Glazeman, her American History teacher, for failing her on last Friday's quiz over the Mexican-American war. She yelled at Tommy Nickel, the boy at her friend's party who'd danced with Sheila Becker all night long — Sheila Becker in her tight jeans and blue mascara and Farrah Fawcett haircut. Shrieking and clapping, Sara told the sky to fuck off, told Nebraska to go to hell, told the whole world she'd be famous someday, just wait and see; she'd be somebody to look at, a tiny woman wearing perfect A-line skirts with an impeccable knowledge of French wines. And just as she lost her breath, just as Sara's arms and legs burned hot with the needles of sweat against sharp cold, she bent her head over her knees and threw up, felt herself collapsing both inward and outward all at once. Sara remembers that feeling now as the best of her entire life, awake and alive, an emotion that had shaken her from her toes up.

Now, the wineglasses in her hand are dirty with Leonard's thumbprints, so Sara moves to the kitchen, turning on the bright overhead light and the tap. Rubbing her fingers under the warm water, Sara stands quiet. The feeling is still with her, of being both inside and outside her body. Leaving the water to run, Sara opens the cupboard door under the sink instead, stuffs the two glasses in the bottom of the wastebasket and tucks the rest of the garbage around them, a breakable gift. Then she goes back to get her cable sweater and pants from the laundry, her bra and underwear from the chair in the bedroom, her tortoise-shell barrette from way back behind the couch. Placing them all in the kitchen trash, one by one on top of the glasses, Sara pushes everything down and down again. Like a fresh-faced Santa, she gathers the garbage bag

at the top, heaving it over one shoulder to take to the dumpster behind her building.

Outside, the trash makes her lopsided and tipsy, but the October air is cold and clean and holds her fast. Thinking of winter, Sara breathes the air through her nose, slow and fine and stinging. She sees the glitter of hard frost, the ice, the long stretches of white, pure snow. And even though it's Iowa she sees, the thought of all that whiteness, those flat fields without drifts or footprints or tracks of any kind, makes her smile faintly to herself, a promise.

**A**cross the parking lot of Sara's apartment, Leonard tilts in his car seat, fingers pulling his bottom lip. He watches her as she takes out the trash, a softened Sara wrapped in clothes that work as pajama's, reading gear, workout wear, or a run-to-the-grocery-store outfit. So tidy, he thinks.

She's so very tidy.

He's always noticed her smallness — the dainty, trim movements, like the thought that he could fold her up and take her anywhere, hide her away without fuss or trouble. Where could they go, he wonders. Italy? Mexico? What used to be Russia? The wide, wide world is a dream for Leonard, a set of bleary, unfocused flashes like pictures from the turn of the century. What is crystal for him in Iowa, its sky and horizon and single trees that snap, dry sticks, in high winds. He's lived here all of his life, gotten used to seeing movies two months late, never having Presidential campaign visits without a flood, living in fruitless search of Chicago-style pizza, lox and bagels, real café au lait. What he wants is for Sara to stay here, anchored and fixed. He'd take her away to his house, if anywhere, his overgrown farmhouse where the land meets sky and city all at once.

Sara rounds the corner of her building, stepping quick, her head level. Leonard takes his right hand, and using his thumb and second finger, frames her body in his sights, pinching her down. As both his hand and Sara move toward her front door, he senses a ferocious need — a need like a live thing thrashing inside of him, splintered wood and ground glass, steel teeth and claws of bone. He wants to close his fist, take Sara up, but she's already opened her door and disappeared. Shutting his eyes, Leonard drops his hand, and in that moment, he knows love — smooth as butter, heavy as stone, Leonard knows that loose-limbed, sour and salty, soft, bright, humming sense that tickles his throat and wraps him up, makes him ready to do anything. But the feeling is bitter, and even after John comes home and the lights of Sara's apartment turn off, even after Leonard's knees are stiff with the cold and the angle of the seat, even long after Sherry will have called his lab, irritated with a worry she can't help, Leonard sits, tracing first Sara's windows, then her door, then her building, then her trees, then her sky, and finally the outline of his own windshield with his fingers.