

Self-Portrait of Someone Else (excerpt)

by Vincent Eaton

1.

Recently I think I became someone else.

When the alarm clock rings in the morning, it sounds sharper than usual; getting up, my feet don't seem to quite touch the floor; looking into my bathroom mirror, my face seems to be melting, sliding, my eyes drifting farther apart, my nose flaring, teeth shifting....

I don't know what's causing this, and I don't know what to do.

All I know is that after a few days, the alarm bell begins to take on its own sound again, I can feel my toes touching the living room carpet, and my face begins to settle. Life seems normal again.

Except I'm different somehow.

I'm not me.

And now it's happening again. It's just past midnight, and I've started this notebook, writing me down, keeping track. Since these things have begun happening to me, I feel I must keep notes on myself. The insides of the head can hold only so much information - paper keeps the details.

Tonight I have tried to sleep, but as I lie on my bed the sweats come. My sheets become damp. As the night gets deeper, they start clinging to me and I imagine ropes slipping noiselessly from under my mattress and binding me. Feeling the tightening pressure, I have to get up. I don't want to wake up alone, unable to move, not again. I go into my small kitchen; I look around the cupboards and the stove and the fridge, expecting to see something I don't expect to see. Once I opened the fridge and some blur of a mouse or a rat lunged out at me as though going for my throat. I remember almost screaming, closing my eyes instead, backing off until the wall behind stopped me, and then standing there, waiting, my heart racing.

When I opened my eyes, the rodent thing was gone, the fridge was open, and I was cold with sweat. I had a pain in my intestines.

I open the door to the fridge cautiously now: nothing leaps. The package of cheese remains immobile, a carton of milk looks up at me expectantly.

I make a cup of instant coffee and a bologna sandwich. I take a few bites and a couple of sips, then leave them on the kitchen table and wander into my living room. It's silent, furnished and dark. The dead TV screen glints, the lamp stands there, the sofa sighs. I'm shivering. I don't dare look down at my feet in case I'm not touching the floor.

I go to my front door to check outside, to know the world is still there.

I live alone in a bungalow, one of seven bungalows, and within each little bungalow lives one solitary person, and no one knows any of the others, no one says hello, no one says goodbye, yet everyone, for some reason, has a telephone (I've seen sitting, talking shapes between parted curtains). These bungalows are set back from the street, in a U shape, almost like covered wagons waiting for an Indian attack. There are two dying elm trees (I live on Elm Avenue) and some withering brown grass for decoration.

It must be after 1 A.M. and it's turned foggy. I can barely see past my tiny porch. I know that thirty yards away, across the withered grass, there's a bungalow. I think I can make out a vague yellow light from a window. Could there be someone else like me alive at this time of the morning?

Suddenly I hear something way, way in the distance. Like someone practicing the tuba, unhappily, a few low, fat sounds coming to me out of the fog. A strange fear chills my spine, and I shut the door, lock it. I check all the other doors in the house. Everything's locked, even the clothes closet. Yet I still don't feel safe. I feel there's something hiding somewhere waiting to lunge at me when I least expect it.

I return to my kitchen and the coffee's cold and there's one fly on my sandwich.

"Hey," I say aloud, and quickly look up at a corner of my ceiling because my echo came back at me, as if there's somebody else there.

I look behind me, thinking I caught some movement from the corner of my eye. Only the quiet and the darkness are there. And so I go from my kitchen through the living room to the study and through my bedroom to my bathroom back to my kitchen in a complete circle, and in each room there's no place I feel safe and comfortable. Everything seems to be whispering; my breathing seems loud.

~Tim~ - I move my lips to avoid the sound of my echo - ~go look in the mirror~.

I don't want to do this, but there's nothing for it: I must. Silently I go into the bathroom and close my eyes and switch on the overhead light. I keep my eyes shut. Clumsily, I feel my way to the edge of the basin, knowing the mirror is above it. I wait. I cannot find the courage to open my eyes. I remain standing like this a long time, looking in the mirror with my eyes closed. Then I feel myself slipping, as though spiraling into sleep. I rock, nearly pitch forward, then jerk up with sudden alarm and open my eyes by reflex.

I don't move. Because there's someone in the mirror and it's not me.

2.

I dive upward, as though through the thickest water, past the pitch darkness, through a crack of light, into the light, my eyes open, and I hear the insistent ringing of the alarm clock.

Another day: to work: routine; anything but the chaos of the night.

I go to work.

I am the manager of an indoor Olympic-size swimming pool. My official title is Head Aquatic Recreation Supervisor. But in reality I'm just a lifeguard. If swimmers sink, I save.

During the school year, my main function is to let in school students for their athletic hour of splashing about. I keep a

lifeguarding eye on them, and after they have finished, I let the damp herd out and, alone once more, wait for the next class.

The first thing I do when I arrive at the pool is walk around everywhere and check out everything. I'm always afraid that I'm going to find something where it's not supposed to be and then have to do something about it. I expect to hear something ticking like a bomb in a clothes locker. I expect to discover a frightened family of cockroaches in one of the desk drawers in the office. I always expect to see, as I walk slowly round the circumference of the pool, the shape of a motionless body at the bottom, fully clothed, dead, overlooked from the day before.

I check the pool temperature, I check the chemical count of the water, I check my pulse, to make sure everything's in working order. The pool's temperature is just a tad low, the chemical level's a little high, and my pulse is regular. I'm alive. I'm very concerned about my pulse. I check it regularly, counting the pumps, one, two, three, listening to the ~whoosh~ of blood going by my temples. I often sit in my office, overlooking the empty, quiet pool, and listen to my heartbeat. It's like counting the moments, one by one, of my life going away. Thinking: I'll never have the same heartbeat twice. I listen to a single heartbeat, and before it's completely through, before its echo has had time to fade, there's another beat, and another. I'm just that much closer, closer to death.

The first class of my day arrives, a noisy group of thirty-four, supervised by two female teachers. The kids shout, knock on the closed doors, and drown out the sound of heartbeats in my ears. I go to the doors; I open; I'm flooded by life. They tumble in like a wave-- girls and boys split left and right into separate locker rooms. The teachers follow, making chatting noises as we walk through the main building to the pool area.

I've made the mistake of telling them a bit about my past, and now at least once a week, the teachers ask why I'm wasting my time at this pool, merely lifeguarding: shouldn't I be doing something else, something more worthwhile? I never argued; I nodded; they weren't used to seeing a twenty-eight-year-old educated man in

trunks and sweatshirt just sitting there every day, without ambition.... As the first student comes racing out of the locker room and hits the water with a flying ~whoosh~, I climb up to my lifeguard's chair on a tiny tower near the deep end to observe all this wet energy and life, prepared to save if necessary.

They might be right: I might be wasting my life. I went to a university and read psychology and sociology, overdeveloping my mental muscles. I became thoroughly swallowed by the subjects, disappearing between the pages and case histories for weeks on end, and everyone had high hopes for me. I had high hopes for me. I got a degree and went for a master's. Then somewhere along the way I sat back from studies, looked at all the books and papers scattered on my desk and realized I was wholly obsessed with human problems and flawed social structures. I was consuming large amounts of my youth specializing in studies of how distorted people in society could become. Then a small question created a big issue: Was I a model of civilized normality, an example of what people could be? This question raised an old basic problem: What exactly was sick, and hence what exactly was a cure?

If I had been studying something practical, like plumbing, I could then perform very practical and specific repair work. If there was a leak in a pipe, whether an aluminum or a plastic or tin pipe, I would know how to patch it: specific ways would exist to mend the fault.

But if you discover a leak in a human....

I reread my psychology and sociology books: found nearly every expert had a different answer to what was The Answer. It only depended on which school of psychology fitted one's prejudice.

I read, studied, questioned, realized: brilliant people everywhere were building elaborate systems of explanation and theory to justify their definitions of well behavior.

And so I understood: on his or her own ground, in one's own country, within the realms of over a hundred therapeutic schools, just about any behavior could be considered absolutely stark-raving normal.

So while studying for my Masters, I got sidetracked into doubt. I've never been the same since.

I turned into a brain studying itself. I insisted on regarding myself as a case. For if I was ever to presume to speak to someone as an authority on why their mental nuts and bolts were becoming loose, it had to be assumed my nuts and bolts were firmly in place and tightened to the right degree.

All I found were a thousand definitions, a thousand ways to be mentally healthy, which naturally had to include the possibility of maladjustment as a form of adjustment. Any fanatic on a street corner shouting "The world is mad; I will not participate; thus I am sane" could be right. The science of psychology dissolved before me....

A lot of things have happened since I first had thoughts like these, the main one being that I did become a sort of plumber: a practical lifeguard. At twenty-eight years of age, I sit perched on my tower, guarding lives, knowing I can do something practical if someone sinks below the surface and I see it. This is as close as I can come to helping people without having doubts about the method.

No one drowns. I've done my job. I say goodbye to the teachers. The students shout as they dress. I hear their voices exiting. I check the locker rooms to make sure they are empty; I close and lock the front doors to keep out the unwanted. I return to the pool, and everything is quiet. There is not a single ruffle on the glass-smooth surface of the water. It's silent, dead silent. I check my pulse.

3.

Five identical classes, six and one half hours later and it is time for me to return home.

Home is the place I return to when I have nowhere else to go. I do not want to go there and listen to the silence and stare at the corners of my rooms, waiting for the shadow of an inanimate object to move ever so slightly.

I drive through streets as evening falls. Lights are on inside most stores. People pass in cars, no one walks the pavements. I pass a franchise restaurant famous for selling highly processed food full of artificial additives and colorants to millions of people everywhere.

I turn back and go in. Young people under harsh lights package and serve food. Customers order using trademark names, pay, take their trays, search for a plastic place to sit. I order, pay, take my food tray and sit on a plastic chair. I spread the meal before me: round hamburgers within buns hidden in pliant Styrofoam containers. I've read somewhere that a reputable university performed scientific laboratory tests that consisted of feeding two dozen tiny white mice the same type of round hamburgers I have before me for a period of six weeks. All but two died.

I undo a Styrofoam container. I lift out my round, warm hamburger. I lift up the edge of the bun and peek at its innards - it appears harmless. I bite. It tastes sweet and innocuous. Yet all but two died.

An elderly lady with limp gray hair sits down alone at a table just opposite. She wears ten layers of lumpy sweaters. Her face is blank, she doesn't seem to have any teeth. She slowly unfolds her food before her. Her lips, like monkey lips, curl round a piece of hamburger bun and gently tear off a soft morsel. As she munches, she seems to be mumbling to herself and nodding her head in agreement.

My heartbeats begin again, rushing blood past my eardrums. She begins to speak louder. She looks before her. I'm there. She talks.

I hit my knee on the table as I hurriedly get up. I leave my food and start toward the door. I think she calls me back to her.

I get into my car, start it, put it into reverse, turn up the radio and back away. Hurry, Tim.

There was a time, I think, when I would have remained, accepted her noise as part of the modern environment, just turned my head and continued eating in cold blood.

I used to be quite different. I used to march in crowds along streets holding a placard listening to people chant against nuclear

war. I signed petitions for abortion and women called me a true feminist. I enjoyed crowds. It was in a protesting crowd that I met Alisa Peck. She was tall, dark-haired, with a thin nose, full lips, quiet eyes. When she found out I was working at the pool she would come on weekends to flirt. One Sunday morning when there were only twenty-some people in the pool, we were standing at one end and she was saying, "I should push you in."

"Don't," I said, grabbing at her approaching hands. Then there was a blurred moment when something tugged at the corner of my eye. But Alisa, with a little laugh, was coming closer. Then this fluid motion, as though half inside my head, passed like a shadow again. I felt the tug and, while holding Alisa's hands, moved my sight over the pool.

It took me a moment to focus; I was still smiling at something Alisa was saying. The handful of people in the pool were splashing, seemingly safe and absorbed in their games and exercise. No one noticed.

Then I did.

A shadow, there in the distance, over the length of the pool, moving, undulating, an indistinct shadow quiet beneath the water.

I stopped playing and took two steps away; my breathing intensified.

"Oh, God."

I began a slow, uncertain trot along the edge of the pool, my eyes fixed on that appearing, disappearing shadow; I wanted it to be a reflection, a spooky illusion. As I approached the far end, I expected that shadow to dissolve, simply a refraction of light....

Then I saw the long, long hair floating on the water. Suddenly the world snapped into a dream for me. My heart caught, and the air halted in my throat. I froze at the poolside, staring. This long hair floated to the surface, in peace, long swirls spreading, growing slowly on the surface of the water.

"Tim?" It was Alisa's voice, concerned, at my elbow; she had followed me. "What ... is it?" She too looked. Then I heard her gasp.

It was no dream. Her reaction was reality. I leapt.

The leap seemed to take forever, as I soared through the air, diving toward the hair. An absolute, eerie silence filled the pool. The water surface became a mass of blinding reflections. I reached out, strained, wanting to dive into the middle of the hair, proving it had no substance.

As I hit the water the dream exploded - all was sound and rush, the true speed of reality. I reached the hair in an instant and plunged my hand into the middle of the mass. My hand found the shape of a skull. My fingers scrambled past the top of the head, down the face, over the forehead, eyes, nose, and as my fingers slipped into the mouth ajar, I pulled.

The face rose, turning in my direction, passive, heavy, hopelessly drowned. In that moment, staring into that young girl's face, with the water in thin streams running off it and the thick ropes of her long hair splayed across her features, I wanted to lift and toss her away, like a brief, weightless nightmare, toss it out of the water, across the pool and through the building, and far into the Sunday-morning sky, disappearing, absorbed, gone, not real.

The girl's head dropped limply forward, falling with a splash face first into the water. I went into automatic, following the rules of safety. I twisted her round, wrapped an arm firmly across her chest, lodged my hip against the small of her back, and tugged her, one-armed, toward the side of the pool.

In a controlled hurry, I lifted the limp girl out. A breast had worked itself halfway out of her bikini. I took a moment to place it back behind the cloth. I was obsessed with neat details, the rules of life.

As I laid the body flat on the cement, I noticed another eerie silence filling the pool. I looked up, wondering whether it was real or just me. Swimmers, once playing and shouting, were slowly turning their curious eyes toward me at the far end of the pool. Some were wading in my direction.

Alisa, biting a knuckle of her hand, came toward me, hesitating, one step, two, stopping.

I said, "Go to the office and phone the emergency number. The number's stuck on the handle of the phone." She stopped, pressing her hand harder against her mouth, and did not move. "Now. Do it." I did not shout. I was firm, in control, following rules, real. She moved; she ran.

I returned my attention back to the body. The head, arms, and legs were in unusual positions, positions that a body with life in it, even a sleeping body, would never assume. There was no one in that body any more. I straightened the limbs into a semblance of normalcy. I did not want the other swimmers to see the girl like this and think something was wrong. They might panic.

I cleared the long hair from her face, propped the head backward, pulled the mouth open and placed an index finger into the orifice to locate the tongue. I pushed it flat down, then, lowering my lips to hers, breathed my life into her.

There was a blockage; a wisp of air disappeared down the passage, most of it blew out the sides of the tight seam of my mouth on hers. I sat back and stared at her. I slapped her face, testing for reaction. I bent her head farther back and thought I detected a small convulsion of her jaws. A red fear jolted my body.

She might still be alive.

I had decided from the first that she was dead. The limpness of the head wobbling on the neck, the puffed look, the splayed limbs - it seemed obvious. I was only going through the motions until the real people got here with their machines and medical certificates and told me she was dead.

I covered her face with mine and breathed. I thought more went in this time. I placed my hand on her sternum - the feel of her cold and naked and wet and soft - and pushed - and breathed - and pushed - repeating, and repeating, endlessly - even when Alisa came back to me and said breathlessly that they were on their way - I continued - when other swimmers came up to murmur suggestions, or stare like Alisa with their hands against their mouths, some whispering, shaking their heads - I continued forcing my breath into

her to give that faint spasm I'd detected a chance to become life once more.

The medical team arrived: stretcher, oxygen and portable machines. They took over. I stood, backed off, stared down. Alisa took my arm. I observed as they too made their attempts to bring her back. I watched every movement for the next minutes, their hands moving, probing, pushing, checking until they looked up at me and said, "She's gone."

I was not fired. I was given time off to have a breakdown.

It was not my fault, they told me, wanting me to keep my job and my sanity. The girl had a history of epilepsy; the parents were irresponsible to have sent her into the pool without some kind of surveillance; it was not my fault.

It was one of those things.

It could have happened to anyone.

It wasn't my fault.

It happened to me.

It was my fault.

But I kept my job, but that's all I kept. I got rid of Alisa, I got rid of the committees for peace, abortion, crowds, and people.

I changed. I could feel, quite distinctly, a distant alteration.

I began seeing things that used to be hidden in me appear on the surface.

When I return home, I'm hungry. I walk through my rooms, checking the corners. I wash and change into my nightclothes. I make a sandwich and go with it to my overlarge reading chair. It's a huge chair, meant for sedentary invalids who watch television. I sit and it swallows me up. My feet barely touch the rug. I put my sandwich on one arm of the chair and my book on the other arm. I am alone. I stare around. Nothing moves. Yes, I am alone.

God. So often, so very often, when I am alone like this in my home, reading or thinking or looking around, I do notice that it's all so very, very still that I might very well be dead.

Police Report

The subject, Tim Buckles, Jr., was born in Los Angeles, California. His father was a small businessman; his mother, a housewife. He had one brother. After graduating from high school, he attended college, pursuing studies in human sciences. For four years he was employed by the Department of Recreation in the Aquatics Division for the city of Los Angeles. His most recent employment was with the Nestor Richards Corporation.

Parks and Recreation Director

Yes, of course I remember Tim Buckles. In fact, it was I who originally hired him. Back then, I was regional manager for that part of the city. We needed someone to run the pool - a responsible individual to serve the local school as well as on public holidays. To oversee, lifeguard, generally manage. In the beginning, he was attending a university, knew swimming, had the proper life saving certificates - it's all in his file - and he was willing to switch to evening classes. It was a perfect arrangement. I hired him.

Professionally speaking, I was thoroughly satisfied with his services. He was punctual, diligent, rarely ill, though once I recall finding him in his lifeguard's chair shivering with fever. Real dedication, as far as I'm concerned.

He remained with us for four years, and we were glad to have him. Except for the two losses under his supervision, he had an unblemished record. At the time, we thought the drownings unfortunate and grievous, and at no time did we charge them to Tim Buckles' incompetence. His past record proved otherwise. Of course, knowing what occurred after he left the Parks and Recreation Department, the things he did, we can only speculate....

I hope to God I'm wrong.

Psychologist's Comments

From the facts currently at hand, it appears that Tim Buckles experienced periods of diminished alertness, mental confusion, disorientation, difficulty in fluid speech, cognitive deficits and prolonged delirium. The symptoms varied from day to day.

4.

When the telephone rings, I jerk awake. The television is on without sound, a book is open in my lap, a light shines from the kitchen, and the telephone is in the study behind me. It rings again.

I get up, look into the study, and watch the telephone ring several times. I answer and wait, listening.

"Hello?"

"Hello," I respond.

"Tim?"

"Yes."

"It's me."

I wait.

"Alisa."

I wait.

"Remember?"

"Hello, Alisa."

"You sound strange. Am I interrupting anything?"

I am looking at the bedroom door. It's open a crack. There's a shadow. I'm waiting for it to move.

"Tim?"

"Yes?"

"How are you?"

"Fine. How are you?"

"You don't sound okay. Is something the matter?"

It moved.

"Just a minute." I put the phone down and move toward the bedroom. Heartbeats, mine and from the bedroom. The sound grows as I approach. I watch the shadow. As I come closer, it fades,

disappears. I place one finger on the door and push. It moves slightly. Slowly I look in, hearing the heartbeats, expecting hands to grab my throat, thumbs against my windpipe, a face thrust toward mine, death.

Just as this is about to happen, the phone rings. I look back. The telephone, off the hook, lies there.

When it rings again, I feel something lightly touch the back of my neck. I close my eyes and whisper gently, "Please."

The phone stops ringing, the touch goes away. Only the heartbeats remain. I go to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Everything okay?"

I sit down and turn my head to a corner without shadows.

"Yes."

"It's been a long time since we talked."

"Yes." I try to remember. "Very long."

"Too long."

"Yes. Too long."

"Do you miss me?"

"Yes." I hear so many heartbeats.

"We can see each other again, if you want to."

"Again?"

"Yes. I hope you don't mind if I called."

"No, I'm glad."

"Do you want to see me again?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Now."

"Tim, I--"

I hang up. I hear other things. Behind me. I check each room, each closet, each corner. The telephone rings again. She must want to say something else. I answer.

"Hello."

"Hello."

I freeze. The same heartbeats, the breathing. It's me. I'm there.

"Hello, Tim. It's me."

I drop the phone. I back up - I enter the bedroom. "Hello." I spin around, looking for the voice. I'm everywhere.

I sit in my living room and the light from the kitchen snaps off. It snaps on. Off again. On. Off. I close my eyes, I check my pulse, I hear heartbeats and a roomful of breathing, and a bell. I hear knocking. I open my eyes.

Knocking.

I rise and float toward the doorknob. It turns. Infinity. As though far away, an evening wind blows, and it touches my face, and the touch seems far away. I see a shadow move behind a curtain in the bungalow opposite. I hear a passing car. This is what it means to be alive.

"Tim!" Alisa hurries toward what is left of me, coming from the dark, along the narrow walkway, into the light of my doorway. "Tim." She is so very far away. Tim.

"I knocked and knocked and when no one answered--"

With fingertips she touches the bare flesh of my elbow. She can not know what she does. It is the first time someone has touched me since I touched the dead drowned girl.

I stand like a stone, suddenly warm inside.

Tim?

The touch. I feel the touch. A sob wells and breaks from my chest.

"Alisa...."

Alisa takes me, she holds. And something hidden within me until this moment allows me to fall apart. And believe: I am not mad, I am not mad, I am not mad. Because I am in Alisa's arms.

Alisa's Statement

I loved him.

Go on.

Even now that I know, I still think I love him. I wanted to help. He needed....

I understand. Drink this. Better?
Yes. No. What do you want from me?
I want you to tell me about Tim Buckles. It will help us.
Can't this wait?
Yes, but we need to clear up some preliminary matters. Establish things, you see. Drink some more.
What is this?
It's good for what you've got.
But what is it?
The doctor prescribed it. Now, your name is Alisa Peck?
Yes. Why?
It's for the record.
What record?
For our files. How long have you known Tim Buckles?
I don't know.
Be precise, please.
I am.
Please be helpful.
What was your question?
How long have you known Tim Buckles?
Which one?
Please....
I didn't think you'd understand.
How do you mean?
Never mind.
I'm sorry to insist after all you've been through, but--
I guess I first met him about two years ago, at some rally. It was about the possibility of nuclear war. He was quiet. Watchful. We were next to each other listening to a speech. We got to talking. There was something very soft about him. Is this what you want to know?
You're doing fine.
That was the beginning. After less than four months, it suddenly finished. A young girl drowned where he used to work as a lifeguard. I was with him when it happened.

He was very professional, but also frightened - I saw that. But it was a normal reaction to something horrible like that. It made a very, very strong impression on him, I know. Afterwards, he didn't want to see me any more. He cut off everyone, I think. Retreated completely. I tried visiting him at the pool but he looked right through me. He'd changed.

In what way?

It's hard to say. He was absent. Just stared at the pool.

And what was he like before?

I already told you. Quiet. Thoughtful. Very intelligent. He ... had family problems.

Could you tell us about them?

Don't you have them already on some record, file, what you said?

We'd like to hear it from you.

I don't know much.

All right. When did you get involved with him for the second time?

I telephoned him. I just wanted to make sure he was doing all right. But he sounded as though he needed me. It happened just like that. I had to go.

When did you become intimate again?

That same night.

And then?

Do you have the right to ask these questions?

We want your cooperation.

I sort of began living with him.

Sort of?

Sort of. Off and on.

Did you ever notice anything odd?

Of course. Yes. So much was odd. But I thought that was just Tim being normal.

You weren't afraid?

I loved him.

Why?

What? How do you mean?

How long did this last?

What?
You two together.
Until it stopped. Yesterday. Today. What day is it? What's happened?
Now, now.
Please ... don't let it be true.... It couldn't have happened....
Here, take some more of this. There ... calmer?.... Good.... I think that will be all for the moment. Thank you very much.

5.

Help me.
I don't want to be who I've become.
I lie on my bed in the dark in the dead of night, listening to Alisa breathing beside me, and I hope.
I don't want to be me any more. This is hope.
I close my eyes and can just make out a dim part of me, deep, deep down inside, nearly smothered, who wants Alisa, life, the small allowed portion of love.
Change.
Yet there is this strangely dented person lying here in the dark whom I've become, whose sole desire is to remain alone in his living room, reading books on psychology, sociology, pathology, brain wrestling to understand the tiny, tangled, infinite universe of the individual mind.
Then there is this third somebody, surfacing, taking over, who only wants me to go around the house and lock every door and all the windows, shut myself in the bedroom, crawl underneath the bed, and remain there, forever.
I must fight to alter, struggle to change, evolve. Stay sane. For I don't think I've been going out of my mind, no, but receding, slipping slowly inward to the gray recesses of brain, the shadowy folds of membrane and memory. And it could happen, one day, finally, that I'd disappear completely within a fold, sucked in, absorbed, never to return.

No.

No more. I want, and with want comes evolution.

As I have these thoughts in the dark, I can almost feel the ache of my bones as they restructure, an inner, silent splintering and reformation of atoms. Another me emerging.

Somewhere in the distance water is running. Somewhere near comes a humming. It's a dream. I imagine the sunny scene, seeing through the leaves in a forest, to a waterfall, someone happy, humming, somewhere there. I move in the bed. This is no forest dream. I open my eyes to see what it is. What it is: where Alisa was, is emptiness.... God - was she ever there? - no ... please. I lie in bed alone, listening to the sounds. I am awake, on alert. I turn soundlessly and look through the doorway into my bathroom. The water, the humming? At that instant, the water stops, the humming stops.

I close my eyes, concentrating, clenching my fists: I will make this real, make it now. Sounds must not stop when I look for them. My teeth begin to grind together, my body becomes rigid, sweat squeezes from pores. With all the power in my mind, I focus on the tiny dot of this instant. I will not allow any part of my brain to drift away, and with it part of me. I must force myself to touch down to earth. This is life.

Distantly, I hear the humming begin again.

Relaxing a little I open my eyes.

She is there. Alisa is there, naked in the bathroom. Morning light from the window falls across her flesh. She has showered. She dries her naked self, and I watch, my heart full. Her long, long limbs. Her short, wet, flat hair. Her back. The ache I feel looking at the long grace of her back. I'd forgotten: the female form - the silky movements, the hips, the breasts, the haunches, the all. The endless physical variety, so much more than the basic solid male. I cannot take my eyes away. As she puts the skimpy cloth of her underthings on, I feel a panic. Her flesh covered. Feeling deprived, I become aroused.

"Alisa!"

Later, I look in the mirror. I smile. The mirror smiles. I blink, it blinks. Nothing sliding, no melting, all looks okay. It's like looking at a miraculous recovery. The face in the mirror appears normal.

"What are you doing?" Alisa asks.

"Seeing if my face works."

She laughs. I jump.

"What's the matter?" I say.

"What you said."

"Oh."

I look at her there sitting on my bed, smiling, looking at me. Her eyes are always amused, intent and tender. I don't know how she can look like that all at once.

"What's the matter?" she asks.

"You amaze me," I say.

"Good." She moves a little on the bed, happy with what I said. It's so strange to see her there, in my house, in my life.

"Don't move," I ask, and go to her. Lightly, I touch her cheek and it seems to glow red with life. I touch her arm, and my touch seems to leave a spot of softly glowing red. Every part of her I touch seems to glow suddenly, as though there is a multitude of muted lights just beneath her flesh.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't know. Making sure you're here?"

Alisa laughs again. Her laughter in my dead bedroom.

I turn and look around. We're alive, room! Take that.

"Timmy." Alisa hugs me from behind.

Together we lie upon my bed.

"Alisa...."

She lies there, hugging me, her eyes closed. For a second, just for a fraction, she looks dead, her mouth a little slack, her hair a mess on the pillow. "Do you feel dead when your eyes are closed?"

Her eyes open. "What a strange question."

"Do you see things when your eyes are closed?"

"See things? I think that's what opening your eyes is for, Tim."
She studies me. "Do you see things with your eyes closed?"

"Sometimes."

"Such as?"

"Well, let me look." I close my eyes. I wait.

It sure is dark in here.

"Tim?"

"I'm looking."

"...Well?"

"I ... I think I can just barely see something deep, deep within me."

"What?" She sounds interested.

"A small floating red something, in an overwhelming blackness." I look at it some more. "A feeling." I open my eyes. "It might be a feeling. But I don't know which one."

"That sounds so sad."

Suddenly this feeling seems to overwhelm me.

"Don't go away."

In her arms once more I begin to cry, and she is there.

Everything's going to be fine. Days pass, Alisa is there. I touch the rug when I walk. The shadows don't move. On my tiny front porch I keep potted plants. I often enjoy squatting by them and investigating new leaves and looking for uninvited insects, keeping tabs of each plant's thirst habits, and I even talk to them when no one's looking. Now I take these potted plants from the porch and move them inside for the winter. Alisa says we should both get involved in all sorts of activities. I smile. Alisa talks about other jobs, other futures for me. I nod. Some of her clothes hang in my closet. Her scent is in the air. My home is our home. Yes, everything from now on is going to be okay.

