

Gerard Stout

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Ellis' intercom buzzed. The voice of the front desk man, Chester, said that his mother was on her way up. Ellis told him thank you. He could hear Chester entertaining his mother and his mother's delighted squeal before the connection cut. Chester was a math major in his third year. His parents were poor, so he was at Winslow and Homer on scholarship. Women probably liked the shape of his nose, thought Ellis, which did something for his character. A curve in the bridge, a gentle hump, and sometimes when he was laughing, he would snort and his nostrils would wink. Ellis found this to be unnerving and resented him for being poor, unattractive, and presumptuous, all at the same time.

One night toward the beginning of the semester, Ellis had performed a secret act against him. Chester had microwaved a chicken and Swiss and left it steaming on a paper towel on the reception desk while he went to use the restroom. Ellis happened to come in from the library at that moment, where he'd been struggling to understand a Wallace Stevens poem about cats. Whenever he got

his mind around one image -- the archways, for example -- he would lose the image, and other images would appear, images that had nothing to do with the poem. Literature was so difficult. He would feel his thoughts turn to helium. Then the poet inside of him would appear, would emerge from the shadows of mental night. The poet's name was Gerard Stout. Ellis had invented him. The name came from a beer bottle label he had seen once in a storefront window.

Chester's sandwich had smelled crisp and hot. Ellis relished the anticipation he felt as he waited and listened for voices and footsteps. The coast was clear. He swiped the sandwich, along with the paper towel stuck to the bottom of the bun, and dunked it into the pocket of his windbreaker. He fled into the chill of midnight and did not stop until he reached a lonely tree behind a parking lot in south campus, where he ate only half of the sandwich and tossed the remainder on the frozen grass. Once the pleasure of having stolen the sandwich and making it his own little secret faded, he felt sad. He flirted with the idea of anonymously buying Chester a replacement sandwich, but this would have required him to admit that what he had done was wrong.

When his mother, Kitty, reached his room, she was still pink-cheeked from the cold. She stood in the hallway and kicked off the snow from her pink boots. She wore a new fake fur and a blonde box hat. She took a seat at Ellis' hard desk chair, which was the only chair in the room that was his. The other belonged to his roommate. She carried a beanbag chair that she dropped on the floor.

Where's your roommate? Is his name Albert, or is that somebody else?

Ellis was standing up and looking down at the chair. I don't want it, he said.

It is Albert. I don't like him. Are you friends with the young man at the front desk?

I told you I didn't want it.

He told me that you have a girlfriend.

Kitty smiled to herself and took a small green book out of her purse and began to page through it.

Do you mean the front desk worker?

Yes. When I told him that I was coming to see you, he told me

that I was the second beautiful lady he had let into your room this week. And I asked him what he meant. I asked him, Ellis, if you had another mother. Don't you think that's funny?

Ellis started up "Triangles from Three Clouds" on his Pray-Na game counsel. He was being rude. His father was holding court at Bedadekker, and they were expected.

We have a reservation, she said. What are you doing?

Ellis said that he could play triangles while she talked.

At Littleman Roth's, Ellis. They were having a college sale. Redec your dorm. You should have seen it. Beautiful orange banners with other beautiful colors everywhere. And all of the sales representatives, they wore the jerseys of their favorite college teams. It was so cute, and the colors were so bright. Twenty dollars, she said.

Ellis still didn't want the beanbag chair. Kitty stuck out her tongue. He could feel her doing this.

She waved the green book and said: Anyway, you're keeping the beanbag chair. But I have something else here that I think you will be interested in. Your cousin, Tellie, do you know what she's doing now?

Ellis failed at the triangles. He wasn't paying attention and he wasn't very good at them. Triangles fell from three different clouds that zipped back and forth across the top of the screen.

Tellie, he said.

Pay attention to me. My radar went off for you. Gabby is going to help us.

Ellis set the controller on an upturned milk crate he used as a table. Go on. I'm listening.

I feel like you're being very strange.

I feel a little weird about the conversation we just had.

We didn't just have a conversation. I was trying to tell you something. She waved the book in the air.

Chester was teasing you.

Just forget it. He wanted to talk to me anyway, and I don't see what difference it makes.

How do you mean that?

I mean that he wanted to talk to me. To flatter me. And I let

him. Because at my age it feels good to be flattered by a young man. Besides, it's not my business what you do.

Ellis picked up the controller, and Kitty said: Your cousin is in publishing now. She works for a book company.

Do you mean a publishing house? Ellis's body faced the video game, but his head was turned toward Kitty.

She took off her blonde hat and set it on her son's desk behind her. Then she lifted something from the desk, a little ball of paper, brought it close to her face, shriveled up her nose and flicked the little ball across the room. She closed then opened the green book. She prepared herself.

Far Away Patterns Press, she read aloud to him. Tellie's an editor there. She just got the position last month.

I don't even know what that is.

It's a book company. Gabby was telling me. I said that you write those poems, Ellis, which I've never read, and that maybe she could make you a published author.

Ellis stood up and started mumbling in a way that Kitty recognized as his being frustrated. She was surprised. Maybe he needed to use the bathroom.

While Ellis was putting his coat on, Kitty paced aimlessly in the center of the dorm room, holding the green book between her thumb and finger at her side as if it were a tissue. She seemed deep in thought, and Ellis thought it was obvious that she was considering a way to sell the idea of Tellie's press to him. He didn't want her to drop the issue; he was waiting for her to push him harder.

"Triangles from Three Clouds" was on auto play. Kitty jerked her head curiously after the first triangle fell into the basket. The screen blinked silver and blue and silver, creating a huge flash in the center of the dusty little room.

What kind of video game is this?

Ellis asked if she had recently taken some interest in video games.

You can laugh, she told him. But she knew what was around. She had never seen a video game quite like this one. It's kind of fascinating. She touched the green book against her chest.

Ellis had his coat on. He watched his mother's reaction to the game with a deformed eagerness. She seemed off to him, perhaps

damaged. She was not supposed to be this way. Three pink-orange clouds floated from left to right to left across the top of the screen. A triangle popped from one cloud then from the next then from the next. The speed at which the triangles popped from the clouds increased with each sequence. When a triangle emerged it made a popping sound. A triangle could be one of three colors: peach, neon red, or alabaster. Across the bottom of the screen was a series of baskets where the triangles landed.

It's just a shape game, said Ellis.

I can see there are shapes, said Kitty. She suffered a buzz inside, watching the triangles as they came shooting out of the baskets at the bottom of the screen after falling in, leaving behind trails of glittering pink and silver. She felt that her insides were getting a workout. At home she had a colored fountain, a little gift she had bought for herself that was supposed to promote relaxation. Kip had begun encouraging her to relax because she had "gone off the deep end" perhaps a week ago. It was nothing. Only they had been at a book release party for one of Kip's authors, and there had been many blinking lights on the ceiling, and Kitty had felt a buzzing in her ankles. Then she began to weep. On her knees, Kip insisted, though she knew she would never get on her knees in public. Her fountain buzzed, and dyed water sprayed and bubbled from its many spouts. It did not relax her; on the contrary, the fountain caused her the same sensation, that she was exhausting herself, but only on the inside. She held the green book up to her chest and tapped her fingers against it. It worried her that the sensation was being caused by another stimulus, but the result wasn't unpleasant. There was something about the blinking lights ...

When the final triangle, an alabaster one, fell into the basket, the basket glowed red and began to blink. "You Have Been Successfully Invaded by Triangles" flashed on the screen.

On the way to the restaurant, Kitty asked Ellis if he was still writing those poems. She had her blonde hat on and was driving with one hand on the wheel. The other hand she used to gesticulate. She was a little worked up and burning much energy on trying to remain calm.

Ellis didn't drive. He failed the test twice. He preferred looking

out the window. He knocked his knuckles on the glass. Did that video game scare you?

Blah, she said and used her gesticulating hand to whoosh away the thought.

He was relieved to see in the streetlight and headlight that she was wearing her good humor smile instead of the three ridges that sometimes appeared on her forehead.

You had that professor, she said. With the funny name. He thought you were talented.

The darkest days of the year, he thought, seeing a woman in sunglasses sitting on the hood of her car on the side of the road. The white, the passing of streetlamps. Then he tried to remember the summer, because it felt different and consisted of a memory of sitting in his bedroom at his parents' house, the sun making him feel anxious, leaving a big bright spot on the floor, and the giggling of teenagers outside.

A lot of people don't like "Triangles from Three Clouds."

Kitty said that she didn't know what he was talking about.

My game, said Ellis. With the triangles.

Why do you want to keep talking about that game? Look at me.

They were at a stoplight. He thought he was being stoic, but he looked sad, and Kitty thought, honestly, that he had a pathetic pained look. She imagined that from the look of him, had he not been her own son, she would have thought they were always leaving him places, the mall, the Food Palace. This was not the case. She used to take him everywhere. There was dinner in an apartment in the city one night, Ellis was a little boy, and a woman with a crystal emblem on a thin chain around her neck whispered into Kitty's ear while they were eating: He's just like a little adult.

Your writing, she said. That's what I want to talk about. Don't you want to be a published poet? Everybody says that you're good. And Gabby says that Tellie might be interested in publishing your work.

What does Gabby know?

You've told me about your ideas.

Ellis reached into his coat pocket and took out his stress triangle. He kneaded it with his fingertips then with his knuckles.

Tellie says that she's fascinated with your ideas. She doesn't know that man you like so much. Your influence.

I don't know what you're talking about, said Ellis.

Your ideas, said Kitty. You told me. About that author. The poet you like.

Kitty knew about Gerard Stout. She had once told Ellis that his father didn't really think he was literary, despite the classes he took and the books he read. She had meant it innocently enough; she thought she was making conversation. Regardless, Ellis had flown into one of his rages that frightened her. He insisted that literature was his calling. It was Kip who didn't understand literature. Kitty reminded him that his father, who'd worked his whole life in publishing, had helped to bring up some of the great literary artists of the day, including a once little-known bohemian named James Patterson III, the master spy novelist. It's all horseshit, Ellis had said. She told him not to curse. He said that there was only one writer who was worth reading, and that was Gerard Stout. This was the first time he had spoken the name of the mystery figure, whom he himself could hardly grasp, whose imagination existed separately from Ellis', and whose work was as modern and elusive as that of Wallace Stevens. He felt that he had exposed a part of himself and was frightened at first. Over time, though, he took pleasure in how it felt to be revealed. Kept under the ice for so long, he thought, now the liquid runs.

They were at another streetlight. Ellis was holding his breath and looking out the window. The surface of the stress triangle was soft and cool. He brought it to his face and rubbed it against his stubbled cheek. He could feel her energy beside him. She was jittery. She turned on the radio, which was tuned to a modern light rock station. Ellis was annoyed. She changed the station so there was static. She stopped at the static and turned the volume up a tad.

Are you trying to teach me a lesson, said Ellis.

Kitty responded in the negative, but she was obviously off in her own head, and it seemed to Ellis that she was really listening to the static, which he imagined could not be the case. In front of them was a little minivan with a bumper sticker that Ellis thought was incomprehensible. There were five tennis rackets lined up, and

each tennis racket was a different primary color, so the bumper sticker looked like a children's learning game. Beside the graphic of the five tennis rackets was the phrase: "We Make You Love Your Atmosphere." Completely incomprehensible, thought Ellis. An inside joke.

Meanwhile the static played. It was white noise. He didn't mind it so much. He concentrated on his own thoughts, which revolved around the nature of the incomprehensible phrase ahead of him, what it could mean, if he could make his own incomprehensible phrase for a bumper sticker and what the phrase would be. Somewhere in his head was Gerard Stout. Stout was known to linger there in the mental background. It would have been fair to call him a shadow unwilling to reveal the source from which it was cast. He was sure that Mr. Stout wore a mustache, and though he was a modern poet, he was a Victorian in Ellis' imagination. He could visualize Stout riding a horse, or tapping the bowl of his wood pipe against his palm. He thought of his cousin, Tellie, looking up Gerard Stout and finding the poem on the internet. And his father telling him that he was a liar, which he was. And that he was a lousy poet, which he also was. But Gerard Stout, on the other hand, that man was brilliant. Then he felt embarrassed. There was not a complete and full layer of static. On the contrary, there were voices. Ellis thought they sounded like ghost voices. He imagined they were ghosts holding conversations behind an electrical storm. He thought of a poem by Gerard Stout about ghosts and electrical storms, and he realized that one did not exist yet.

Kitty listened intently to the static. Her facial expression was blank. Ellis turned the radio off. After a delay, she took note that there was silence and she looked confusedly at her son.

I'm sorry, she said. The sound of the radio just then. Didn't that remind you of the game? The one with the triangles?

No, said Ellis.

They were pulling into Bedadekker's parking lot. She was clicking her tongue and catching her breath, but doing so quietly, so that he wouldn't know she had been out of breath in the first place. He wondered if they were fighting, she and his father. She never seemed quite as unhappy as she should have been.

When Kip announced that he was holding court, it meant he wanted to keep tabs. Bedadekker was a fine place to meet, he thought, because it was elegant enough with its hanging light-fixtures that were squid-like in their complexity of curve that it pleased Kitty. Yet its atmosphere was dark, serious enough that the conversation would not get too emotional. Ellis wouldn't act out and make the absurd statements, to which he was sometimes prone, about his poetry and his poet, designed to make Kip look like an ass. And his wife wouldn't raise her voice and excitedly point across the table. There were the waiters with their pads and trays, always refilling drinks, always available to place another dinner roll on one's plate when one was about to say something important. The restaurant was a dark, oversized crypt, but it kept the conversations inside of it exposed and vulnerable.

When mother and son entered, he stood and smiled at each. The young man hung his head and was digging in his pants pocket. His wife in her pink boots walked on tippy-toes and scanned the room to be aware of the young men who were present. He found himself being more careful around her since her breakdown -- for that was a breakdown at the book party, there was no doubt, even two of his interns agreed. He imagined himself visiting her in a hospital, a different vase of flowers each day, and he felt instantly agitated.

He hugged Kitty. She was stiff in his arms. When he let her go, she plopped into a chair that had been pulled out for her by a male servant with bulbous forearms and an apron. Kip only hugged Ellis on holidays, sometimes on his birthday, or whenever they were in a public situation where they were expected to show familial love. Today he shook his hand. Ellis let his hand fall limp in Kip's. Kip had already informed him that he had a weak handshake, and to irritate his father, Ellis let his handshake become so weak it seemed arrogant.

Ellis will probably become a published poet soon, said Kitty.

They were sitting at table. The glasses of water had been filled. Now one of the servers was using tongs to place hot rolls on each of their plates. Kip unfolded his cloth napkin from its stand-up triangle form and spread it on his lap.

Your niece, she said.

What about my niece, said Kip.

She works for a publisher.

Kip used his butter knife to cut his roll lengthwise. He thought what his wife had said was funny. What kind of publisher, he asked. The kind that publishes poetry, I'd imagine. Is that right?

A small book company, she said and looked at Ellis as if this were something they had already discussed and made clear. The other day I was telling Gabby about Ellis' poems, she said.

What's Gabby know about poetry, said Kip.

Tellie, said Kitty, becoming frustrated. She lifted her dinner roll and squeezed it. Gabby was telling me about Tellie. She's interested in Ellis' poetry.

Kip glared at his son across the table while tearing at his roll, buttering the chunks of bread and shoving them into his mouth. Ellis broke his bread daintily and chewed it dry. Kitty was calmly listening to another voice, an invisible fourth party that floated somewhere above the table.

They're not ready yet, said Ellis. They seem too much like Gerard Stout.

Does Tellie know this Gerard Stout? Kip was amusing himself.

I believe you can find a poem by Gerard Stout on the internet, offered Ellis.

And you put it there, said his father.

After Ellis had unfortunately revealed to Kitty the imaginary existence of Gerard Stout, she had told her husband, who insisted that there was no Gerard Stout. Then one night when Kip was driving Ellis back to campus, he asked his son this question: Why did you go and tell your mother about the made-up author? He's not made up, said Ellis. His father turned silent.

Kip had seen the poem on the internet, too. He had one of his interns do a little research. "Blue River Review" was the name of the online journal. It published high school students and house moms.

What are you suggesting, said Kitty suddenly, as if she had been interrupted from another conversation. She was hunched forward with both arms on the table. Her head was tilted and her mouth was open.

Perhaps you should skip the drink, said Kip.

Kitty had become distracted, that was all. What she couldn't tell her husband, because he wouldn't understand, and also because she didn't want him to understand because it was hers, was that there was a static she heard. She had a vision of a number of triangles falling from the sky. Different colored triangles, falling. She had closed her eyes for a moment. That was all. She honed in on her son. He was so quiet, and his face was so long. She loved him just then for being so innocent and shy, while she was experiencing something she didn't know yet, but it was terribly exciting, yet the excitement wouldn't show on her outside. Only on her inside. She must have blinked, she thought, because when she opened her eyes (so they were closed, obviously) her son was different. Not shy, but in shadows. Oh, that's a trick of the light, she thought, delighted, for a handsome waiter was standing over him, blocking the light. She smiled at the waiter for being there and considered offering him money, though she would wait until her husband left the table.

Maybe I'll just have a vodka tonic like I always do, said Kitty.

Have you been feeling tired, asked Ellis.

His father agreed that this was an important question, so it seemed to her that they were conspiring.

Tired, said Kitty. She looked around her. The servers. There were at least two she could see right across the room. One was a dark-haired man with olive skin and a cocky smile. He was handsome, and she wondered if he was the type who would make flattering comments to her. The other was a young woman with rope-colored hair and a blank ghost face. Kitty did not like her smallness or her seriousness.

Why do you insist that we come here every time we're in Tokenville, she said.

Kip shrugged. He was done with his roll and wanted another. He signaled for a server. The server came over with his basket of steaming rolls and used the tongs to drop one onto Kip's plate.

You seem drunk, he said. I want you to be conscious of that.

Our son could be a published writer and you don't seem the least bit impressed. I remember a time when you said that literature was the only -- she scratched her cheek with a delicate swipe of her finger -- sublime industry.

He fibs to you, said Kip.

You fib to me, said Kitty, turning to her son.

Ellis thought that she did look tired. She could hardly keep her head up, as if she were exhausted, but her eyes were dynamite. The stare, he thought, is almost crackling. And she didn't smell of alcohol. Perhaps something was happening to my mother, he thought, on her inside.

I want you to take your mother out for some fresh air, said Kip. If she wants to smoke her cigarettes, you should let her.

Ellis stood up, and Kip motioned for him to come close. He tugged at his son's shirt sleeve and whispered: Shut up about the Gerard Stout nonsense. You understand that? She believes you.

Ellis walked her arm-in-arm to the coatroom, where she refused her coat.

You're going to get sick then, said Ellis.

I'm not going outside.

Ellis asked if she didn't think the air would do her good, and she said that it might, only that she really was not feeling so well and she was thinking that she might want to sit alone for a bit.

Alright, said Ellis.

Would that be okay? She spoke gently, rubbing his arm with the back of her hand.

Father wanted us to go outside for a bit.

And you want to do whatever father says is right.

I happen to agree with him. I think we should walk.

Fine, she said. If you both think it's right, then I'll go.

She kissed him on the face before she took her fake fur from the coat girl. She turned the coat around in her hands a few times because she couldn't distinguish the top from the bottom. Ellis watched her amusedly at first then grew concerned.

Outside he said they should walk the perimeter of the restaurant on a path that had been shoveled just for them. Different colored Chinese lanterns hung from the rim of the building, creating lakes of light on the dark snow. The cold made Ellis turn up the hood of his coat. Kitty wore her blonde hat. They walked arm-in-arm together, but she was distant. It seemed to Ellis that she was following a music or a voice in her head, but she had never been

an introspective person. She's losing her mind, he thought, but this didn't seem quite right either. His mother was not the kind of woman who would lose her mind. She was too concerned with the material, with things. Stout's poem on the internet came to mind: Our parents are dark clouds that pass sporadically over our heads.

Your father doesn't think Gerard Start exists, said Kitty.

His name is Stout, and I don't want to talk about him.

Is that true?

Of course it's not true. He has a poem on the internet. You can read it.

I don't use the internet. Besides, your father suggested that you put that poem there yourself.

This is why I can't talk about it, Ellis snapped. He felt instantly guilty. She pulled away her arm and reached into her coat for a cigarette.

They were behind the restaurant now. Ahead of them were three dinosaur dumpsters. A staff man in an apron piled big black bags of garbage into one of them.

Why are we back here, said Kitty.

I thought we would walk the perimeter, said Ellis

Kitty turned around and started walking back. Ellis followed. She seemed driven, as if there were some purpose to getting back in the restaurant quickly. She's cold, thought Ellis, or she has to use the bathroom. This wasn't right. It was more. Her head was lifted and tilted to the air, as if she were hearing a song or some voice. She held a cigarette, but she didn't smoke. Could she really be losing her mind? The thought made him feel bewildered, almost excited by its unexpectedness.

At the door of the restaurant, she stopped before going in and turned around. When you hear that noise, she said, the noise we heard just now, doesn't that make you think of the video game with all of the triangles? The one we were looking at in your room?

Ellis hadn't heard any noises. He helped her inside with an arm on her waist. You remind me sometimes of a Gerard Stout poem, he said.

Kitty asked what he meant.

A poem he wrote.

Why would you think I know a thing about poetry? It's Gabby.

And what she tells me about Tellie.

It's called "Triangles from the Sky." I can email it to you so you can read it.

At the coat room, Kitty paused with her faux fur halfway down her arms. I don't like that email, she said.

I'll mail it to you the old fashioned way, said Ellis. Then you can forward it to Gabby. I would have to check first with Mr. Stout, of course. Maybe you could read some of my poems too, he offered. After all, he is my greatest influence.

Two weeks before Ellis came home for winter break, Kitty received two manuscript envelopes in the mail that made themselves safely to her room before Kip could intercept them. One was return addressed from Ellis' dorm room and the other was from Gerard Stout, whose address was a P.O. Box in Tokenville, where Homer and Winslow College was located. Caitlyn brought her postal basket up from the front stoop and set it on her bedside desk beside an elaborate turquoise umbrella lamp. She asked if Kitty was okay for now and if she felt like getting up and out of the bed.

Caitlyn was the day nurse Kip hired to keep tabs on his wife. Kitty didn't mind the new setup, though she could see herself getting bored. The room was always toasty, and the winter was so miserable. Caitlyn was sweet. She had yellow skin and cheery curled hair. She also had an accent Kitty didn't recognize. The nurse pronounced her name Ki-Tay.

She spent most of the day before supper in bed, watching the news and television shows and sadly paging through *Perfect Roast* and *Sweet Somethings* while the hired cook worked in her kitchen. Sometimes Caitlyn came in to operate the Plexiglas colored fountain, five feet high, which stood in the corner, near the bathroom. When on, it emitted a soothing buzz; and red, yellow, and blue dyed water came bubbling from its many imbedded spouts.

Kitty's head was propped on a couple of pillows. The first envelope was from Ellis' dorm. To read the return address on the second, she lifted the top envelope and saw the name Gerard Stout and the P.O. Box. Ellis had promised poems: she remembered that. Nevertheless, having the envelope in her house, in her own

bedroom, made her uneasy. Kip would not like them. She pressed a red button on a white plastic rectangle beside her bed. She couldn't hear it, but apparently this button created a buzz in the kitchen and in the nurse's quarters, which had once been the downstairs guestroom and now was host to a rack of Caitlyn's white and blue smocks, a little machine she used to punch her time cards, and two manila envelopes where she kept record of Kitty's behavior, which the husband had requested upon the administration of services.

Caitlyn smiled and whispered hello each time she entered the room. She is in her late twenties, thought Kitty. Her teeth were particularly white and faintly glistened, and her eyes were wide with deep black centers, so that she appeared to be gentle, almost like a woodland creature, she thought.

I would like my fountain turned on, she said.

Of course, Ki-Tay, said the nurse. She went over to the fountain and got on her hands and knees and flicked a switch that was somewhere beneath the basin of the fountain. Then the nurse waited to make sure the fountain ran correctly. It took a moment to begin. It buzzed and trembled. Then heavy drops began to plop from the holes, but the water wasn't colored yet. The buzzing became louder, the trembling of the fountain intensified. The red water streamed out first. Then yellow, then the blue water. The three colors arced into the basin surrounding the fountain.

Caitlyn clapped her hands. There, Ki-Tay, she said. Is that all? You love that fountain. My grandmother has a fountain.

Kitty pleasantly dismissed her. She switched off the umbrella lamp so that the room was dim with a bluish tint and the faint reflections made by the colored water on the wall. She could watch the colors' dance quiver in and out of being with the passing of shadows from outside her window. A mechanic worked on Kip's sport scar in the garage, so there was a gentle clanking from outside. With the faintness of light and sound, and the magical quality of the colored water, Kitty became hypnotized. "Hypnotized" is how she referred to it herself, though she would never say as much aloud. She didn't even need to close her eyes. Lying there with her head propped on pillows, she let her mouth hang open and she would slow her breathing, and she focused on an image in her head. Ellis'

videogame: she liked the triangles. She liked to imagine how the triangles blinked and changed color as they dropped from the sliding clouds. Those clouds must be sliders, she thought. Sliders were objects that slid whenever they moved. Then she imagined the baskets blinking, and the blue in the background on the screen. She found her memories of the game supremely amusing. The buzz of the fountain made her ticklish. She had not felt so well in such a long time, lying in bed with her fountain.

She worked her inner self into a frenzy with the fountain. Her body was still, almost numb, but her mind ran like an independent motor. She sweated eventually and panted with her eyes closed and the sheet drawn away from her body so she lay there half-exposed to the ceiling in her nightie. She had to gain her bearings before she could buzz up Kitty again to have her turn the fountain off. She dabbed herself with a hand towel. She'd had an orgasm. But this was not how she remembered orgasms to feel. She wasn't enjoying the pleasant recklessness that normally came along with an orgasm. She didn't feel like lounging in bed half the afternoon. She felt guilty, though. She did not want to consider the triangles anymore. They were haunting her. They appealed to her with their affectations.

When Caitlyn returned, Kitty was being huffy. Please hurry, she told her; I can't bear to look at that water. The nurse appeared to physically resist her bad mood, her shoulders were big and stiff. In truth, she was uncomfortable with her position and wondering if she were not doing this unhappy woman a disservice by, well, spying on her.

She has big shoulders, Kitty observed and quieted herself by returning her head to her pillows.

Would you do three things for me, she said. I need an envelope opener for these manuscript envelopes. I also need my little green book. The book is either in my purse, there by the mirror; or it might be in the kitchen, because I was down there yesterday, writing a check for the man who delivers the food in bulk. I also need the beanbag chair, for when Ellis comes home. In the basement, I think.

Kitty hadn't covered herself with the bed sheet, so her bare, shiny legs were exposed to the nurse. She noticed that the young woman would not look down at her body. Kitty smiled at her as though to

seem pleased, though she associated the nurse's discomfort with her triangle fantasies and the colored fountain. This was nonsensical, of course, and the fact that she was aware of this showed that she still had her wits.

The nurse got on her knees to go through Kitty's purse by the mirror.

The beanbag chair is for my son. You will meet him when he comes home from winter break. He's going to be a published poet soon.

Caitlyn showed the woman that she had found her green book.

Bring it to me, said Kitty. My niece is a publisher. She publishes poetry. And I think she's interested in my son's work. How about you?

The nurse was inching toward the doorway because she wanted to leave. Kitty was keeping her out of spite. She wanted her to stay in the room while she was half-exposed. She would have to see her body. Kitty was not as grotesque as all that. As a matter of fact, she thought, many men consider me attractive.

Do you read poetry, said Kitty, or don't you understand the language well enough? I understand. I feel the same way about Spanish.

The poems I read are meant for children, said Caitlyn, not sure herself why she said this.

Well you've never heard of Gerard Stout then, said Kitty. And it's no wonder. But you will.

Hopefully someday I will, said Caitlyn blankly, then turned and left.

Kitty opened the package from Ellis first. She read five poems and the brief explanation in a little under an hour. A few of the poems she had to read over several times. The introduction she saved for last and read amusedly then set the thin manuscript of poems on the bed to reflect with a grin that mirrored the innocent playfulness she attributed to the literature. The poems by Gerard Stout, on the other hand, baffled her. She expected to enjoy the juvenile idiocy of these as well. In the end it was hopeless. She looked over each poem again. The Stout poems seemed to be about her, about her love for triangles and colors, but this was utterly impossible. She was being paranoid. They made her nervous. Ellis' poems had been about a girl he named June. One poem was about how June lives in the basement of a school house with a dog. The dog's name is Anthony. At the end of the poem, she puts the dog outside because she is annoyed with its sad eyes. Then the dog returns to the basement of

the school house by itself. Except this time it is the ghost of the dog, which is a dripping of water that floats to trickle back and forth over the basement floor. This poem is very dumb, she thought, but she didn't dislike it. The Gerard Stout poems on the other hand ...

Kitty buzzed for the nurse. She needed the fountain. The fountain would do her good. Caitlyn remarked that this was the first time she had seen Kitty use the colored fountain two times in a row.

It's this poetry I don't understand. When Ellis comes I'll have him explain a few things to me. You won't like him at first. He's a bit effeminate. But he's very smart.

Caitlyn waited for the water to bubble from the imbedded spouts. Once the fountain buzzed and gurgled, Kitty began to tremble, as if she were enjoying a light, uncontrollable seizure. The nurse excused herself and retreated to her quarters, where she continued her notes on Kitty's behavior. Mrs. _____ seems very bored to me, she wrote, and she is too dependent on her fountain. She probably needs professional help. As a day nurse, I'm not really cut out. Though she did just receive some poetry from her son, which she has been thinking about. Maybe the poetry will help her. Poetry has always seemed to be an exercise for people who have much time to waste and little to think about.

Then she scratched the last sentence out.

When Ellis came home for winter break, he took the two hour bus ride from Tokenville, then from the station he would take a cab. Most of the bus ride he spent with his head rattling against the window as he slid in and out of sleep. When he opened his eyes, there was white, gray, desolation, the sides of the highways. Farmland steeped in gray. The passing cars low beneath the bus. The heads in the windows of the cars. Many wore sunglasses. He would imagine the word "anonymity" at the center of a cluster graph and a number of words related to the word "anonymity" in smaller circles around the central word. He found his own imagination uninspiring to a frightening degree. It could feel sometimes that he carried a miniature void in his globe.

I am the only person who is even partially Gerard Stout, he

thought. There was a voice, an amalgam of a childhood counselor and his father's calm sternness, it asked him why he would want to fool his mother. From the letters she sent, it's clear she's not well. She never leaves the bed. And she writes mostly about how much she likes triangles and colors. His father had sent him an email; Ellis had not read it. In the darkened arena of his imagination, he sat across from the shadow inquisitor. They were each in wooden chairs. There was nothing around them. A void. I'm not trying to fool my mother, he said. She was the only person who might accept Gerard Stout. What bad could it do if I even just showed her the pipe?

He imagined a thin or brittle surface. The void in his globe had taken a shape. A layer of ice, akin to the white, the frost on the windows, the gray. You could stare at the hopeless white and imagine that no thought could ever be thought and articulated again. One couldn't even read a book without being concerned about what it meant. Yet beneath the surface there was movement, an unfrozen, running liquid. When he considered this image and its metaphorical value, he felt relatively optimistic. He felt that Gerard Stout was certainly the person living inside his person. The running liquid who would articulate the person.

At his parents' house, he was greeted by Caitlyn, the nurse. In a letter, his mother had described her as pretty, plain, yellow, and more or less punctual. Caitlyn shook his hand, which Ellis let fall limp. She withdrew her arms so she stood facing him and clasped her hands behind her back. Ellis decided that she was an enthusiastic person.

Just these two go to my room, he said, referring to the duffle bags at his feet. But not this one, he said, referring to the smaller duffle over his shoulder. The contents of this bag included one pair of reading glasses purchased at the drug store; a wooden pipe he had swiped from Professor Milhauser's learning den during the end of semester history trivia bowl; an artificial blonde mustache to match his own hair color, lifted from Bragman's Costume and Design; and a cape he had cut (clumsily, he knew) from the drapes on the picture window in the dorm lounge, from the second layering of drape so it would be another week or so until a grounds man

learned a piece was missing.

Caitlyn apologized. She was not a servant. But she would help him nonetheless if she would tell him which room was his. Ellis was humiliated. Instead of apologizing, he turned his back on her and marched onward to his father's office.

He was in the habit of visiting Kip first so as to get the greeting out of the way. Today he was nervous. He had prepared a little performance for his mother, and his father had a predator's sense of smell. Ellis worried he might know that he had a performance in mind.

Ellis knocked and Kip mumbled a few incomprehensible words. Ellis came in. Kip was hunched over his desk. His white shirtsleeves were rolled up and he was filling out a form with hard-drawn angular writing in red ink. A column of wrinkles appeared on his forehead when he squinted. His power jacket -- sleek, black, and with shoulder pads -- hung on a coat tree in the corner. Behind his desk was a photograph of Kip and James Patterson III on the deck of Patterson's yacht, the white of the sky over the water in the background. They smiled, and Kip wore diamond-shaped shades. He was younger then. Only ten years older than Ellis was now.

Your mother is not well, he said, without looking up. You probably didn't read the email I sent you. Has your learning been successful?

Ellis asked if his mother was sick.

In her head. And I don't think she's gotten bad. I don't want her to leave the house. If she tells you that she needs to leave the house, then you offer to do whatever she needs done.

Is there a doctor?

Kip eased back and rolled his chair against the wall. Doctors are for physical illnesses. I suppose, if your mother were so bad off, if she were talking to God and eating dirt, I would demand she see a doctor.

Does she seem tired, said Ellis.

Like a woman who needs to rest, said Kip. She has Caitlyn here, and she has her fountain. Her colored fountain. She got it a few months back. They say it promotes relaxation.

After Kip went back to his form, Ellis got up to leave. His father

stopped him.

You're all done with the poetry business now, aren't you? Your mother? You won't let her talk about Tellie and that small press?

Ellis looked disturbed. He knew he did. He could feel his bottom lip tremble.

I don't know what you mean, he said. Mr. Stout has expressed interest in being published with Far Away Patterns Press.

I read that poem you put up on the internet. What is it called? Mountains of clouds?

"Mountains of Black Clouds." It's a fine poem.

It is not a fine poem.

Kitty called Caitlyn into her room to ask if that was Ellis she had heard coming in. Well, tell him to come here, she said. I wanted to ask him about the poems. You know they've been driving me nuts. And don't tell him about the beanbag chair. I want it to be a surprise. He'll get angry if he knows.

The nurse frowned at this and proceeded down the hallway to retrieve Ellis. She did not like this. She was being treated like a servant. These people needed a servant, she thought. The son had felt cold to her. A non-presence. She used the phrase, piece of air.

When she knocked he called for her to come in.

She called through the door: Your mother wants to see you now.

Please come in, Ellis insisted.

Caitlyn hesitated. She thought of making up an excuse. She went ahead and turned the knob. She found Ellis hunched before her, his arms slack at his sides. Apparently, he was in a costume. He's a poet, she thought.

On his face he wore a pair of old woman's reading glasses with turquoise frames, and also a blondee mustache that might have been his own, except for how thick it was, and the fact that he had not worn a mustache less than one hour before. Strangest was that he wore a cape on his back that appeared to be a sort of drapery made from red velvet and tied around his collar with an ornamental golden rope. He put a pipe in his mouth and scowled with all seriousness and weight.

The nurse wondered if she had misheard him. Had he not told

her to come in? You're rehearsing for a play, she suggested.

My name is Gerard Stout. Ellis' voice cracked as he spoke, but triumphantly he pushed through his fright. I am a poet and a friend of Ellis'.

He gave her his hand to shake. He did not offer a firm shake, but he wasn't nearly as limp as when he was only Ellis.

It's very nice to meet you, Gerard Stout, she said. I think Ki-Tay would like to see you now?

He was sweating under his arms. In the heat of the moment he forgot what he was going to say. The little monologues he prepared seemed distant to him, part of an imagination he left behind in his old self. He already felt embarrassed and he had not even gotten past the nurse yet.

I think she would like to see me, said Ellis. Thank you.

Kitty decided to read over the poems one more time while she was waiting. Ellis' poems she did like better the second time around. Most of them, no. There were seven poems in total. The one about the dog with sad eyes, she liked this one, but still felt that it was silly and that it betrayed a childish mind. How strange that Ellis could be so childish. He really wanted you to believe he was a serious person. Another of Ellis' poems that tickled her the second time around was called "Caves in the Grass." The poems begins: "Believe it or not / Little pink gravestones lead to caves in the grass." There were also caterpillars with women's names in the grass. One caterpillar was named June (again) and the second was named Betty. Then they died. The poem didn't say how, which Kitty did not like. He should have talked about how the colorful little critters met their demise.

She put the poems back in the manuscript envelope. Then there were the Gerard Stout poems. No, she didn't like those. When she thought about these poems, she imagined a big blank space, and there was no color at all. The poems were about her desires, her fancies, her precious buzzing on the inside, but they were empty. Of course, there had to be color. It was impossible to not have color. There were gray and blue colors, but not many.

Her head was propped on two pillows. She was going to press the buzzer. She couldn't. She couldn't buzz now. She wanted the

fountain. She imagined the triangles falling. She could not feel them. She could not feel the triangles falling. She needed the fountain on. But then Ellis was coming, and she couldn't stand the thought of his watching her with her fountain on. He was like Kip; he would judge her.

There was a knock on the door just then. She didn't like that knock. She was expecting her son, and the knock sounded closer to Kip's. But it was too uncertain to be Kip's knock, and she did not think he would travel all the way upstairs for her. It was too masculine a knock to belong to the nurse, though she did have big shoulders.

Who's there, she said. She covered herself with her blanket.

There was no answer. There was only another knock. Kitty repeated that whoever was there should say who it is. Is that Ellis? Then please just come in.

It's Gerard Stout, said the voice on the other side of the door.

This struck Kitty as absurd. Gerard Stout? Ellis, is this a joke?

Is it okay if Gerard Stout comes in?

Kitty was bewildered. She moved to the edge of her bed. She felt head-light. No, she said, it's not okay. I think Ellis should come in here.

There was a moment of silence. She pressed the buzzer. She felt herself distinctly aware that it was her son on the other side of the door. But she was uneasy. She didn't want those terrible poems living in her room. She did, in fact, hate the Gerard Stout poems. She understood them and hated them for what they meant. She felt a special note of triumph.

It's come to my attention that you've read a few of my poems, and I was hoping that we could discuss them.

I don't know a thing about poetry, said Kitty. Please, go away.

I can't go away, said Ellis.

Then she heard a pair of footsteps in the hallway. She heard Caitlyn ask Ellis if Kitty wasn't ready yet to see him, and Ellis replied with haste that Gerard Stout would come back at another time. He slammed his door shut.

I need the fountain, said Kitty once the nurse came in. Please. What did he look like?

Caitlyn was agitated. Her face was contorted so it looked like she

had an invisible straw in her mouth. She switched on the fountain and waited. She'd planned on napping in her quarters.

He looked very nice, Ki-Tay.

Stout? He looked nice?

Your son. He was wearing a mustache and a cape.

Kitty was on her stomach with her feet covered and was hugging a pillow. She was confused. The bubbling had begun. She could hear the bubbling and buzzing. It was only a matter of minutes now.

Were Ellis and Gerard Stout the same person?

Caitlyn didn't want to play the strange game anymore. She didn't understand. As she was leaving, the woman told her to stop. The nurse didn't turn back her head. The fountain was buzzing now, and at any moment Kitty would start having her seizure.

When Kip asks about dinner tonight, tell him to talk to the cook. I won't be joining him. I'm feeling tired.

Kip won't ask me about dinner, said the day nurse.

Then I guess everyone's in the dark, said Kitty.

Caitlyn closed the door and left the woman with her fountain. She would not write about the episode with Ellis in his costume because she was afraid to do the thinking about it required to put the matter into words.

That night Kip and Ellis dined together around six-thirty. Kitty heard Ellis go downstairs. She went into the hallway and listened. After some time, there were sounds of kitchen life, silverware clanking. She could smell the pork, it surely would have been pork tonight. The odors began to fill the hallway. She sat on a step and listened for voices, but she heard only the murmurings of the man and the woman who made up their temporary staff. Ellis and his father seldom talked to one another. For the first time in weeks, she found herself craving a cigarette. Perhaps, she thought, it was the getting out of bed that did it.

There was a balcony next to the bathroom. It wasn't a large one. There was just enough space for her to stand and pace once, turn back and pace. She wore flannel slippers, a robe, and a shawl over her head. Smoking gave her a dull ease. The smoke looked blue and heavy as it floated. The mechanics were down there. A gentle

buzz emitted from the garage. It was too gentle to be machinery. A thought occurred to her that she knew was off. She wondered if there had been some visitation and maybe the mechanics had already gone home. She was cold. She went back inside and let out a gasp when she unexpectedly met her son in the hallway.

Ellis apologized. He looked very pale to her in the hazy moonlight. He showed her the palms of his hands. I didn't mean to frighten you, he said. He was going to the bathroom.

Ellis, what were you doing today?

I was on the bus.

When you were knocking on my door.

He was quiet.

I know that was you knocking on my door. I do not believe that you would bring Gerard Stout here.

Ellis felt warm and eager. He had to hide for a moment and think. Excuse me, he said and ducked inside the bathroom.

Caitlyn normally left the house for the night shortly after seven. Kitty turned in without saying goodnight to either her husband or her son. She didn't feel comfortable knocking on Ellis' door, and he had not come to see her. She turned off the lights. She considered the gentle buzz from outside and she wished she could hear it again. I'm tired of the triangles, she thought. The triangles and the colors. That's what Gerard Stout likes, too. Shapes and colors. But the gentle buzz she had heard outside while she was smoking. That sound she liked because it had an original, understated quality. There were no bright colors. There was a gentle brown. A gentle brown quality of the buzz. It belonged to her. Stout wouldn't know about that. As a matter of fact, she wanted to hear the buzz now. There was no reason why not. She might find it soothing.

The hallway was dark. Kitty was quiet as she moved. In the darkness she saw some colors, but they did not impress her. There was a faint silver she saw quivering near the shelves. Outside she was first disappointed. The temperature had dropped so she felt instant discomfort in her legs and fingers. She believed she had gotten out of bed for nothing. If there was a visitation, then it might have gone away to whatever space it inhabited. The thought of this

made her dizzy. What visitation, she thought. She couldn't imagine a shape or color for it. Only the sound. She needed to go back inside. In fact, she thought, if I just come back the same time tomorrow, then it's possible the thing, the sound, the gentle buzz will have returned.

In the hallway she took off her flannel slippers because some snow had attached itself to the bottoms. Her toes were red and numb. I'm a madwoman, she thought, going outside in the middle of the night to hear a noise. She was thinking of paging through a memoir she purchased and had always meant to read. It was about a young handsome fellow who gave away his multi-national business for the woman of his dreams.

When she returned to her room, Ellis was sitting on her bed. He had been waiting for her to get up and use the bathroom. He hadn't realized that she had been out on the balcony, smoking. And he had grown bored, then anxious, dressed in his cape, glasses, and mustache. He tucked the pipe under the cover so he could surprise her with it. In the time while he waited, he had gone through the scenario again and again. He felt tired and frustrated, blocked. But Gerard Stout could not be blocked. This was against the very nature of the dark shadow man, who had an imagination of his own.

I don't want you in here, she said.

Kitty was angry and not the least bit surprised. She knew that Gerard Stout was around and that he was trying to see her. She was also not surprised to learn that Gerard Stout and Ellis were more or less the same person. She'd had a suspicion she had not been able to articulate.

I'm a guest, he said. I'm a friend of your son's. From what I understand, he sent you seven of my poems, which I was hoping we could discuss.

Well, I don't like your poems, Mr. Stout. And I don't even understand the first thing about poetry.

Then how can you mean you don't like my poems, said Ellis. He stood up and adjusted his drapery so it covered half the front of his body. Now was a good time to reveal the pipe.

Because I know what the poems are about. Then in a quieter voice that was all the more tense for being suppressed: Don't you

think I know about the triangles and colors? Don't you think I know?

Ellis felt as if he were jogging in place. The scenario was not moving as he had planned. It was actually not moving at all.

How can you not like the poems, said Ellis, forgetting the fake baritone and sounding like himself with a cracked voice.

Please, turn on my fountain. I imagine you must know how to do it. According to your poems, you love the colors as much as I do.

Kitty felt that she was glowing. She got back into the bed. Gerard Stout stood stupidly by the fountain, his mustache half-undone and dangling like a half-moon over his rounded mouth.

It's under the basin there. That's how the nurse does it.

Stout got on his knees. He found the switch after waving his hand back and forth. Except he didn't get up off the ground afterwards.

There's a beanbag chair, said Kitty. Feel free to sit on it.

Ellis took off his glasses and undid the golden rope around his collar. The colored water of the fountain made lakes of trembling rainbow here and there on the dim moonlit walls. His mother's body trembled above him, squeaking the bed springs. He thought of the poem Gerard Stout would write if it were he on the floor now. His brain was eclipsed, suddenly shuttered in darkness. It occurred to him that he knew. He knew exactly what Stout would write because Stout was there. The two of them were there on the floor, and they had nothing between them to feel except a hot and heavy embarrassment for having tried to articulate anything at all. The fountain caused Kitty to burst out with a scream of pleasure that paralyzed him with fear.