

April 28, 1971

TUESDAY

Donald Over the Bridge

by Jan Laskar

Summer came through the trees. And me sitting on the edge of a wooden park bench watching it come and I could smell it like it was dripping from the green wind that the leaves made. Summer. And on the wharves behind the park I could smell the Portuguese fishing boats and my brother Bill helping them unload a shipful of tuna and I could smell them getting those big fish ready to cut their heads off. And I closed my eyes and listened to fudge cooking in the candy shop on the corner and to the hard rubber soles of people walking in the streets and scraping against hot metal cars and dripping ice cream and sticky asphalt and summer came through the trees at my nose. Louise Johnson, it said, Why aren't you working?

But it was only Marty Fink coming from the telephone building where we both worked and walking lunchly across the green to my bench. Louise Johnson, why aren't you working?

I closed my eyes and moved two inches on my bench and smelled summer. Hello Marty Fink.

Louise Johnson why aren't you working?

I thought I'd go in to work after lunch.

What time are you supposed to work?

Ninethirty.

It's elevenfifteen.

I know it is.

Why aren't you working Louise? Why aren't you working?

I smelled summer some more and listened to Marty Fink. I don't know, Marty. She went to get lunch.

In the lobby a small beige phone lived inside a tight metal case on the wall. I opened the case and lifted the phone and placed it carefully between my right shoulder and my head. Good morning, beige phone, I told it. It buzzed into my ear.

My left hand reached out and pulled hard on the Employeesonly door handle. It didn't move. I leaned back hard, pulling and listening to the beige phone.

The buzzing stopped. Operator, the phone told me.

Louise Johnson, I answered.

Beneath my left fingers the Employeesonly door yawned open. Thankyou, I told the phone.

Right, it said again. (An operator, the Black Book notes, does not say okay.) Right.

I hung the beige phone back in its case and

the Employeesonly door reached out and swallowed me.

Margaret Linden was four feet six inches tall and wore fluffy pink hair around her head and thick pink rimmed glasses around her eyes. She watched me from the other side of the Toll Room door. (When late, it was written in the Black Book, an operator must first report to her supervisor.)

Margaret's pink rims watched me move toward her.

Hi Margaret. I had my headset on and spoke carefully into the mouthpiece.

Are you late?

I guess I am.

Why are you late?

No reason was good enough for Margaret. Nothing stopped her from reaching the Toll Room. Not floods or famines or blizzards. Nothing had stopped her for twenty-one devoted pink years.

I don't know, I told Margaret. I don't know why I'm late.

The pink rims pierced deep through me. Sit down, Lou, Margaret said and moved me by the remote control deep in her pink irises to position 14.

I sat down at the switchboard and picked up a cord. (An operator, said the mighty Black Book, must AT ALL TIMES have a cord in her hand.) Maria was next to me at position 15. Maria was easily nine feet tall and close to seven feet wide and moved with a steady twining motion in her long wide arms like an octopus. I sat very still and watched her from the corner of my eye. Her voice wheezed into her headset to one customer and her enormous fingers flicked back and forth from tickets to cords to dials. Now and then a light would appear on the switchboard and Maria's octopus arms would swoop over and stab it. Operator, she'd bellow. It didn't have a chance against her eight powerful twining arms, so I sat quietly and watched her swoop and stab. You're still not working Louise Johnson you are rotten to the core you will never come to any good.

Never any good. Not as long as Donald was there. Lou, Mom kept saying, what's wrong. Don't you like kindergarten Me biting my lip in front of her and tracing X's on the floor with my feet. Don't you like school, Lou.

I don't know.

Then why won't you go? Do you want Bill to walk with you? Are you afraid to walk home by yourself?

I don't know.

And Bill standing behind her aiming at me with his paperbag lunch and his face and fist clenched up, twisted, menacing, glaring at me.

No. I don't want Bill to walk with me. I'm not afraid.

Then will you go to school?

Yes.

Will you stay there Lou?

Yes.

And Mom handed me two cookies in a brown bag and Bill unclenched his fist and I went to school.

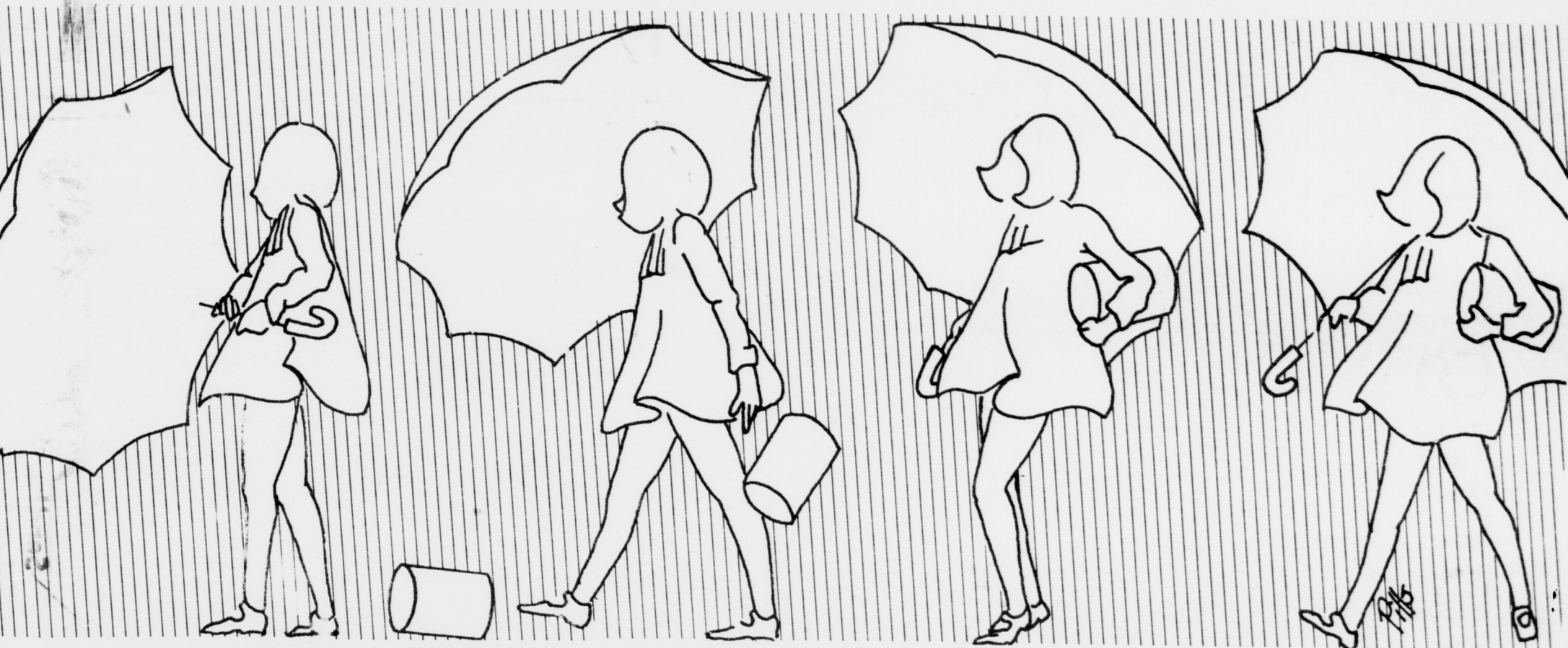
But there was Donald on the way back. Third grade Donald and the biggest the biggest that I had ever seen and he moved with such slow enormous footsteps and his arms and legs twisted like an octopus and his hair dark grease in his eyes behind me every day. Never spoke or threw rocks or looked in my direction. But Donald every day with octopus feet and thick black grease and me walking home on the bridge every day by myself.

They never guessed that I was plotting murder. That every night I prayed hard for rain and for Dad's big umbrella and I plotted and counted how long it took Donald to lumber out of his third grade classroom onto the sidewalk. It would take a little more time in the rain, of course. And if I wasted time to have a plastic rainhat tied at my chin and help me please buckle my yellow raincoat and such a big umbrella for such a little girl well I could wait till Donald got ahead of me.

Then the bridge. The big wooden falling apart bridge where I had suffered the echoes of Donald's footsteps so many times. And naving removed my boots which sloshed so loudly I would rum up silently behind him and quickly of he'd never know what hit him so quickly stab at his back with Dad's big black umbrella and a burst of power like a lever simple machine and Donald over the bridge.

Operator. Maria reached in front of me and I ducked from the octopus. The switchboard bloomed into Christmas lights. Margaret was

(continued on back)





PHOENIX

Beyond scattered maples, withered with fall,
An idling girl, filtered clear then indistinct,
Like a face through a white picket fence,
Rises toward the stream, as if to cross.

Wilting, sprawling unawares, she leans,
Breasts to knees to toss a stone against
Bleached - out clay, and glances over splintered
Shale and fossiled stream toward weed-shrewn graves

Feel a boy run past on a hillside road.
He leans panting against a guard post,
Shirt undone, shoes scarred in ascent,
Afternoon breezeless, moment unending.

A stone drops clattering; a confluence of tears
Sparkling in a final ray of silent sun.

—Jay Paul

GOD INSPIRES THE POETS

He was about to read the one
where his family almost suffocates
in darkness white as the Paradiso

when the rain really began,
sirens slinging warnings
like screaming stones over the city.

The room had been too stuffy
anyway. Backs
were falling from the chairs.

People closed their minds
like books. Whirlwinds
cannot be eluded.

Phone calls to sitters/quick
trips home/beer cans popping
faster/risking
creaking steps into a
cooling cellar/the real
party had just begun.

The old man, hair slicked,
beard jutting into the wind,
the porch an open bridge

where some were pretending
to steer, wind smashing
his face with laughter, his own words
("I've lived long enough already.")

The chatter below/the roar
surrounding/a choice.
Beer upstairs/friends below.
So it went.

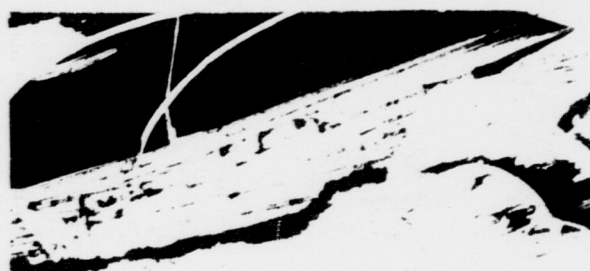
until a flash
silenced the cellar. All eyes
mourned the burned and broken
cord, the smashed radio,
knowing now they'd never know
if the laughing captain had a chance
to weather the lurking blow.

The entire city saw
the black funnel of fate
the next night/took pictures/
phoned friends, but our poet
lay disconnected, still
of use, like the beer.
He came up, faced us
read and knew we knew
real wind had swiped
his life away.

—Jay Paul



'UNTITLED': THREE



(Untitled)

Coming on you unexpectedly like that,
at Washington and Shiawassee
you seemed a Jonah -

Freshly spewed from the darkness,
from the closed - mouth conspiracy
that kept us turning different corners.

For a moment we stood,
grounded in each other's eyes,
making sentences from the scraps at hand,
building an island with words.

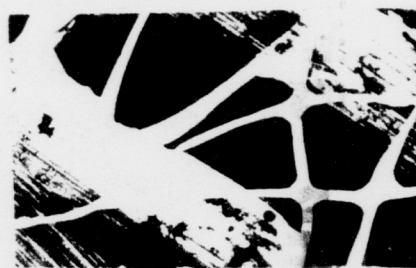
But it was cold there on the corner,
and we could not withstand
the current of our separate selves.
Our island was too soon swamped,
and you were swallowed up again.

—Lorraine Sigle

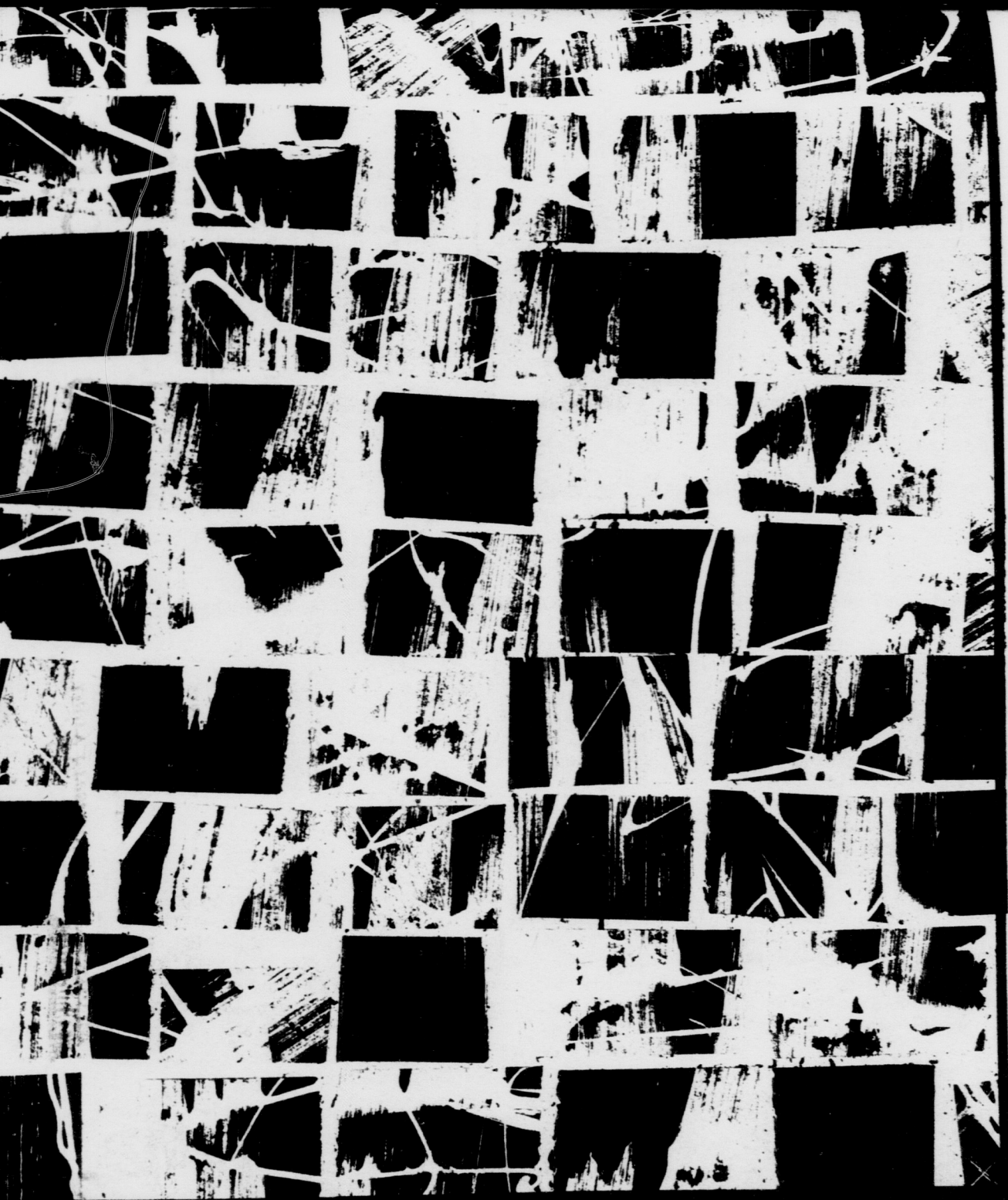
Lorraine Sigle — a junior English transfer student from Lansing Community College, a new poet to the MSU scene, has her first publication.

Jay Paul — a graduate of Hartwick College, Oneonta, N.Y., has nearly completed his dissertation on James Fenimore Cooper. He has accepted a position at Northern Michigan University starting next fall, is a published poet, and a book of poems published by Wipeout Press. His poems have also appeared in many magazines around the country.

Richard Thomas — a history graduate, recently married, works in the Cultural Affairs, his poetry has been featured in anthologies including "Nine Poets" published by Moore Publishing Co. His poems have appeared in many literary magazines, appeared in the reading New Black Poets in New York City last term which attracted a large audience, among others.



ink drawing by D



FREE MSU POETS

(Untitled)

This past winter was dead in the center.
White ash of burned stars settled on our minds.
It did not snow.

It remained unmusical
as the clack of cleated tires on dry pavement.
Then we had rain;

Freezing rain that iced in the town
and threatened to refuse traffic.
We slept in that morning.

But by noon the roads were salted,
and there wasn't enough conversation
to last the evening.
We let the coffee go cold in our cups.

Our street began to look hollow cheeked.
All the houses grew round - shouldered
and apologetic about their paint.
It was February and we expected snow.

The clouds collected and hung like slow lovers,
ponderous and afraid.
A fine powder fell and hid itself like a young girl
who knows she has no bosom.

We went to bed that night without turning on the light,
and talked about the storm of three years ago,
when you wore snow shoes to McGowen's Grocery,
and I baked bread for the first time.

—Lorraine Sigle

morning

there are no buildings here
no early morning neurotic traffic
no blank faces racing
with clocks in their bloodstreams

no chicago sudden morning explosion
no new york mob rushing underground
into the sickening belly of the city

Vomiting up the souls of the people
no detroit blue shirts
ford and chrysler zombies
rushing to their daily funerals
no stuffed buses full of
dying shapes of obscene visions
of fatter wallets and mini-skirt
teenagers advertising their thighs
to the old men looking over
their newspapers in the park

Morning here stretches out
treeline touches but does not disturb
the settling blue sky. birds circle
insects sing (do insects sing in subways
have you ever watched a small bee
drink from the yellow face of a flower?)

no cities roaring in the morning
never sleep - restless whores!
beds full of men.

the only intruder is a jet — and
it is gone now.

the outhouse is
a suite to us — Listen! Listen!
you finely dressed deadmen
your inside choked with smoke and
car parts, your breath of smog —
your neurotic pace
your empty face
your jet jetting you through time
and space

Listen to your subways
Listen to your noisy coming awake
Look at the blueshirt factory workers
the black domestics
the white slaves
the technicolor slave drivers

Listen cities/
and
Dig your doom swelling
and you on top
of all your technology
chasing yourself through
the bellies
of your ugly magic
—Richard W. Thomas

We are no one.
A stone carving they
touch and love.

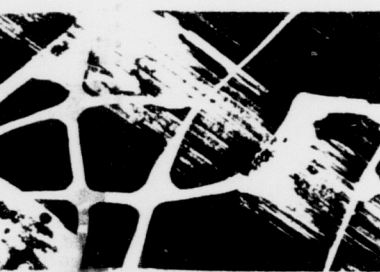
We the Brothers
loved and unloved
while Judases make out
under our crosses
with our ex - lovers.
who in our upperroom
swore to never leave,
our names now annoying
memories
as they undress to
give themselves to
our executioners.

While we
look down
choking on spotlight
—Richard W. Thomas

— a junior English major, a
t from Lansing Community
oet to the MSU area, this is her

graduate of Hartwick College in
has nearly completed his Ph.D.
James Fenimore Cooper, has
osition at Northern Illinois
ng next fall, is about to have a
published by Windfall Press, his
appeared in many small literary
d the country.

— a history graduate student,
works in the Center for Urban
ry has been featured in various
ncluding "Nine Black Poets"
ore Publishing Co. and also in
gazines, appeared at the poetry
ack Poets in America in New
rm which attracted Leroy Jones



ink drawing by David Kirkpatrick

(continued from front)

...pacing steadily back and forth behind me. I lifted a cord and plugged it into a light. Operator.

And the river water brown half sea and salt running crazy over its banks. Donald over the bridge. And I would sweep the black umbrella back under my arm and no one would know. Such a big umbrella for such a little girl. Donald over the bridge.

Operator. Operator please dial 2032352992 and I wish to speak personally with Mr. Blackington and I'd like the time and charges on the call and operator hurry I'm calling from 4838214 got that now please hurry.

One moment please sir.

Have you got that Operator have you got it all I'm in a hurry.

Would you repeat the number you're calling please.

Brown crazy water running wild into the woods. Over the bridge the bridge and we couldn't see through the rain.

How much longer do you think the bridge will last, asked Allen. His hair was deep red kinks in the rain.

Two minutes, Bill said. What do they teach you at Choate?

Allen turned the color of his hair. I don't think the bridge will last much longer. Do you Lou?

Allen you're sitting on my umbrella.

Never seen the river so high. I wonder how much will be left of the beach. I bet a lot will wash away.

I don't know Bill. Allen you're sitting on my umbrella.

And your number is 4838214. Thank you sir. Yes sir. I'm sorry.

Bad day, Operator, is that what's wrong?

I don't know sir. Yes sir I guess so.

Allen came through the back yard wearing a heavy sweatshirt that said CHOATE in thick blue letters. Allen lived in our back yard every summer in a modern A-frame summer home with his parents Mr. and Mrs. Allen Alfred Barrington Senior. During the winters Allen lived partly at Choate Preparatory Academy (which would enable him in about two more years to emerge from our back yard with YALE written thickly across his chest) and partly in a large split level home in Deep River Conn., where his father was a dentist. He came through the back yard and his hair was red kinks in the rain.

Hello Lou, Allen said. He took off his glasses and wiped them. Hello Bill.

Bill moved to another room.

I heard that the bridge is going to wash away. Do you think it will?

The bridge, I said.

Allen nodded. Do you think it will wash away?

Long distance is calling for Mr. Blackington. Is he there please?

(They always named hurricanes things like Alice or Cindy or Ethel. By the time the alphabet got to the L's there were no good storms left and they never named them Louise anyway.)

One moment please sir. They're getting Mr. Blackington for you.

My god, Lou, you're a mess. Where have you been in this weather.

(Worst hurricane we've had in years the papers said.)

I went out with Bill and Allen to see what's left of the bridge. It's almost all washed away.

(They never named them Louise.)

Where's your umbrella Lou? Why are you so wet?

I don't know.

What happened to your umbrella.

Me standing there in front of Dad biting my lip again and looking carefully at the floor. It fell into the river, Dad.

Fell into the my god Lou fifteen years old and you can't hang onto a what is wrong with you

Brown salt wild water spilling over its banks. It isn't any good now, Bill, I'm going to throw it in. Brown monster witches mouths swallowing black spokes. Over the bridge over the Allen you sat on my umbrella. His hair was red kinks in the rain.

Mr Blackington? Thank you. Go ahead now, sir.

Operator. Credit card call please card number 4995690548Z and I need information in Boston. Thank you sir. One moment please. Yes sir are you finished with you call?

The charges Operator. I asked you for the time and charges on the call.

Right, sir. One moment please.

The cardinals lived in our back yard right before Allen came two years ago. March and half snow half rain winds and morning fogs and they'd be sitting in the maple tree's cold gray branches and I could hear them bringing spring through the trees in the morning. Six cardinals and they were red in the fog.

Yes sir, the charge on your call is two dollars and forty cents plus tax for a total of five minutes.

Two dollars my god Operator you're crazy. Since when is it two dollars.

Well sir you did call person to person. It costs more you know. Excuse me a moment please sir. I have to leave the line moment.

Operator I wanted Boston information. Yes sir. One moment please.

What are they doing, Dad, I asked, watching the cardinals. Red feathers smashing into glass. Beating red fog mornings into windows.

I don't know Lou. I don't know what they're doing.

The cardinals stayed for two months. Five o'clock every morning they'd start banging through the fog on our windows. Sitting in the cold hard maple branches and they'd fly one by one into the windows. And all of us watching them smash scarlet driving beaks into the glass. Beak against pane tearing at glass with feathers. What do they want and every morning at five o'clock for two months they came. Nobody knew why.

Dad hung old shirts and paper bags and scarecrows in the windows. Mom woke early and went outside to try to scare them away. Every morning five o'clock red feather smashing at glass. The cardinals stayed for two months.

And you're calling from a pay phone sir? You were cut off oh I'm sorry sir. No I don't know what happened. Just a minute please I'll try to get your party back.

Three minutes signal when through please.

Allen came then and on Saturday mornings when his father Mr. Allen Alfred Barrington Senior went shopping in Hyannis with his mother Mrs. Allen Alfred Barrington Senior he would collect peanut butter jars and fill them with rum and whiskey from his father's liquor cabinets and then fill the rum and whiskey bottles with water. He invited Bill to help and they hid the peanut butter jars under the scrub pines and hemlocks in the back yard and on Saturday nights they said they were going to the beach. Did they teach you this at Choate, Bill said. Allen's face was the color of his hair. They were friends afterwards and summer came and the cardinals weren't there in the morning. One moment for your overtime please.

I don't have any overtime Operator. I hung right up. I don't owe any money.

Sir you talked for seven minutes you only paid for three.

Bill hated the cardinals anyway because once when he drove the pickup to Hyannis a bird killed itself against the front window and when he stopped the car a piece of its head was still on the dashboard. It wasn't a cardinal but he hated all birds after that and he would never drive with the windows open because he read once that a bird had flown into somebody's window and cut itself in half. But I loved the cardinals because they were red in the morning and because we never knew what they wanted in our window. And I almost hated the part of Bill that hated the cardinals because he knew why he hated them and how could he know when I never knew why I hated Donald.

That will be an additional fifty cents please for a total of seven minutes.

Donald the biggest the biggest.

Look, Allen said, You can see a piece of Louise's old umbrella over there on the rocks.

Where said Bill.

Where out there, isn't that it? The one she threw into the hurricane. Allen's hair was red kinks in the summer hot wetness. When do you think they'll build the new bridge?

Bridge? I asked. Are they building a new one? Allen you broke that umbrella.

Sure they are, Bill said, Where should we go tomorrow Allen? And I could feel them thinking Saturday night peanut butter jars.

Bill, I said, Do you remember Donald.

Donald? Bill threw a stone into the river. I skipped twice over itself and fell under the sleepy brown water. Sleeping next to the lazy river fishes. Bill picked up another stone.

I don't know anybody named Donald.

Bill, said Allen, let's go get the rest of that umbrella.

Donald moved away anyway, I said but they weren't listening. Do you really think they'll build a new bridge soon? Allen over the.

Sir would you deposit fifty cents please.

I did, Operator.

I only heard thirty five sir.

It was fifty.

Well sir I don't think I heard.

Fifty, Operator. Don't you believe me. Maybe your supervisor will believe me.

Yes sir. I believe you. Never mind it sir. I could see Margaret's short pink fuzz from the corner of my eye. Maria was still next to me stabbing and swooping at position 15. Operator.

Donald over the Allen over the I wonder where the cardinals.

Operator. The switch board was swimming with lights.

Lazy river fishes Donald over the.

My left hand stabbed quickly at a light with my back cord (an operator ALWAYS answers lights with back cords; front cords are for dialing out and my right hand carefully wrote down the details of the call. Creditcardperson to person to Cleveland, Ohio. I lifted a front cord (ALWAYS a cord in the hand) and plunged it Maria-like into another light. Payphone to Boston. I closed my key and watched Mr. Creditcard talk to Mr. Payphone. The lights blinked on and off violently. Signal the operator I told them. Go ahead and signal Louise Johnson you'll never come to any good.

I had another set of cords in my hands. Back cord into one light front cord into another. Signal signal they blinked crazily frantically and I laughed and Maria sitting there staring octopus eyes at me an operator NEVER laughs at the switchboard. I plugged Mr. Blackington into Mr. Boston information please and Mr. Overduepayphone into Allen and into Donald and the river will they ever build a new bridge over the bridge over the.

Standing up at the switchboard (NEVER said the Black Book) and my hands removed by headset and placed it down in front of me (OH NO said the Black Book NEVER) and my ears felt Margaret Linden's feet moving fast and pink toward me and my feet ran quickly in the other direction and me standing there a minute pulling hard on the Toll Room door.

Marty Fink was sitting outside in the lounge wearing her headset. I ran quickly by. Louise Johnson she said into her mouthpiece Where are you going. Why aren't you working Louise.

I don't know Marty.

I ran down the stairs. Summer was coming through the trees.

