COTTONWOOD 37

COTTONWOOD *37*

COTTONWOOD magazine welcomes submissions of fiction, poetry, graphics, photography, translation, reviews of small press literature and literature by midwestern authors. We also welcome articles on the arts from both local and national writers and artists. Poetry submissions should be limited to the five best, fiction to one story. We cannot return submissions which do not include a stamped self-addressed envelope.

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COTTONWOOD 37

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WINTER 1985 SPRING 1986

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EDITOR'S NOTES

Response to **COTTONWOOD 36** has been most pleasant for the staff. We are very pleased to present in this issue Daniel Overturf's interesting portfolio of portraits, Vic Contoski's relaxed and informative interview with Donald Levering, some fine poems by Levering, and a strong gathering of poems and stories by writers who have appeared in these pages before and writers we are just beginning to know. We are sincerely interested in your response to what we are doing and would like to hear from you.

As we looked over the retrospective issue (35), it seemed to us a shame that so much good material could be recognized only through printing the poems and stories as attractively as a constrained budget would allow. Authors deserve better recognition. We are still not in a position to pay for submissions, but we are able to announce the establishment of a modest fund to supply awards for the best work published each calendar year.

The awards will be called the ALICE CARTER AWARDS in honor of Alice Carter Nasmith (1892-1972). Alice Carter was a graduate of the University of Illinois who, after teaching for a year at Baker University of Baldwin, Kansas (1916-1917), served as missionary in China (1920-1949). In 1926, she married Augustus Nasmith, a widower with three young children. To these children and to the two children born to Alice and Augustus, she imparted her love of the arts, particularly music and literature. We feel that it is especially appropriate to name the awards for this fine woman, who worked throughout her life to improve mutual understanding among peoples through the insights of the arts. Anyone who wishes to contribute to this fund may send a (tax-deductible) contribution to The Kansas University Endowment Association, specifying that the contribution is for the ALICE CARTER fund, a sub-fund of the English Department Development Fund.

Awards will be announced in the Spring issue each year and will honor works published in the preceding calendar year. Thus, the first awards will be announced in Spring 1987, and will honor works published in issues 36, 37, and 38.

As previously announced issue 38 will highlight fiction and poetry by Black writers.

We have received, too late for review in this issue, a book that will surely be of interest to many of our readers: *To All The Islands Now* by Edgar Wolfe, Emeritus Professor of English at KU. Copies ($5.00) may be ordered from Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University, Topeka, KS 66621. We plan to review this collection of stories in our issue 39.

George F. Wedge

POETRY

Denise Low

AN AGATE CHARM FOR LINUS ST. CLAIRE

I.

Slow clock like a tree ring:
mineral-charged water settled into a rock cavity,
maybe a lava bubble
around a center—the eye.
Four thousand years measured out each band
and always an escape path
where water seeped in and out
like a Navajo blanket
always left with a thread undone
for spirit to slip out and away
to continue its meander—

like time.
The Aztec god of time, Xiuhteuctli,
propels the earth:
His eyes stare out
from the center of the calendar stone.
He commands fire, stars, earth, and time,
heartbeat of the world
repeated over and over.

Like agates—

each one, too, a center and a beat,
calendar and map at once,
tinted carnelian or copper or violet,
rainbows collecting around a pivot,
layering year after year,
faithful to stone laws.

May your life grow full around a center
like this agate.

II.

Agates sit on the shelf with silent eyes
as you and I talk circles in our heads—
of mothers and fathers ahead of us,
our sons to follow,
the layers of generations
we lie packed against
and can never change.

Past years are seed pits within us
we do not leave behind,
but carry deep
like mussels sealing over pain with pearl.

If you want to extract a sorrow
wrap it with a stone
and throw it deep into Lake Superior.
Water rings will hold it tight,

and you can choose a new road home
like thread leading the spirit safely
out from a Navajo blanket
or the passage leading out
from a mother's full belly
or the path outward from an agate's eye.

III.

Like agates:

apricots, chalice, breasts, mandalas
bulbs, jewels, eggs, sun and moon
tree rings, water rings, rainbows, pearls
the circle where earth meets sky.

Find them in your treasure chest mind:

bird nests, raspberries, water jars, chrysalis
geodes, snowballs, sunflowers, acorns
eyeballs, nautilus shells, teapots, rosebuds
the planets in their orbits.

May your life grow full around a center
like an agate.

Denise Low

A SUMMER DROWNING

Just a moment to step into
this delicious high summer current
cresting with all of spring's thunder.
A smooth coverlet slips over
my ears and eyes. No terror.
A release into silence and heartbeats.

This river turns corners so widely
I can ride forever a long wave.
The channel buries itself deeper
and deeper into farmland
and I follow.

Up on the sliding surface,
sunlight shimmies
on polished brown glass.
Everything is hushed and waiting

like a child holding her breath

and counting how long

she can stay under.

Cynthia Pederson

RETURNS

the phone rings
at four a.m.

only once

then it startles the room
with sudden silence

now awake
every worry
with which I have ever been burdened
returns
ringing
like a busy signal
unanswered in my mind

I rise, tranced
and dial the phone

any number will do

letting it ring once
I hang up

passing on the message

Deborah Artman

TRACTOR MAN IN MY MOTHER'S BED

He's the man my mother slips into
before she falls asleep. I hear
her mutter his name in her dreams.

Alone in the house, she's past
the pleasure of her eyes
kissed open. She tractors
back to Roxbury. The street
is hot, boys are
whistling: Hey Norma.
She's teasing.
She's "the girl with everything"—
the first love who went to war.
The saxophone she hears at night
is his voice
over water—honey,
moon—
promises she can't keep.

She turns over, hungry,
with the Tractor Man.
He is her traveler,
he digs up. He's what
gets her in the car
each day and home
to cook.

He's what she eats, what she counts
when she looks at the clock,
the minutes back to him
and his back to her and she touches
it slowly, piece by piece.

John Repp

CORNELIA

Treelimbs creaked with wet snow, it seemed,
on all the Easters of her youth.
Big Cornelia stomped to Sunday school all in white
and beat up boys who called her Big Cornelia.

One Sunday when they were twelve,
George Jacobs brought some rubber dinosaurs
and flashed them at all the girls.

The teacher was talking about Paul,
the wages of sin, the burning rocks of Hell
when George shoved his greasy handful in Cornelia's lap.
She ran out screaming about blood
and tearing and things burning up.

For as long as she came after that,
Cornelia sat quiet in the back.
George led the giggles when she came in and went out.

Cornelia's a big, gentle woman,
alone with three kids now.
She keeps them close around her on Sunday.
She hears limbs break all over town on Easter.

David Lunde

NIGHTFISHING

In the last light waning
over the low, weed-thickened lake,
bats hurl themselves
through the still air
with the recklessness
of blind hunger,
mosquitoes whine
feverish for blood,
and my black jitterbug
walks on the water
indigestible as God.

Each shift of weight
makes us toss and pitch,
the uneven thrust of oars
propels us erratically from side to side
of our compass point,
the night air begins to chill
and cold stars float in the
water
as we lift our arms
and cast our lines into darkness.

Patrick Stanhope

A SHORT FICTION

1
War was raging
in the hills of paradise.
We were running short of money
but all in all, thought ourselves fortunate
to have such keen memories
of ale and mango we had shared
near the sea.

2
Aldo was such a handsome liar
in cashmere slacks, his rosewood guitar
leading us from one palace
to the next, I recited verse
to shepherds on the steppes
and thought often
of crossing the sea
in a skiff made
of Egyptian reeds.

3
From a balcony
near the great river
we heard the dark waters turn.
Boatmen came up from the riverbank
blowing their clarinets,
dancing a peculiar jig.
We removed our shoes,
threw our glasses at the moon
and went down to the street
with a mind to dance.

4
That was long ago
and now we are old men
tending vegetables in the wind.
But occasionally
Aldo brings out his rosewood guitar.
We throw our glasses at the moon
and set out for the palace
prepared to dance.

Marc Munroe Dion

A POEM VERSUS THE RADIO NEWS

July 7, 1982

A six foot one inch white male
with a .38 caliber pistol
shot you
between the fifth and sixth ribs.
Against this
I have one image.
You were fifteen years old
and I set off firecrackers
in your front yard.
You came to the porch,
flounced and hurried.
First your teeth,
then all of you,
caught the light.

Walt Phillips

MORNING IN THE METROPOLIS

setting down her coffee
i damned near
spilled it into
her clock-radio

my gut aches today
the cat was dissatisfied with her food
the lawnmower crew's outside
making too much noise

we get into an argument
about how much milk
is left downstairs
in the refrigerator

i wish i was bicycling
on the moon

D. Nurkse

MANUAL DEMOLITION

The foreman's daughter's so pretty
she makes me feel grimy
even when I'm covered with clean dust
from knocking down retaining walls.
I stand behind her in the launderette
pumping the machine for tiny packets
of bluing, cornstarch,
static annihilator . . .
Her clothes churn behind one glass wall,
mine froth behind the other,
our hands stay outside
bone-dry in mirror-image.

Twilight will find her folding, folding—
my
shirts will be crushed
at the bottom of a sack of hammers.

Sharyn Wolf

PLACES

Today in tiny Roslindale where
my most recent concern was finding
a good parking space A man
has come to speak to the Cambodian
children who go to Winter Hill
School just up the street
from St. Theresa's I watch the

news clip on TV introduced by a
pretty anchorwoman with perfect
nails "We are survivors" he tells
them "My story is your story
The story of the Jews in the
Holocaust The Armenian genocide
We are a part of a history we must

never forget" I see a young boy
place his hand on the shoulder of
the girl in front of him His
fingers tighten and when she turns
to comfort him the camera catches
a look in her eyes that is
punctuation to these words His story

Her story too There they are
Kids from Winter Hill School With
pictures on the walls and pencils
in their desks Come back to tell
that there are places where they
murder children Places where
they wake to bombs Places where
blood still slides like the sea

Jeffery Gruen

HALF MOON IN NEPAL

For the family of Laximprasad Devkota

Someone's come along to snip the moon in half.
The remainder steeps in clouds
Breathed out like smoke in front of her.
The sky behind is blue
Which fades to orange,
The color of kicked-up dust.

Why does this house sleep
With fields all around
In front of her—
Fields
like a pregnancy?

Someone's come along
To take away half of the moon.
Someone has taken her to another land
Where everything which is eaten
Is sweet.
Here hills ripple away in darkness
Like the breasts of a village's women;
Women who are sad to see half of the moon go.
Calling

Good moon,
Objective,
Here when you are needed,
Comfort to those who think that beauty
Has gone away from this earth.
Beauty

Has not gone away from this earth.
Instead she has gone up to some faroff,
Unknowable lake
And there she bathes.
It is she who has taken
Part of the moon away.
She holds it up
And gazes at herself
Using the stolen half-moon as her mirror.

Lynne Butler

A STORY

We string our lives, like beads on a strand,
story by story. My mother, my grandmother
waiting at the door, looking across the fields
toward rising storms talked about the year
they lived on watermelon money, how they'd
hang wet sheets in the doors to cool themselves,
how it never helped. They'd tell about
the night the dogs, frantic at their chains
barked until morning, and in the light
how they found circles of tracks around the house,
deep and deliberate—mountain lions
up from the river or down from along the bluffs,
drawn by the fresh meat they'd hung on the porch.
Riding home I always wanted to hear that story
again. And once, jerked from sleep saw,
I swear, a lion on the road. A story
I tell with some reserve, for there are always
those with their own version, who choose
not to see the flash of eyes beyond the headlights.

Norma Gorst

ALBUMS

You send me photographs, mother
They're always posed, in color, and never of you
but of people at your elegant table, laughing
or lined up like dolls in the garden
  in front of your prize roses
and of him.

More will come:
birthday cakes and baptized babies;
you tell me Jan has had a boy.
That makes four. Isn't it wonderful?

On visits, I spend whole afternoons
searching for me
perched on his shoulders
on his lap, my solemn eyes
  staring at the camera
sitting at the lake's edge, alone.

Now I send you pictures, never of me,
but of the children
in ballet dresses
or in uniforms with trophies
or with him.

Teri Stettnisch

KINSWOMAN

When a woman dies
there is a sound
in the room
like the small dripping of snow

or the final bee
rasping, resting on a branch
before it drops.

When a woman dies
the voices in the room know
nothing more to say
and they fall,
like dust in the shaft
of sunlight that lies across
her whitened bed.

CLIFF

Sprawled against the rock, he is aware
of all his parts at an instant, fingers
bent into cracks, toes
hard against thick bootsoles that
stop intimacy between
footskin and stone. He prays that the cliff
take his offering of small metal
into its next hard, unmoving mouth; shifts
the rope's mass hanging, swaying, pulling down
against his groin harness; bites
down on dust, inhales, sucking
closer to the stone coldness. He
does not look behind him
to the sun but knows his own blackness
of shape on the white rock, does not
look at this moment
to the ground but feels the
rope
hang down.

Dennis Dufer

ON MONROE

I can hear them whining.
Two fat dogs
lost in the tall weeds
that separate
Monroe from the tracks.
A shiny yellow ribbon
holds a mute tin bell
to each throat.
Across the street
an old woman clutches
her wrought iron porch
and pleads on thin legs.
She points to the weeds,
to the stretch of empty track,
then back again.
A bowl lies broken on her steps.
Pieces scattered all around.
I lift the closer dog
and turn,
when the old woman calls out
NO (Her throat tight on the words)
THE OTHER ONE FIRST.

Jean Strayer

MOTHER'S DYING

So this is how it ends
thin yellowed skin . . . bald,
hungry eyes eating sons, grandchildren
fingers plucking at sheets
that are only tomorrow's laundry
but they grant another day and another.
Nighttime is for roll call.
The dead are resurrected
they throw a party in your head—
I have not been born yet.

Dave Etter

VERONICA

I jog along Willow Creek Road.
It is corn planting time again,
the last killing frost ten days gone.
Aunt Grace's funeral last Friday:
the open casket, white tulips,
the slow ride to the cemetery.
My right thigh stiffens up a bit.
I go over and sit down for a minute
on the stone step of the pioneer church,
its narrow stained-glass window
jeweled with afternoon light.
Aunt Grace's rouged face: for our eyes only.
It begins to rain, just a sprinkle.
The sweet smell of new grass
and the ageless odor of plowed ground
excite me as never before.
I massage my sore thigh muscle
and think about jogging some more.
Aunt Grace never approved of body building,
my lifting barbells in a gym.
She lived on a big farm nearby,
over by the town of Noon Prairie.
She baked a ton of apple pies
and canned every green bean in sight.
I'm about two miles from Main Street.
I run with a nice, easy stride.
I'll never forget the time Aunt Grace
blew up a monumental storm
when word got out that I had won
a wet T-shirt contest at Arne's Pub.
"Say something, Ed," she said.
"Too late now," Dad said and smiled
and put his pipe back in his mouth.
Warm weather is here at last.
The corn crop will soon grow tall.
I can't tell you how I love to sweat
and jog along a lonesome country road
and know that what I do is Veronica.

Robert Tremmel

YOUR FIRST TIME DRYING HOT PEPPERS

You're surprised the crop
is so bright and bloody looking.
You think of the hearts
and lungs of small animals,
tongues, animal heat.

You manage to find
waxed thread in the bottom
of a toolbox,
a fat-headed needle
bent for sewing sacks.

You work it in
under the green crowns,
stack them down
against the twig
knotted at the end,

start another, and another,
hang them under the eave
of the porch for seasoning.
At a distance they look like
braids of hair, columns of vertebrae.

You worry
about the heavy
strain of hanging,
but as they dry
and their color drains

they grow lighter
than locust husks
in the evening

only hollow bones

wind chimes
full of music
left behind.

Terry Tierney

SHAKY CHARLIE TALKS ABOUT HIS YOUTH

In North Dakota we plant early, and we
open the ditches before the river thaws.
The water you get must last.
We sow more seed each year than we'll need,
in case the spring's dry and the summer hot,
or the cattle will die next winter.

He said this at harvest time on the Marne,
in the earthquake evenings with no stars,
the farmland shaking like a slaughtered cow,
and in the machine gun mornings, the tin
cups, the coffee burning his numb lips.

And he said it again, alone in the muddy trench,
his hearing stunned, his limbs quaking.
He was saying it when they found him,
and he repeated it like a liturgy
to the sterile hospital walls.

Forty years later he still talks about it
as his sister smiles and helps him drink
coffee. Her grandchildren laugh at his stories—
Shaky Charlie. Every month she drives him to Fargo
where he says it again and the doctor laughs.
They all remember the prairie of his youth.

Maureen Seaton

THE NEW FATHER

He dreams of nothing,
longs to scatter his genes
to the far tiled wall.
He is draped in white,
spectator, cheerleader,
signaling her moves.

He congratulates himself.
She's a good one:
good hips, good pelvis,
good teeth, he adds as a joke.
She bears down,
throws back her head to pant.
The woman in her young eyes
looks past him.
He needs a smoke, shifts
his weight.

The child slides into his life.
"A girl!" they say.
Fear moves in his heart,
darkens his face.
His tears are genuine.

ILLINOIS 80° BELOW

A drunk freezes to death between Cary
& Crystal Lake, slumped inside his jeep
like a rag doll.

He slips his tongue inside my dress, vanishes
like a flame in Chicago wind.

The authorities say he felt nothing,
close the surrounding roads.

It's true: whenever he drinks Coors beer
he cannot be held responsible.

I hunt beneath the linen for the vodka,
wake the next day on the kitchen floor,
body curled in a question.

DONALD LEVERING: INTERVIEW/POETRY

AN INTERVIEW WITH DONALD LEVERING

Victor Contoski interviewed Donald Levering before Levering's poetry reading in Lawrence on 25 November 1985.

CONTOSKI: Don, my first question is: How did you first become interested in poetry?

LEVERING: I'd say I wrote my first poem when I was fifteen and it was really the only thing I was successful at as an adolescent.

CONTOSKI: How did you know you were successful at it?

LEVERING: I felt good about writing it, really felt better at that than trying to make it with girls or playing football, and I also got some reinforcement from friends and teachers.

CONTOSKI: Do you remember what the poem was about?

LEVERING: Oh, no. Oh, no, I don't—those old poems, I don't look at at all. I do have them. I've saved everything I've written.

CONTOSKI: Who were some of the poets that turned you on to poetry, some of the poets that you read, say, in high school that you liked?

LEVERING: Well, in high school I liked Shakespeare and Coleridge and Keats and other romantic poets. I didn't read contemporary poets then in high school, only in college.

CONTOSKI: Who were some of the first contemporary poets that you discovered that spoke to you?

LEVERING: W. S. Merwin and Charles Simic are two.

CONTOSKI: That's interesting because those are two for me that really got me started in contemporary poetry.

LEVERING: Pablo Neruda, translations of Pablo Neruda, also, Walt Whitman, Robert Bly, and an obscure surrealist named Philip Lamantia were poets I read early on.

CONTOSKI: When you started writing poetry, did you originally write rhymed poetry?

LEVERING: I never wrote regularly rhymed. I had occasional rhymes, but I never wrote set form rhyme poetry. I shouldn't say never. I've written some sonnets.

CONTOSKI: Well, I guess we all have. When did you first start publishing your poetry?

LEVERING: As an undergraduate here and there in little magazines.

CONTOSKI: What were some of the little magazines that helped give you your start as a published poet?

LEVERING: I think *Hey Lady* was the first one.

CONTOSKI: Was that Morgan Gibson in Milwaukee?

LEVERING: Yes, exactly. *Abraxis* was another, and let me see, *Cottonwood Review* fairly early did a poem of mine, and then there were school publications as well.

CONTOSKI: At what point in your life—I'm not going to ask you the exact day and hour—but at what point in your life did you start thinking of yourself as a poet?

LEVERING: I think when I was about nineteen or twenty I had a traumatic event on the football field where I broke my hand and I couldn't play football any more and I kept writing these poems and I started realizing about that time that playing football was of no importance and writing poetry was everything.

CONTOSKI: That's fascinating. How does a poem start out for you? Does it start out as something in your head or a rhythm or an idea? Do you write it in your head first or do you put it down on paper and then start monkeying around with it?

LEVERING: I think the conception for a poem, that is, what a poem is going to be about, the meaning of it, stays in my head for quite a while usually before I commit anything to paper, and then when I sit down what I think the poem was

going to be about always changes. It's usually just something that's kind of in the back of my head for a week or two before it gets down onto paper.

CONTOSKI: When you put it on paper how many revisions do you go through? Do you find you're revising yourself a lot or once you get it on paper is it pretty well set?

LEVERING: No, I'm an incurable revisionist. Even after poems have been published in books, I change them to suit myself. Just an average would be eight to fifteen major revisions of a poem. I really work them over.

CONTOSKI: Do you think there's a danger that you might possibly revise too much?

LEVERING: Definitely. You can kill a poem from revision, and I've done it. I've killed some poems. Yes, there is something about the original impulse that needs to stay there somehow and be preserved, and not necessarily the idea, but something about a cadence in it or consonance or assonance that is a dominant pattern that is good to retain in that from the first draft all the way through.

CONTOSKI: Do you make conscious decisions about line breaks and stanza breaks?

LEVERING: Very conscious, yes.

CONTOSKI: How do you decide in free verse where to stop at the end of a line and start a new line or stop at the end of a stanza and start a new stanza?

LEVERING: Well, it depends on what I'm trying to do with the lines. If I'm trying to create motion, I will enjamb lines, that is, you know, carry lines through grammatical structures. The grammatical structure will begin on one line and continue onto the next line. If I'm trying to have a more measured—if I want the reader or listener to pause at the end of each line, then I will try to make that go even with the grammatical unit, so it's basically flow versus pausing. As far as stanzas, to me there's really no problem with stanza breaks because you really are shifting gears dramatically when you move from one stanza to another, at least I am, so I don't even have to think about that. This is just clearly another stanza.

CONTOSKI: It seems to me that one of the problems of contemporary poets in America is that the general public doesn't see much need for poetry. Do you think there is a general need for poetry in the United States of America at this time?

LEVERING: Certainly, of course.

CONTOSKI: How can, say, poetry help the average person in his or her life?

LEVERING: Well, how can it help? I'm not so sure if it's poetry *per se*, but it seems to be that the culture— there's so much pressure on people to do what—well, not so much do—to think like our masters, as Philip Levine calls them, our masters on TV want us to think. Commercialism is a tremendous force and what people need, I think, is to be able to step back and think for themselves, to be in touch with themselves and with the natural world as well, and I think poetry is—because it comes through the voice, through the breath, is as good if not a better medium than any for that getting in touch.

CONTOSKI: You mentioned Philip Levine. Who are some of the other contemporary poets that you read now and that you like? You mentioned Simic and Merwin were poets who got you started in contemporary poetry. Do you still read them with as much enthusiasm as you did?

LEVERING: Simic I do pretty much. Merwin's later stuff I don't read with the same kind of reaction. It seems more diluted now. Lately I haven't been reading a tremendous amount of contemporary poetry. I'm kind of in a process of backing up and reading people like Richard Wilbur, Karl Shapiro, who are contemporary but who are sort of at the ends of their careers. Theodore Roethke is a great influence.

CONTOSKI: Are there any questions that you would have me ask you?

LEVERING: No, go ahead.

CONTOSKI: This is a very personal question. I'm not sure that it has an answer, but it seems to me that if poetry is any good that it makes the poet and the audience better people, however you choose to define *better*, and I'm wondering if you think poetry has made you a better person. In twenty-five words or less. I'm sorry to put that question on you in that way.

LEVERING: That's a hard question to answer because it's one of the situations where I don't know. I can't imagine what I would have been like without poetry, so how can I say what it has done? I'm not trying to just skirt the question, it's just that I don't know.

CONTOSKI: I'm not so sure it's a question that has an answer, but it seems to me that I have a moral obligation to ask it according to Contoski morality. Well, thank you very much, Don. We look forward to your reading tonight.

LEVERING: Thank you, Vic.

Donald Levering

WILDERNESS

after Lars Gustafson

Sound comes out of stone
This spring pictured on the map
like a spermatozoon
Downstream
mushroom breezes, tadpoles

* * *

A door opens in the forest
Glissandos of light lift
aspen leaves from the floor
The mind settles back
into shadow

* * *

Pile-driving thunder
Rivulets under the tent
Revealed by lightning
horses standing outside
dreams

* * *

If the self is a center
around which wheel
the mountains, aspen rings
are selves concealed
as years

* * *

No one hikes alone
Chipmunks scare and ahead
a bad-mouthing raven
from a bare lightning-struck crown
The hoof-hole sucks down sky

MARCHING INTO WINTER

The procession of autumn suns we call
marigolds lining the patio
have all but died before they
catch the teeth of my rake
and spring their seeds

The damp shadows of leaves
cling to the flagstone
like fossils

I have stomped these compost leaves
with the weight of a winter's snowfall
Still the wind swirls
leaves like blackbirds
leaving

WIND, FOR YOU

the bones of birds
have been fluted
the seed of puffweed is poised
the clouds pile up
the laundry waves
the curtains bow

For you we have forged raincrows
we have staggered snow fences
we have planted cypresses in rows
we have banked with ailerons
we have raised socks on sticks
we have set afloat cities of sails

For you slack tarpaulins
and paper money;
confetti parades and pinwheels,
serenades and columns of dust;
for you the reports
of gunshots

For you we offer our sweat
and hot metal,
our flags of smoke,
the vanes of our mills,
the curves of our cars,
the eyes of our kites

For you all manner
of fire and flue—
the coals beneath the vagabond's soup
the hand-cupped match
the cigarette flicked in dry forest
the witch's pyre and carburetor scoop

ROSEBUSH

In March when I prune
this crab of a rosebush
it snags my clothes
and jabs my hands
with infections.
They pain me so
I shake my fists
at the boil of a sun
in overcast sky
asking why my blood
should be inflamed
for rosebuds.
But come June, what
a gentle compress
do rose petals make
for aching eyelids.

CALENDAR PHOTOGRAPH

May

a thistle bends
with the weight
of a pollen-dusted
bumblebee

just below
a rubythroated
hummingbird
needles

the same pink bloom

PHOTOGRAPHY

Photographs by Daniel Overturf

1. Justina . . . Chicago
2. David . . . Urbana, Illinois
3. Ky . . . Peoria, Illinois
4. Susan . . . Peoria, Illinois
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6. Desiree . . . Cheyenne, Wyoming
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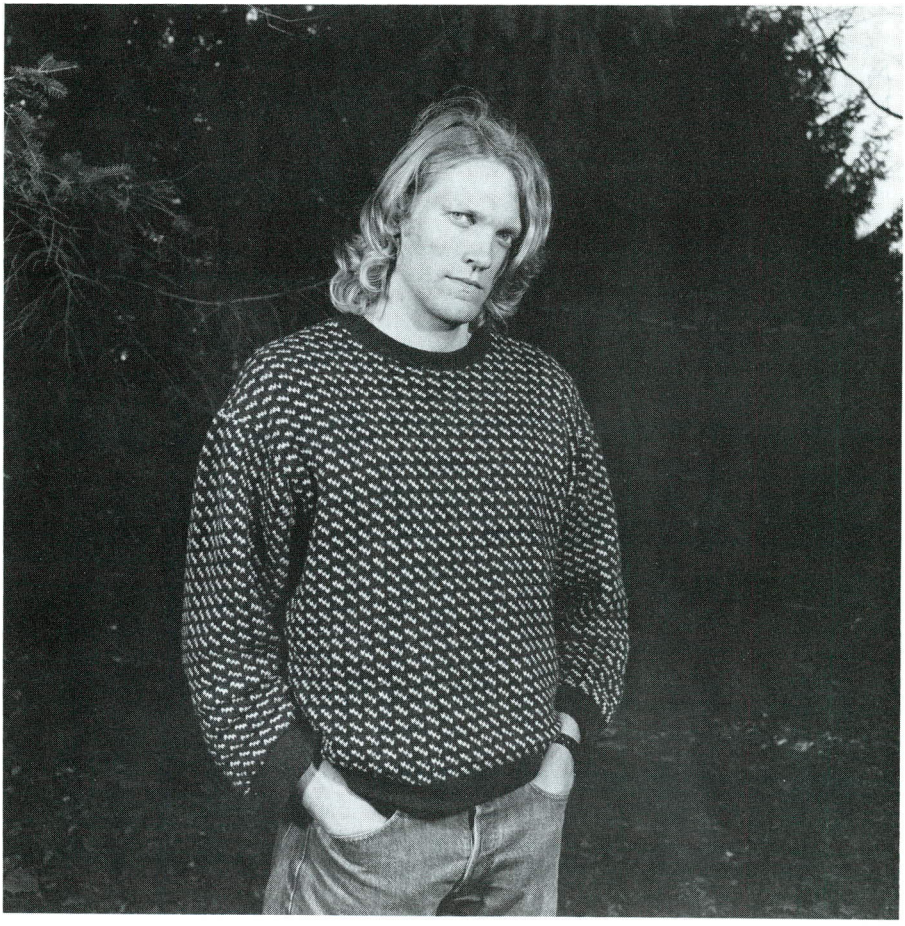
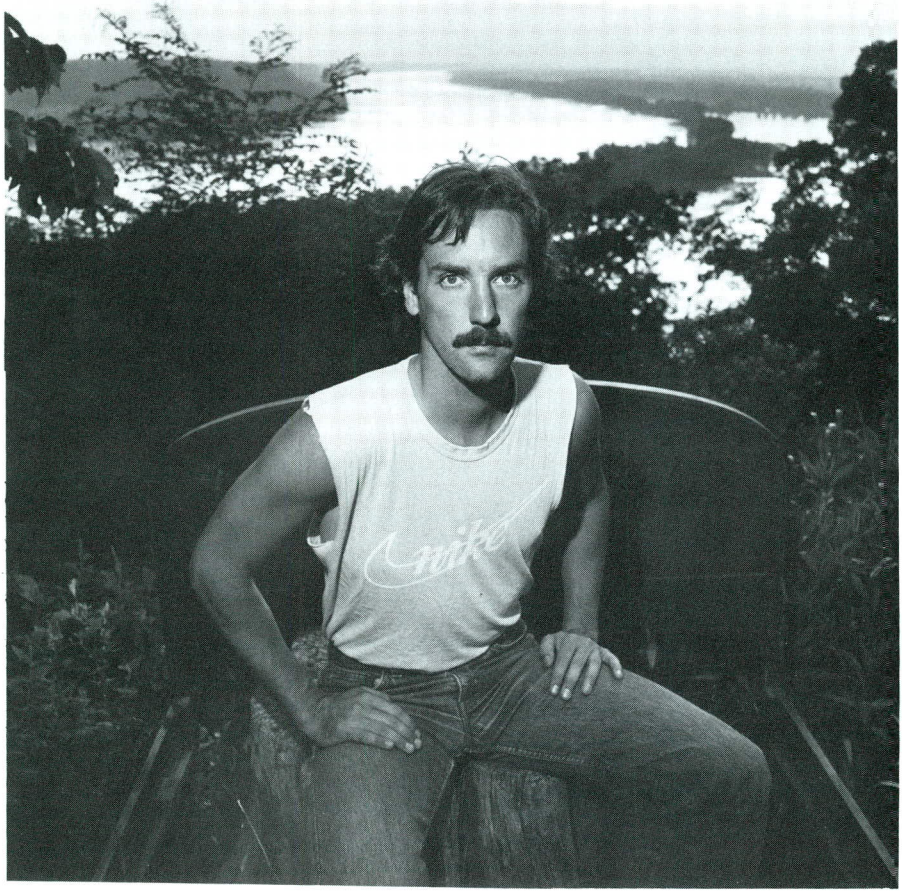
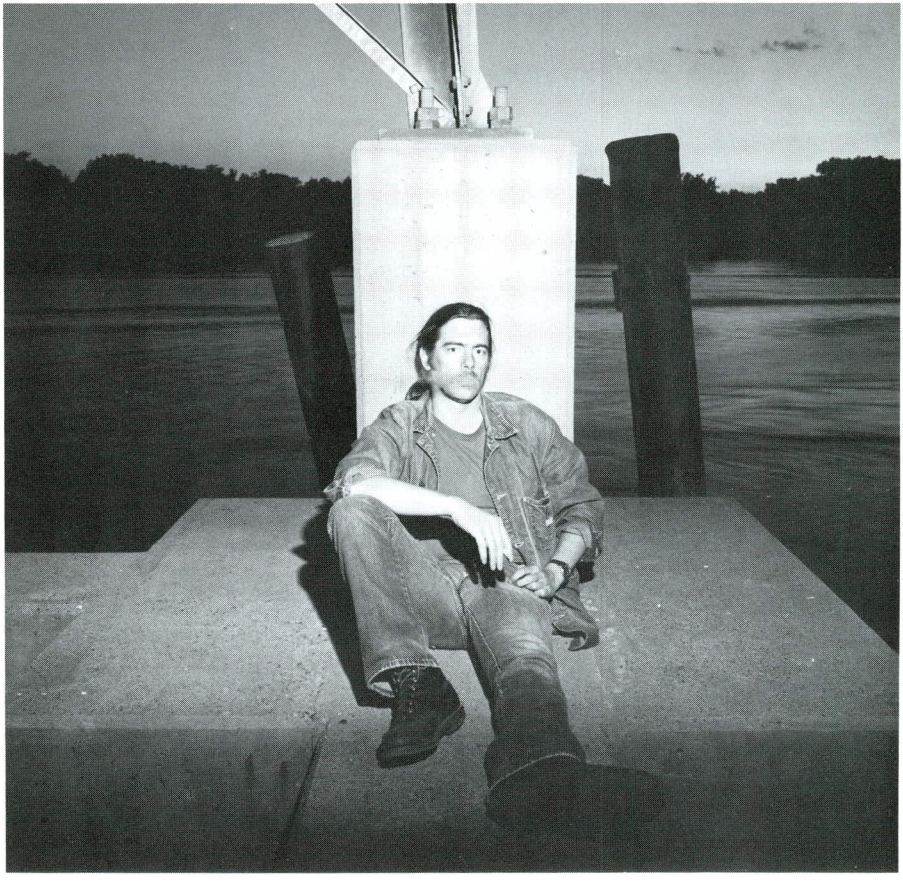



Cruiser



FICTION

Peter Turchi

SHOP TALK

I am strangely silent in a barber's chair. "Thin it out," I'll say. "Take it a little shorter. Regular back." The haircut begins and the silence settles like the barber's apron.

There used to be an exception: one barber learned that he and I drove the same model Pontiac. He would ask what sort of mileage was I getting and had I seen the new models. My answers were short and to the point ('About 20" and "No"), and after another minute of idle chatter he would resign himself to having only the clips and hums of his tools for company.

It's not that I'm unfriendly, or even that I'm normally quiet. It's just that I stop talking the minute I surrender my glasses. I'm nearsighted to the point that I can't tell a can of hairspray from a drinking glass, and when I take off my glasses I drift into a pleasant calm, afloat on a sea of unidentifiable objects.

Maybe that's the right explanation, maybe it isn't; maybe the problem is psychological; maybe it's hereditary. I can remember hearing my father say, when my mother shouted to him as he watched a football game, or when a persistent voice broke his train of thought, "Hold on. Let me put my glasses on

so I can hear you."

My father was my first barber. (This was back before either one of us wore glasses.) Every other Friday my father would take me down to the one small room in our basement that still had a bare cement floor. The hot water heater was in there, and so was the oil burner, so it tended to be warm. I would prop myself on top of an old stool and play with the dials of an ancient unrepaired radio while my father brought out a gray and white striped cardboard box. With great ceremony he would lift off the cover, unfold the apron, tie it around my neck, and go to work.

Those haircuts were silent, probably because of the heat. I can still see my father, deep in concentration, his face flushed and dripping with sweat as he carefully trimmed my short hair. I could feel the heat of the motor of the old electric clippers, the dry hair, itching as it fell on the bridge on my nose, and the soft brush against the back of my neck as I momentarily disappeared in a cloud of powder.

Later, when I went to school and learned that not all boys had their hair cut by their fathers, the silence in the basement grew hostile. I began to complain to my mother. One day, after he slipped and nicked my neck, my father gave in and put the box away for good.

Two weeks passed, then three; it was four weeks before my father decided that I was "starting to look like a girl" (my hair nearly reached my ears) and that I needed a haircut. He took me out to the car and we drove to Sam's.

Sam was my father's barber and one of his good friends. They were both the sons of Italian immigrants. It's been a while, but I remember that Sam was bald, that he whistled whenever he stopped cutting someone's hair long enough to give you the latest *Superman* and the correct change for the soft drink machine, and that he loved to talk politics.

"You know what?" he would ask. "My property taxes go up again. Three years now, three times they go up. I tell my wife start looking for an apartment." He'd snap the apron, sending locks of hair up into the air before they drifted to the floor. "You'd think we pay enough taxes already, right?"

I was twelve and didn't much care about property taxes; I was more worried about whether Superman was going to find the kryptonite that had been planted on Jimmy Olsen.

So I got used to having my father continue his own conversation with Sam while I sat quietly through my haircut. There were only two questions Sam directed to me. After he finished he'd say, "You want some bubblegum?" Then he'd smile and hand over two pieces of Bazooka. And before we began he'd ask, "What about the back? Square or regular?" I had no idea what he meant; hoping for the least damage, I said, "Regular." To this day, the only thing I know about haircutting is that I wear my hair with a regular back. I have no idea what that means. I never asked.

One other thing about Sam. Being an Italian, he liked to talk with his hands. This never bothered me until my chin hairs started to show and Sam gave me my first shave with a straight razor. Watching him talk, seeing that sharpened blade leap in the air from my ear to my nose as he argued with my father over the Mayor's plans for the Inner Harbor, I made a decision: to this day I have a beard.

My senior year in high school my family moved. My father began going to a barbershop near his office and so, for the first time, I went to get my haircut alone.

Calvin's Barbershop was owned by a man about thirty who had married a girl who still went to my high school, but even that didn't lead to conversation. He seemed slightly embarrassed about talking about his wife's American History class—the only one we were in together—and I had my glasses by that time, so the silence was mutual.

One day I was in the third chair, by the window, while a man waiting for his turn read the newspaper.

"This Earl Weaver," the man said. "This Earl Weaver's the best manager in major league baseball, I'm tellin' you. A few years from now nobody's gonna remember what Hank Bauer *looked* like. This Weaver's a genius." He looked up from the paper. "Am I right?"

Calvin and I were the only ones in the shop. I couldn't tell which one of us he was looking at, but Calvin didn't answer.

"Am I right?" the man asked again. "Is he a genius?"

"He's a genius," I said.

"And that Brooks Robinson," he said. "Brooksie is an incredible ballplayer." He was getting excited. "Three-for-four with three rbi's, a homerun and a double. And I don't have to tell you about his glove. Is he a fantastic ballplayer or what?"

I assumed the question was rhetorical. I was wrong.

"Is he fantastic?"

"He's fantastic," I said.

So began my career as a Greek chorus. The favorite subjects in barbershops around the country have always been sports and politics, and I grew used to being a polite audience, nodding and agreeing and grumbling in shared protest against the Orioles' loss or Mayor Schaefer's latest decree.

But then I left home. I went to college on Maryland's Eastern Shore, and then I traveled. I went to Europe, settling for a while in England (I was in a barbershop in Oxford the day John Lennon was killed). I was thousands of miles away when my father died. Most of the small things that had seemed important when I was young seemed irrelevant now, and changed forever.

When I came back to the United States I moved to Tucson, Arizona, to teach. I didn't know anyone, and it took me a while to get settled. After two false starts I found the barber I have now. Somehow I had always managed to avoid the new breed of barbershops, places that serve both men and women and call themselves "hairstyling salons." The shop I go to is called Anthony's Hairstyling, but it's small, I've never had my hair "styled," and the price is right.

But I'm not comfortable in Anthony's. It is run by a husband and wife, and my first appointment was with the wife. About half-way through she started to describe a class she was taking at a community college. She was learning to paint china. It was clear where the conversation was heading, and finally she asked me if I'd like to see some of her work.

"Sure," I said. I didn't want to hurt her feelings. "Bring it in sometime."

"Oh, it's right here," she said.

And it was. She put down the clippers, walked over to the closet and brought over two plates. She stood in front of me, holding the plates high and making excuses, saying things like "The yellow isn't very good on this one," and "This is only the second pair I've done."

I didn't know what to say; she had forgotten to give me my glasses.

"They're fine," I said. "Very pretty."

"Tony doesn't like them," she said. "He says you can't even tell what they are."

She paused, prompting me. I thought I'd embarrass her if I asked for my glasses now; anyway, I could make out a tree limb.

"Sure you can," I said. "They're birds, aren't they?"

It was the wrong answer. "Even *he* could see that," she said, worried. But what *kind* of birds?"

There was a heavy silence. I squinted, but it didn't help. I made a calculated guess.

"Sparrows?"

She sighed, disappointed. "Robins. I guess the red should be brighter."

After that first visit I've always had my hair cut by her husband. He's a friendly man with a round face and glasses, and he wears his hair like I wear mine. He told me once that I'd go bald in about five hundred years. Strongest hair he had ever seen.

Only two things about Anthony bother me. For one, he doesn't like sports. I was in his shop the day the Preakness was run last year, and someone called to tell him the winner.

"Is that all?" he said. "What do I care about a horse race?"

When he hung up I considered telling him how Betsy Kupfer and I cut high school every Preakness day for four years to see the race, but when I mentioned the subject he said, "You know the definition of a horse race? A bunch of horses' asses watching a bunch of horses' asses."

The other problem is that Anthony has a bad memory. He keeps confusing me, not just with some other person, but with any number of other people. I corrected him the first time, but since then I've found it more interesting to play along. He'll greet me at the door and ask, "Moved into the new shop yet?" Or he'll wait until I'm in the chair, trying to remember me, then smile as it comes to him. "So," he'll say. "How are things at the observatory?"

Even at Anthony's it's still just a regular haircut: thin it out, shorten it up, regular back. Neaten the beard. And as barbers have become hairstylists and barber poles have disappeared, as haircuts have increased in price from two dollars at Sam's to ten dollars or more almost everywhere, the entire process of going to get a haircut has become unconscious. I go in, take off my glasses, close my eyes, and twenty minutes later I'm on my way.

But once it was different. Last summer I drove across the country, and on my way I stopped in Kansas City to see some in-laws. I was a day early, so I wandered down to Hermann, Missouri, bought some wine at a local winery, had a sausage sandwich, and late in the afternoon, with nothing else to do, I searched for a barbershop.

It had a small front with a big plate glass window framing the first chair. The letters on the window spelled, simply, Barber Shop, and on each side of the window was a red-white-and-blue striped pole.

I went inside. An older man with hardly any hair at all was being attended to by a younger but still old man with gray hair cut simply. I looked up at his sign above the cash register: Haircut $4.

I looked at the front page of the newspaper while the barber and his customer finished a conversation about the Kansas City Royals. At the cash register the older man paid, the barber offered him his change, and the older man waved it away. They had done it all before.

The barber turned from the cash register. "John used to play with the Boston Braves back in the 1920's. He still watches all the ballgames." He snapped his apron and motioned me forward. "What'll it be?"

I told him.

"Can I take those glasses for you?"

He took them and settled down to work, combing the hair out, snipping precisely. Through the window I could vaguely see the Missouri River flowing in the sunset. I turned to follow it east but the barber stopped my head.

"That's the problem with good scenery," he said. "You could lose an ear to it."

I held still. It was peacefully quiet; the only sounds were the ones accompanying the choreographed production going on just out of sight. Then my eye caught something across the room. It was dark and box-shaped and instantly familiar.

I asked him if it was a radio.

"What?" He followed my gaze. It was just a box. "I know the kind you mean," he said. "Wife and I used to have a big old Emerson, but you can't get the tubes for it anymore."

The silence settled again. Then, before I could stop myself, I was talking, telling him about the radio in our basement, and how I'd played with the dials while my father cut my hair.

"That's what got me started," the barber said when I finished. "My father. There were four boys in our family, six years apart, and our father would just line us up and mow us down—by the time he was done you could hardly tell us apart. It was funny, too, because he had been at it for a long time." He repeated it, under his breath. "Long time."

The barber went on, explaining how his father had learned to cut hair. Something about shearing sheep, then joining the Army. I heard him mention crew cuts. Outside the shop someone stopped and waved. He waved back, never pausing. He didn't seem to mind that I was barely listening.

"So my father volunteered. They took him straight to the shop on the base and gave him the tools."

He turned me so that I faced the mirror as he clipped. While he talked I looked ahead, and instead of seeing my own blur of face and beard, and a vague light blue rectangle where the barber's jacket should have been, I saw my father standing over me, biting his tongue, sweat on his forehead; then it was me, standing over a boy becoming increasingly impatient.

The barber put down the scissors and combed my hair. I asked him to trim the beard.

"Well, the sergeant asked my father, 'What do you think you're doing? Is this your idea of a joke?' And my father was scared stiff, so he says, 'No, sir,' and explains.

"So the sergeant, he sits back and laughs and laughs. He says he guesses anybody with that much enthusiasm deserves a second chance. On the other hand, he says, 'We're going to have a rebellion around here if these men can't get decent haircuts.' So he told my father that if he'd work for free—they usually got fifteen cents a head—he could keep working."

The barber finished trimming my beard, handed me my glasses, and held up a mirror.

"Okay?"

"Fine."

He unsnapped the apron and powdered the back of my neck. He kept talking, but I stopped trying to focus on the words. Instead I remembered an older, vaguely familiar story about a summer job driving foreign cars to their new owners, and a near wreck in the mountains of West Virginia.

The barber lifted the apron neatly, letting the hair fall onto the floor. I stood up and took out my wallet.

I asked him if his father ever got paid.

"Eventually," the barber said. "He got better with practice. But even years later he could only cut hair one way: the Army way. My brothers and I didn't think much of that. When we got older we started cutting each other's hair the way we liked it, and that was the end of our father's career as a barber." He closed the drawer of the cash register.

I told him why my father had stopped, and I asked him if he had ever thought that he and his brothers might have done the wrong thing.

The barber looked at me as if he knew that I was listening for the first time.

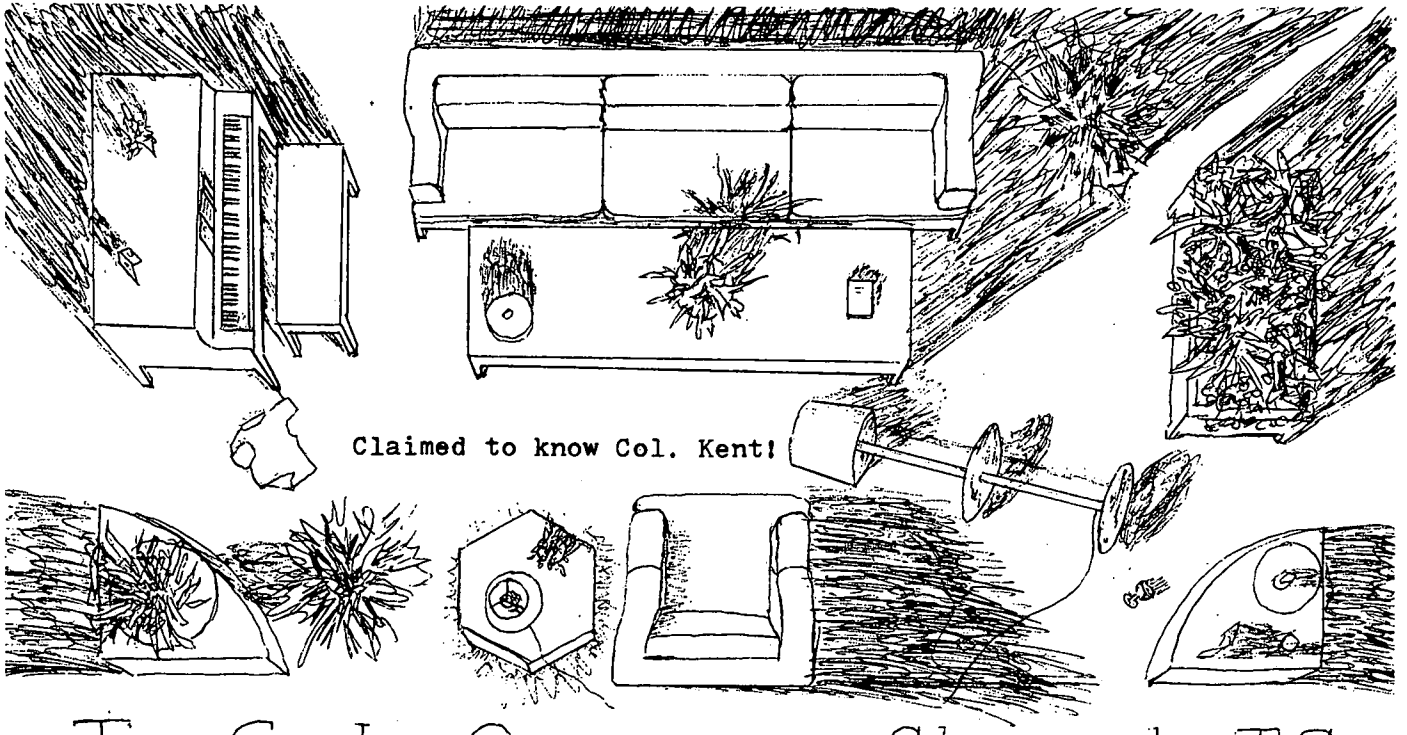
"Sure," he said: "Sure I did. But I really don't think cutting our hair meant that much to him. He never said anything, and later on I got the feeling that he was just as happy not to have to bother with it."

I told him that was probably true; it probably didn't make much difference. But I also told him that I couldn't help thinking that there was something mean about the way we had stopped them, and that I could still remember how my father looked in the car the first time he drove me to Sam's Barbershop.

The barber walked me to the door; he was finished for the day. "Well," he said, "it's something to think about." He smiled and told me to come again some time.

When I stepped outside he closed the door, then waved through the glass before pulling the blinds. I looked out to the river, then walked along the street as cars turned to head home.

After my father died I helped my mother sort through his things, and I found the old box where he kept his barber tools. I still have them. They aren't much good—the scissors are rusty, and the clippers were old even then—but I've still got them, still in that box, buried in a closet somewhere. I'll never use them. But sometimes, when I'm in a barber's chair, and if I listen carefully, I can hear my father talking.



Joe Sark's Outrageous Claim • by JS

Anthony Di Renzo

THE SINGER AND THE SONG

Not much to do in Freehold. 'Cept hang around the bus station with all the other burnouts. We're all sprawled there, drinking Coors. Me and Danno and Leroy and the Gimp. It's hot alright. . . . But not nearly as hot as it's been. It's the tail end of summer, and we're trying not to think about school.

"Freehold sucks." I crush my can and toss it in the trash.

"Tell me about it," says Danno.

"Brucie Baby came out of Freehold," says Leroy.

"But then he split ta Asbury Park," I say.

We sit there, feeling this mutual betrayal.

"Bummer," says Leroy.

"Pass me another cold one," says Danno.

I tear off a can from one of the rings. The sweat on it glistens.

"Springsteen, man," Leroy says.

We sit there, guzzling. All except Gimp. He sips his like tea and keeps to himself.

"He'the last rocker left," Danno says.

"The Boss," says Leroy.

I burp. "No bullshit at his concerts. Just pure rock 'n roll."

"Can't get that no more," says Danno.

"Everthing's gotten so bogus," I say.

"Flashing lights, costumes, make-up."

Leroy snorts. "That's just jive. Brucie don't *need* no flashing lights. Brucie got the light inside."

Springsteen, man. We always talk about him. Especially whenever he's in town. The man's in our words. He's in every sentence. If we talk about him enough, we think he'll appear.

Like that time he picked up O'Grady on Newman Springs Road.

O'Grady is this snaggletoothed basketball hotshot who goes to the Academy with me and the Gimp. The Academy is way out in the country. Nothing there at night but dark and damp.

Practice ends late, and O'Grady has to thumb it back to Freehold. Cars pass him by. He's stranded on the road. The crickets and peepers are getting on his nerves.

O'Grady checks his watch. . . . One o'clock. *Shit.* A cow moans, and headlights cut the dark. O'Grady stands in the middle of the road. A car pulls over. A salmon pink '55 Cadillac. Sleek. The engine's purring, and the window rolls down. The tape deck's blaring. O'Grady leans over. The driver's silhouetted in the darkness.

"You know how to get to Freehold?"

A low gravelly voice in the darkness says, "Yeah; I know how ta get ta Freehold."

O'Grady throws his stuff in the back and gets in. They barrel down Newman Springs Road. O'Grady's stretched out in the back; his big sneaks propped up against the headrest. The driver pops "Born to Run" into the tape deck. O'Grady taps his feet. He drums on the window with his fingers.

"You like Springsteen?" the guy up front says.

"He's the greatest," says O'Grady.

He tilts his head back and closes his eyes.

He's about to drift off, when he gets the feeling the guy up front is smiling at him. He doesn't have to see it: he can sense it. Then he realizes who's driving.

O'Grady bolts upright. He stares at the driver. Springsteen slaps the dash and laughs.

The next day, O'Grady writes a poem. It gets published in *The Torch*, the

school paper. The first part goes:

I was lost in the dark
On a long, lonely road
When my soul was resurrected
By the King of Rock 'n Roll. . .

It doesn't get better.

I suppose that was corny; but unless you've been to a Springsteen concert, you wouldn't understand. It's more than a performance—it's a fucking celebration. It's a rite and a riot and Marines on Iwo Jima. Springsteen is *there*, man. He's radioactive. He's lightning and fire and whirlwind and hail. Power, man. Energy in denim. It's scary the way he holds you in his hand.

I remember that time he sang "Jungleland." He got us so worked up that if he had said go, we could've torn that place apart. The song's about street gangs, and Springsteen howled like a wounded animal. He was mourning from his soul. The cops were getting nervous, but they shouldn't have. Violence isn't Bruce's thing. Springsteen is joy, man. The joy of raising a little hell because the System always has its teeth in you. That grit in his voice. Life taught him that. You can tell he's kicked ass—but you can also tell he's gotten his own ass kicked. And when he dances, man; that's something else. Those back kicks. Jesus. He reaches for the sky. You reach, too. That's the thing about Springsteen. When Springsteen dances, everybody dances. Even when you're sitting, you're dancing with the Boss. That's why I love him; and I can't even see him. I'm stuck here in Freehold, beating my meat. Can't buy a ticket. The Garden State Art Center's less than 20 miles away, and I can't see Springsteen 'cause I don't have the bread.

It's getting dark. The streetlights are just coming on. All of us are buzzed—but not happy buzzed.

"Friday night in Freehold," I say. "Beat."

"Let's go see Bo Derek," says Danno.

"You always wanna see Bo Derek," I say.

Danno's got a Neanderthal face. His eyebrows join at the bridge of his nose.

"Come on, Amato. She's playing at the Pond."

"We saw it already."

"Who cares!"

"You wouldn't even know what to *do* with Bo Derek, if you had her."

Danno frowns. "Oh yeah. Well at least I'm not a faggot like you, Amato. Going to an all-boys school."

Gimp bows his head and winces.

"You and your friend over there. Going to an all-boys school."

"*Can it*," I say.

Leroy lies back and puts his hands behind his head. "Forget it, man. Forget it," he says.

We look up at the sky. The streetlights blot most of it out. . . . But if you look hard enough, you can see a few stars.

"Let's start a race riot," Leroy says.

"How'd we do that?"

"You could call me a nigger."

I wouldn't call Leroy a nigger for anything. He's small but wiry, and there's a razor scar on his cheek.

"Go ahead," says Danno.

"Shut up," I say.

Leroy yawns. "Can't even start a race riot," he says.

Danno nudges a can with his foot.

"Let's face it," I say. "The last exciting thing around here was when the racetrack caught fire."

"That was something," Danno says. "All those sirens."

"Sometimes I wonder if you guys didn't start it," I tell Leroy.

He and Danno exchange looks.

"Maybe we did and maybe we didn't," he says.

He winks, but I don't think it's funny.

"So whadda we do?" says Danno.

Gimp mumbles something.

"Speak up, Del Vecchio." I love Gimp, but he sometimes bugs the shit out of me. It's not just the leg brace and it's not just the glasses. It's his whole attitude. Gimp acts like they used to drop rocks on him in his cradle.

"Speak up," I say.

"Uh . . . maybe we can go to the Springsteen concert tomorrow."

We all laugh.

"Sure, Gimp. How we gonna do that?" I say.

He takes out a pair of tickets from his pocket. The three of us gawk.

"Whereja get *them*?" says Danno.

"Been saving up."

"Let me see 'em," I say.

He holds them up. They're a light pastel blue.

"They're bad," says Leroy.

"How come you been keepin' this under your hat?" I say.

"I wanted it to be a surprise."

"So who ya takin'?" Danno says. Gimp's upper lip disappears. "Well?"

"I was thinking of going with Johnny."

"It figures," says Danno.

I give him a look.

"J-J-Johnny's my f-friend."

"Yeah. We know what kind of friend he is."

"Please, Danno."

"Look, it's the man's ticket," says Leroy.

"Why should Amato go?! He's seen Springsteen dozens a times! I've never seen Springsteen!"

"J-J-Johnny's my friend."

He grabs Gimp's wrist. "Gimme those tickets."

"Danno, please."

"GIMME THOSE TICKETS!"

I give him one across the mouth. Danno lands on his back.

"You shit."

"Protectin' yr boyfriend, Amato?"

I take Gimp's arm. "Come on," I say.

Gimp hobbles along.

"Faggots!" says Danno.

I hear Gimp sniffling.

"Don't look back."

"Faggots!" says Danno.

There's dead silence between us on the Parkway. You can hear the engine coughing under the hood of my Dodge.

"About yesterday."

"Forget it," I say.

It's impossible to stay mad at Gimp. Gimp's been abused. I've been to his house. His mother treats him like dirt. She does her nails all day and reads soap opera magazines. Gimp does all the cooking and cleaning. It's never good enough for her. She's a cocktail waitress who never made Carnegie Hall. She blames Gimp for that. She keeps telling him she should've had an abortion. I can almost understand why Gimp's father left. Almost. I got no pity for people who don't make an effort. When Gimp's dad lost his job at the factory, he lay down and died. He'd smoke cigars on the john and watch reruns of *The Honeymooners*. He went through women and liquor and smashed up the car. Then he blew town. He bailed out and left Gimp holding the bag. That's treason, man. I mean it. Letting your kid go through puberty alone should be a capital offense.

I always thought Gimp was a loser until my old man died. The asbestos finally got him. Gimp was the only one from school who came to the funeral. He stood beside me. I remember the fat priest standing over my old man's grave.

"*O death, where is thy sting?*"

In my fucking heart, father. I drew myself up and fought back tears. Gimp touched my arm.

Okay, so he's a geek. But where were the rest of you fuckers when I needed you?

I look at Gimp. He's gazing out the window, lost, lost.

"Hey," I say. "We'll go to a Mickey D's after the concert."

"Okay," he mumbles.

I shake my head. "Goddamnit," I say.

We arrive at the Arts Center early—along with the rest of New Jersey. People carry lawn chairs and wear Springsteen T-shirts. Me and the Gimp look for our seats. Gimp keeps talking about the Arts Center. He says it reminds him of this amphitheater in this place called Taormina. That's over in Sicily. Gimp was visiting his grandmother. I nod my head and pretend to listen; but I'm really checking out foxes. Springsteen draws them like beetle lure. I'm hoping to get some leftovers.

We find our seats. Not bad; halfway down and over to the left. Everything's set. . . . Then this buffalo in this waxy yellow organdy dress plants her ass in front of me.

"Let's move," I say.

"We can't."

"I'm sittin' behind a *grapefruit* for Chrissake!"

"Johnny, we can't."

I crane my neck. "Let's find different seats."

"But the concert's sold out."

"Somebody always cancels. Trust me."

Gimp doesn't like it, but he follows me down. I *know* there's a couple of seats out there; I can feel it. We scout around. The old Amato radar comes through.

Front row center. A couple's arguing. Two refugees from the 60's. She's got tie-dyed jeans and long blond hair, which she's starting to touch up. Her eyes give off sparks. Her boyfriend's a winner. A potbellied guy in a corduroy jacket. The jacket is covered with protest buttons. He's got baby blue eyes and a bald spot. You can tell she's chewing him out. He stands there and takes it, his face chalky. His Adam's apple bobs and he grits his teeth. Then he says something. Her mouth hangs open. Suddenly, she looks old. She slaps his face and runs out, crying. He runs after her. We take their seats.

"What if they come back?"

"They won't," I say.

People like that don't belong at a Springsteen concert.

We wait for sundown. The crowd stomps.

"*Bruce! Bruce! Bruce! Bruce! . . .*"

The stage lights fade up. The band files in, one by one. Springsteen steps onto the stage. Explosion. The same roar from five thousand voices. Seismic. Springsteen absorbs it. He stands there and smiles. Levis, biker boots and a white sport shirt. The sleeves are cut off. Brucie's been pumping.

Springsteen nods and the band strikes up. "Born in the USA." Cheers. We clap in time and sing along. This is *our* song, and Brucie knows it. It's about

America. The real America. The one nobody wants to talk about. It's about raw deals; and being screwed. And all that shit about Vietnam that was never really cleared up. People wave flags. America, man. You love it and hate it. Don't ask me to explain. You take it up the ass and you're lied to left and right, and still you wanna stay. Crazy. I guess you love it because it's home. Not because it's great, or because it's everything they say it is. Because it's home. Home, man, home.

"*I'm a cool rockin' Daddy in the USA!*"

My throat tightens. As far as I'm concerned, it's the national anthem.

It's a great concert. Springsteen breaks and raps with the audience. He imitates a TV evangelist.

"I wanna tell you how rock 'n roll saved my soul," he says.

We laugh and applaud. The walk and the accent are perfect.

Springsteen goes into this long spiel about when he was a kid. He says the nuns wanted him to play basketball, but that God had other plans.

"If you won't believe *my* testimony, listen ta Brother Big's."

The Big Man, Clarence Clemons, lugs over. He's the biggest black man I've ever seen. He's lost some weight, but he's still huge. A saxophone hangs from his shoulder. He wears black leather pants and a tiger print shirt.

"Brother Big," says Springsteen. "Tell the congregation what I was like before I accepted rock 'n roll."

"You were ugly," says Clarence.

Springsteen says that when he and Clarence first teamed up, they were two lost souls on unemployment. They jerked around mostly, and hit every bar from Newark to Camden.

One night, while they were coming home, they got a flat near the swamps of Jackson. A thunderstorm came up and drove them into the woods. They were lost and scared. Lightning knocked them off their feet. When they came to, they were in a clearing. A sax and a guitar hung from the branches of an elm.

"Let the Spirit sing!" says Springsteen.

Clarence cuts loose and goes into a solo. His sax gleams. The band jams, and Clarence wails for a good ten minutes. We want more.

"Do you believe," says Springsteen, "that if you died at this concert, due to excitement, that you'd go to HEAVEN?"

"YES!" we go.

A groupie next to Gimp screams and jumps up and down. She's mighty fine. Short shorts and no bra. *Una bella chiavata*, my grandpa would have said. Gimp smiles at her, shyly. She glares and curls her lip. Bitch.

The band starts "Dancing in the Da." Everybody sways. This is the song where Springsteen picks somebody out of the audience to dance with. All of us up front are on the edge of our seats.

Bruce struts back and forth, singing. He points in our direction. The groupie squeals and jumps out of her seat. Her tits bounce. Bruce smiles and shakes his

head. He wants Gimp. Gimp shakes his head wildly, but Springsteen insists. He stretches out his hand. Gimp takes it. Springsteen helps him up to the stage.

The crowd goes wild. Gimp is confused. He's not sure the whole thing's a joke. Springsteen dances all around him. Gimp looks sad. Springsteen stops and shows him how. He plants his leg, and lets the other one do all the work. He swings his hips and moves his shoulders. A nice, easy, fluid motion. Gimp tries. It's pretty spastic. Springsteen encourages him and he catches on. I can't believe it. Gimp is dancing. He's hardly moving, but he's dancing.

Springsteen picks up the mike. They put a spot on Gimp. Springsteen sings and Gimp dances. He molds Gimp with his words. Bruce is the singer and Gimp is the song. He gives Gimp a whole new body. When it's over, it's like an ocean. Gimp stumbles over and hugs the Boss.

It's 1:45. I'm driving home. Gimp is asleep in the front. His face glows. He smiles peacefully. I've seen that look before.

Gini Moro and me made it together in the Freehold Motel on Route 9. It was both our first time. There was a picture of a forest with a waterfall above us. I looked down at Gini. Her face was like Gimp's.

I'm seventeen years old, and I've seen plenty. I've seen my old man die of cancer because of the asbestos in his place. I've seen my cousin come home in a body bag and Mrs. De Luna's goiter. But I've also seen Springsteen dance with the Gimp, and it kind of balances things out.

I guess that's life; and it's pretty amazing.

But I still think Freehold sucks.

Kathleen Maher

WATER BABIES

Water babies talk under water. They never wear bathing suits and two or three times when Jamie and I bobbed for air, the sandbar shifted, taking our suits with it. This made Jamie's mother livid. At least that's what my mom said—to my dad. "Cynthia Everett's reaction scares me," she said, "I mean I'm not crazy about their skinny-dipping either. But Cynthia, who can afford new swimsuits a lot easier than I, gets livid over it."

All summer, Jamie's mom Cynthia wore lace-up-the-front bathing suits with matching wrap-around dancing skirts and thong sandals. My mom (who's named Judy) wore tennis and jogging clothes. Both my mom and Cynthia would occasionally tie a bandanna around their foreheads. But once my mom mentioned that these were to absorb sweat, Jamie and I vowed never to use them.

Our trademarks were barrettes with streamers, lilac moccasins or ballet shoes, and chocolate peanut butter ice cream. Besides water babies, we used to play two other secret games: Horror Stories and First Night Romance. To play Horror Stories, you spend a rainy, thundery summer night at a friend's house. You go outside and brave the elements—toes squishing in black wet dirt, face tilted to the

storm, hair and clothes plastered to your bones. Jamie would hum this spooky song. Water blinded us and lightning flashed in the treetops. When we were scared out of our wits, we'd race back inside, towel off, and hop into a big bed with lots of blankets where we'd whisper grisly stories about the most horrible babysitters in the world.

First Night Romance we did only once. Each of us took a turn being the boy. When Jamie was the boy—we called him Brad—the couple ended up bickering about Coke versus Pepsi. But when I played Brad, the pair reclined in the grass. They kissed for a long, long time. Not on the lips, of course, on the cheek. "Honey," Bradley said, "your skin is luscious." And it really was—like vanilla toffee. I kissed Jamie's face and forgot what I was doing. My head swelled up like a balloon and finally when it was about to burst, I yanked myself up. "Get sensible," I said. And we shook ourselves and straightened our clothes. Jamie's glasses had slipped and she repositioned them on her wide round nose. "That game's too sweaty," Jamie said and I said, "I swear." So we abandoned it forever.

* * *

Scraping my knees was never a big deal but I was also scraping my nose and forehead a lot. Every morning I practiced handsprings, back flips, handstands, and the splits. When the palms of my hands got pocked from tiny stones, I'd allow myself a break, facedown in the hammock. I'd kick at the bald spot between the black willows and listen to the birds and hot weather insects. The grass and hedges, honeysuckle, fruit trees, a few stunted roses—the smell made me swoon. My plan was to develop a remarkable acrobatic ability before Jamie and I started eighth grade. Having watched the eighth graders carefully the year before, I figured acrobatics was more important than anything. This was my idea: I'd casually do a stunt or two before a few gym classes and pretty soon Jamie would risk her life to be my friend again.

* * *

My mom leaned on the horn and I dragged myself around from the side of the house. "Hurry up and help me with the groceries, Lonely Puss." So I hoisted a brown bag and plodded into the kitchen, screen door slamming. The house was dark compared to the sunshine but not noticeably cooler. Shadows and deeper shadows skimmed the table, cabinets, and counters. My mom dumped her bags on the butcher block and removed the car keys from between her teeth. "I've been trying to recall if your sister ever went through a phase like this." I was tempted then to stick out my tongue in response but, as in everything else, my mom beat me to it and said, "Why don't you call Jamie?"

"Because if Jamie wants to be my friend again, she'll call me."

"I ran into Cynthia at the grocery store," my mom said, tearing the wrapper

off a cherry juice popsicle. "The Everett's divorce is in the works, though I don't think Jamie's dad has moved out yet—he wants to take you and Jamie to lunch."

"Mother, no."

"Friday. So if you don't want things to be awkward, you better call Jamie and make up with her."

Bending over the table, I stretched myself flat against the wood. "I don't believe it."

My mom patted my rump. "Prostrations won't help. Want to come to the beach?"

"I hate the beach."

"Carla, you can tell me about it or you can wait until the rates change and call your sister and tell her about it. You can tell your father about it. We're all willing to listen. Why don't you call Jamie? Her mother said she's moping around worse than you. And the main reason Cynthia cornered me at the meat section was because she wanted to make sure you didn't wriggle out of this lunch. She thinks you're the one who dropped Jamie."

"You know what happened, Mom. Jamie spent the weekend here while her mother was in the hospital and then afterwards she just wouldn't talk to me. She even said, 'Carla, I never want to see you again.'"

"Did you embarrass her somehow? Maybe about Cynthia's operation?"

"No, I didn't."

"Then do you think we hurt her feelings while she was here? Your father teases her so much."

"Jamie loves Dad. And she couldn't care less about her mom's nose job."

"I don't know, Carla. Are you sure you're not leaving something out? Are you sure you're giving me the whole picture?"

* * *

After losing a couple of good bathing suits, Jamie and I wore second-hand Speedos. The day we lost those, Jamie's mother was watching from the patio. She claimed, her mouth twitching madly, that she saw us dive, four white pears flashing after our suntans. She saw us dive and dive and come up empty-handed. We lolled on our backs for a while, our two heads dividing the white caps. We splashed near the shore and came out, stark, sleek naked. Water beading on our skin, dripping from our hair, we skipped along the sands. We snatched our towels and bounded up the steps. Jamie sunk her head between her shoulders. And at the top, I noticed her invert her mouth, suck in her lips until they didn't show.

Immediately, Cyntia started screaming at us. She couldn't believe her eyes. Had she really seen what she'd just seen?

"What?" Jamie said and her mother slapped her. The sound was fierce and before it even stopped ringing, before I dared to look, Cynthia collapsed in a lawn chair and covered her face with her hands. Then Jamie shoved me in the

small of the back, pushing me through the side door.

"Is *she* crying?" I said.

"Yes, dummy. Now shut up." Jamie dragged me into her red and white checked bedroom, the only room in the house without Japanese accents. "The reason she gets so angry," Jamie said, "is because my dad does the same thing: he loses bathing suits."

That (plus some other stuff) happened a long time ago but I still can't believe Shef Everett ever lost anything. Shef was so nice. When Jamie and I were still in seventh grade he started taking us on special dress-up expeditions. Once a month, at least, he escorted us to some art exhibit or ballet or opera. Now with anyone else this would have been ultra-boring, but with Jamie's dad it was sort of fun. Jamie and I would preen in our dresses, velvet or linen depending on the season, and eat chocolate pastilles as Shef gallantly dropped little tidbits of info about whatever we were supposed to be seeing.

My dad, on the other hand, might take us to a PG movie, but even then, only on the spur of the moment. Good old Henry just wouldn't think of arranging a bonafide date with his daughter. He did once take us horseback riding, and once to a roller rink. But mostly he just hung around with us, as if by accident. When not at work, my dad wears baggy old clothes and sometimes, on the weekends, he doesn't even shave. Then let's say I complained that his face scratched me. My mother, if she was within earshot, would explain the comment. "Preteens tend to get very concerned about hygiene." She also explained to him—in front of both me and Jamie—that we were too big to be picked up and tossed over his shoulder.

Shef Everett would never roughhouse like that. To show he was listening very carefully to you, he'd cock his head to one side and nod enthusiastically. He carried an umbrella with a carved wood handle. Dapper from cultural exposure, he and Jamie and I used to click and clack over the city streets. We'd go to Shef's favorite restaurant where he ate thymus glands in such a cool, elegant way, we girls didn't bat an eye, let alone retch. We always split his watercress garnish and ate two pieces of praline cheesecake apiece.

* * *

Lying on my parents' bed, I was flexing my back when the phone rang. I flipped up, chin to my knees, and landed with a spin on my butt. Looming over the white Trimline, I yelled for my mother or father to answer it. Before I said hello, I wanted to know who was calling: Jamie or Shef. But it was someone for my dad.

A lunch date with Shef was nothing unusual. It was actually normal, except that no one had said anything about a long dull performance before the food. The only truly unusual thing was that Jamie had called off our friendship. At first I had persisted like crazy. I couldn't believe we'd gone from blood sisters to

strangers overnight. But Jamie made herself clear. She said, "Get out of here, Carla. I can't stand the sight of you."

The phone rang again and my nose slammed down on my knee. Tilting my head back, I wiped the blood with my hand and my mother huffed in and picked up the receiver. "Hi Shef," she said. "Yes, Carla's right here, a bit worse for wear." She handed me the phone and Shef invited me to lunch.

"Jamie's coming too, isn't she?"

"I hope so," Shef said. "I'll pick you up at noon."

* * *

At 10:30 in the morning I watched a game show on TV and toyed with a few index cards. I was too distracted to practice my handsprings. I was already wearing my white dress with the navy trim. The game show host wanted to know what things you never unplug.

I tapped the index cards with a pen. On the top one I'd written, Topics of Conversation—Ice Breakers. I couldn't think of anything, though, and decided it was worth asking my mom. Leaving the TV on, I padded barefoot up to my parents' bedroom. I hovered in the doorway and brushed the index cards against my skirt. Still, my mother didn't look up. Head back and eyes closed, she lay in bed, her fingers and toes wiggling against shiny smooth pillows. Three baby steps forward and my knees pressed against the box springs. I cleared my throat and startled her. "Honey, what is it?" Her pink face glowed with pinpoints of moisture. I shifted my weight toward a shaft of sunlight.

"Nothing, Mom. Just nothing."

"Don't worry so much, Carla. This tiff with Jamie will blow over."

* * *

Shef was so rich, he only went to work when he felt like it. He paid other people to run the chain of fancy sporting goods stores he'd inherited so that he could paint watercolors and play his synthesizer and work out in his private gym. He liked to spend a lot of time with Jamie, playing games and old rock and roll tapes. But even I noticed he never exactly doted on Cynthia. Once when I spent the night, I watched Shef and Cynthia exchange a good morning kiss and it was the kind of no-breathing peck you'd give some great horrible old relative smothered in perfume.

He rang our doorbell, wearing a short sleeved linen shirt, cream colored slacks with pleats, and soft tan shoes. Not to be rude, but I couldn't help it: I darted out the door toward his little white car to see if Jamie was waiting in the front seat.

She wasn't. Shef closed the car door for me and I pinched my thighs to keep from blinking. The tree trunks at the end of the driveway shimmered and I concentrated harder. If I cried at all, if just one tear escaped, it would be the ultimate embarrassment.

Shef popped an opera into the tape deck and adjusted his sunglasses. Sopranos shrieked from the stereo and we zoomed into the city. He parked in a honeycomb parking lot. His hand when he took my arm shook more than usual. His hands always shook when he was excited, when he was about to blow us girls off the screen in some video game, for instance, or when he was spooning up the first taste of his favorite dessert, slightly crushed raspberries. But now his hands shook more than usual and the round little muscles by his jaw popped up and down. Since he didn't say anything, I didn't either.

We sat in the top tier of a dark little restaurant and when the waiter brought Shef the wine, he set two glasses on the table. My mouth closed tight around my first sip, which tasted strong and raw, as if the individual droplets had a secret life of their own. I took a sip of water. Sipping the wine and water alternately, I folded my hands on the tablecloth and asked, "Why didn't Jamie come?"

Shef cleared his throat. "I wanted to talk to you about that, Carla."

"Do you know why she's mad at me?"

"She's not mad at you. If she's angry at anyone, it's at me."

"No, she's mad at me. I don't know why, but she's definitely mad at me."

The waiter interrupted then, setting pots of oil and cheese on the table. He lit the sterno cans and uncovered large silver trays of meat, bread, and vegetables.

Shef speared a chunk of chicken, lost it in the pot, and poked around for it. "That night you girls showed up unexpectedly, when Jamie was supposed to be staying at your house . . . you came over at midnight to check on some rock experiment . . ."

"Yeah. We were making sedimentary rocks in shoe boxes. Every twenty-four hours was a millenium. And after every millenium we spread a different layer of plaster of paris and sand, or plaster of paris and pebbles, leaves, dirt, etcetera. We were watching TV in my bedroom when Jamie remembered we'd let two milleniums go by. So we snuck out and rode our bikes over to your house."

"And what did you see?"

"Nothing," I said and watched Shef, head down, fuss with the chicken chunk on his plate, dabbing it in different sauces with his trembly hands. "You saw me, didn't you? And my friend Kirk."

"I guess so. But then Jamie shoved me out of the way. She yanked my arm practically out of the socket and ran out of the house."

Shef looked up, directly at me, and rubbed his face. "That's the problem," he said. "That's what's wrong."

"What? What's wrong?"

"It's very difficult for Jamie to accept me right now, Carla. And since you know about me, she can't accept you either."

"Jamie doesn't care that much about the divorce. She told me; it's not going to change her life."

"She has an awful lot to contend with right now."

"But I'm her best friend."

"You saw me, though, Carla."

"I can't finish this," I said, pointing to the smear on my plate. Suddenly, I was crying, but I didn't care. "So I saw you in the living room. So what? I mean, so what?" My tears fell in the sauces on my plate. "So," I mumbled, "so stinking what?"

"Carla, everything will be okay."

Bawling out loud like an idiot or a baby, I made a dash for the bathroom. When I got back to the table the waiter had cleared the table and laid dessert menus by our spoons. Shef ordered two cappuccinos and mango sorbets. And I told him, "Everything will *not* be all right."

"It will," Shef said. "Kids heal fast. A month or two when you're young feels like a year."

"That's what makes it worse," I said. "You'll always be her father but I'm already nothing but her ex-best friend."

Shef's long fingers pressed against his temples. He sucked in his lips so they disappeared. Then he said, "I'm sorry, Carla. I know it's my fault but believe me, it can't be helped."

* * *

I fell asleep in my dress. When I woke up I noticed the bedspread had left a horrible imprint, like a rash, on my left cheek, arm, and leg. I changed into my striped shorts and told my mother I was going for a walk. Then I wandered through the ravine until I was floating over the stones. Only my shoes and shorts, my overlarge T-shirt anchored me to the path. This was a private game, making myself weightless. Weightlessness allows me to do all sorts of things I normally wouldn't dare. It's like being almost-invisible. The idea is: pure spirit. Reaching this state takes time, quiet, a certain rhythm. So I walked barely touching the ground, and hummed, lulling myself.

Mosquitoes bit my ankles and the backs of my knees. They buzzed in the air and carried me along in a cloud of heat and dust. I let the leaves and twigs scratch at me and the heavy air cling. My tongue snuck out from my lips to taste it, the sadness. The sticky salt taste of it set a strong, crackly shiver through my bones.

Then I was ready. Weightless, I stood outside Jamie's house. In a lawn chair near the terrace, I watched her room for signs of life. I circled the semi-famous house of concrete and steel, crouching in the thick hedges and aching for some sound or sign. Even bolder after waiting an hour or more, I rose up and danced across the lawn. I cartwheeled and somersaulted, flipped, fell, and walked four steps on my hands. A faultly handspring knocked the wind out of me. And I lay on my back, mud-streaked and sweaty, thinking the sky would embrace me—an

idea that finally, on top of everything else, embarrassed me so much that I scrambled to take myself *out of there.*

* * *

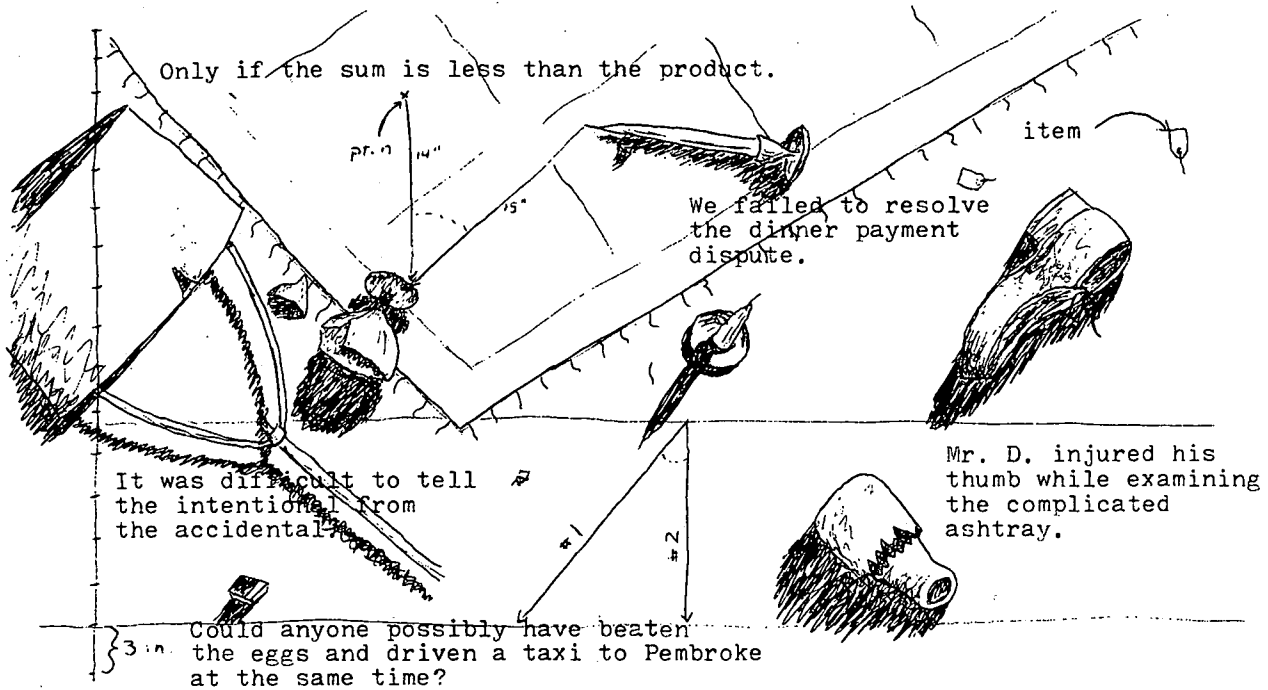
Shef's car was in our driveway when I got back. So I snuck through the garage door. Then I heard my parents thanking him for explaining everything. They were sorry for Jamie, sorry for him, and certain I'd get over it easily—I was the last one Shef should worry about. Then they wished Shef good luck in his new life. The front door slammed and my mom said to my dad, "Talk about dropping a bombshell. I had no idea about him, did you?"

Before I had to listen to another word, I zipped up the back stairs. I don't really know what the problem is but I know it's big. Big enough so that my mom, I bet anything, will want to have a talk with me. She'll explain Shef and explain Cynthia and explain Jamie. She might even draw diagrams, if not on paper, then in the air. Definitely she'll use that soft, serious, horrible voice reserved for "difficult" (i.e., disgusting) topics.

"Carla, please, listen to me," she'll say. "It's important that you understand these things."

Well, I already understand more than I can stand. I'm staring up at my ceiling and I understand perfectly that there's some kind of shapeless gray ache people get when they grow up. That ache sucks things up, devours them. Friendship, families, whole lives disappear in no time. I know about the ache because I can feel it swelling up in me right this minute. I'm staring at my ceiling. My wallpaper has huge pink, orange, and yellow flowers all over it and the ache reaches out for them, twisting and curling all over the place like a thousand strong fingers ready to grasp, before I can stop them, whatever they ever desire.

* * * * * *



The Question of Jones's Interference

by JS

Florri McMillan

PERFECT WEIGHT

Nobody knows exactly how Tony fell under the wheels of the five o'clock westbound Burlington Northern freight. It happened just early enough so that my wife Jean heard the news before supper and told me when I came in from the fields.

It was Wednesday, too, the night we all go to Champ's Bar to drink beer, so there was plenty of talk about it. My brother Dennis picked me up in his truck like he usually did, but we were a little late. He brought his wife over to sit with Jean, and the women were both upset, so we stayed a little before we left, to settle them down about it.

We didn't talk much driving into town. I watched the tracks, two silver ribbons trailing in the last light. Dennis and me, we used to walk side by side, balancing on those rails when we were kids. We held our arms out wide, and when one of us started to lose it, he'd touch the other's fingers, just lightly, to get right again. We'd walk the rails every nice night before supper, feeling the hum

of the wheels under our sneakers before we saw the train.

It was a terrible thing about Tony, hard to take in after all the years we'd known him, seeing him just about every day. He never married. "A blessing now," Champ said softly, wiping down the bar. Dennis and I sat on the stools with Charlie and the rest, talking about what would happen to Tony's gas station, the only one in town. We wondered whether Steve, his younger brother, could handle it by himself.

"He can do anything with a piece of machinery," Charlie said. "The problem is people. How could he explain to you what's wrong? Or order the parts? Or the gas?"

It was true. In thirty years no one had ever heard Steve say a single word, not since he and Tony came back from the war. It was the Japs that did it. He was holed up on one of those little islands, the rest of his outfit dead or run away. The Jap planes were everywhere, strafing. They got Steve out in '45, but he never spoke another word.

"He was alone for a long time," Tony used to explain.

Tony always called him "the little fella," even though Steve was taller by a long shot. They were a real pair. Tony was always laughing and joking, his wide smile crinkling up those round cheeks that were marked like the pox. Steve was skinny and silent, his sad eyes set deep in his lean face. His hair was thin and brown with a white patch on one side, just the opposite of Tony's, which was black and curly all over the place. We figured the Japs gave Steve his white hairs too.

Steve didn't come to Champ's the night Tony died. We didn't expect him to. He never went anywhere by himself. We didn't expect Father Carney that night either, but he came, and in his cassock.

"He slipped," Father said, very definite about it. "He lost his balance."

All the men at the bar made rumbling sounds deep in their throats and turned their glasses in their fingers, agreeing without saying so.

"Just slipped," Charlie mumbled and shook his head over his beer, looking like he might cry.

"He's in the Lord's hands," said Father and laid his hand on Charlie's shoulder. "That's his salvation."

I thought about the Bible, where it talks about the falling to be saved.

That would have been it, except Mac had to come in just then and sit down next to me.

"Heard about Tony." He said it as a fact, looking straight at the tap.

"Father says he slipped," Charlie answered quickly.

"The hell," said Mac, slapping his glass on the smooth wood.

"Keep it down," I told him, glancing over my shoulder at Father's long black skirt.

But Mac wasn't having any.

"They found blood on the wheels of the seventeenth car," he went on, his voice loud and flat. "He didn't slip under no seventeenth car now, did he?"

I looked at Dennis, shifting on his stool, and wished I was someplace else.

"That ain't what Father says," Charlie repeated softly.

"Well, what would he say? Tony's got to be buried in the graveyard, don't he? Father can't bury him if he laid on the tracks."

Mac's eyes flicked over us one by one as if he could read things we didn't understand ourselves. We weren't exactly afraid of Mac; he was too old and dog mean for that, but we kept our distance from him. His eyes on your face and the hard ring of his voice were like light beaming into dark corners. I wished he would stop talking now, or that Father Carney would take over and say something. Father had moved over to the cigarette machine. He stood like a statue, with his back to us.

Charlie turned to Mac, his eyes narrow.

"Jesus, Mac, you want us to truck him over to Amenia or something, to the Lutherans?" he asked.

Mac shrugged. "All I'm saying is, he didn't slip," he muttered, and took his glass over to a booth.

We all left early that night. We were upset by what Mac had said, and we didn't want to talk about Tony any more. Before we went home Father told us that the Mass would be Friday at four o'clock and burial after in the churchyard. So then we knew one thing for sure, Tony had slipped and fallen.

The next morning Dennis came over to help me combine wheat on my south forty, which yielded low because it had been hit hard by black stem rust. Goddam black spores multiplying on the bushes in farmyards till they're blown into the fields. Rotting the stalks of the wheat till harvest and then laying dormant on the dead straw till spring. You can't see 'em, of course. You got to get rid of the bush or the wheat, one or the other.

Driving the box truck alongside the combine, waiting for Dennis to open the chute, I thought about how many bad things survived in nature's deadly balance, like black stem rust and Tony's pain, as if they were some gift from God. Shit, the yield on this wheat wouldn't even pay for next year's seed.

When my truck was filled, I peeled off at the corner and headed down to the granaries. My mind skipped back to thway Tony and Steve had been when I was a kid, before Tony's troubles began. I remembered riding into town with my dad, in a truck like this, pulling up to the gas pumps, and Tony leaning on the running board, asking, "How's the crop, Joe?"

"Cross your fingers. Right now I could lay boards on those heads."

"You'll be rich this winter," Tony said, his eyes sparkling.

"Not at your prices, you robber," my dad laughed. "Fill 'er up!"

When Steve filled the tank he kept his eyes down on the ground. After awhile you got used to the fact that he didn't talk. It was like he never had talked in his whole life. You couldn't imagine what the sound of his voice would be. If one of the farmers spoke to him, he'd look over at Tony, his eyes darting bright as a bird, and Tony would answer for him. The only time he'd lift his eyes was when a plane flew overhead. He lowered the hose to the ground then, and watched the plane without moving, the nozzle dripping forgotten in his hand.

Once, when a plane flew over low and loud, I saw him throw himself onto the cement and wrap his arms around his head. He lay there in the grease without making a sound, the metal toes of his work shoes scraping against the concrete.

Tony stood and waited until the humming noise of the plane had faded, and you could hear the grasshoppers again. Then he walked over and touched Steve's shoulder, gentle as a mother, and said, "OK, little fella, it's over. Go get me the grease gun. It's all right now."

Steve lifted his head up real slow. He looked at Tony, and I saw in their eyes how it was that they had to be together.

I understood that look. It took me back to the time when Dennis and I were little and the tornado passed by. We were playing out in the orchard. The wind was wild, and we shouted like Indians, grabbing at the whipping branches, trying to catch a ride. Suddenly the air got still as death, and the sky turned dirty yellow so quickly that we knew something was going to happen, something we had never known. The rain began to fall gently, huge splattering drops. We stood still, letting it soak us, too scared to move. Then the wind came back fierce, driving the drops into our skin like jagged splinters. The lightning leaped through the thick, gray cotton of the sky, reaching for us, breaking the wind into cracks like a thousand rifles.

I was all alone, I watched the box elder tree beside me split open silently, the front of it falling slowly to the ground, leaving white wood standing, bleeding. Then the lightning bolt exploded inside me, into glittering pieces, and I knew I was dying.

From the center of fire I heard Dennis's voice cry, "Joey! Joey!"

I felt his body hit hard against mine, knocking me off balance, and we fell, rolling, to the ground together, clinging to each other to be saved.

We never talked about it after, how the lightning hit, but the tree was there to remind us, making us nervous to look each other in the eye. It took the stripped wood a long time to weather to gray, and it was October before we walked the rails together again, holding hands and balancing loosely on the tips of our joined fingers.

My dad had built the granaries close together in the pasture at the north end of the coulee. I drove my load in through the gate and closed it against the handful of weaned heifers I could see on the near side of the water. Then I pulled the truck onto the platform of the old Fairbanks Morse scale and got down from the cab to check the position of the wheels. She was on pretty straight. No driver knows exactly how that scale works. There's an arched steel semi-circle under the platform, but you can't ever see it. When the truck is pulled onto the wood planks, it bends the steel down in a very small way.

All the truck driver can see is the balance beam and the two weight bars—the 100 pound weight marker on the top bar, the 1000 pound marker on the bottom. I've known guys to fiddle around for twenty minutes, cussing out the balance beam and trying to get a true weight, when all the time they got their boot on the edge of the platform. The tip of the beam is that sensitive. You hold your breath when it comes off the top bar. If you've pushed the weight too far, it slams to the bottom with a hell of a crash, and you start all over again. You're always trying to get a perfect weight, but of course you never do. As long as the beam hangs between those two bars, it's close enough.

By the time I got my weight, it was noon. I drove the truck home, figuring to

unload it after dinner. I was in bad shape. I was mad at the Fairbanks Morse, worried about my wheat yield, and I kept remembering Tony, calling Steve the little fella.

When I came in I told Jean, "I was thinking out there how it used to be with Tony and Steve."

"Before Tony got strange, you mean?"

"I guess so, yeah," I answered reluctantly. Jean had such a straight way of putting things. "What I mean is, I guess they just had to have each other."

"Tony never treated Steve like a real person," Jean said, real positive.

"Well, what the hell," I answered, amazed.

She pulled a dish towel off the rod over the sink. "It all started with the girl," she said.

"What girl?"

"The one he met during the war, at Pearl."

"Oh, that's Mac's old story." I shrugged, uncomfortable, and moved over beside her to wash up.

The first time I heard about Tony's girl, I was too young to understand the story. Over the years I pieced it together from Mac. Just after Pearl Harbor Tony had fallen in love with a Hawaiian, a girl of different blood. Tony talked about her all the time, pulling the tissue-thin envelopes that held her letters out of his coveralls to show that she was real. He would always end up by telling everyone that she'd be his bride before spring planting.

"He was always going to send for her," Jean said now, "like she was a prize that would come in the mail."

I leaned back on the kitchen chair. "I remember," I said. "She was always coming before the spring, only she never came. Mac claims she run off with somebody else."

"He was never the same after the girl didn't come," Jean said, so definite that it made me mad.

"You women always made so much of it," I mumbled, though I knew she was exactly right.

"The thing is," she said thoughtfully, "Steve started to get better then."

"About then. Not exactly at the same time."

"At the *very* same time," she said positively.

"Maybe it was, then," I said sharply. "How do I know? I was only a kid."

Jean kept right at it. "He needed a thing to have, and be in charge of. His girl, if she ever existed. His brother. He made the caring all his."

"Is it so bad to take care of your brother?" my voice rang loud in the kitchen.

"Don't you see? It's not like you and Dennis," she said, so low and soft that I felt afraid.

"Or you and me?" I asked her.

"I hope not," she said, and kneaded my shoulders with her fingers. "Eat your dinner," she sighed.

How can you know exactly what a woman means? I couldn't hardly chew my food the silence was so heavy. Finally I spoke up through a mouthful.

"That old Fairbanks Morse is no good anymore."

"Why's that?" she said, cautious.

"Dunno," I answered. "What I need is a new scale like they got over at the Amenia elevator."

"I don't know what difference it would make to have a new one," she said. "All those scales work exactly the same way."

I slammed my fist on the table, and my plate slid off with a crash. "It's a better scale," I shouted, "*that's* the difference— it'll work better!"

Jean came over then and hugged me around the shoulders. I felt the sweat in her blouse on my face and muffled my words against her breasts.

"I'm sorry. Sorry," I whispered. "It just drives me crazy when things won't balance out."

"I know," she answered, touching the hairs at the back of my neck, and honest to God, I felt tears springing up in my eyes.

"I gotta get back to work," I said.

I watched the kernels of wheat moving up in the auger to the top of the granary. I had to admit that Jean was right. Tony went down pretty fast after he stopped talking about the girl. And as he got worse, Steve got better. Tony, who could always match a beer and a belt with the best of them, took to tying one on pretty regular. Not just on Wednesday nights, but in the middle of the day too, Champ said.

I believed it because more and more often, when I pulled into the station, Tony would be standing there in a fog, his eyes as red as the sunset. I'd call over to him to fill me up, and it would take a few seconds for him to come to himself before he'd stumble over saying, "You got it, Joey."

I didn't expect Tony's coveralls to be clean, but they seemed to look dirtier and more rumpled than usual, like he never changed them at all. One morning he was wearing house slippers instead of his boots.

The two of them came to Champ's regular every Wednesday, but it was different from before, when Steve would look down at the bar while Tony talked for him. Tony'd tell what a great mechanic his brother was, how he fixed Savocchi's hydraulic with nothing but his own spit. Then he'd poke Steve, and Steve would look up to see us all smiling.

When Tony started to hit the bottle hard, it was just the opposite. Steve sat straight up, his eyes watching Champ or resting on whoever was talking. Tony mostly sat quiet, his head sunk down between his shoulders, and drank hard, as if he had a limit or a goal he had to reach. We started to talk to Steve now and then, real talk, just to see what he'd do. He'd always smile back at you, maybe shake his head. If we told him to play the jukebox, he'd get right up and go over to it, something he never did before. We came to see that he was trying to be with us, in whatever way he could be.

One Wednesday night Mac got to teasing Steve about not talking. Tony was pretty bad that night. I don't think he could hear what was being said because for

sure he wouldn't have let Mac go on baiting his brother.

"Can't you even whistle, Steve?" Mac asked him.

Steve just looked at Mac, calm as you please. He didn't seem mad.

"C'mon, little fella, give us a tune." Mac taunted, his mean eyes fixed on Steve's face.

You could have knocked me over when Steve puckered his lips and began to whistle. The sounds were strange, hung close together on a long sad line, filling spaces I hadn't heard in any other song. His chin moved up and down, pushing out the notes. When he was done, nobody could say a word. Dennis poked me, and I looked at him. Mac just sat there.

Then Steve stood up and put his arm around Tony's shoulders. Tony lifted his head slowly and looked at his brother with empty eyes. Steve slipped his hand down along Tony's arm and lifted a little. Tony struggled to get up off his stool and lurched against Steve. I saw his face then, how his cheeks hung slack around his mouth, and how tears ran down them, disappearing into the deep lines that framed his lips. Steve moved toward the door, half carrying him along. We turned away and looked at the bar, embarrassed. It didn't seem right to say goodbye. From across the room we heard Tony's voice, hoarse with pain and whiskey.

"Oh Steven, Steve, you little fella," he said, crying like a baby.

The truth is that when Tony got bad, Steve pretty much handled the station by himself. He didn't say a word, of course, but he managed fine. Tony didn't say much either. He never passed the time of day anymore. If you had trouble with your machine, you'd tell Tony about it. He'd stand there kicking the dirt and grunt once in awhile to show he heard you. Steve would be right behind him listening carefully. Maybe he'd nod or smile. It got so you weren't sure which one you were talking to, but the job always got done.

Later Steve took to waving when you pulled in. As often as not, Tony wasn't around, and he'd come over smiling to see what he could do for you. He still looked up when he heard a plane go over, but the sharpness was gone from his eyes, and no one ever saw him hit the deck any more.

Things went along about the same. Steve brought Tony to Champ's on Wednesday nights and took him home when he'd had enough, which was usually too much. I'd look for Steve when I went to get gas, even if Tony was around. It saved time and kept me from feeling embarrassed. I knew that something had got hold of Tony and was eating away at him, but I couldn't see just what it was. Champ said it was the drink that made him talk about people being all around him, hunting him down. Maybe he thought he saw the Japs, come back for him, or maybe the people were just there for him, invisible as black rust. I couldn't explain any of it.

Then Mac came with his story, and it put the chill of evil on me, colder than

the still, yellow sky in the orchard, that got me and Dennis when we were kids. Mac told me he went to the station at noon to see about fixing his transmission, which was slipping.

"Steve was out by the pumps," he said, "so I asked him, 'Where's Tony?' because I couldn't talk to Steve about it, now could I? Steve didn't say nothing, of course. So I wandered into the shop, calling for Tony, and there was no answer. I poked around, thinking he might be dozing, or even passed out. I called to him again, but there was no answer. Even though the shop was quiet as death, I knew he was there."

"I found him, all right. I walked around behind the counter, and there he was, all curled up between the counter and a pile of tires."

" 'Jesus, what're you *doing*,' I said. He just looked at me with his eyes wild. Not *at* me, but something behind me. Then he starts to shake and holds himself tighter, puts his head between his knees and starts to roll back into the tires, whining like some kind of animal."

"He was drunk," I said, breaking into the fear that webbed around my heart.

"Stone sober," Mac said, punching his thigh with his fist. "He was off his rocker, that's all."

The thing about Mac was, you wanted not to believe him, but somehow you always did. He had that way of knowing everything, of finding evil out.

"I don't believe you," I told Mac.

"Suit youself," he said and walked away.

I didn't want to give Mac any satisfaction, but that picture he gave me of Tony is the one I carry to this day. Tony, curled in terror, hiding in the blackness of old tires and whiskey, clinging to his own body when there was no one left to hang on to. Trying to save himself.

Dennis and I quit about two-thirty on Friday so we could wash up in time to take our wives to the funeral. Tony was buried from the church, just like Father promised.

"He'll rest in hallowed ground," Dennis said on the way there, and that made me feel better.

Almost everybody in town came. Maybe they were just curious, but I like to think they were remembering Tony from the good times. Moroney, the undertaker, had him sitting up in his coffin. I wondered how he managed that until I saw the silk coverlet pulled up under Tony's armpits.

"There's nothing under it," I thought, looking at the shapeless pile underneath. "The wheels cut him in half."

Steve didn't cry. He sat in the front pew on the right, facing Tony. From where I sat I could see him staring. All the time Father was offering the Mass, Steve's eyes moved across his brother's face. It was like he was looking for something he'd lost and only Tony could give it back to him.

When the service was over, and we got up to go, Charlie put his beads in his pocket and turned to me.

"How's the crop, Joey?" he said.

The words hit me like an echo. I heard Tony's voice calling across the pumps to my dad, and I turned back to the coffin, looking for my own answer. I saw the undertaker's rouge on stiff cheeks and open eyes that were as flat as glass. The corpse was no more Tony than the quilt that covered it. He was gone.

Steve was back at work the next day. I went in after lunch. The pick-up was near empty, and I wanted to see how he was getting along by himself. When I pulled in he was picking up stray pieces of paper. Mac stood on the concrete watching, with his hands in his pockets. I raised my arm in greeting as I pulled to a stop.

"She's pretty low," I said, pointing to the gauge, and Steve nodded.

He disappeared around the back of the truck, and I stayed in the cab, worrying a hangnail that was bothering me and just listening to the afternoon's sounds. It's funny what you can hear when it's quiet. There's a kind of buzzing that's everywhere on a summer day so that it covers up other sounds. It took me a minute to catch the whistling and to recognize the long, mourning notes I'd first heard from Steve's lips at Champ's Bar. I leaned out the window to grin at him and wave, but there was only Mac, leaning against the pump and whistling Steve's tune.

Then there were the words, coming clear and sure from behind my truck.

"There 'ya are," Steve shouted to me, "all filled up."

So that was what his voice was like. I knew for sure it was him, though I couldn't describe how he sounded. You can hear all kinds of things in a voice—wind blowing through empty spaces, splinters of lightning, even a balance beam crashing in the silence.

Yannick D. Murphy

BEFORE I WAS BORN

I did it to her in the bathroom. She sat on the toilet, the cover down. Near her head was a pipe. She leaned her face against it. I cannot remember what I was saying to make her cry. She asked me to stop. She did it with her hands in her lap, palms up. I was thinking this is the farthest in the house she can go. We are at the back of the house, in the back of the bathroom, the window behind her and her face touching a pipe. I had never seen her cry so much. It was horrible that she shook and did not come at me.

She answers the phone like she thinks a mugger is calling. Then I cannot believe from the sound of her hello I already want to hang up. She makes her voice mean. She answers like she is out of breath, like she was just out back rounding up sheep or raising a barn and the phone happened to ring. Then I think about my brother or my sisters and how they never yell at her like I do. I want to know what they do to keep from thinking she is crazy. What happened before I was born? Did she tell them a secret about herself so deep inside that they will understand her for the rest of their lives? I am the youngest. When she dies I will still be young and I will still need her. No matter when she dies they will have

known her longer than I have. I keep thinking there is a formula that I can write down and work out that says in the end I will have known her longer than they have.

I found it in the barrel. I wish I had never seen it. My father's waders were in there and all of our ice skates. The girls' ice skates were white and the men's were black. The waders were black too. Then I felt the lace and pulled it up.

It was scary that it fit, like she had known when she first bought it she would have a child years later who could wear it. See how thin I was, she said and made me turn around for my sisters. They walked away. In the house there were no bedrooms so walking away was the same as saying I am closing the door now, even though you can still see me, I am alone now. I am not listening. I told her it did not fit in the chest and she said it did. Then I was sorry that I said anything because she came up to me and reached into the dress and pulled them up so they would fit into the pointy cups. Like this, like this, she said. It was a tight, black, lace dress. It used to have a fur collar. She said it got eaten away by the moths in the barrel. I turned to the side in the mirror. She said I could stop traffic. She always said the men used to put their coats on puddles for her so she could walk across and not get wet. When she said that we always walked away.

When she puts on make-up we sit and stare. Not until she asks us if we are catching flies do we shut our mouths and realize we were staring. My friends tell me she is beautiful and that they cannot believe it when they first see her. When we walk down the street together the men look at her, not me.

I am scared because my sister, who has been fat all her life, is losing weight. Already her face is prettier than mine. What will happen? Who will be prettier in the end? I tell myself what the fat has done to her skin—made the shoulders look like suns, and the lines pulling down them into rays—will never go away. Not even if she gets as thin as I am.

I want to know how she can answer the phone like that. Maybe I am making it up in my head. I want to ask one of my friends to call her and tell me what she sounds like. What if I end up like her? We have the same legs. Even though she is fat, like my sister, her legs have stayed thin.

It gets better when I think about my thumbs. I have my father's thumbs. When he comes we hold them up and place them together. I make the others look at our thumbs. Nobody can believe how much they look alike. Everyone laughs and shakes their heads.

I found out Michele hid money in the place where the batteries go in her radio. I never knew she hid money. I did not know why she hid it. She folded the bills so they would fit into the hole, next to the wires. After I saw the money I knew I should not have let my mother go in my dress. I stopped kissing her at night. Before bed I would lie on the carpet and do sit-ups in the dark. At the front of the house I could hear the TV going and the lights on the ceiling shaking because she was doing what she always does when sitting quietly. She was bouncing her leg up and down.

We all do it. But not my brother and my father. The girls do it. My aunt does it. One leg is always going underneath the table. Going up and down. I want to know if something like that is passed on. I do not want to give it to my kids. I

would hit their knees if they did that like I do. It would drive me crazy.

I do not want to talk about it. Because if I do and it happens then it is my fault. What's it going to be? She better be here until I grow up. What if she gets too old? I am not going to clean her pee-pee pot. I hate the sound that thing makes when she slides it out from underneath the bed.

My brother played the guitar. We fell asleep to that soft sound at night. When I got up, and it was late, I heard the guitar and I was used to it like I knew where the floor creaked in the dark and where the nail's head was that caught my sock on the way to the bathroom. But sometimes I hit my leg against JoJo's bed because it stuck out, like the rest of our beds, in the middle of the house. And I would look at her and think, there, go ahead and wake up, get mad at me because I forgot where your bed was. Your dumb bed. What is it doing here in the middle anyway? And I imagined that if she woke up I would tell her I knew where the nail was without having to look and could she do that? She never woke up. She can sleep through anything. She always looks peaceful too. She has a round little nose with a red spot on it. She has a dark spot on her leg and she calls it her strawberry. I want to know who she is kidding. It is a fat brown freckle. She has got more freckles than anybody. She has got my father's coloring. My mother calls freckles beauty spots. I have only three. When I was little I thought they were like my teeth or my height and that they would grow in number as I grew up, but they did not and they are not. She said my ankles would thin down but they have not and they look wrong on my small feet.

In the summer, at night, we left the rest of the house and moved into the front storage room. There was a window in there and the air conditioner. We slept on mattresses on the floor. We brought the cats in with us because otherwise they would cry outside the door. Once inside they went under the covers, and their fur fluffed like it does in winter.

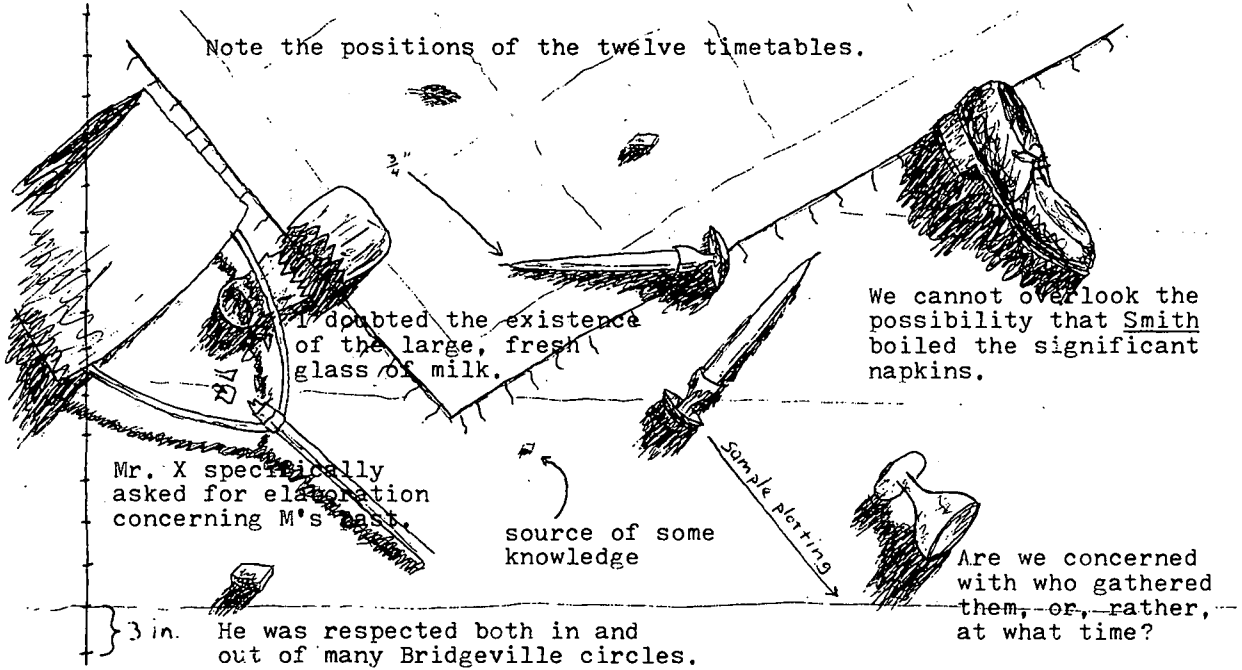
In the morning, outside the door, the first thing I felt was the quiet. It was quiet away from the air conditioner. It was hot in the big part of the house. The sun came in through the skylights. Sometimes I sat on the couch and waited until I became used to the heat.

He could not do it. My father came downtown, sat on top of the ladder, and talked to him all night long through the storage room door. My brother stepped through his guitar and broke glasses. I did not know where to go. Where was I to go? I wanted to read my book but everytime something broke I jumped. I was sitting under the lamp in the living room area. That time it felt cold sitting under the lamp. I looked at the books on the shelf and I could not believe we lived like that. The books were stuck in everywhere, and the books that did not fit on the shelf were piled on the floor and on top of the TV. The chair I was sitting in made me hurt. Its arms were broken, pulled out from the back, so that it just had two stumps coming up from its seat and when you sat down you had to slide yourself in between the stumps. It was the chair I sat in every night but I felt like it was pushing me out of it, and my legs got hot.

I went in there and leaned against the shower. It was a room with a door. When my mother walked by and knocked and said she had to go, I did not let her in. Then she said she did not want to worry about me also. When she walked

away I made sure she kept going. I listened for when the floor creaked under her foot. My sisters were on their beds. I wished I was like them and could forget about the other end of the house. I imagined my mother had a plan. She walked by their beds, then by the bathroom and up to the storage room to keep herself calm, to know we were all there. Her children. She says blood is thicker than water. I felt sorry for her trying to bring all of us together in such a big place. She passed the door a couple of times and then she knocked again—said she really had to go.

She looks different with her make-up off than she does with it on. She acts nicer with it on. She sat on the toilet but I think she forgot to go because then she stood up and came to hug me. I could smell her face make-up and it had its own beige smell that I liked. She put her hand up under my shirt and smoothed my backbone down. She said I was so skinny. Then she stepped back. Don't you ever do this to me, she said. I could not think. Do what? Don't ever get skinnier than her? Don't ever get prettier? Then I had to make myself remember. Don't ever do it to her.



The Question of Jones's Involvement

by JS

Andrew Brown

A TIME OF INNOCENCE

In the next week the youthful murderer killed Caril's mother, stepfather, baby half-sister, along with a farmer, a Lincoln businessman, his wife, and the maid, a teenage couple, and a salesman . . . TIME—account of Charlie Starkweather.

You would want to be the redtail hawk rising on thermal air currents, up over the crossroad of blacktop highway and white crushed rock township road, above the stubbled wheat and the heading milo, above the line of trees that marked the river's passage down the valley. You would want to rise above the valley until you could see east and west down the arrow of state highway and north and south down the cross arms of the township road. From this advantage you could see with a hunter's eyes, intent in their focus, the woman/child standing at the crossroad, her foot planted on a suitcase, waiting that which has not yet come, but which is coming as surely as death. You would want to see it all from this detached height, but you cannot. To see it you must come closer.

You could take the eyes of the turtle in the grass. From that vantage in the ditch you could see the long legs, and up under the print dress to the white bikini

panties with their edge of red lace; you could see the long suntanned arms, with the strangely too-big hands, the nails painted red, and you would see the way these too-big hands are delicate, if deliberate, in their holding and lighting of a cigarette. From the ground you could see the blonde hair falling in a ponytail down between her shoulders. You could see the way she turns with economy of motion to look west down the highway. But if you were the turtle would you know it was a highway that led from somewhere to somewhere, or would it only be that place where claws grated, and life was crushed?

To really see her eyes it would be better to be a midge circling around her head, drawn to her perfume and the scent of her lilac talc. Her eyes which are a blue persuasion seem fixed, and the fine hair curled in front of her ears vibrates as antenna with the motion of her breathing. If you were a midge, and unafraid of the cigarette smoke which drifts on the nearly motionless air, you could land ever so lightly on the nape of her neck, and you could drink salt from the drops of sweat that are forming. But you would have to be very light for the woman/child has quick reflexes. Even now the bus she waits for pushes the air before it.

The woman/child strikes her neck as the door of the bus opens. "Damn bugs," she says, still smiling wide-eyed at the driver who stands at the door to receive her. She hands him money from her purse, and he writes the ticket. In a moment the bus moves on. It is gone from the turtle's view. High as the redtail hawk is it is not high enough to see forever, and all too quickly the object is gone from the landscape. The roads stretch out like the empty arms of the cross.

* * *

I met Sandra Lone in September of 1957. She was enrolling in college as a Freshman. I was one of those forever students playing out my G.I. Bill, wondering why I was in college, and I suppose taking a deep breath before I plunged on toward purposefulness and responsibility. There wasn't any gray in my hair, but I felt older. I suppose we all seemed older then, so many of us coming back from forced inoculation against our youth. We smoked too much, drank too quickly, talked about books with an urgent suddenness that reflected our fear that we were behind and might never catch up.

Maybe half of us were veterans, but it seems now that we all were veterans then. We were urgent young men trying to catch up, and yet . . . and yet some were like me. We didn't know where we were going. We only knew we were consumed with a restlessness.

Enrollment, in those years, was conducted in the old gym. Tables were set up on the basketball court and students moved through rope corridors to the tables of advisors and then to the tables of class cards. I'd been drafted by Harry Markum to work the journalism class card table. Harry told me it was my act of contrition for being an editor on *The Sunflower*, the college's weekly newspaper. Harry was writing a book. He'd been writing a book since '53 when he'd left

Korea and returned to Northwestern. Now he was teaching journalism, but he was still writing, and he drafted all his senior editors to do his menial labors while he tended more important matters at the V.F.W.'s bar. It was all right. I could understand it. I spent enough time there myself.

There wasn't much traffic at the table so I was reading *Gatsby* in a paperback edition, marking it up as I went because I wanted to get a jump on Holt's modern lit. class, when in front of me I heard the shuffle of a foot. I looked up at a woman I thought must be Daisy. I was always doing that, putting people I saw in parts. I waited to see what her voice was like. It was low. It was almost as low as a young man's.

"Do I need your signature, Doctor Markum, to take journalism?"

I laughed. "I'm not Harry, and Harry's not a doctor."

"Who are you?"

"Just the guy who gives out the cards."

"Don't I need a signature?"

"Sure," I said, and I reached for her packet. She held it out, and I saw how long her fingers were, how cool they felt as they brushed my palm. "You need a signature, and I'm a master of signatures. Even the Dean acknowledges my right by service to sign names," I winked. "Provided the name I sign isn't his." Some Freshmen, most girls, would have pulled back their cards at that moment. We were all so accustomed to following the proper form in those days. She simply smiled at me as I signed Harry's name and pulled a blue class card for her collection. I pulled it back from her hand and smiled my most knowing smile. "You want to join me for a beer when you get done? I could tell you all about the do's and don'ts of college life."

She took the card from me and put it in her packet. The smile didn't leave her face. Her eyes didn't stop looking into mine. "I don't think so. People are always offering to show me things. I like to find them for myself." She turned and walked away toward the social science tables across the gym. I liked the long stride of her walk. There was a sensualness in her movement. I'd seen something like it in the Korean whores that walked the street around the officer's club. Where had she learned that motion, or was it just an accident she was born with? I wrote her name down inside the cover of *Gatsby*.

* * *

I've always been angry with myself for having intentions to burn. I meant to look up Sandra Lone, but I didn't. I meant to start a novel that fall. I didn't do that either. What I did was fall into a pattern of being an editor, hanging out with Harry and friends at the V.F.W., and pretending in my weekly column that I was just as witty as Max Shulman. When I was drinking with Harry, reliving the war that had become a joke to us because it wasn't the big war, then I pretended I was Jake Barnes and all the women Brett Ashley, and when I was in the student union watching the girls and playing the old man I figured I came off all right.

My sex life was pretty much a mental fabrication. I'm saying this so you'll know I wasn't looking for sex the last really warm day in September when I took three bottles of beer from my roommate's hoard, took his bike and rode to the other end of town. There was a secluded place I knew off the golf course where the Cottonwood River pushed a loop into the trees and the water ran deep, heavy and quiet. It was my spot.

I suppose there was something in me that needed moments of solitude. I couldn't get past the idea that what I was doing in school was right for a man.

I would think about my father with his shoe repair shop. I could see him going in each morning at 6:30, coming home each evening at 6:30 and always dreaming of the day he could put "AND SON" in gold letters on the shop's window. He'd never thought of college for his boy. No, he'd thought of a new stitching machine for the kid with quick hands, and how was he to know the army would catch the kid, and then the very thing the kid had known would come out did. The kid was smart. The kid could learn. Old Miss Voss had been right. The boy deserved an education. For services given the grateful government would see that he got it, if he wanted it. And he had wanted it. Or was it the educaton? Maybe what he wanted was that other world. He knew there was a world of ideas where bodies didn't bleed in the snow, and bellies blown open didn't steam in the cold air. Maybe the kid didn't want to live out his life like his father stitching shoes. Maybe that kid should have known himself and what he wanted. I didn't know. What I knew was that when the question played too much about my mind I had to get away and sit as quiet as I could. I would sit and listen to the river's slow passage, remembering that all things did pass.

I knew this place wasn't mine. There were the few old beer cans in the weeds, the empty whiskey bottle, the odd rubber shriveling in the grass. Still it was my private place, and so with my back to the oak I let myself drift into the twilight between reflection and dream. I must have fallen asleep. When I woke I heard voices without conversation. Even without the words the desire was clear in the man's voice. I heard a splash. I felt a little like a voyeur, but I wanted to see. Twisting around the oak I kept low in a shallow swale until I could look through some willows and see the river and the river's bank.

She was like pictures I had seen of a pink Amazon porpoise. She came up out of the water and then slipped down into the circles of sun only to break clean and roll and twist. Her breasts were firm but fluid, and her whole body seemed to blend with the elements as if she, the light and the water were one. I couldn't take my eyes off her. At that moment I didn't think I'd ever seen anything so sensual. She was playing, teasing, antagonizing and then I heard Walt.

Walt was standing on the stump of a cottonwood tree. He was naked, and he had an erection he pointed at her. "Come on, baby, I can't swim." He pleaded with her to get out, but she went on rolling in the water, playing and laughing. I knew Walt. He was a perpetual student, a theater major who played the lead in almost every show. I'd had a few classes with him. A smart guy. A guy who looked at the world through the eye of his cock. He had a mousy wife who worked in the library. The idea of Sandra Lone with Walt bothered me, and at that moment I couldn't say why.

"Come on out, Sandy, we've got rehearsal in an hour."

She laughed and swam to shore. For a moment I lost sight of her, and then

there she was standing on the grassy slope, the water streaming from her as if she was finely oiled. Walt bounded down to her, and she reached for him. They sank down together on the grass. I turned away and looked up through the trees at the empty blue sky. The last image, the one tacked to my eye by the sun, was Sandra Lone's sinewy leg, brown and golden, beaded with water, curling and clamping over the back of Walt.

I could hear their sounds of lovemaking, and though I would not look I could not move away. At last there was silence and I strained to listen knowing that what I was doing was wrong. This wasn't my business.

"We better get back," I heard her say. "Your wife thinks you're learning lines."

"Aren't we?"

"I am." It sounded so cold-blooded. I suppose I had wanted to believe she was the innocent seduced, and that she knew nothing of Walt's wife.

* * *

I pretended what I saw didn't have anything to do with me. With classes and the paper there was plenty to do. So what bothered me about Sandra Lone?

Harry took his beer bottle and made rings on the table. He drew with his finger connecting swirls, and all the time he spoke in a half-drunken drawl. "I'm damned if teaching does anything for me. I figured it was just a means to the serious end of writing, but I'm realizing it chokes off what a man wants to do. You're lucky. You don't have to meet kids every day whose big desire is to join the house that has the wildest parties."

I wasn't listening. It was the first of November and the campus was doing all those things associated with autumn, football games and homecoming. Woody Herman was coming to play the big dance, and it seemed everyone had paired up for the year. I hadn't, but then I never did. I wanted something to happen. Looking at myself I saw the saddle shoes, the chinos, the blue V-neck sweater over an ivy-league shirt, the crew cut, the narrow face with the too-thin mouth. I looked like a college kid, but I didn't think I felt like one. I was the impostor hidden in a safe place.

"You have to write a book. It's important. Of course how can you write about important things when the most important news is did Ike shoot a good golf score, did he break open his gut, did he teach David to fish, and how many Tri Delts got in a phone booth. I tell you the world doesn't give shit anymore." Harry belched, and went on talking, and making circles.

Maybe you're wondering why I'm not talking more about Sandra Lone? Well, our paths didn't cross very much. I thought about her. I'd see her around campus, most of the time in the company of theater people, and once in awhile she'd come to the newspaper office in the basement of the Ad. building. All first-year journalism students had to get so many hours in with the paper, but we had more journalism students than we had stories. It wasn't my job to meet with

them and make work. When she saw me, saw me looking at her, sometimes she would nod, and once she winked at me over the shoulder of Walt when they were in the union. I wanted to go over to their table, but I didn't. I was surrounded by beauties of my own.

Let me tell you, Harry and I and the associate editor Barney McGee were always in the company of young ladies. They flocked to us. They did it because we seemed so romantic. We were the worldly people. We were among the campus leaders, and when we read our poems, stealing our style from Eliot, and when we read our short stories lifted from Hemingway they crowded around us in the dark rooms, pressing to be part, part of the in group. It was so flattering. No wonder we never finished anything. To get the reward we didn't have to bottle the beer; just brew it. We didn't have to be the writer; we only had to seem to be. Of course this kept us from getting close to any of the girls who pressed themselves on us. It had its own safety built in. If they got too close they might see us for the blank face behind the mask.

I think that was why I dreamed of Sandra Lone. There was a look in her face that said she saw through pretense. I felt she saw pretense and laughed, and then she used it as a lever for her will. Marty McGee, Barn's wife, told me Sandra had taken the theater department by storm. There were stories, but then Marty loved to gossip. So why don't I repeat the stories from that time? Well, later they would seem more important. Later, in light of what happened, what others said they'd done, I would wonder, but there's so much incentive to lie, to try and put yourself at the center of the circle. So many, like me, must have wanted to be her lover that it was easy later to say they had been.

* * *

The college always emptied for Thanksgiving break. Those of us with nowhere to go, or just unwilling to go home, pawned ourselves off on married friends. We would pool our funds to splurge. In vet. village Barney and Marty were hosting a turkey feed with a wine punch bust. For us there wasn't any television then, no big game, and so we sat propped against the walls, the late light making the room dim, and we talked. We filled the room with ourselves. We invented our own game. The game of who is least understood.

I guess I drank too much and fell asleep, or losing out had closed my eyes to gain more satisfaction pitying myself. Whatever the reason I realized that the afternoon had gone to evening, and one candle across the room held back the dark. Sandra Lone was stretched beside me. She was holding a Mason jar as a replacement for a wine glass. Her eyes were open, looking, I decided, at the candle flame.

Without even thinking I reached down and clasped her thigh as if the jeans would shred away exposing the fine down I'd seen in the sun. She did not turn her face, or shift her weight, but taking one hand she covered mine. She held my

hand in hers, and her hand was firm and warm. Don't speak, I thought. Please, don't speak. I didn't, and she didn't, and we sat there as the conversation murmured like forest sounds.

* * *

We measure time in so many ways. Looking back on it now we couldn't have sat holding hands for very long. I wanted to ask her to come home with me but before I'd time to find the right moment Walt called her name, and letting go my hand she got up.

She smiled down at me when I tried to rise, and I realized that the wine punch had made me slow.

"Can I see you?" I asked.

"Not now."

"Why?"

She smiled again and turned away, and that was all the explanation that she gave.

Why didn't I go after her? Why didn't I call the next day, or at least I could have called the day after that. I suppose the answer rests in who I thought I was. Maybe by then I'd read too much, or read the wrong books, or thought what I read too true. I was convinced I'd seen things that left me scarred, left me wishing to walk in the rain hoping to be cleansed, to find my own Two-Hearted River. I'd read too much Hemingway, or rather I'd read him poorly missing the whole ironic point. To me it was right to make myself suffer. And so I went on being foolish, staying away from a woman I wanted to be with, writing my column, playing my part, drinking nights at the V.F.W. with Harry, Barn and the rest of the crowd.

* * *

I had a roommate. His name was Winton Byrum. I say he was my roommate but we really shared two rooms with bath and closet space. We'd put our desks in the larger room, and slept in bunks in a room so small a double bed wouldn't have fit. I remember that room because it was made even smaller by wallpaper of pale yellow with purple grapes. Byrum said it was made for the D.T.'s and kept us sober. We chose to spend our time away from there. Even our study room was little used as I was at the paper and Winton kept an office in the Science Building where he tended rats. It was the room that had brought us together, not any common interest. Still, we were friends, and we've stayed in touch, however lightly.

Mostly we stayed in touch because of the two events that brought our interests close together. Maybe Winton was ahead of his time. He was the first person I knew who thought that rats could tell you about human behavior. He was the first person I knew who read journals of forensic medicine like I read Raymond Chandler. When the case of Charlie Starkweather and his girl gripped us all, Winton made me bring home every clipping and every tear sheet from the wire service.

Time and more sensational crimes have blurred and buried Charlie and Caril Ann's murderous spree, but then it was a big thing, the biggest thing. We followed the case, and when the photos of Charlie ran in the papers and on the fuzzy T.V. in the union we crowded around to see the monster. The papers were already making a show of how he looked like the late James Dean. You could see fellows on campus looking at their own carefully imitated hairstyle. We saw, I think, how much this little man/boy with a gun resembled our own fantasy of what it was to be a rebel. Harry took my space and wrote about it in the paper. "The New Rebel Without A Cause," I wrote for the headline.

Winton took the opportunity to tell me Harry missed the point. Charlie wasn't copying the myth, or the style. Charlie, he said, was the myth. He was the style.

"But is he crazy?" I asked.

"No. He's just Charlie being Charlie. He's being what he is. They'll have to call him sane because to call him anything but that would be to admit the sickness is ourselves."

I found myself drawn to the case. I found myself listening to Winton, and then I would talk it over with Harry and Barn.

We were drinking beer and shooters in the V.F.W. Barney brought his hand down flat on the table. "Listen," he said. "As far as I'm concerned your buddy Byrum's nuts. People kill because they get the idea they can get away with it. Period."

"Look at us," Harry said. "We wouldn't kill anybody now, but when we had the chance, well, didn't you ever shoot somebody then because you wanted to, and you could?"

Barney and I looked at Harry. I don't remember which of us did it but we quickly turned the topic to something else. We'd had that conversation once before. It scraped at something open and still unhealed. Perhaps you have to build a scar before you really see the nature of the wound.

* * *

And now I can tell you what I've fumbled so long to get at.

The theater was performing *The Lark*. Walt was playing the part of the English general and Barney thought we should do a feature on him. Sandra Lone was playing Joan. Of course I wanted to be interviewing her. She knew it too. She sat at the elbow of Walt, and she looked at me from behind his back. We were in the

student union. She kept smiling every time Walt made one of his supercilious comments about acting. I had the feeling she didn't think acting was as important to life as Walt did.

I had finished my questions, but Walt was still explaining his artistic philosophy when his wife came looking for him. I realized I could never remember her name. Even now I don't remember if it was Lois, or Louise, or Lisa. Probably it wasn't any of those. What I do remember is the picture of her standing at the far side of the union, by the salad line, looking small, vulnerable and forlorn. She came moving through the half-filled tables as if her passage might tip the universal balance and set off a cataclysm.

Sandra saw me looking and turned her head. Sensing he had lost his audience Walt turned to look too. I couldn't tell what passed between them but Walt's wife stopped, and then she stood growing smaller and smaller as if she would soon crumble under the weight of the books she cradled to her chest. Then Walt turned back and went on with his speech like a man who had brushed away a fly. I looked at Sandra Lone, and she told me with her expression as clearly as with words that Walt's wife knew, and that it didn't make any difference to them.

Walt's wife stood next to him, but he went on talking. It was Sandra Lone who finally stopped him. She reminded him that he had promised to take his wife to supper. She spoke as if his wife wasn't even there.

Walt gave me a few more points of information though I'd long since quit taking notes, and then he left, but not before he'd pontificated about what he thought Sandy should do that evening for her dress rehearsal. She listened with rapt attention, but when they left she turned, and smiling, winked at me.

"What are you doing for supper, Mister Editor?"

She was playing with me. Teasing and smiling like a coquette. "No plans," I said.

"I have to do a costume fitting before rehearsal. You will be there tonight?"

She knew that I would be. She knew I was bringing a photographer. "After the show," she said. She stood up and then leaned across the table, resting her hands and bending toward me. Her shirt gapped open, and I knew that too was deliberate. She was inviting me to look, to examine the beauty of her breasts. I tried not to look. I tried to concentrate on her face.

"I liked your story on Charlie Starkweather. Did you really think you could have been like him?"

The story she referred to was really my column when one week I'd turned serious and stopped lampooning the union coffee, and inanity of frats. I'd written that we were products of our time, and that there but by the grace of God go I. Harry and Barn had hooted at it, and Winton had stuck it to the bathroom mirror with a red pencil note, "Read B.F. Skinner."

"I understand James Dean," she said. "After rehearsal buy me a hamburger and I've something to show you." This time she did walk away leaving me with my cold coffee and my notes.

* * *

I want to invert time here, to turn events around in their order. You see I don't remember them the way they happened. When I start to recall that year, those events, when I find myself stopping in the reading of a book, or drifting off over a news story I'm writing I always start at a point that was neither the beginning nor the end. Once, a couple of years ago, at a luncheon of old college guys I talked for a moment with Winton. He's a psychologist now who specializes in counting the feces of scared and starving rats, then telling us about overcrowding in the city. Winton told me there was nothing odd about daydreaming out of order. The mind, he said, was like a drifted beach uncovered by the wind. The objects exposed were not always the ones laid down last; it all depended on the currents of the wind. I wouldn't have thought he could be so poetic. At least he gave me the idea that in recalling I do not have to tell it as it was. This isn't journalism; it's remembering. As Winton said, the winds blow things up out of order. Perhaps the wind exposes what it wants exposed. All the rest the wind leaves to us to scrape away and find.

I wasn't surprised we ended up in bed. I suppose from the time I picked her up after rehearsal, Walt looking at us with pinched resignation, and we got a hamburger, which she ate as quickly as a child eats a candy bar, there had been some subtle knowing between us. Even during what passed for foreplay there had been the sense that she had singled me out for this. Maybe I should have felt used but I didn't. I was neither inept, nor Jake Barnes; neither, I knew as we lay together in the bed, was I anything more than a satisfactory release. I remember a line an actor had said to me, the worst review would say you were just satisfactory in your part.

She reached a long arm over and turned on a lamp. The bulb was not so bright and there seemed to be more shadows than light. Looking down over us was a half lifesize poster of the actor James Dean. It was the one they put in the glass cases in front of movie theaters. He was the *Rebel Without a Cause* in red jacket, blue jeans and motorcycle boots, leaning against a brick wall, cigarette dangling from his fingers, his hair forever fixed as if ruffled by the wind, his eyes looking as if he looked at you. "Don't you feel uneasy sleeping under him?" I said.

"He's everything," she said, and I believed she meant it. I rolled over on my stomach, bracing my elbows, so I could look at her without seeing the veiled expression on Dean's face.

"You know," I said. "I once fell in love with a Coca-Cola ad."

"When?"

I told her when I had been in the army there had been in the day room a picture of a girl in a white bathing suit. She was alone on a white beach before the blue ocean, and she had been drinking a Coke. I had wanted to be there with her. Just alone with her. I'd wanted to be there and watch the sun go down, and to build a fire, and lay beside it with her watching the stars, and the lights of passing ships. I told her that even now when the class work got too heavy, and the deadlines piled up I thought about that girl on the beach. I couldn't tell her about the other times I'd thought about the girl just to calm the horrors. I couldn't tell her that so instead I made a joke about how I'd sworn off Coke and taken to drinking beer.

She didn't laugh but put her hand in the middle of my back, moving her fingers slowly.

"Editor-boy, what would you have done to keep that poster?"

I was confused by her question. "Do? I don't know. Not much, I guess. I guess I always knew it was just an advertisement. A thing I put imagination on."

"You know what I did to get James Dean? I traded my virginity." I tried to turn over the better to see her but she pressed down on my back. "I come from a farm near a little Kansas town south of Phillipsburg. Dusty little place. A drugstore, poolroom, couple of grocery stores. There are a lot of little towns like it. I'm telling you so you'll understand there wasn't very much going on."

I can't remember her words, but I remember she told me how every Saturday night in the summers, in a little park, the city paid a man to come and show movies on an outdoor screen. He'd put up a tent wall, and for a quarter after their shopping the folks would see the show. She was so frank when she explained how seeing the poster she knew she had to have it, and how she knew, after seeing the man look at her, just how she would get it.

"In the front seat of his truck," she said. "There were nighthawks shrieking as they chased bugs around the light. I could hear them, and I could hear him, but it seemed he was as far off as the birds."

I remember her saying that, and then, "I knew I'd always get what I want. I knew I had this gift God had given me like he gave James Dean. All I had to know was what I wanted."

She let her fingers move slowly up and down my back. And that's when time reversed, and always does, because I saw her playing The Maid. She was Joan. I knew that deep resolve to keep faith, that inner light of a saint I didn't think an actress could fake. How could one so callous in her goals be the troubled mystic I had seen her be on the stage? Even in dress rehearsal she shook your faith. I rolled on my side. James Dean looked down, his lips half-parted in that look which said, "I know."

It's then that photograph of Charlie flashes in my mind. I think of him as he looked leaving the courthouse after the verdict had been read. He had that cocky look saying he'd keep his crazy faith in rebels even if they killed him for it. That look we called half-wit because we couldn't understand, couldn't bring ourselves to believe then that any whole man would act his way.

And then the images end, or fragment into space.

* * *

What possible point of view can explain the end? After all these years it is mixed between something of the fantastic and the cheaply fictional. After all these years of reporting the news I've become too skeptical of reality. I've lost the ability to believe that single metaphors stand for anything. No event taken by itself is too improbable not to be true. I guess the straight facts would be best.

Sandra Lone left school and went to California with Walt. They left right after his graduation. We learned by scraps of gossip that his wife had come home from the library one day and all his things were gone, and their bank account cleaned out. Some of us chipped in a few dollars that we could, and we all felt embarrassed that summer when we'd see her walking across campus.

I left that fall to take a job with the Kansas City Star that Harry helped me get. The Star was a real newspaper, with real work, and I began to feel a sense of purpose re-enter my life. I even started seeing my folks on a regular basis. I found my father was really proud of his son, and I understood that I didn't have to think he'd wasted his life repairing shoes. I even half seriously started a novel about my war and college days but it didn't get very far, and that didn't seem so bad because I realized I didn't know what I really wanted to say.

I followed, in a sort of professional way now, the appeals made on the part of Charlie Starkweather. We made bets on if in the end he might cheat the electric chair. But I was learning the hard truth that news ran quickly and what held your front page attention one day you put in your bird cage the next.

Then one day someone hollered at me about a story that had come in over the news wire from California. An instructor at a Kansas college had killed a former student. I read the account and knew it was all wrong. Since the Star went to the hinterlands the editor thought the story might be worth some space. He gave me a name to call in L.A. and the job of sorting out the facts.

Walt had shot Sandra Lone after coming home and finding her with a talent scout. According to our source Sandra had been living with Walt. She was studying acting while he worked at a radio station. When he found Sandra with the agent, the agent had taken off and there had been a big argument. Somewhere in the argument Sandra Lone had been shot. When the police got there Sandra was sitting in a wingback chair, in shorty pajamas, holding her chest and screaming, "Walt did it. Walt did it," while she begged them to give her something for the pain. She'd died on the operating table from an internal hemmorhage. Walt was in custody and had confessed. He'd been drinking, and he kept crying that she'd used him and ruined his life. He said she was going to leave him. The California reporter thought it was pretty ho-hum. "Happens all the time out here," he said.

We straightened out the facts and gave it five paragraphs on an inside page. For a while I thought the editor might send me back to the campus to do a feature story, but someone held up a bank in Dillinger style and a cop was killed, and I was assigned to helping with the big story.

* * *

I couldn't put Sandra Lone out of my mind. In December, just before Christmas, Walt pleaded guilty to second degree murder. They gave him twenty years. That spring I drove to Hays to cover a speech on gas taxes. It was an

assignment that gave me a little time and I knew what I was going to do. Just like the expected scene in a movie, I knew I wanted to visit where she had lived.

I found the town just as she'd described it. The tall white grain elevators looked elongated and ivory in the late afternoon sun. I found the little park with the permanent wood movie screen. I wondered if they still showed movies on a Saturday night. I wondered if the same man with his truck and posters would be there. I looked around for what might inspire dreams. I didn't see anything but the dusty buildings, the uncut grass of the park, the movie screen and, rising over all, those ivory towers shoving like fingers into the sky.

I knew I was going to do it, laughed at myself because it was sentimental, but knew I would do it anyway. I went looking for the town cemetery. I found it on a little hill surrounded by stunted cedar trees and fields of green wheat that moved like the sea. In fact as I got out of the car I had the feeling that at any moment the hill might sink and the grass would roll over me. I looked around until I found her grave. It turned out to be just a grave. New grass was growing on it and there were plastic roses wired to a stake.

Two miles up the highway I saw her family name on a signpost. I thought about driving in the direction of the arrow toward the shadowed line of trees that marked the river. I thought about the day I'd seen her swimming. What was it they said about the pink porpoise? It was a soul sent to drive the lonely mad. He who loved the mermaid would never know peace again in mortal arms.

A turtle crawled out of the grass and started across the highway. I could see a car coming, and so I picked it up and carried it to the other side. High above the intersection a hawk was circling. I got back in the car. As I started to drive away, I saw the turtle was coming back across the highay. A pickup truck, the driver waving at me, straddled it; then the turtle rose on its legs and extended its neck. I drove away. What could I do to change such intention? I knew in the face of such blind will I had no understanding.

REVIEWS

Writing in Winter by Constance Scheerer. BookMark Press, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 1985. 72 pages. $5.25, paper.

Although Constance Scheerer has been publishing poems for years, *Writing in Winter* is her first book. Experience bequeaths to her work the utmost refinement. BookMark Press of the University of Missouri-Kansas City chose well in presenting this Lawrence, Kansas, writer to a larger audience.

Evidence of the matured poetic voice is in the style. Lines are finely bevelled. The poet builds vivid images, as in this description of the moon: "Earth black, sky silver, both/ cut from the same bolt of blue/ estuary." The unexpected conjoining of "bolt" and "estuary" also typifies Ms. Scheerer's originality.

Contemporary poets often shy away from orthodox religion, fearing sentimentality. This writer is at ease with such traditions, drawing upon her background as an Episcopalian priest's daughter—and her own faith. She describes herself and sleeping children ("Evensong"): "the sun made cathedrals/ of our bowed heads," and the oblique image suggests innocence.

The subjects range from Dutch paintings to drownings. Water seems a frequent inspiration, as well as seasons. But whether writing about shipwrecks or foxes, Ms. Scheerer always illuminates deeper meanings.

Perhaps the most stunning theme of these poems also comes from experience: loss is bound up with the mystery of living. The poem "Hurricane, 1944" narrates how wind-borne glass narrowly missed her husband. But the time they had after that was "a space of reprieve," not a final rescue from mortality.

The title "Writing in Winter"—creation in a season of loss—aptly states the book's "essence." And reward for these recalled years is the stark gift of wisdom. Ms. Scheerer uses her gift well.

Denise Low

Spring Geese and Other Poems by Denise Low. Museum of Natural History, Kansas University, Lawrence, KS 66045. 84 pages. $6.50, paper.

A poetry book published by a museum of natural history? That is only one of several surprises awaiting the reader of *Spring Geese*. Several of the poems begin with descriptions of exhibits in the Kansas University Museum of Natural History. But Ms. Low does not limit herself to the museum. She pushes off from it the way dancers push off from the floor. On the first page, for example, she describes a walrus in the exhibit. The effect of the poem depends on the implied contrast between a live walrus and one who sits stuffed "in perfect museum weather."

The book may seem at first a guidebook to the displays. The poet, as if with a gesture of her hand, shows the reader bird fossils:

> We have
> some pterosaurs stuck in shale,
> a few sharp-toothed loon cousins,
> one contorted bat.

Then suddenly she whisks the reader out of the museum and into the world, into the past when the prehistoric birds actually flew.

> The rest an invisible flock
> still in flight.

The museum becomes, in effect, a magic gateway through which Ms. Low passes to emerge suddenly in the Pleistocene era.

> A chipped hide scraper appears at water's edge,
> thick and blunt-nosed,
> left behind by nomads, star followers.
> The stone tool is cold and wet,
> three thousand years old.
> Reaching towards it
> I lose my hands in twilight and mud.
> (from "Clinton Lake, Archaic Site")

She then looks back from the past into the twentieth century. Animals killed by cars seem to be on display as the highway itself becomes a kind of museum.

Past and present intertwine. The dead show an uncanny life: a deer carcass tied to a car waves its legs; a stuffed walrus stares at the other exhibits; and Egyptian mummies prepare for everlasting life in Chicago. Each incident adds weight to the next, so that the poems, like the animals, blur, melt, one into

another, like the shovelnose sturgeon.

Edges of flesh blur,
sink into sand—
a creature from another time
melting into this.

Such poetry wears well. Denise Low does not flaunt her vision but presents it simply, modestly. She knows that things have an eloquence of their own, and time and again she seems to let them speak for themselves. Her work depends on the quiet juxtaposition of human and fossil. It displays all the virtues of a good museum.

Victor Contoski

Outcroppings from Navajoland by Donald Levering. Navajo Community College, Tsaile, AZ 86556, 1984. 65 pages. No price listed, cloth.

Donald Levering writes of the Arizona desert. The first poem in the book, "Silica," begins with a view of its subject from afar.

from a distance it seems
an indian has dashed
a bottle against
the mesa wall

Levering gives us what we think we know, the stereotype of a drunken Indian. Then he opens our eyes.

but look closer Anglo
this translucent rock
is laid in sheets
of luminescence
an icy fragment
lifted in the hand
is lens to the land
below

As we look closer, the music of the poetry intensifies. Note the abundance of lilting *l*'s and *n*'s in the above passage, the way the rimes (hand-land; luminescence-lens; Anglo-below) emphasize important words.

The piece of rock becomes a frame through which we view the land, not only in the present but back to its origins, to the Yei, primeval giants—

whose bodies comprised
rainbows
before the Flood
when the Navajo
ascended through a reed
to this fifth Level
of horses, white man
and whiskey

Suddenly we found ourselves in the past; just as suddenly we return to the present, to the drunken Indian.

"Silica" is a typical Levering poem—sudden magical shifts in perspective, quiet non-dramatic statements, and a subdued ending, which leaves a subtle after-taste. Though the poetry does not seem intense, it possesses an amazing, haunting power.

Levering serves as an excellent guide through unfamiliar territory. He points out various rock formations, unusual plants, and strange lakes. Sulphur Lake, he tells us, was formed when Grasshopper Man, one of the giants, ate all the unripe beans in Zuni gardens. The other giants "got sick of his belching/ & farting & kickt him/ out." Dizzy, he stumbled and reached a hand down to earth to steady himself.

Grasshopper Man
emerged dizzy & trippt
on a mesa; almost falling,
he reached down for balance
& touched earth, right here,
where this sweaty
stinking thumbprint is.

Right here! Wonderful words—they take us from our chairs right to the brink of the lake, where we find out not only its origins but something of the attitudes of higher beings toward mankind.

Now all grasshoppers are
skinny, just elbows & knees,
from his having the shits
so bad, and we are left
with this smelly pond

Sights and sounds abound in the poems. Sometimes we have sight *as* sound, as in this description of fragments from a prehistoric refuse dump:

by a smasht skull
the chippt lip
of a jug
the broken 0
of a vowel shift
the culture collapsing

In the third section of the book, the white man intrudes. "Car Hulk" and "Uranium Tailings" show us unexpected additions to the desert. And "Beer Can Cairn" is surely one of the pieces destined for good anthologies of contemporary poetry. Here is the conclusion.

in a
distant century the pile may have risen
higher than Hosta Butte when another tongue
asks * * *whose altar* * * whoever they were * they
*stumbled away in stellar winds like luck candles *

We feel such violations of the land because Levering has been able to transform our vision of the desert world. By the end of the book we come to see the Arizona landscape through the eyes of the Navajo, and it will never be quite the same again.

The immediacy of the poetry is enhanced by several fine photographs of the country.

Victor Contoski

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