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Columns — *Carol A. Samour*

Fiction • Poetry • Photographs
Interview with Mary Downing Hahn

The Green Umbrella

By Marc Bookman

David Hoover did not delude himself. He knew that what he was doing was wrong. Not illegal, he regularly reminded himself; but immoral, or at least unethical. If ethics had anything to do with it, that was. He wasn't sure. For him ethics and morals were not personal questions — when he thought about them at all, it was only to help him decide whether anyone else would do what he was doing, and whether he was likely to be caught. Which was what finally settled it for him, the fact that he couldn't be caught. He was unrestricted, and no one would know, and he couldn't help himself. He picked up the phone, punched in seven numbers, waited a few seconds, punched in three more, then a final one. Even though he was alone in his apartment, he held the phone close to his ear and hunched his shoulders, as if he were holding a straight flush and didn't want anyone to see. He listened.

"Ms. Arkin, this is Horace from Autobody One. We've got your door as good as it's going to get without putting in a new one altogether. I'm going off now so if you call back ask for Mr. Irvine, and if you get here before seven they won't charge you for the night." Nothing. He hit the pound sign.

"Jane, I'll meet you at the book store tomorrow at noon. Please don't be late like you always are, and whatever you do don't wear the red velvet, I am." A woman's voice, probably Marlene. Hoover had met her only twice, but Jane told him they always shopped together. He hit the pound sign.

"I forgot to tell you, Paul wants to double this Friday. What do you think?" The same voice, definitely Marlene, who lived with Paul Johnson or Johnston, Hoover couldn't remember which. He pulled his head away from the phone and looked up at the ceiling, figuring out the day of the week. Tuesday. While a computerized voice listed options provided by the answering machine, Hoover quickly reviewed his own options, finally pressing the pound sign again.

"There are no more messages. Please hit the star sign for more options."

Hoover hung up the phone. A few seconds later he thought to pick it up; someone might have called him while he was checking messages. He listened carefully to the dial tone, which was uninterrupted. No messages. Then he started to think: did he have any plans for Friday night? He recalled overhearing a secretary tell someone about a party that night, but no one had mentioned it directly to him yet. I'll just say I'm busy and can't make the party, Hoover whispered to himself. He always whispered when he talked to himself.

An hour later he decided that he should call Jane. He had been sitting on his sofa for a good part of the afternoon, mostly looking out the window, every once in a while glancing at a chess board on the coffee table, where he was in the middle of replaying a game between Capablanca and Spielmann from 1927. He liked to think about the great players and how they dedicated their lives to such a narrow pursuit. He was not really a chess player — the board had been there for more than a week, a conversation piece in case of a visitor. Since he had called in sick the last two days he wanted to be sure he was home if anybody from the office thought to check, although no one ever had in the five years he'd been working there. In any case, that was the reason he had given himself for staying home. But the phone had not rung all day, not a salesman or a computer-generated call or even a wrong number, and this had prompted him twice to pick it up and assure himself that it was working properly.

But the phone had not rung all day, not a salesman or a computer-generated call or even a wrong number.

Make the call, he whispered to himself. He dialed a number, holding the phone to his ear but away from his mouth. His thumb was poised on the disconnect button. "Jane Arkin," a voice answered. All business. Don't call me at work, she said whenever he called her. Why not? Because I'm *working* — as if that were some sort of an explanation. "Helloooo," she said, stretching the last syllable to make the person at the other end feel stupid. Hoover listened intently but was absolutely silent. Finally she sighed, not for effect but because she had had enough. "Great," she muttered, "just great," and slammed down the phone. He pressed the disconnect button, lifted it back up to check for messages, then placed it gently in its cradle. The thought occurred to him

a few minutes later that his phone might only be working one way, so he walked to the corner and left a message for himself. "This is a test to see if my answering machine is working," he said. It was.

* * * *

They had been seeing each other for five weeks, and already the pleasure had turned. Suddenly Jane was busy, and her work had picked up, and some friends were coming in from out of town. Hoover had gone down this road before, had even led the way once or twice, but this time it was different. This time the color of her hair kept flashing in front of his eyes, their early conversations kept replaying in his mind; when he walked down the street he thought he heard her calling his name from the other end of the block. They had only slept with each other one time, a drunken night she seemed to regret almost as soon as they had started, so it wasn't that. In fact it wasn't her at all — she had never given him the slightest impression that they were doing anything more than simply passing time together. But something had locked in Hoover's mind: the idea that she was special, the idea that *they* were special. He couldn't let go, and he knew he couldn't let go, and that was when the notion came to him that he could break her code.

She was always calling in for her messages. I'm more relaxed if I know I haven't missed anything important, she said, but to Hoover her behavior conveyed the opposite: she wanted to be somewhere else, from the very beginning she wanted to know what she was missing.

"Anything important," Hoover asked when she had returned from the seventh inning stretch of a Phillies game.

"No messages," Jane announced; she smiled to let him know this was good news. It was their second date, things were still on the upswing.

"Maybe you should get a beeper or something," he said, half kidding. She was a retailer for a downtown department store, a job he assumed was without emergency.

"No, I don't think that would be a good idea at all. You're committed to being found if you have a beeper — someone has called you and expects to get called back, someone is *waiting* to get called back. An answering machine is different. There's no obligation, no connection even. At the same time, you're not getting a beep beep beep, you're hearing a voice, you're getting information."

"You've convinced me," Hoover said, mainly to change the subject, if it was a subject, or to end the argument, if it was that. There was something about the way she had said "obligation" that told him more than he'd wanted to know.

Over the next few weeks her habit of checking messages increased. It never dawned on her that she might be offending Hoover, at least not until the very end. Sometimes she actually asked him for a quarter when they were passing a phone booth; once she even covered the phone with her hand while she listened to her calls and he hovered behind her. Around this time he started to notice how she dialed in for her messages: a three number code, he was certain of that, with the first one a four or a seven. That meant two hundred possibilities. Hoover placed the calculation in the back of his mind,

Racing the Storm

In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came...

Moby Dick, *"The Mast-Head"*

The story was an Ishmael's tale
I'd told a dozen times:
how we took off into that storm
we hadn't seen, and how
you got us through it.
As if the string of terrors
and the fear of dying
was all there was to it.
But there was more I didn't
or couldn't tell: what I'd learned
about risks and those who take them.
The *why* — about the adrenaline,
and the dark place where a form
of confidence is born...

We hung on updrafts,
windshear tugging at the stick
with the fight of a game fish.
The west was a black cave's mouth
where the Flint River slid away
on bronzed scales, then disappeared.
But out in front of us,
the east lay open, glazed lakes
placed like stepping stones
to the edge of seeing.
I remember how you wondered
if we should land the little plane
or try to outrun the storm
that dragged us back
with the cold twinge
of momentary weightlessness
you feel in the pit
of the pit of your stomach.

And then the river parted
to share its mysteries with us,
as if the roter of some giant
hovercraft had scooped it out:
whitecaps, long combers
riding to the banks, then back again.
Right there, beneath the chop
and froth, the calm dark space
we'd never guessed at,
alluring as a boy's dream
of those hallowed
nether parts of woman.

Come home, it said to me,
but you'd have none of that,
of desperately telling the bright beads,
deciphering the golden runes
the earth spread out ahead of us,
until we'd beat the storm,
or it beat us. Of letting whatever happens,
happen. But in the cavernous second
when we hung suspended
between the up- and downdrafts,
and the black water said, Come home,

you chose for us instead
the course of dull unfaith.

Lee Passarella

but before he did he decided that it could be done. He could listen to her messages.

She was forty-five minutes late for their last date. It was a rainy Thursday night, and they had arranged to meet at Sixteenth and Market Streets, which in retrospect was a very bad idea — the intersection was huge and packed with rush hour traffic, the car lights glaring in the cold rain, the pedestrians huddled under black umbrellas. While he waited under the portico of an office building, poking his head out every thirty seconds or so and occasionally running across the street, not knowing what corner they were meeting on or what she would be wearing or even whether she would be driving or walking, Hoover marvelled at how deeply he had let himself fall into this relationship.

"Sorry," she mumbled when she finally appeared, with another man, under an immense green umbrella.

"Everything will be fine," the man said.

"Thanks for the walk," she said to the man, who touched her on the shoulder and then turned back the way he had come, twirling the green umbrella behind him as if it were a pinwheel. For some reason this made Jane laugh.

Later, alone, Hoover ran through a spectrum of comments he might have made, ranging from "I'm sorry, did you say something?" to "What for? Now there's less time that we have to be with each other," but on that night he simply said, "It's all right, I was a few minutes late myself." Somehow, he hadn't yet realized that their time was over.

A few minutes later, sitting silently over drinks in a dumpy out of the way bar on Sansom Street that she had insisted on, Hoover looked over and noticed Jane buffing her nails with a napkin. "So how was your day?" he asked.

"Did you call me? Did you keep calling me and hanging up? Because somebody did, somebody kept calling me and hanging up the whole goddamned day." She folded the napkin inside out and started to work on her other hand.

"What are you talking about?"

"The phone, David, did you call me on the phone about fifteen times today and hang up each time?"

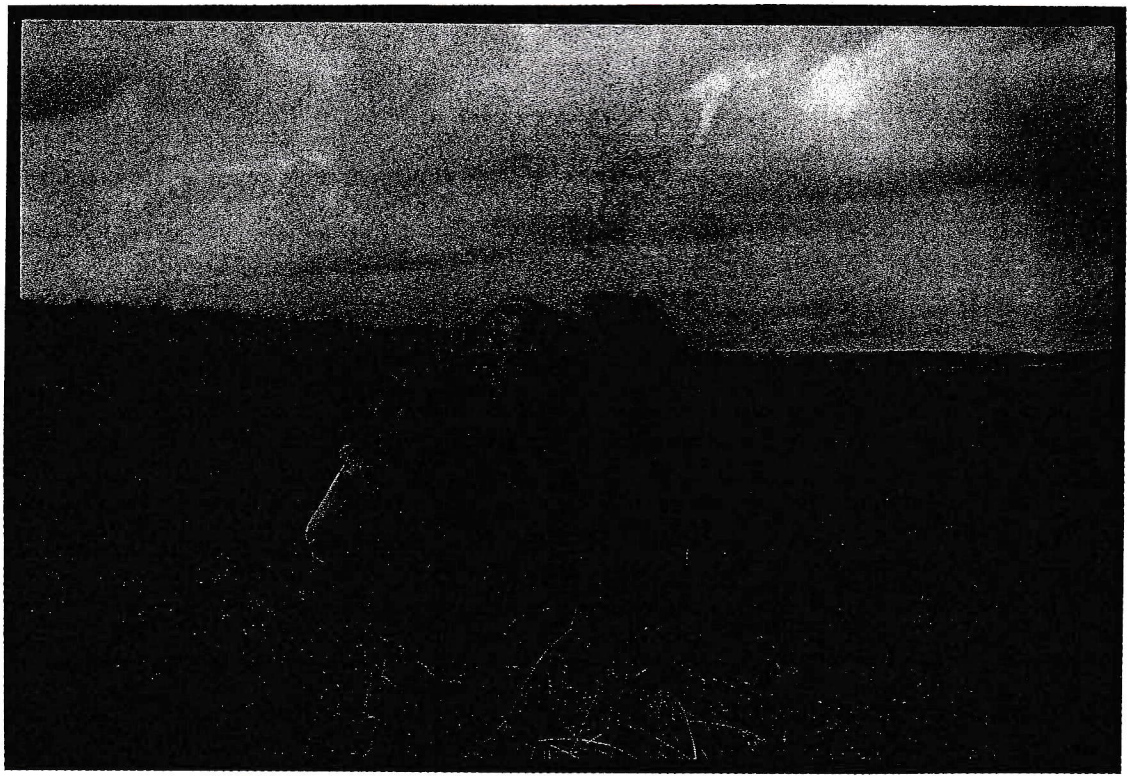
"I don't know what you mean," he said. Fifteen times! He had called her twice, three times at the most. But lately it seemed that she was exaggerating everything between them.

Jane threw a five dollar bill on the bar and hopped off the stool. "Listen, maybe I'm wrong. No hard feelings, it's just one of those things. Take care of yourself, okay?" While she talked to him she carefully buttoned her raincoat, and when she was finished she looked up at him and smiled, as if it really was one of those things. He tried to say something, but she was practiced at leaving, and he turned instead to the bartender for another beer.

"On the house," the bartender said. That was the moment Hoover decided to do it. Not out of spite or anger, not even out of self pity; but because it was a last connection, a last hope.

* * * *

He went in order from 400. "The United States weather service forecast for Philadelphia and vicinity is...no, I'm just kidding. You've dialed the right number, if you've dialed 592-5859, that is. Leave a message. If I don't get back to you, it means I don't want to." He had laughed at that the first time he'd heard it; the second time, he thought he heard a tone of seduction creep in, and every time after that he imagined Jane recording the message dripping wet from a shower and with a towel



Mare in the Meadow *Bruce Wilder*

around her head. Occasionally he would dial the number just to hear her voice. Now, though, he attempted number after number as soon as the message started. With each one came a heartbeat of excitement, a hitchhiker's anticipation that the next ride might be the one to take him all the way. Had he given his task a moment's thought he might have started with the correct number, since Jane's birthday was April 28, but there was nothing premeditated about his behavior; he simply went home and started dialing her number. Something told him that she wouldn't be there, that he could call her apartment for hours and get only her answering machine. If she did answer the phone, he was prepared to hang up on her. Instead it took most of an hour to reach the number 428.

"It's me. I hope everything went okay tonight. I guess I'll see you before you hear this anyway. Never mind." A man's voice, but hushed, as if he were somehow afraid of waking her. Hoover listened to the message three times, each time whispering the words *everything will be fine* at the end. After the second replay he was convinced that it was the man with the green umbrella; the third time he concentrated on the man's tone of voice, trying to imagine from the accents and inflections his height and weight, the shape of his nose, the breadth of his forehead. He wished he'd taken better notice when the man was right in front of him — all he could remember now was the umbrella, bright green in a sea of black and gray. Hoover decided that this was a man who needed to stand out in a crowd, a man not as comfortable with himself as he wanted others to believe. A phony, trying to convince Jane Arkin that he was a friend first, a lover second. If he even was a lover! It's *me,* Hoover repeated. *Never mind.*

* * * *

The next morning he woke just before the sunrise. He hadn't slept more than a few hours — he remembered rolling over to see the red neon 5:17, thinking how little light it took to illuminate his bedroom — but he felt well rested, like he had napped well rather than slept poorly. He showered quickly, dressed in the dark, and bought a cup of coffee and a doughnut just as the haze of daylight silhouetted the houses at the far end of Spruce Street. Puddles from the night before shimmered with gasoline, and Hoover intentionally slogged through them while he crossed over to Pine and up to Eighteenth. His steps echoed in the street; he started whistling to their rhythm, as if he were a dwarf heigh-hoing it to the diamond mine. But when he neared the corner he stopped whistling, sat down on the stoop of a flower shop, and adjusted over his eyes a silly fishing hat he had brought along. For the next three hours, as the sun rose and the traffic increased, he stared across the street and three houses down at an ornate wooden door. No one carrying a green umbrella came or went. At a few minutes before nine, the flower shop opened; an elderly woman with a foreign accent practically stepped over him to get to the front door. She opened it with a jerk, forcing Hoover to dive out of the way.

"I hope you are here because of some sort of flower buying emergency," she articulated carefully. "I will not have people loafing about in front of my establishment, do you understand me?" Her pronunciation of "loafing about" made such behavior sound especially sinister.

"I'm sorry," Hoover said, while the woman pushed by him with buckets of chrysanthemums and single long-stemmed roses for sidewalk sale. "Do you have a public phone I could use?"

"If it's a local call you can use my phone," she said, "but you have to make a purchase."

She smiled, and Hoover thought she might be kidding him, but he picked out a small bunch of bright blue and yellow flowers anyway. He took the phone from next to the register, dialed a very local number, and pulled the cord as far as it would go. Even so, he had to crane his neck to look out the window as the phone rang. On the second ring, he saw Jane Arkin rush out of her house, glancing at her wristwatch as she pulled on her coat. She was alone.

Hoover's heart relaxed. "I'll take these," he said. "What are they called?"

"Forget-Me-Nots," the woman answered.

"That's amazing," Hoover said. For a second he thought he had been talking to himself, spilling his guts in front of the flower lady.

"Not really," she went on. "There are many different species. All of them are known for their magnificent blues. This one is a heliotrope. It always turns to the sun."

"A heliotrope?" he repeated.

"Indeed." She wrapped them carefully in a matching blue paper, double-knotted a rubber band around their stems, and placed them gently in Hoover's hands. "Have a lovely day," she said.

"Yes it is," he said, not listening. Forget-Me-Nots! If that wasn't a big bright neon sign in the desert, he didn't know what was.

By the time he emerged from the flower store, Pine Street was backed up with traffic as people jaywalked north to work; he crossed against the grain and walked into the sun, holding the flowers in front of himself to see if they might sense the light and lead the way. "You're not doing anything wrong," he whispered to himself as he approached her door and stuffed the flowers into her mail slot without breaking stride. He felt that he was being watched, but when he turned around a few houses later the traffic was moving smoothly, and no one was behind him. Emboldened, he crossed the street again and doubled back — the flowers appeared to be squeezing through the mail slot, as if the house were packed full of them and these few had found a way out. For a second he considered looking in her window, just to remember some of the details, but at that moment a neighbor came out of the house next door wheeling a baby carriage. He was late for work anyway, so he kept walking. No one was any the wiser.

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For ten minutes Hoover sat at his desk and knocked out some idiotic copy about a new bath bubble line his firm had recently picked up — *the more fun your kids have in the tub, the cleaner they get with Maximum Bubbles!* But he couldn't concentrate, he couldn't think straight about bubbles or any of the other assignments piling up on his desk. Every few minutes he looked over at his phone, waiting for a call: "David, this is Jane. I wanted to thank you for those beautiful flowers. I had to stop at my house for some paperwork I'd forgotten, and I knew as soon as I saw them in the door that they were from you. Maybe I

Willow from the Willow

Winner, 1998 Literary Contest

Learn about pines from the pine,
and bamboo from the bamboo.
— Basho

Sad Michaelmas under a weeping sapling,
little *Salix* with no river to cry leaves into,
just this brick and mortar rounded fountain,
plaster Mary holding broken hands
out to us.

Why weep, so green and yielding in the breeze?
You thrive on the light of cornered stones,
send roots between these buildings, learn
to bend and yield to wind, water, change
and holding on to leaves in autumn last and last
to fold them out in spring, late bloomer,
Salix makes good wands and wicker.

Look up over rooftops at blue buttermilky
Michaelmas sky and right then floats a feather,
white, pigeon probably and timed like the best joke,
spinning on that late September wind,
falling and rising in the breeze
that stirs green willow branches,
whispers back to the fountain
where Mary blesses bricks and perfect platters
of nasturtium leaves and nightshade with its wound-
red berries and the painted black steel chairs
like playground toys or Calder mobiles
floating on solid ground.

This is matter, where it's at, in coffee
hot and sweet and black, on Michaelmas it's good
to drink dark drinks from flame blue mugs
and pick up black walnuts, green and soft
as olives, dry as aging hands
smelling their sour flesh know
there's so much left to learn.

Margaret Young

overreacted last night." Hoover picked up the shatterproof bottle of Maximum Bubbles on his desk and passed it back and forth in his hands, creating in his mind different variations of the phone call he had just imagined. Finally he placed the bottle next to the other products he was supposed to be working on. "Get a grip," he whispered; then he called his supervisor, told her he was sick, and went home. Not directly, though. Instead he went two and a half blocks out of his way. The flowers were still there, sticking out of the mail slot like an invitation to yesterday's dance.

That's when it occurred to him that he may have made a mistake. For a second he considered pulling them out — maybe they were too much, or too soon — but it seemed more dangerous to take them back than to have left them in the first place. What if someone asked him what he was doing? It was one thing to say he was leaving flowers, quite another to explain that he had changed his mind. She might not even realize the flowers were from him! She wouldn't know they were Forget-Me-Nots, that was for certain, and there was no note to announce their purpose. As far as Hoover knew, the jerk with the green umbrella routinely bought her flowers for no reason at all, and maybe after last night he even had a reason. Hoover cursed himself for not giving her flowers when they had been dating, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He had left them — without a note, without an explanation, without a thought. How could he have been so stupid? Suddenly he really did feel sick; he thought he might actually throw up right there on the street, and he hurried back to his apartment.

— and she would surely disconnect him before he had fully explained himself.

The phone was ringing as he opened the door, but it stopped a full three seconds before he picked it up. The dial tone was uninterrupted; no messages. He slammed the phone back on the receiver. If only he hadn't left those flowers. Now he had two choices, and neither one was acceptable. He could call her at her office, tell her that he had left them in her door, that he was sorry for whatever he had done last night but there were no hard feelings, that he still wanted to see her and if she didn't want to see him then the flowers could be just a token of friendship. But she had warned him not to call at work—even when things were going well she didn't want calls at work — and she would surely disconnect him before he had fully explained himself. Or he could leave a message on her machine at home, let her know that he hoped they might still stay in touch even if they were no longer dating, mention the Forget-Me-Nots in passing but not dwell on them. Except that by the time she got the message she already would have the flowers, and if she hated them he would be better off not telling her he had left them at all. He decided it was better to do nothing; instead he called her number to see if she had received any messages. She had.

"Hey. Just wanted to say hello. I should be home tonight, give me a call if you feel like it." Hoover let the message sink in as he listened to his options on the automatic machine. He was sure it was the same man. The same excessive familiarity, the same suggestive tone, the same unspoken details — he hadn't even left his number. And it was only twenty minutes to ten! He listened to the message again, this time with his eyes closed to hear it better; when he was certain he had gathered every nuance, he hit the number "six" and deleted it. Then he blew the dust off his chess board and began leafing through his book of great games, finally settling on the Capablanca-Spielmann match because the editor felt that it exhibited "ruthless and remorseless logic." He needed time to think. If he was going to leave any more flowers in any more mail slots, he wanted at least to be certain not to regret it later.

* * * *

Hoover stayed in his apartment for two days. Every hour or so he checked Jane's machine, then his voice mail at work, then his own system to see if any messages had been left while checking the other machines. The third day he went back to work; he had somewhere to go, and he didn't want to have to explain his sudden recovery to a fellow employee who might happen to see him.

"I hope you're feeling better," his supervisor said, sticking her head into his office as if she had been walking by and remembered quite by accident that he hadn't been there in a while.

"Much," he said, barely looking up.

"I really need something on the Bubbles account today."

"Hoover picked up a piece of paper from his desk and held it at arm's length: 'How about 'Maximum Bubbles — if you keep them out of your eyes, you'll be okay.'"

"Don't start, David. You haven't given me any work in three weeks, and every time I walk past your office you're on the phone. I can't imagine what's gotten into you lately. I'm trying to be nice, but you'd better shake it off, whatever it is."

"Shakin' it off here, boss," he drawled, like an inmate in *Cool Hand Luke.*

If he walked out quickly, with his back to the coffee shop, he was certain not to be seen.

"You should see a doctor," she said softly. When he turned to respond, she was gone. "Just shake it off," he whispered, as if he were giving himself two aspirin for a headache. The rest of the morning he spent pacing his office. He wanted to think, he needed to clear out his mind and just *think,* but he could not muster the calm to do it. Bubbles, answering machines, deadlines collided in his head, and all the while he was watching the clock. He had to be somewhere by noon; he could do his thinking and hand in some copy on Maximum Bubbles that afternoon. He checked Jane's machine — no messages. It was a quarter to twelve, he decided to be a few minutes early.

There were two large bookstores in Philadelphia, and Hoover wasn't sure which one he should go to. Barnes & Noble was a five minute walk from Jane's office, Borders practically next door. He didn't think he could cover both, especially if she was late, so he headed for the store near her office. If he ran into her on the street, he was prepared to say he needed a new book to read. But he didn't, and a quick check of the coffee shop at Borders told him she wasn't there either. He positioned himself four aisles deep — ostensibly in European History but with a full view of the front door — and waited for the noon rush. Jane appeared soon after with Marlene, and he quickly stepped back out of sight. Almost twenty-four hours of anticipation had preceded this moment, and Hoover was surprised at how little thought he had put into what he would do next. Now, huddled in a corner among biographies of Disraeli and Gladstone and Queen Victoria, he knew that he was not prepared to face her. As the store filled with browsers, he slipped across the aisle to get a fuller perspective on the coffee shop. The women were seated at a far table near a guitar player, who was picking out a meandering New Age tune and glaring at them every few chords as if to say *Do you mind?* They didn't seem to — each spoke animatedly in her turn, each seemed oblivious to the guitar player and everyone else around them. Each appeared to be wearing the same burgundy velour blouse, which Hoover initially took as evidence of Jane's willful nature. After all, hadn't Marlene specifically asked that she not wear that? Before he left the European History section, though, he wondered if he might have deleted Marlene's message about their lunch meeting. Perhaps they had spoken that morning, or had simply run into each other on the street and agreed on a cup of coffee? Hoover didn't know what to think any more, he couldn't remember what he knew and what he was supposed to know and what he wasn't supposed to know. Maybe he shouldn't have come to the book store at all, maybe he should have given her a week or two to see if she changed her mind. But it was too late for all that, or was it? He had wanted to see her, and he had; now he could just sneak out of the store. Jane would never know he'd even been there.

If he walked out quickly, with his back to the coffee shop, he was certain not to be seen. The store was crowded with shoppers — already a long line had formed to buy books — and Hoover moved behind them toward the exit. He was only a few feet from the door when he decided to take one last look at her, seize one last memory that he could keep until they saw each other again, not stealthily or from a distance but face to face and with all this behind them. He excused himself through the line of shoppers, lifted himself on his toes, and craned his neck back toward the coffee shop. That was when he was spotted. Both women turned toward him in unison, almost as if they had been waiting for him to turn up, and Hoover thought he heard Jane gasp. He ducked down and then, realizing how he looked, straightened up and walked calmly past the guard and out the door.

Soon he was sweating profusely. He considered the possibility that Jane hadn't seen him at all, that he was worrying about nothing, but there was no way to ignore

the turn, the gasp. She had seen him, and Marlene had seen him, and he was furious at himself for leaving the book store without approaching them. If only he had walked past, feigned surprise, said it was nice to have seen them, gone on his way. But he hadn't done any of those things; instead he had acted like a crazy man, lurking and spying and stuffing flowers in mail slots. Now he had to clear the books with Jane, come clean about everything and ask for one more chance. He needed to tell her that he wasn't like this.

Hoover couldn't bring himself to get any work done the rest of the afternoon — if the firm lost the Maximum Bubbles account, so be it. He had a plan, a plan that required him to call Jane, and after they spoke he was certain they could pick back up where they had left off. He wanted every word to be just right: he was sorry about everything, it was all his fault, and if she wasn't already hooked up with the guy with the green umbrella maybe they could get together on Friday night, even double with Marlene and her boyfriend if that was still on. He sat at his desk writing down things to say, and by five o'clock he was ready. She would be home in ten minutes, and he wanted to speak to her before she settled in for the evening or, worse, went back out again. That's when it occurred to him to listen to her messages one last time, just in case there was something on her machine he needed to know before talking to her. Quickly he dialed her number, lifting the receiver to his ear while kicking the door to his office closed. He shut his eyes while her phone rang, and his heart began to pound in his chest. What if there was a message about him? Should he delete it, or talk to Jane about it? He hadn't yet made up his mind when he noticed that her machine wasn't picking up. Six rings, seven, eight, and still no machine! He shook his head in amazement — all the times he'd called her number, and now, just when she was about to walk in her house, he had dialed it wrong. More carefully, almost delicately, he dialed her number again. For a moment he actually thought that the ring was more familiar this time, but before long he knew it to be the same one he had just heard, the same one he had listened to so closely over the past weeks. While he waited for her voice, a slow calm came over him, as if he were walking into a cool pool of water on a very hot day, and with it came the realization that there would be no more messages. She'll be home any second, he whispered to himself; you should hang up the phone. But he didn't hang up. Instead he listened, with his eyes shut tight he strained to listen. The ringing seemed to get softer and farther away, and soon he thought it impossible that anyone might answer.

AR

Marc Bookman is a public defender in Philadelphia. He has published in numeorus journals, including Antietam Review *in 1990. He hopes to return sooner next time.*

Wings

Runner-up, 1998 Literary Contest

Wind blew wings
to you, though sun to the underside
exposed only rot
where they'd hung too long without name or notice.

Wind blew them back
and a feather — nothing pure as white ibis
or dove, ordinary house sparrow — brushed my cheek, a tenuous spray
of angel's loam

behind. A swan
perhaps, a breath.

Nicole L. Reid