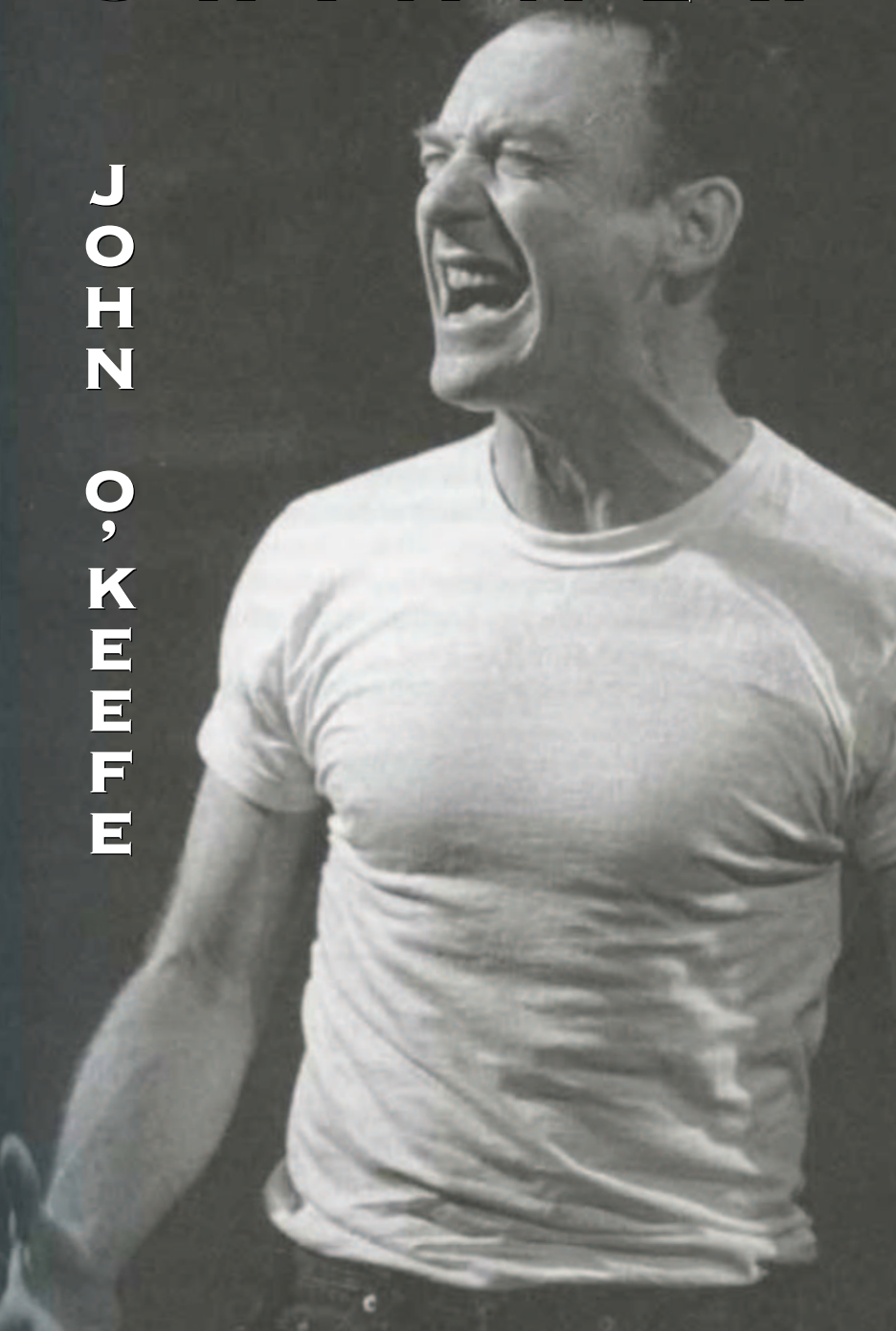


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*Originally produced by the American Inroad Series at Life on the Water in San Francisco, Shimmer was first performed by the author on January 5, 1988. Since then O'Keefe has taken the piece to Los Angeles, Hartford, Philadelphia and New York. Among the awards he has won for Shimmer are the 1988 Drama Critics Circle Award for Solo Performance in San Francisco and a 1989 New York Dance and Performance Choreographer/Creator Award.*

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This story is true. Most of it. It was the end of a long bad time. The fall of 1956. In the heartland of America, Tama County Juvenile Home in Tama/Toledo Iowa, just off Highway 30. It was a home for kids from broken families. Most of us hadn't broken the law. Me, I didn't even swear.

Had this tall red brick chimney that stuck up out of it. I can remember others, seven, eight, nine tall red brick chimneys sticking out of the flat midwestern landscape, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois. God and razor straps. Five long razor straps in Tama/Toledo, lined up and hanging on the wall, with holes in the top so that they'd whistle and make tattoos, hanging right where you could see them. Tama/Toledo, the worst and the best, best because it was the last, worst because the razor straps were harder to take the older you got, best because I met Gary Welch and we discovered Shimmer.

Gary was shorter than me. Had sandy-colored hair and a big honker of a nose that hooked out so that you could see up it. I'm glad he didn't have much nose hair because I spent a lot of time with him. Came from Des Moines. The biggest city in the state. Gary was a year younger than me. I was almost sixteen.

I met him during a fight. Kept sticking his chin out at Dewey Wheeler and getting it popped. Dewey had these big sharp knuckles you could cut grass with. But Gary kept on coming at him. Dewey could have totally dismantled him if Teats Brewer hadn't stepped in and stopped it all. Teats was a big black kid, called them Negroes in '56. He was called Teats because he had the biggest set of pecs in the home. A light-skinned black guy with the fastest hands I've ever seen.

Teats started pushing Dewey back, calling him trash-face and mingo-boy, short for Mongoloid (Dewey wasn't that smart). Dewey backed off waving his hand like he was trying to say good-bye to

a girl that didn't like him. And ole Teats he was strutting and talking like Amos and Andy, flapping his hands around like he was sending signals to a ship out at sea. He'd made his point; he was king of the field, except for Richard Mathison. But Richard Mathison wasn't on the playing field. He was in Lockup and he had two weeks to go, so Teats, he was having a heyday.

After everybody cleared off I saw Gary sitting on the grass trying to keep the blood off his duds. Ole Mr. White see them dirty and he'd kick him in the shins. Good ole Mr. White, patron of Hoover Hall. That was our cottage. Fast with his hands. Almost as fast as Teats Brewer except he didn't pull his punches. Five foot six, mean as mosquito meat. Talk to you one moment, nodding and bobbing his head full of good cheer and confidentiality, next moment on you like a thin cloud of bad gas, hands and feet flying, every one of them too, every one of them reaching their mark and their mark was you, sucker. Went off on Teats a lot. Made him mad as hell the way Teats could cover himself. Tried to pull ole Teats' arms and legs away but couldn't budge them. "You chicken shit, son of a bitch, chicken shit, son of a bitch." And Teats, you could just see him beneath the blur of Whitey's flying limbs, believe it or not, giggling. Teats was an astronaut of beatings. He could enter that dimension and come back like you and me can walk through doors.

"Goddamned Teats. I had that son of a bitch."

He pulled his pants up. His cuffs were over his heels.

"I hate these motherfuckers, ole man White's wife's keeps giving me these long pants. She's trying to turn me into a duck."

"She'll get numb pretty soon."

"Numb?"

"After a while she'll forget you're here unless you remind her. Old man White's another story."

"Yeah, the story of my life."

"I'm John."

"I know, Captain Spacy."

I hated that name. I got it because I wanted to be an astronaut. It was just the beginning of the space age, remember? They were

shooting guys down railroad tracks at the speed of sound and blowing up rockets on launch pads but I wanted to go up there.

"Yeah, I'm Captain Spacy."

"Space ain't so bad."

He looked up at the tall red brick chimney.

"It's gonna blow soon."

"The whistle at the physical plant?"

"Yeah."

"At five o'clock."

"Makes me nervous waiting for it."

"Yeah?"

"It's not because it's loud. It's because I know it's gonna happen."

"Yeah."

"It's neat."

"Yeah."

"I ain't crazy, you know."

"I know."

Just then the whistle at the physical plant blew. We looked at each other as the sound ripped through us, grins of pain and confirmation shifting through our faces. The kids ran toward the cottages, calling out to each other. I watched their heads bob and their hair flash in the September sun. The wind came up, could feel it whisper through my hair. I knew it was saying something. I wanted to know what it was saying.

"Race you up the hill."

"All right."

I dug my feet into the grass and pushed off into space. I left Gary behind me. I was fast in those days.



"Penguins really live in the ice. Below the water. So do seals. They dive into the water and they go down into the ice and they go far enough that they get to a place where the ice is so cold it

isn't cold anymore. It gets hard instead like super concrete. And it's totally smooth."

"But isn't it dark down there?"

"No, there's light."

"Where does the light come from?"

"I don't know. It's just there."

"Right."

"It's a blue-green glow."

"Like that blue-green you see sometimes in the snow?"

"Exactly, it leaks up there."

"Oh."

"Below the ice you find all these places."

"The seals go down there?"

"Yeah."

"What do they do down there?"

"They do everything that we do, but they do it before we do it. We just do it and we act like we did it first."

"You mean there are penguins and seals that look just like you and me and they're in the Home?"

"Yeah, but the Home's different there. It's neat. You get to see girls and drive around."

"Are there people who've ever gotten down there?"

"Yeah. And they tried to bring things up with them."

"What kinds of things?"

"Things they'd never seen before."

"What happened?"

"By the time they got something to the top it had turned in-to water."



Gary and me found times to make up stories. By the window facing the playing field where we first met, or on the playing field itself, throwing a baseball.

(Fwack) "I don't like to swear." (Fwung)

(Fwung) "You've got to swear, Spacy, (Fwack) if you want to talk."

"Swearing isn't a sign of good language." (Fwack/Fwung)

"Yes it is. Swearing's where you pour the hot iron in." (Fwack)

Like look at those  *fucking*  stars."

"Throw the ball."

"Right. What is it when you say (Fwung)  *darn it* ?"

(Fwack) "I don't want to swear." (Fwung)

"Swearing's (Fwack) good for you. It's what you say when you mean something." (Fwung)

"Deep, Welch, deep." (Fwack/Fwung)

"It's true. Just tell it to me (Fwack) like you'd tell one of your priesties. What is it, 'Admit it, son, admit it.' What is it when you say (Fwung)  *darn it* ?"

(Fwack)

"Damn it."

(Fwung)

"Shadows in the (Fwack) night, buddy, shadows. What is it (Fwung) when you say  *heck* ?"

(Fwack) "Hell." (Fwung)

(Fwack) "What is it when you say  *shoot* ?" (Fwung)

(Fwack) "Shit." (Fwung)

(Fwack) "You're getting pure."

"What is it when you say (Fwung)  *frig* ?"

(Fwack)

"Come on."

"Come on, say it."

(Fwung)

"Fuck."

(Fwack) "What is it when you say (Fwung)  *gosh darn it* ?"

(Fwack) "Come on."

"Come on, say it."

(Fwung) "Fuck it."

"No, that's not it."

(Fwack) "Goddamn it." (Fwung)

"Right!"

Gary and me pulled cafeteria. We had to be there at 5:00 A.M., an hour before the rest of the kids got up. Most of the kids

hated kitchen duty, but Gary and me, we liked it because we could walk under the Iowa sky, ablaze with its Easter-egg light, the air filled with the sound of roosters and dogs and birds, and our leather shoes as we walked from Hoover Hall to the cafeteria.

*(Click-click)*

"People don't think dogs can think."

"I think they do."

*(Click-click)*

"So do I."

*(Click-click)*

"I think birds can think."

"I do too."

*(Click-click)*

"I think bugs can think."

"So do I. I think worms can think."

"Me too."

*(Click-click)*

"I think dirt thinks."

"I don't know, it would be hard on the dirt, all those people walking around on it and digging into it. Anyway, what parts of dirt, the little parts or the whole ground?"

*(Click-click)*

"The little parts think like the little parts and the ground thinks like the little parts when it thinks of itself being the field."

*(Click-click)*

"Well, where does the field end?"

"Where the fences are."

"Why there?"

*(Click-click)*

"Because the fences tell the ground when it's a field."



The cafeteria was one of the most exciting places of all because it was where everybody came together, i.e., the boys and the girls. Everyone waited outside the cafeteria. The bell would ring and everyone would file in according to cottage. One of the patrons would begin the prayer.

"Bless us, oh Lord  
for these thy gifts  
which we are about to receive  
from thy bounty  
in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord,  
amen."

The rustle of chairs, the clinking and clanking of silverware and plates and then, silence. There was absolutely no talking allowed. The sections were patrolled by patrons and matrons who paced the aisles between the tables. Evy, big, fat-faced, black-haired grinner, would roll between the boys' tables with his arms folded over his potbelly, just waiting to give his infamous ear clap, which meant that he would attempt to clap his hands together with your head between them. He could come up on you so quiet you didn't know he was there and no matter how much winking and finger-twitching the guy on the other side of you gave he would inevitably catch you whispering to a buddy or gazing at a girl across the room, and then Pop!—a mind-blackening explosion would send your ears wailing. And ole Evy wouldn't say a word, he'd just float on down the aisle with that same grin.

Going together in the Home meant sneaking glances at each other across the cafeteria.

"Is someone looking at Beatrice? Who is looking at you? Stand up and show us who is looking at you."

She stands up. She doesn't look at him. She doesn't want to get him in trouble. The matron slaps her.

"Who is looking at you?"

She doesn't look. She slaps her.

"I said, who is looking at you?"

She slaps her again and still she doesn't look at him.

Davey stands up and looks at her. Evy strides over to him and says, "What are you looking at boy? Sit down."

Davey doesn't sit. Evy shoves him down in his chair. Davey gets up. Evy slaps him. Davey doesn't sit down. Evy whacks him across the back of the head. Davey's chin smacks against his chest.

He lifts his head up and looks across the cafeteria at Beatrice. The fat matron has stopped slapping her. Everybody in the room is looking at him except for her. Davey smiles, blood's coming from the corner of his mouth. Davey's bit his tongue pretty bad. Evy grabs Davey by the collar and pushes him out of the cafeteria. The fat-cow matron tells Beatrice to sit down and keep her eyes to herself. She does. That's love. Love in the Home.



We looked at a lot of codes, Morse code, semaphore, Braille, the Greek alphabet, sign language. We even made up our own sign language. Teats Brewer caught us signing to each other and made us teach it to him. He was real good at it. The only trouble was he laughed a lot and jumped around on his bed so that ole man White caught us and made all of us hold paper to the wall for two hours. Teats started inventing a new code with his face. Pulling both eyebrows up meant one thing, pulling them down meant another, lifting one meant something else, smiling with both corners of the mouth, smiling with the right side, closing the left eyelid, thrusting the lower jaw out, sticking the front teeth over the lower lip, pursing the lips, wrinkling the nose, crossing both eyes, crossing one eye. It's a miracle we didn't get killed out there, but ole Whitey didn't hear us laughing.

"Who's receiving the code?"

"Anybody who tunes in. They catch this wave and its talk, and they pass it on."

"And we get it?"

"Right, but we don't know we got it, we just act like nothing's happened. Like static on the radio, we think it's noise but it's really talk. We're not smart enough to get it."

"Like smoke coming off a cigarette, it's like smoke signals for really smart Indians."

"Exactly."

"Who's sending the code?"

"Everything."

"What's it being sent to?"

"To whatever's signaling."

"What is that, God?"

"Yeah, but a weird god, weirder than a jellyfish. You'd throw up if you saw it."

"What would you call this code?"

"I don't know. It's not just a code, it's a language. It's on the edge of things."

"Yeah, it shines."

"Yeah, it shimmers."

"That's it."

"What's it?"

"That's the name."

"Shimmers?"

"No, Shimmer."

"Shimmer. Yeah. . ."



While we were working on the basic principles of Shimmer Richard Mathison got out of Lockup.

Richard Mathison was a mongrel Hun with a bit of bad Celt mixed in. Biggest fifteen-year-old I ever saw. Wasn't quite six feet. didn't weigh more than 160, but all the same, everything about him was big. Sandy-haired, with this huge face and thick, insensitive skin and a mood that could cook and freeze a TV dinner at the same time. His hands looked like they were made out of big dicks. He made Teats look like an exotic butterfly.

And there was Mathison's sidekick, Tony Kemler. Most of the time he just moved around with a convivial grin. But when Mathison was on the prowl he turned into his straight man, a straight man from hell.

And so Mathison was among us again and Welch would have to face him. To let him pee on him, so to speak, the way dogs do.

We walked down the hill together from the dairy to the cottage.

"Is he gonna beat the shit out of me?"

"Not as long as you shut up."

"What am I supposed to shut up about?"  
"Everything."  
"Great. What if he asks me a question?"  
"I don't know. Just don't be aggressive."  
"What does that mean?"  
"Don't laugh. Don't smile. Don't make your face blank. Don't look sad."  
"Just look scared, right?"  
"Yeah, but not timid."  
"How bad is this guy?"  
"He's bad."  
The whistle blew.  
  
"He looks Italian to me, Richard."  
"Why's that, Tony?"  
"He's got a big nose and a little dick."  
"No shit?"  
"But I might be wrong. I ain't never seen it swolled up. Probably when he gets a hard-on so much blood goes down there he passes out."  
"Yeah, that would be something to see. Well, what will get him hard?"  
"Captain Spacy."  
"Captain Spacy, he couldn't get a rise out of nobody."  
"He's changed since you been gone."  
"Has he gotten tough?"  
"He's really gotten tough."  
"Could he beat me?"  
"Jesus, I don't know."  
"I want to know."  
"I don't know."  
"Don't fuck with me, Tony!"  
"Yes, he could beat you."  
"Goddamn that son of a bitch, where is he?"  
"He's right there, in the shower, Richard."  
"Are you in the shower, Space Boy? There you are. Wow, you've grown?"  
"He looks tough, don't he?"

"I don't think so. He's really bony."  
"You're right, he looks like he's gonna cry."  
"Where's his buddy?"  
"In the shower over there."  
"No shit? Is he tough?"  
"No, he's weird."  
"Where is he? Oh, he's neat. You're right, he must be Italian."  
"They hang out together."  
"That's neat. Hey, Spacy, come here. You slicing the biscuit with this boy?"  
"No."  
"Fuck off, you fat slob."  
"What'd he say, Tony?"  
"Jesus Christ, I don't know."  
"He say something to me, Tony?"  
"I said you're a blimp, muscle-face."  
"Did he call me a fucking name, Tony?"  
"No, ain't no name ugly as you."

Mathison put his big hand full of dicks right into Gary's face and smashed his head against the shower stall. Gary went down. Everybody backed away. Mathison stepped into the shower stall. And I went off. That's right I went off on Richard Mathison. Admittedly, his back was to me, but I went off on him. It was all like a dream. I threw my fist (it was my right hand) into the side of his head with all my might. It was crazy, I had this loving feeling mingled with a suicidal glee and this clarity, like riding the rail to a predestined and preposterous act. His head snapped and I distinctly saw spit fly from his mouth. Boxer's spit. I had made boxer's spit fly from Richard Mathison's mouth. I wondered what would fly from mine after he got through with me. But Mathison wasn't doing anything at that moment but going down. I watched him aghast, completely jarred off. So was everybody else. They gazed at me with the disbelief and curiosity of witnesses at an execution. What I did next to Mr. White probably saved me from hospitalization. I got Lockup instead. I slugged him. That's right. His face no sooner appeared around the shower stall than I swung at it. Call it a reflex. His face was bony and hard. Mathison's was

meaty and soft. I understood, for a moment, the reason why guys liked to fight each other, it's like petting, except it was hard and very fast. But Mr. White didn't go down. He grabbed the back of my head and brought my face down into his quickly rising knee. Miraculously (I had a butch) he was somehow able to grab me by the hair and throw my face into his left fist. And it was there, I think, believe it or not, I had my first Shimmer. And before we struck, that shower drain and me, I entered that place Gary was talking about, where the seals and penguins go, I Shimmered my dad.

Mother's keeping quiet in the corner.  
She knows, she knows  
ain't no law this side of custody.  
Ain't no law. Ain't no law.

Hear the alcohol ripping through his veins.  
"This is your dad, baby. Crossed  
the dividing line some years ago,  
just before you was born."

"Johnny, Johnny,  
sing him to sleep.  
Sing him that song he likes.  
Goes like this:

*Tweedle o'twill  
knocking on corn wood,  
tweedle o'twill  
knocking on silk."*

"Oh, Jesus, here it comes.  
I'm gonna shout,  
Johnny,  
I'm gonna shout.

Why are you looking at me?  
What are you looking at me for?

What are you looking at?  
What do you think you see?

SMACK!

Hey, Johnny,  
why ain't this going right?  
Just wanted to give your mama a kiss.  
I'm in trouble now, ain't I, son?"

*Tweedle o'twill  
knocking on corn wood,  
tweedle o'twill  
knocking on rice.*

"Now I'm talking to *you* son,  
Now I'm talking to *you*.  
Can you hear me?  
Can you hear me talking to *you*?

What is he doing, trying to keep me down?  
Is he trying to keep me down?  
Is he trying to fool me, honey?  
He's singing. Why is he singing?"

SMACK!

What's that word,  
they call it?  
Surrender.  
Yes, yes,

Surrender.  
In this big, wide world  
full of sin.  
Surrender.

SMACK!



My daddy goes a-hunting  
 He loves those birds  
 loves those bass  
 Why ain't the world like that?  
 Why ain't the world like that?

My daddy, got to know the other side of his angry face.  
 SMACK! We hit, that shower drain and me.

A towel was stuffed in my bloody face and my head was directed by a sure anonymous hand (probably Mr. White's) out of the showers, up the stairs, and into a moon-filled Iowa night, over a white sidewalk and into the little two-story cottage called Lockup.

A fat-faced stupefied-looking man led me up the stairs, his big ass rocking back and forth making his keys jingle. Mr. Kibby, a Methodist from Muskatine. A door was opened, the hand on the back of my head gave me a shove. I heard the door slam and I was in darkness. I groped around, keeping a hand on the towel that was soaking up the blood coming out of my face. I found a cot and sat down. It squeaked. I hated the sound of squeaking beds. They frightened me and turned me on. They had a petty sound that told you every time you turned that you were alone and that you couldn't sleep.

*(Squeak-squeak)*

All the memories.

*(Squeak-squeak)*

The time when you came into this place.

*(Squeak-squeak)*

The time just before you came.

*(Squeak-squeak)*

A classroom.

Ames Iowa.

Mid-afternoon, ten of three.

A pretty girl with blond hair smiles at me and turns her head.  
 I'm looking down at the cuneiform between my hands, I know it's English, but I can barely read it. Sixth grade.

*(Squeak-squeak)*

I hear a phone ring in the hall. Somehow I know it's for me.  
*(Squeak-squeak)*

The Principal comes in the room. My heart is pounding. He looks at me. My heart pounds harder.

*(Squeak-squeak)*

"Johnny, could you come with me?"

*(Squeak-squeak)*

The kids turn their heads and watch me. The blond girl catches my eyes and turns away.

*(Squeak-squeak)*

I don't want to leave. But I am already in the hall. There's a cool light on my skin, but I think, maybe I'm on fire. But I'm not. There is no glow coming from me. The Principal looks at least six feet taller than me. His face is made of white iron, his smile is soldered on. He's holding my hand as if I was a toddler, I think

*(Squeak-squeak)*

maybe I am.

We are moving toward his frost-glass door. I know there are people in there waiting for me. I can see their shadows tilting as if they were behind a wall of ice. The Principal is opening the door. My face is freezing and yet it is aflame. It is breaking apart.

"Hey, Johnny, we're taking you to a real neat place. You'll really like it."

I can feel their nervousness like they're ready to catch someone who is very fast.

*(Squeak-squeak)*

"Where's my mother?"

I don't want to say those words but they're coming out of my mouth.

"She's okay."

They have their hands on my back.

*(Squeak-squeak)*

They're moving me towards the door. I'm starting to cry.

*(Squeak-squeak)*

I can hear it. I can see it but there's no one there, just this clumsy terror turning my arms and legs into pudding. A fast-paced comedy man shifting into another world but not here, not here. . .

*(Squeak-squeak)*

I hear this voice coming out of me, it's at least an octave higher than the one I used to have.

"What kind of place are you talking about? Are there really great kids there?"

*(Squeak-squeak)*

My cheeks are sticky I don't dare wipe them because I'm cool.

"Yeah, there are."

We're walking through the parking lot. The sunlight is warm. There's no mood music playing the end of the world. The "free kids" are playing on the swings and the jungle gyms. Yes, I've already

*(Squeak-squeak)*

crossed over the line.

There's a car with a crest on it that says "State of Iowa Welfare Department." Welcome back, brother, it's been a little while.

*(Squeak-squeak/Squeak-squeak)*

I run for it. In that brief moment of freedom (about ten seconds) I watch the big elms rush toward me, and I do, for a moment, think I hear mood music, it's a love song, the big midwestern cumulus are dancing over my head. Someone's got my legs, I'm hitting the ground. I can smell the freshly mowed grass.

"Come on, son, don't be a problem."

No problem. No problem.

The bed didn't stop squeaking, but I didn't hear it, I had fallen... to sleep.

There was a blast of light.

Mr. Kibby comes into the room and sways toward the sink. He turns on the water faucet, he begins washing my face.

"I'm sixty-five, how old are you?"

"Be sixteen in October."

"Be good to yourself."

"Yes sir."

"You know what I mean by good?"

"No sir."

"Cherish your temple."

"Yes sir."

"You know what I mean by that, son?"

"I think so, sir."

"The Lord's watching you all the time. You want the Lord to see you doing that?"

"No sir."

"You be good, I'll let you walk around."

"Yes sir. Sir, I'm sorry for crying and I want you to know that I want to be quiet."

"You talk odd son, are you with us?"

"Yes sir."

"You scared? Just keep yourself in the Holy Hand of Jesus."

He puts his big palm on my head, the bottom of it drips down over my face.

"You shouldn't be in a place like this."

He puts the side of his lips against my left ear.

"I can tell that. You're a gentle boy."

I turned the light off and sat in the dark on the bed and tried not to let it squeak. Sometimes I wanted to get up and ram my head into the wall. Sometimes I just sat there and shook my head back and forth, whimpering until snot was flying off my lips.

*(Squeak-squeak)*

And Mr. Kibby's shadow would appear with his slashing box of light.

"Are you with the Lord?"

"Yes, yes, I'm with the Lord."

"Is it true? Is it true?"

"Yes, yes."

Sometimes everything was black and clear and I could look into that darkness and see myself looking back just as if I was sitting there looking at a mirror. Sometimes there was this inner flashbulb that would go off in my face when I wasn't looking. And every once in a while I'd feel this buzz that was specifically me and I could imagine feeling free even if I was at the bottom of a pit.

It was in Lockup I hatched the plan to make a break for freedom.

Ole Man Kibby never did "let me walk around." He came in twice with a water bucket and a broom. He sat on my cot and

watched me scrub the place down. When I was done he gave me a bar of soap and some fresh towels and told me to take a cat bath in the sink. And he sat there on the cot and watched me do it. Finally, one day he came in and led me down to the bathroom. He stood there and watched me take a shower. When I was done he handed me my work clothes.

"Keep yourself near the Lord, next time you come here we'll get to know each other better."



Mathison was gone when I got out. He went with a farmer in What Cheer. When haying came he was one of the best bailers. He could toss a bail like it was a marshmallow and he could do it all day. I think they kept Mathison in the Home rather than sending him to Eldora Training School because he was a good worker and the farmers liked him.

Everybody ignored me when I got out. Except for Teats, who popped the top of my head and said, "There's my man." Mr. White didn't say anything. His pencil-faced wife glared at me and reset her already locked jaw. As for Gary Welch, he avoided me.

I couldn't stand that one. It felt weird to get butterflies over a guy, but I did. I felt the *stab* when I approached him after supper and he moved away.

*Twedle o'twill  
knocking on corn wood,  
twedle o'twill  
knocking on rice.*

My special secret for freedom shouted at him.

Mathison's watchdog, Tony Kemler, eyed me constantly. He looked up at me even while tying his shoe. He was the first one to have a conversation with me, if you could call it that. It was while we were polishing floors.

"Richard's mad, Spacy."  
I didn't answer him.

"He says he's gonna bust you bad when he gets back."  
I didn't say anything.  
"What you gonna do?"  
I didn't answer him.

Late September blew. Thunderstorms rolled past. The trees turned a different color. And still Gary wasn't talking to me. Finally, on a windy, brilliant day in October we pulled dairy together.

"Hey man, what's up?"  
No answer, he moves away.  
"Hey, fuck you Welch, I went down on account of your ass."  
"I didn't ask you to."  
"Yeah, but I did. Why ain't you talking to me?"  
"'Cause you're weird."  
"Ain't no weirder than you."  
"Besides your mother is a whore."  
"Fuck you."  
"Fuck you back. I taught you how to swear."  
I threw the broom down and shoved him in the chest.  
"But you didn't teach me how to fight."  
Gary stepped back, his face ablaze.  
"Your mother's a fucking whore."  
"That's not true!"

I swing at him. It is like dreaming. He pulls his head back and I miss. His right hand is already coming into view. There is this "crack" like you get if you bite down on a jawbreaker too hard. My face snaps back. Blurrily, I hear his voice.

"You hit Mathison from behind."

I see his other hand coming at me and before it hits I stuff him in the chest. He falls back.

"You don't know nothing about my mother!"  
I'm still stuffing him. He falls on his ass right in the cow shit.  
"Son of a bitch!"

He starts to get up and I shove him down again.

"You don't know nothing about my mother, you son of a bitch!"

And I start crying.

Luckily, no one else was around. Mr. Viederhander was in the office testing the night's butterfat content.

Gary gets up and starts swinging at me, screaming,

"Stop crying, you son of a bitch!"

"Fuck you, Welch, fuck you." And I'm swinging at him and he's swinging at me, swinging and crying, both of us, swinging and crying.

I don't know if anything connected. I don't think so and it didn't matter because it felt so good and so bad to be there swinging and crying with Gary Welch. We swung so long our arms ached and we couldn't swing anymore. And we cried so long we started laughing. Both of us sat right down in the shit laughing and crying at the same time.

"Vat yew bouys tooing?"

Mr. Viederhander and twenty-three Holsteins were standing there, staring at us.

We got up and tried to dust ourselves off. All we got was shit stuck between our fingers. Mr. Viederhander's mouth kept twitching. He could barely keep a grin out of his face.

"Yew get tirty."

Gary and me, we walked down the hill together.

"Mathison said if he catches me talking to you he's gonna kill me."

"I was thinking while I was in Lockup. My mother lives in Marshalltown. That's about twenty-one miles from here. She lives at 144 South Van Buren."

"So?"

"We pull dairy on Monday and we build a room inside the bales, right next to the wall, right where we can see the main watering trough."

"Why?"

"Because that's where they all meet when they have their search parties. And that's where they all come back to when they're done."

"So?"

"On Wednesday we pull dairy again. We work until the whistle blows. When it blows we don't go back."

"Where do we go?"

"We go to the room we made. We wait for them to go out, we wait for them to come back in. They won't have found us 'cause we ain't gone anywhere. So they go back down to the cottages and we take off."

"We take off?"

"We take off."

"What if they find us in the barn?"

"That's the chance we got to take."

Gary didn't say anything. The hunting parties were scary. They were composed mostly of the older kids from Coleridge Cottage, sixteen to eighteen. They loved to mess up the shrimps of Hoover Hall. Also, getting caught meant an automatic two weeks in Lockup.

When we got back to the cottage we didn't hang out with each other. Tony Kemler kept his eye on both of us.

Sunday at breakfast Gary gave me the sign, a simple, single nod of the head which sent my heart pounding.

Gary got the dairy on Monday but I got the farm. Tuesday I got the kitchen, he got cottage cleanup. Wednesday he got dairy. I got the laundry. I asked Mrs. White if I could have dairy duty. She told me to shut up. And then the hand of heaven broke in. The phone rang. Mr. Viederhander was calling for me.

"Vee've gut extra verk. He's good vit de cows."

Mrs. White grunted, sucked her thin lower lip and ripped the dairy pass from the pad and handed it to me without looking up. It took everything I had not to skip out of her office.

Since I hadn't drawn dairy on Monday, I hadn't got a chance to build the hiding place. And worst of all Tony Kemler had pulled dairy with us.

"Spacy and the Welcher, ooh, if Richard only knew."

"I ain't talking to him, so leave me alone."

"I ain't talking to him either."  
"That ain't gonna help you, either way, Captain Spacy."  
"Then why don't you just leave it alone."  
"I ain't doing nothing. Don't have to."

God, it was crazy, but I felt like I do when I'm in an airport, though at that point I had never been in one.

As the work progressed Gary and I shot covert glances at each other. It was obvious that we had to make the move soon. Tony was getting suspicious.

"Hey Welch, what are you doing, man? You're supposed to clean up this shit here."

"Oh yeah."

"Great, 'oh yeah.' "

"Why don't you fuck off, Kemler."

"You finish it up, I'm taking off."

Kemler started after him. I stepped in his way.

"You gonna do me, Space Man?"

"Come on man, just walk away."

"What do you mean?"

"Just walk away."

His eyes were shining.

I pushed him and ran. We were both blowing it.

I no sooner got out the door when Gary collared me and redirected me toward the hay barn. I dashed in after him.

"Come on."

He started pulling bales. I watched in disbelief. A hole was emerging. Monday when he got dairy he had made a room!

We got in and started pulling the bales over ourselves. Soon we were covered up. We sank down into the darkness.

"Shhh," Gary said, "he's coming after us."

But he didn't come. Not then.

Gary and I stayed in the shadows and didn't move.

And then it blew, the five-o'clock whistle. I felt my buttocks tighten as I stifled the impulse to get up and do what I always did, buckle down, crunch down, go down to the razor straps, to the cafeteria, to the showers, to the boys pointing at my pecker and

laughing, to the dormitory and the 8:30 lights out, where there was too much time to sleep, and so much time to think.

There was a rustling inside the barn. Gary and I didn't move.

"Spacy, Welch, you in here?"

It was Tony Kemler.

My heart pounded, and yet it seemed like a silly game, all we had to do was get up and say, "Yeah, we're here."

More footsteps outside the barn. We didn't dare look.

"Where are de utter bouys?"

"They already went down."

"Okey dokey, well, you'd better not dally."

"Yes sir, be right there, just looking for my gloves."

"Okey dokey."

Mr. Viederhander's footsteps moving away.

"Spacy, Welch, you in here?"

Silence.

"If you are, let me go with you?"

Silence.

"Shit."

The sound of his footsteps leaving. The sound of his footsteps returning.

"Spacy? Welch? Fuck. Good luck."

The sound of his footsteps leaving.

The sound of his footsteps leaving.

The sound of his footsteps leaving.

"Gary?"

"What?"

"My eggs lake."

"What?"

"My eggs lake, damn it, I mean my legs ache."

"Shhhh."

"I'm hot."

"Me too."

"It's getting dark."

"Yeah, but not fast enough. Let's sleep."

"Yeah."

*Tweedle o'twill  
knocking on corn wood,  
tweedle o'twill  
knocking on silk.*

"Gary?"  
"Shhh. They're coming."  
I heard them. First Mr. White's voice, then Evy's.  
"Keep quiet, Jamison."  
"Get in the truck, Don."  
"Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go." Laughter.  
"Stop dicking off, Base."  
"Yes sir." More laughter.  
The sound of motors starting up.  
"Spacy and Welcher, can you believe it?"  
"The yoo-yoo team."  
Laughter.  
The sound of trucks moving away.  
"Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go."

Crickets.

Gary and me, we spent our time waiting for them to come back by doing what we like most, we talked.

"There's so much to do. Right now there are millions of people doing things. Chinamen are moving on the other side of the world. I can almost feel it, "the other side of the world," Chinamen moving scrap. Moving around, talking real fast to each other. And in the nighttime having a lot of sex."

"I ain't ever had sex."  
"I had sex when I was nine."  
"I haven't had sex."  
"It's not so bad."

"If I could control myself I could live in India most of the times of the year."

"What would you do there?"

"I'd live cheap. I'd have my ticket back to America and enough rent to put a roof over my head in any part of the country."

"What part of the country?"

"Most likely a place near the woods. Where things are cheap. Where you could put yourself up for next-to-nothing."

"What would you do in India?"

"I'd just look at the place and write everything down."

"What's in India?"

"I don't know, it's cheap. The people are neat. They've got dots on their heads."

"Sometimes I think we're just gonna die. I just know it. And it's okay because it makes everything special. Even the universe is gonna die."

"How do you know?"

"I just know. Don't you?"

"Yeah, I think I do. I read it, 'the universe is gonna die.' "

"There won't be nuthin'."

"There won't be nuthin'?"

"There won't be nuthin' forever."

"God."

"But it's okay."

"Yeah. It makes everything Shimmer."

"God, I got to pee."

"I got to pee too."

"And I'm thirsty, man."

"What do we ought to do?"

"We ought to sneak out there take a leak and a drink."

"One by one?"

"Yeah, I'll go first."

Gary pushed the bales aside and climbed into the darkness.  
I felt the sudden cool night air.

"Gary?"

Crickets.

"Gary?"

Gary comes flying through.

"What's fucking wrong?"

"I just didn't hear you."

"Go ahead, take off."

"Okay."

I shot off into the night. I smelled the orchard air sweet and estranged. The watering trough was under the yard light. It seemed miles away but finally I saw the reflection of my face appear. My lips and the pool are kissing. I'm chewing at my own face and it's coming up water, the best cold drink I've ever had. I'm pissing and drinking at the same time when I think I can hear Gary whispering in the night.

"Get in here."

I glance down at my pee puddle. I kick some dirt over it and dash for the dark barn.

"I think they're coming."

Big lights are bouncing down the asphalt road.

And suddenly they're here, swarming out of the trucks, jumping up and down in the headlights, and the others, the bigger ones, are coming out s-l-o-w.

They're in the barn before we can breathe.

"Hurry up, light it before Evy gets here."

They're smoking Luckies.

"Give me a drag."

"Captain Spacy and the Welch, wimp city."

"Where do you think they are?"

"Maybe they're in here."

Laughter.

"Give me a drag."

"Light up another one."

"Maybe they're here."

"Light it up."

He starts to pull at the bales.

"Hey man, I'm sitting here."

The sound of a truck in the main yard.

"Ole man White. Put it out."

Evy's voice outside, "Bill, Don, you in there?"

"Yessir, just checking to see if they're in here."

"Yeah, I'll bet. Is Base in there with you?"

"Yessir, I'm here."

"Well, get your asses out here."

"Let's go."

Base's voice, "Man, if they were in here, I'm gonna be pissed."

"You ain't never gonna know."

Evy, outside, "What you boys been doing in there, smoking?"

"No sir."

"I can smell it on you. Get your asses on down to the cottage."

Feet, voices disappearing down the hill.

Crickets.

Gary's eyes with a plastic glow.

"They're gone."

"Yeah."

"Let's go."

Shimmer time pulling out the light. Dark night beauty with a half moon rising. The grass getting sweet and wet. Dark dairy buildings all around us, casting moon shadows like they were on the "other side." Down the dairy road, running, Gary and me, scared as shit, happy as hell. Gary's shirt flashing in the moonlight. Hearing my feet pounding the road, and my heart, pounding louder.

The fields stretched out from us like the wings of a huge butterfly. I could see Gary moving with me across the road. His pushing space pushed me, together we broke the resistant distance like communicators breaking a code.

"I think I just saw lights."

"Where?"

"Behind us."

Our feet slowly ran to a stop, like music melting off a record. There were lights coming behind us.

Truck lights.

"Gary, let's get down."

Gary stood stuck like a rabbit.

"Gary, come on."

Gary bolted.

"Gary, get back down here."

But Gary wasn't getting back down, he was climbing over a barbed-wire fence and getting stuck like a fly on some real bad-assed flypaper.

I knew the sound of that truck. It was White's '53 Chevy 3100. I jumped up and pulled Gary from the fence, knowing I was tearing skin as well as cloth. Gary let out this very unmanly screech and hit the ground with me.

"Come on, let's cut across the field."

I could hear the truck's big rubber brakes dragging it down to a stop and then the crack of one of its doors opening. I sprinted toward the windbreaker trees sticking up out of the darkness. All I could hear in my mind was "Gary, Gary, Gary, get going."

The wind blew up just as I hit the trees. There was this sizzling all around me and the feeling of hard unkept ground. The cottonwoods that guarded the farm were pulling down the wind.

"Gary?"

Iowa wind moving through the cottonwoods.

"Gary?"

A dog barking, sounded like a love song,

"Run run run  
run away  
run run run  
away  
run away"

I ran toward the vague horizon, over an empty field. I ran through a farm, because it was in the way. I drank water from a trough. It tasted as good as cold milk. Dogs chased me. I tore my skin on barbed wire. My pants-legs were shredded. So were my sleeves.

And coming out of the horizon is this long string of bobbing lights. Highway 30 to Marshalltown.

I hear this sound behind me.

"John."

That was the first and last time he used my name.

"Gary?"

"Yo."

I fell flat on my back.

"I lost ole Whitey for you."

"Yeah, right, Welch."

We ran toward the string of moving lights.

We came to the edge of the highway and were just about to cross it when we saw it, Whitey's truck sitting on the shoulder of the road pointing at us like a big ugly nightmare.

"What are we gonna do?"

"Let's cross the highway."

"Right in the traffic?"

"Yeah, right through the traffic. He'll have to do a U-ee."

"We'll get killed."

"What's the difference?"

We shot across the highway. White revved his truck and started coming at us. We ran in front of him into the oncoming traffic. Car horns blared at us. I saw Gary silhouetted in the truck lights. A big rig's horn blasted. It sounded like the five-o'clock whistle. I saw Gary dive out of the lights and then they were coming at me and I dove. A pair of eyeballs flashed at me as I hit the wall of the ditch. I think I was what you call "knocked out."

I hear all these horns and people shouting. I push myself off the ground and look over the edge of the ditch. I see Gary grinning at me. He's pointing his finger. I follow it. I see White standing in the middle of the highway, trying to stop the cars. All around him cars are skidding and screeching and blaring their horns.

Then it's over. The oncoming traffic is gone and the cars behind him are gone. There was only us and the Chevy.

We're running in the middle of the highway. We're running and holding our thumbs out like we're hitchhiking. It's beginning to dawn on me how crazy this all is when out of the night a pair of car lights appear.

Gary's on the side of the road. He's picking up something



and he's running to me. He's giving me something. It's a big rock. He's got one too. The car approaching us is slowing down. We can hear Buddy Holly coming out of it. It's a Chevy Bel Air convertible and it's pulling to a stop.

"Where you going?"

A guy in Levi's and a motorcycle jacket, ducktail and all is looking at us. I'm gripping my rock.

"Marshalltown," I croak.

"Hop in."

He's saying "hop in." We're not hopping in, we're diving.

The guy is burning rubber and we're shooting off into space.

Whitey is pulling his truck in front of us, unbelievable! The guy is swerving around him.

"Hey, you stupid mother, you crazy?"

Gary and I looked at each other, our faces flushed, our eyes bugged as we slid down into the plastic turquoise backseat.

"Fag?"

The guy held up a pack of Camels. I took one. A Zippo was bundled in the pack. Gary snapped open the lid and spoked the flint. We put our heads together over the oily flame and sucked. God, the taste of those Camels. We looked into the night, the glowing beautiful Bel Air beneath us, and it was no dream. Gary leaned over, carefully avoiding the rearview mirror, gripping his rock.

"I'll kill him if I have to, Spacy."

But we didn't have to. The guy brought us out of captivity like some kind of rock-and-roll Moses. He did in twenty minutes what would have taken us hours. The wind blew through my hair and as the lights of Marshalltown appeared I felt new life. Looking over at Gary I could tell he was feeling it too.

Then suddenly we were surrounded by lights and houses and streets. I watched for a sign. Not street signs. They weren't the right signs. And we didn't want the guy to know we didn't know our way around. And then I Shimmered it, a Mobil gas station. There was something about that logo, a red winged horse,

and the way the station gleamed like a spaceport. I looked at Gary. He looked at me and nodded.

"You can drop us off here."

He didn't say anything, just jutted his chin and popped his thumb up like a World War II ace and left us in a cloud of burning rubber and screaming tires.

I looked up at the street sign. It said Center and Van Buren.

We ran to the Mobil station. Gary looked like hell. And so did I. I was covered with dirt. My pants were literally in tatters, my shirt had holes in several places. Gary's was ripped all the way down the back. We saw the gas jockey's jersey as he bent down to pick up an oil spout. We shot to the water fountain. Gary gulped the water as fast as he could. He made such loud slurping sounds he caught the attendant's attention. Gary immediately jumped in front of the water fountain so I could get a quick drink.

"Hey, man, how you doing?" he croaked with a crazy amiability. The guy looked at him with utter disbelief.

"What time is it, do you know?"

I gulped the water down, wishing it could be more solid, like bread, so I could get more of it down faster.

"Let's go, Doug."

I looked at Gary. He looked absolutely nuts, his eyes bug-ging, a guilty bucktoothed grin on his face.

We dashed down South Van Buren as fast as we could.

"Why did you call me Doug?"

"So he wouldn't know your name, stupid."

"Really smart, Welch. Not knowing my real name's gonna make a big difference."

"You got to be clean about everything you do, Spacy."

"Yeah, right, you look real clean."

We looked at the numbers. 1086, Christ, it was almost a mile away. As we traveled south we noticed the trees were thinning and

the houses getting dumpier. It was beginning to look like the right neighborhood.

We crossed the viaduct over a sprawling train yard. The steam locomotives were chopping sound out of the air, starting fast and loud then immediately slowing, laying down power strokes, black and steamy like Iron-Age insects.

When we got to the houses again we couldn't find 144. 142 jumped to 146. So the best we could figure was that 144 was in the back of 142 which was like my mother's description.

"Mother? Mother?"

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"What do you think I'm doing, I'm calling my mother."

"Christ Almighty, man, do you have to say it like that?"

"How else should I say it?"

"I don't know, but you don't have to call her Mother. At least you could call her Mom."

"She doesn't like Mom."

We moved between the walls of 142 and 146. They were close together and it was dark.

"Mother? Mother?"

Gary snorted and shook his head in disgust.

I put my face next to a dark window.

"Mother?"

A face flew at me out of the dark.

"I'll get you your mother, you little son of a bitch!"

Gary dashed out of sight.

"Does Doris Calhoun live here?"

"I don't know who the fuck lives here but you're not gonna be alive if you don't start running."

"Sorry."

I sprinted into the darkness, tripped and sprawled onto the front lawn.

"Gary?" I called. "Gary?"

Gary's voice came from the shadows across the street.

"Here."

I ran toward him. He was waiting for me in the dark. He looked at me and shook his head.

"Space, man."

"It must be North Van Buren."

Into the night, skirting the streetlights, keeping close to the front yards. Running again, legs burning, we moved north. Over the viaduct, the trains pounding the surface. The Mobil station appeared again, only this time it seemed much brighter.

North Van Buren was on the other side of the light. It was black with trees. I stuffed my shirt in and knocked the dirt off my pants.

Gary just stood there.

"How are we gonna get across there?"

We gazed out at the Mobil station. It looked like it was under floodlights.

"The longer you look at it the worse it's gonna get. It's Shimmering. If we keep looking at it it's just gonna get brighter. We got to pop that fucker. We got to think like we're invisible."

Just at that moment a cop car rolled by. Gary looked at me and started laughing.

"At least we know they're out there."

We pulled back into the shadows. The cherry-top rolled out of sight.

"Let's go."

Slow wind  
moving through the heat  
sweat cooling on our faces  
slowest I've ever crossed a street  
although I was running.  
Lights crashing on us  
two bugs in a kitchen  
running under a bin  
pretty windows gliding by us  
pulling us in.  
Don't catch me boy, don't catch me  
running on wooden feet.  
Don't catch me boy, don't catch me.  
Could hear the leaves blowing in the wind  
over there on North Van Buren Street.

We smashed through the light. I think I saw the silhouette of the gas jockey leaning on the door of the station gazing at us as we ran past him, our rags flying, our faces aflame. The trees of North Van Buren loomed over us like a dark continent. The streetlights were thrust up among the leaves, they left a soft filtered glow and welcome shadows. The asphalt had given way to a brick street. The houses were huddled together but there were pools of darkness in each yard. We slowed our pace and looked behind us. The glow of the Mobil station was like a faint galaxy. We began to look for numbers. Near the end of the block we finally found one, 64. I looked at Gary. His eyes were shining. He knew it too, if 144 wasn't right, we were lost. At that very moment we heard a car coming out of the darkness. We dove into a nearby yard. It was a cherry-top, Marshalltown Police Department; its antenna waved, we could faintly hear the sound of the police radio over our pounding hearts. It stayed there for quite a while and then, finally, turned left and coasted up North Van Buren.

"We can't go up there as long as it's up there."

"Let's sleep here until 4:00 A.M."

"How we gonna know when to wake up?"

"We'll just know."

Just then we heard the chiming of the Town Hall bell, two strokes.

Gary grinned and shook his head. It as like we were a part of some kind of transmission. Mind you, if we didn't wake up we'd be a cute sight, sleeping there in someone's front yard at nine in the morning, a crowd of Marshalltownians gathered about us. We laid down on the grass.

The grass crackled in my ear. A car rolled past us: I didn't bother to look. We were past running. If they caught us, they caught us. The sound of the car faded and I realized again that crickets were singing. I felt my eyelids slowly close.

When I opened my eyes again I found they were already open. I was sitting up. An old rag was lying on the ground next to me. I touched it and it began to wriggle. Gary's face rolled out of it. Its eyes opened and I saw Gary look out from them. There

was a part of him that didn't look quite human, something in his eyes; I realized everybody was that way.

"Spaceman, let's go."

I felt him pulling on my arm.

"Spaceman, wake up."

I shook my head and the thing that was gripping my mind let go.

"It can't be more than a block away."

"Yeah."

Just then: Bong. Bong. Bong. Bong.

We dashed into the next block. There was something clear and directed about everything we did. The house had to be wood and yellow. There had to be a set of stairs going up the back. There had to be a front porch and the number 144.

122

124

130

"Gary?"

I stopped and ducked into the shadows.

"Let's cut through here."

"Why here?"

"I just have a feeling."

"Oh brother."

We ran through the backyard, kids' swings. And appearing to our right, in the next yard was a yellow house made of wood with a set of stairs running up the back. I looked at Gary. His mouth was tight, his eyes darted toward the front of the house.

"Let's check the number."

But I didn't check the number. I ran up the back stairs, knocked on the door and whispered,

"Mother?"

Gary ran into the dark.

## SHIMMER & OTHER TEXTS

There was no answer, so I knocked louder.

"Mother?"

I was just about to knock again when I heard footsteps behind the door.

"Who is it?"

"Mother, it's me, John."

A light snapped on behind the door. A shadow bobbed behind the dish towel being used as a curtain. The door opened.

Things happen. That anything happens at all is a miracle, or maybe it isn't. But what happened that night changed my life. My mother was on the other side of that door. And she took us in. And for the first time in my life I had breakfast at 4:00 A.M. We watched dawn come up. We heard the birds sing. After a while we heard babies crying. We smelled coffee brewing. We grinned at each other as we drank our own. All around us, on all sides was the free world. The air smelled different. The sounds sounded different. There were so many different kinds of sounds and smells. Cars started to move below. All kinds of cars. People were coming out of their houses and getting into them. As if it was just another day. But it wasn't. I could feel the world stretch out around me, could feel it bend in the horizon. Gary felt it too. We didn't need to talk, we were Shimmering.