COTTONWOOD 40

EDGAR WOLFE

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EDGAR WOLFE ISSUE

WINTER 1986

COTTONWOOD MAGAZINE AND PRESS
Lawrence, Kansas

COTTONWOOD 40

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. Fiction will not be read between April and September. We cannot return submissions which do not include a stamped self-addressed envelope.

Since COTTONWOOD has no regular source of funding, we depend heavily on the interest and support of our subscribers. Issues appear tri-quarterly at $5.00 per issue or $12.00 for a three-issue subscription. Although issues are sometimes irregular, three issues are guaranteed per subscription. Subscriptions and submissions should be directed to:

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Tom Averill's "How to Grow Old Playing Handball" first appeared in *Tellus 6*.

COTTONWOOD 40

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EDGAR WOLFE ISSUE

CONTENTS

POETRY

EDGAR WOLFE

FICTION

REVIEWS

GRAPHICS by Zili He
COVER: *The Farmhouse and Pete* by Zili He

Editor's Note

When I came here, almost 30 years ago, the university seemed small and intimate—many fewer students; open space where now there are buildings; rare old buildings, since replaced, like Fraser, longtime home of the Department of English; a faculty in English that was accomplished, congenial and a little intimidating. I certainly will long remember Bill Albrecht, Bill Paden, the poet Arvid Shulenberger, among others: gentlemen of strong character, deep learning, and high art. Two who left so deep an impression appear in this issue: Edgar Wolfe, whom the issue celebrates, and Carroll Edwards, who reviews Ed's recent collection *To All The Islands Now*. Edwards, Wolfe and their colleague Natalie Calderwood collaborated on a useful text, *Write Now*, which some of our writing readers may remember as the text in their first college course.

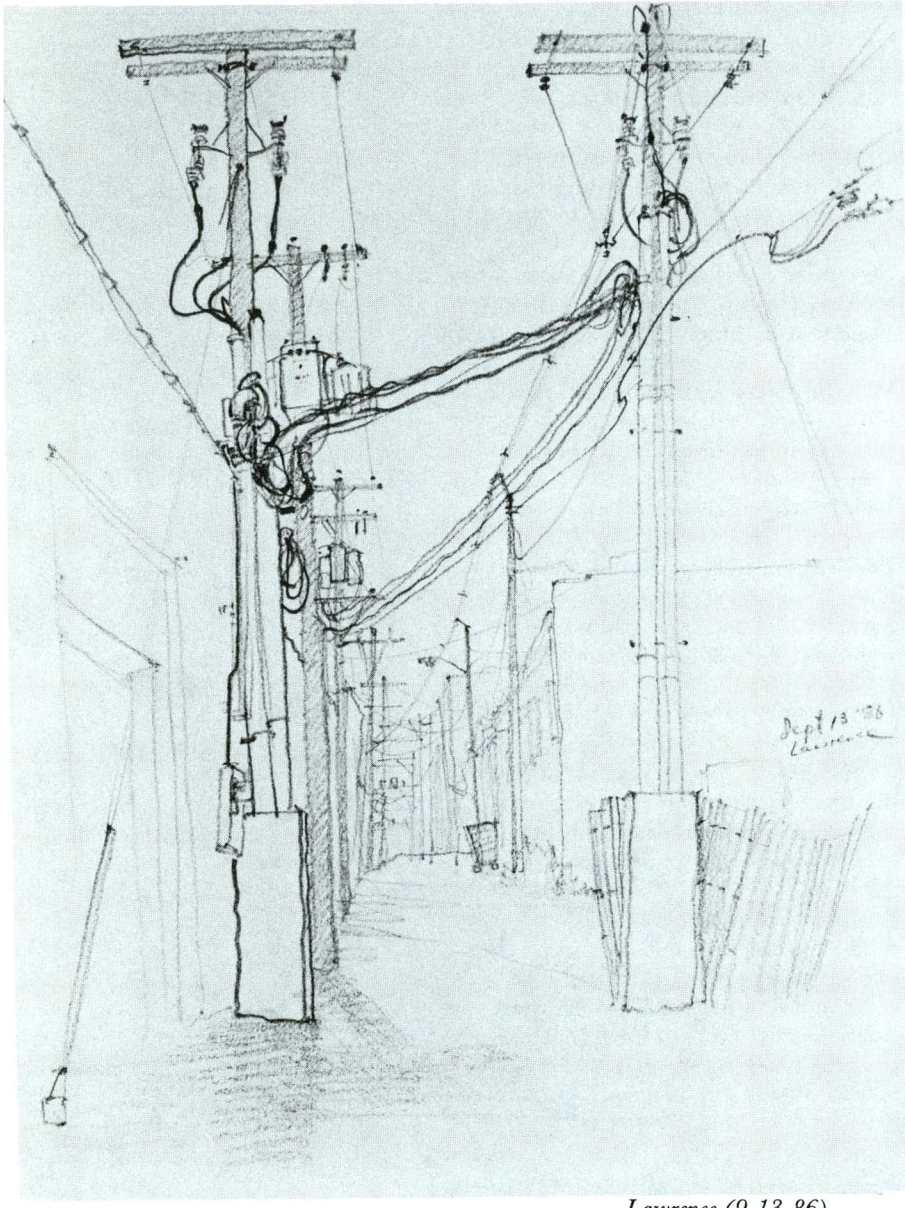
To speak of Edgar Wolfe is to speak definitively of much that is distinctive in the writing of graduates of the KU writing program. The essay by Bob Day expresses some of the ways in which young writers learned honesty, accuracy and humility as writers from a man who could teach these lessons because he exhibited them in his own life and work. Colleagues learned the same lessons, whether in ordinary conversation, consultation over some small manuscript of their own, or on the handball court. I realized again in a recent conversation with him how very much the opinions and attitudes of this man have shaped some parts of my response to the academic world we have shared. All the staff at *Cottonwood*, including those who have joined KU since Ed's retirement, salute him with an issue of the magazine we hope he will enjoy.

We are pleased to announce the first Alice Carter Awards, for poetry and fiction in *Cottonwood* 36, 37, and 38/39. Our judge, Keith Denniston of Emporia State University, awarded a prize of $50 to poet **Kathleen Spivack** for "Hologram," which appeared in issue 36. Honorable Mention for poetry was granted to Deborah Artman ("Tractor Man in My Mother's Bed," 37), Phyllis Becker ("Nobody Home," 38/39), Rita Dove ("Summit Beach," 38/39) and Patrick Stanhope ("A Short Fiction," 37). First place in fiction was a tie between **Andrew Brown** ("A Time of Innocence," 37) and **Russell Binkley** ("Hey Little Man," 36). Each of these authors will receive $25. Honorable mention in fiction was given to Anthony Di Renzo ("The Singer and the Song," 37), Sam Gridley ("Reunion," 36), Kathleen Maher ("Water Babies," 37) and Sheila Roberts ("A Mixed Affair, 38/39). Authors awarded honorable mention receive a year's subscription to *COTTONWOOD*.

In our next issue we plan to feature work by authors who attended the River City Reunion in Lawrence last September, a week-long celebration of literature and the arts. *Cottonwood* issued a set of broadsides for the occasion. Authors represented are Allen Ginsberg, Andre Codrescu, Anne Waldman, Michael McClure, Diane DiPrima, Denise Low, Victor Contoski, Ken Irby, Donald Byrd, and James McCrary. Portfolios containing all ten broadsides are still available at $10.00 a set (plus $2.50 mailing costs). Participants included KU alumni, KU staff, and distinguished guests.

The drawings of Zili He, featured in this issue, are but a small sample of his quick impressions of Lawrence and campus scenes from a very large collection of works recording his visits to many communities in the United States.

George Wedge



Lawrence (9-13-86)

POETRY

Trent Busch

CLEMSON'S WIFE

Another move, another borrowed
truck, boxing rags that were already
rags when we blew another breath
into another broken house.
Sweeping glass, cardboard tacked on missing
window panes, pretending the first
week that hammering can lean it straight.

Why do I stay with a man always
out of work, or when he finds a job,
sleeping in the first dark day of rain,
coming home the following noon
saying, "I can't work for that man."

I ask myself that question every
day. Always the fight, the makeup.
Another job, then the wailing
walls and a ghost child on my hip.

I know what people say, what I
would say and probably did as
a small child growing up, about
the trash that loads their trash into
a borrowed pickup truck and moves
to a place already left as lost.

But now I stop and take one
final look, the kids hollering
and Clemson yelling, "Hurry up."
Here and foolish, am I not allowed
to know what others know: that part
of me is taken there, that all
the world is older, that I stay
because of some place else to go.

Wendy Bishop

LETTER TO MY MOTHER, IN HADES, FROM ALASKA: A DREAM

Tonight, Charon had the face
Of the sly Army surgeon
Who cut pieces of tumor and tissue and said:
"No more babies, Ma'm." He had a close,
Down-to-the-scalpel squint, like Charon,
Sensing the breath of uneasy customers
At his oar-hunched back. Surprise
For the surgeon, had he cared, three more
Daughters from that damaged source.
I was the last. Surprises are what
Charon so rarely gets.
Still, more light than in life,
You jumped to shore from his rocking,
Pitch-stained boat and no glances back,
Being one of those who asked to go.
If I'm not right, somehow you'll
Let me know. You're busy shaking up
The house of Persephone and Pluto.

Fierce the way you lived through us,
Long pulsings of family similarity,
The cord tugs both ways. You tied us to you,
Dove upward through our brains, surfaced
In the spangling light our eyes let in,
And swam more freely than we liked.
Here's a snowstorm in March
But it's nothing new. On the TV, Easter
In a color-bar
display. My daughter,
A child you never saw, opens a pink crackling
Basket to the mystery of serum-tinted
hard-boiled eggs. She breaks them both
And melts chocolate in two fat hands.
Outside the window, flakes fall but don't fall,
Like a countless number of tufted strings
That begin vibrating: the unheard music of snow.
To the south, a volcano, interrupts from
The underworld and begins to blow, stopping
Air traffic. Like you, we're locked in.
If I'm not right, somehow you'll
Let me know. You're busy shaking up
The house of Persephone and Pluto.

Bitter snow. Tang of melt on old pine bracts.
Gravel-darkened drifts recede in weak sun
To needled combs, bristling along
an icy path. Less melt than evaporate:
Another kind of desert than the ones
You knew. Yours the need to dress,
Or dust a lonely trinket shelf,
Or firm an ever trembling lip.
Persistence was your name. "I always wanted to . . .

Write," you always said. Easter Sunday,
Your day. New dresses for a family of girls
Who tugged and bumped against their growth
Like cattle going down the chute
But ended up immaculate in an orderly row
On royal velvet in a crimson-windowed church.
Crucifixion, palm leaves feather
Across the face. That's age. Martyrs
Lead the way. On the old sharp stones
Of Jerusalem, a procession begins.
The woman in the center, on the TV screen,
Seems to be wearing your face,
Your Easter dress, waving your hand,
As she turns a severe rocky
Corner and tidily descends.

Konstantinos Lardas

STABBINGS

Threshing
the bundles on the ground,—
like waves,
like bucklings of the seas.

She, striking,
he, binding
what they had flailed
to death.

Their donkey, grazing,

and the trees behind them,
bristling,
like urchins of the sea,

their branches,
broken needles,
stabbing at the air.

Robert M. Chute

TURTLE OUT OF WATER

The old snapper
makes her seasonal
decision, heaves herself
out of her element, into
overbearing air. She
who could rise, float,
turn with a flick
of her toes, staggers now,
the weight of the sky
on her back.
She lives the myth
of the turtle
supporting the world,
an alien aeronaut
who goes
from weightlessness
to labor in the press
of air. This atavistic
traveler in time
condemns all daughters
to this ungainly
effort to conceive.

Robert M. Chute

JIMMY VALENTINE: The Late, Late Show

He flips the slotted blind
to let a slice
of heart-throb neon in

His wide-brimmed
fedora is too stylish
for a real bad guy

Sandpapered finger tips
caress the wall safe's
shining breast

Stolen pearls
seductively slide
into the blackness of his vest

So they will gleam again
against the throat
of the blonde at the posh hotel

He hesitates
then takes just two
of the many hundred-dollar notes

Michael Swofford

GRASSHOPPERS

In the early mornings,
still slowed by cold dew,
grasshoppers are easily
tobacco-canned for bait.

They are large and yellow-winged
and look like small children
helmeted for Star Wars games.

They are trapped, caught
as surprise breakfasts
for trout in glacier run-off
streams above Nederland.

They are fly-rodded past riffles,
chow-in-bed for the fat, cold,
killer-jawed Rainbows.

They are cast gently, with care,
out towards and above the deeper
black pools, floating as if
arranged on a waiter's tray
timebombed with hooks.

In midmorning,
now warmed by mountain sun,
the surviving grasshoppers
fly the meadows,
angling powerfully like fighter planes
strafing the Indian Paintbrush
and boulders of tossed granite.

They buzz, while flying,
like angry Timber Rattlers
irritated at missing breakfast.

Eva Skrande

LESSON IN METAPHYSICS

Outside, it may as well be night
Across a long pasture,
One lone horse still out
As if there was something else
He wanted to tell the already laughing moon.
The smaller animals of the field, their small
Chores for the day already done,
Prepare for sleep.
At the edge of the field,
Two older men get off of the same train.
Until now, their only connection
Was the similar lengths of the histories
Behind them.
All of this taking place under one huge moon
On the one side of which, a woman
Washes her face, her gentle hair
Pulled back, while on the other side,
Another is still caught
In the destiny
Of an embrace.

Patrick Bizzaro

WALL

for Jason

I lean against the wall
where there should be a window.
Sun scratches on the other side,

trying to get in.
Dust from the middle of the room
rises, trying to get out.

I stand near cat paw
prints where my cat
walked the ledge.

A plant points its leaves
toward the wall, drawn by the sun
that's supposed to shine through.

And all around me glass shatters
from a ball my son has thrown
against the wall.

Rawdon Tomlinson

ALTA

Wind shakes the hedge and bushes,
making a branch tap the window
like a finger.

It's not the dead, the drift of faces
flown from me like leaves in a mad covey
down the street,

but the bright stream of prairie light
through blinds at ten, swirling dust
to warring kingdoms,

floating my bird bones to the edge of skin,
jilting thought light as a feather.
There are times

on the currents of light I'm back in Missouri
with my father the doctor; mother dead,
her black hair

beautiful in the coffin, Choctaw
cheekbones high and rose-tinted,
rhinestone earings—

making the rounds with father in the buggy,
offering gumdrops to the white faces
of diphtheria.

The windows of the neighbor's house
flash bright as mica,
then go black.

I remember that sycamore struck by lightning
in the spring of '43—
a blue blast.

Sometimes I eat chocolates: the ones
with orange centers are best,
my son Milton

brings them from the Five and Dime;
the grocery boy comes at three;
the stray dog

around five, and the Soaps until then,
with cube steak and corn,
the parakeet

whistling tunes. When I crossed the river
into this dry land, I never returned
home again,

grown silent as the dumb chairs of the living room,
a bird-thought among trees of wind—
dust in light.

Lee Harlin Bahan

van Gogh sunflower of cat

A school bus parked on a brick roundabout
would not interest
the van Gogh sunflower of cat
asleep in a clay
pot on my front porch.

She could care less
about No. 2 lead pencils, a slicker
wadded in a child's
room, if peach-halves are canned
in heavy syrup.

In fact, she will not touch
peaches. Or mustard, or
raw pumpkin, nor even an occasional
crook-neck squash. (But does
love eggs fried, domestic carp,
the sharpest cheese.) Such a cat

won't lick your manilla evelopes.
And categorically refuses
to appreciate paintings by one-eared
Dutch artists. This

cat does only what she likes best:
to metamorphose all day long
snug in her orange sulphur
cocoon of sleep.

Walter McDonald

FATHERS AND SONS
(after Roethke)

Roaring songs from a hymnal, my father
beat the front door open with his fist,
staggering, flinging foam from the bottle
as he beat time and bellowed *Onward*

Christian soldiers. My mother marched
to the kitchen and crammed her fists
into soap water, splashing as if feeling
for knives. I stared at the burst door,

the splinters that pinged from the dead bolt
like a slingshot, and faced the beast-master
of my blood. Blur-eyed, he would have killed
for me that night. He drained the bottle

and dropped it, grabbed and flung me
around and around the room, both of us
dizzy drunk in a whirl of door-windows-
chimney, then down, father and son

staggering for the kitchen, laughing,
my thin pitch hitting the high notes with him,
In the sweet by and by while Mother's jaws
knotted and released with each jab of her fists

into dishwater. He peeled her away
from the sink, her fists sloshing out
as if baptized, empty, rigid as saints'
hands waiting for the lions.

The night I staggered home and beat
for mercy on the door, already sick
and weary of my life, he led me back
outside and sat with me for hours

in the dark. He hadn't sung or touched
a drink for years, but we rocked
like melancholy drunks, missing
the music of my mother's rage.

Ann Z. Leventhal

MOLTO VIVACE

Wearing a breeze of garnet silk, my daughter
Amy takes to the concert stage boldly.
My mouth goes dry. My child lifts her viola;
What if it makes no music? Amy draws fur
Notes from the wood belly, revealing Bach's raw
Suite. How splendid! She spins gleaming, the old
Spider's sticky strands, she uncovers, whole
From new weavings, Bartok's peasant shawl,
Bartok's scarlet camellias.
Amy pulls out
A velvet lap robe, stitched rich with Brahms' love,
(My daughter dares to steal from coffins, shares
Her spoils), and wraps my body in her sounds,
Dressing me as she is dressed in that blood
Red silk that throbs red in the savage air.

Lyn Lifshin

AFTER THE WAR

they didn't talk about
it, except in whispers
the way my mother
talked about a
period that was
late or a sister in
law who knew more
about a murder of the
Tip Top pie man. It
was like a dark
shape seen from the
corner of your eyes
a wild cat escaping
My sister said she
never heard, till at
20, seeing a singer
on Johnny Carson
at my ex in laws how
somebody said Oh how
German—she said she
thought the
blonde
woman had a nice
smile hadn't heard
of the ovens didn't
know of the babies
made into lamp shades
They didn't talk she
said when she saw
pictures of Dachau
she couldn't turn
the pages after
the first one
put the book in
the case with
the spine
hidden

Jay Griswold

THE BITCH

At night, you can't stop her if she wants to run.
There is always some opening, a door
left unlocked when a guest goes out
or the cold air blowing into somebody's room.
She doesn't mind. Twelve feet to the ground
means nothing to her. She hits
on all fours like a cat.
There's no use trying to call her home.

A bitch in heat has one thing in mind.
She can't be content by rubbing the furniture.
She smells certain bloodstains on the floor
and the odor itself seems to drive her crazy.
It must be hard, being a female in heat,
to feel the indifferent pulse of a male
once he is mounted, inside her.
It must be hard, just being a dog.

All night she will wander the town
nosing the shrubbery, not going anywhere,
not looking for anything. The males
will find her by the scent she leaves
sooner or later. One will stand guard
and snarl until the others take off.
Later, she'll return, head down, defeated,
licking the hand of the one who loves her.

Greg German

THURSDAY, NOV. 28 1:07 a.m.

One light is on
above the kitchen sink.
Tomorrow's dinner plates
are clean,
stacked next to a bowl
of white, unpeeled
potatoes. Pumpkin pies
settle on the stove.
Chairs sit politely
around the table. Each
individual tick
of the clock
falls off the wall,
out of tune
with the hum
that comes from beneath
the refrigerator.
Everyone else is asleep.
I cut a piece of pie.
Then another.

Sandra Liatsos

DESERT DAYDREAM

The dead people I love
dance around me in the desert.
My grandfather is grinning,
a friendly skeleton.
He tells me not to cry
about being barren.
He says that once you've died
you don't need to conceive a child
to cross over to the other
side of the moon.
He says to me, "See those dark mountains
under the full moon.
You are more enduring than they are.
If you have no children to dance with you
around this campfire
dance with your husband
and dance with all of us.
You can see that we are children
yet, none of us are children.
We are like that dead rock,
its spirit coming out of stone
to dance on the dark air."

J. B. Goodenough

MAST

When he didn't come up
For supper, we thought
He was ailing: one thing
A pig is is always hungry.

And we remembered he'd
Stayed in the woods all day
Instead of up on the doorstep
Asleep in the sun,

And that wasn't like him
Either, to keep to himself.
He ate his supper, but
Went down to the woods again.

We didn't understand until
We lay in bed, and heard
Acorns falling through the branches
Louder than shot birds.

Elizabeth Parker

AT HER WINDOW

Crossing the invisible line
between our yards
she brings us fresh fruits,
apple strudel just baked.
Then brushing past a "thank you"
she flutters like a moth
against the screen
wanting to come
in.
Can't she see
we have nothing left to give?
The day of work behind us
we slump in our chairs
as battered as the rhododendrons
in the yard
slumped against the house
after last night's storm.
Doesn't she know
we have so little time?
"She's just old," we say
turning on the T.V.
At her window she waits
as if someone gone for years
might come home.

Lynne Kuderko

AILI ELIZABETH IN WASHINGTON PARK: 1938

It is summer. She smiles
to the camera, to my father,
to the round, quick silver of light
that will hold her
in browns and grays and whites

for me.
My father's face
is a shadow that falls to her,
touching, almost,
as it did in the double bed in the back room

when I was six
and I found them there just after dawn,
that peculiar light streaking her face,
her eyes,
like now.

They still touch like that, I think,
in their graves
their fingers reaching
under white satin
through dark.

He, on the photo's back, years later,
writes the date, the place.
He writes her name
as he would in the beginning
of a love letter.

Robert Harlow

HERITAGE

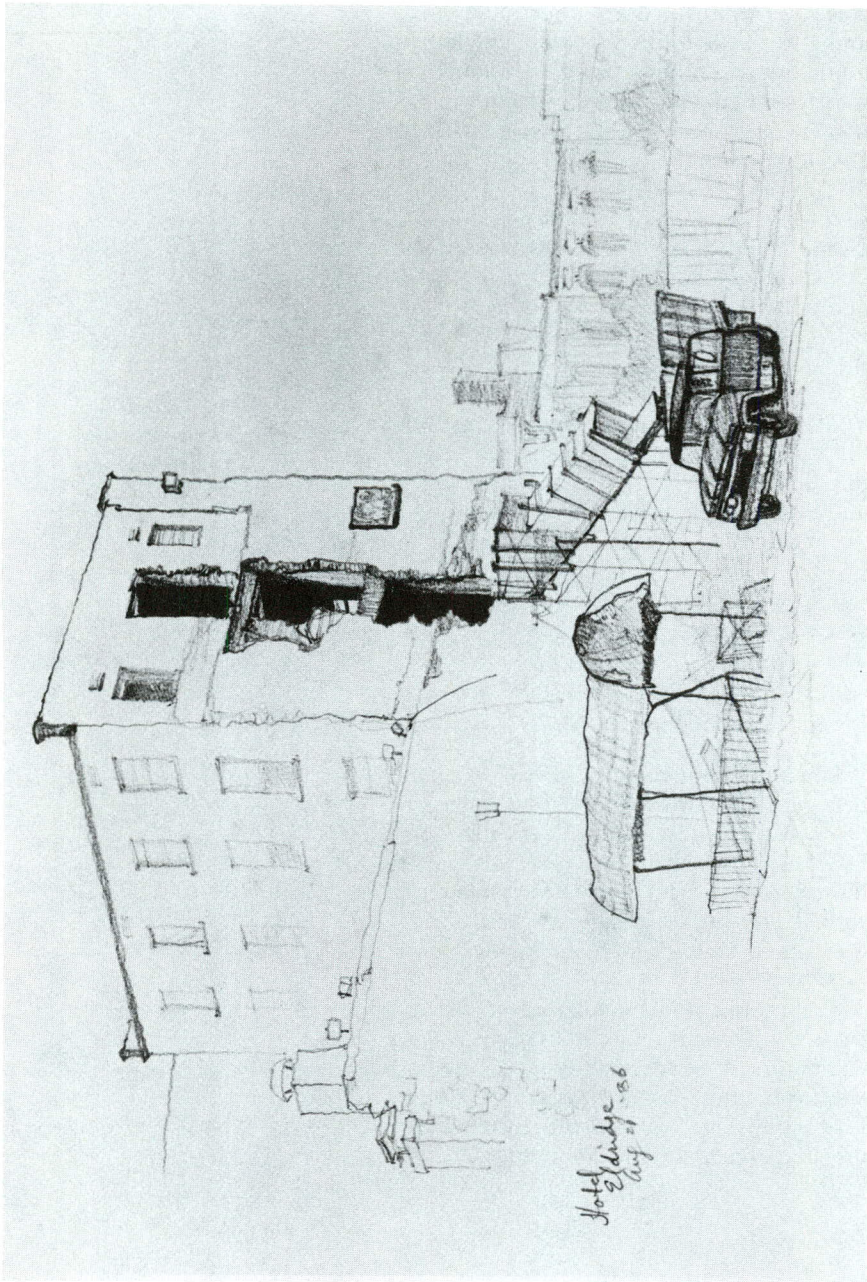
You were smiling the day you came home
wearing your new teeth, and started talking
about apples: "No more applesauce."
Later you had given up wearing them:
"Never fit good anyhow."
And the apples weren't as good
as when you were a boy
climbing Doc Tucker's trees.

The saws you owned are mine now,
and I work wood like you and your father,
a line unbroken for seven generations
until your son sold vacuum cleaners
door to door, then settled down to used cars.
I build porches the way you taught me:
the bottom rail low enough
so a milk bottle won't roll off.
Grandfather, milk comes in cardboard containers
or plastic jugs now,
and milkmen are as rare as porches
with people sitting on them after supper
the way we used to.

Yesterday I built a porch, trading my labor
for a cider press, and made cider
thinking of you, how we'd go to the orchard
and basket home apples, then squeeze
sweet cider out of them in the press
you built before my father was born.
You let me struggle against the wheel
you knew I could not turn.
Then you placed your warm hands
over mine and said, "Must be stuck.
Let's see if we can get it going."

I remember your hands. I'd look at them
believing mine would never be that big,
or do as many things. The last time
I saw them, touched them,
they were no longer warm. They were strung
with Rosary Beads. Fingers woven through
each other, hands folded across your stomach.

There are things I do now the way you used to.
I use my hands in ways you taught me
without using words. Sometimes
I feel something warm close over them.
Like today when I was turning the wheel,
pressing apples the way we used to,
your hands closing, gently, over mine.



Hotel Eldridge

EDGAR WOLFE

Edgar Wolfe

APPEARANCE AND REALITY

There before me, always southeast running, fast flowed
a burning sea, while still above it raced,
more swift by far, high smoke ablaze,
swift sparks alive and purposeful,
or bees, an infinite swarm of golden-glancing bees,
pursuing some far queen to a distant hive and haven,
unstayed of course by rocky hills and prairie-keeping fences,
by deepest breaks and
bluest shadows,
while in the west the sun stood low,
his feet upon the mountain clouds that burned
up from the glint and toss and smoke of the sea
even to their topmost golden peaks.
This I saw, and paused, and heard the singing wind,
adjusted clothing, drew a last warm breath,
then stepped forth into that molten stream,
the force of the gale, the bite of the snow,
and thirty-below-zero cold.

Edgar Wolfe

THE PASTURE

Now, to take up half, or nearly, of all
That once was ours, there's a great dike
Comes rounding in from neighboring northern pastures,
And I with it, walking the dike and looking
And looking, and the dike straightens east as
The land rises, and so in a moment comes
To nothing at last where I with my hoe imperiled
The young corn and crusaded in fall, fighting
With corn-knife sword against great, green pagans
To save the pumpkins. And, too, the persimmons are gone
From the orchard corner, and God knows what
Those new trees are, but I want them to grow
Till a whole triangle of shaggy wild forest
Looks over the dike at the tame great oaks
Up there in the yard and scorns them.

But you, down there,
Sprout off the old roots, hedge tree,
Osage orange, you stand in the right place,
Just where your father stood and bore the turn
Of the wires, anchoring the corner, beginning
The hedgerow. I'll come down from the dike and speak
And wish you particularly well, lone of your kind.
Boyishly (lover of wildness and hedgeballs)
I protested when my father cut the hedge. He said
It sapped the pasture soil and coal cost
Money and fuel we had to have. So.
Well I remember the black windless night
Of the thornpile's high explosive burning,
And how through the long winter I took at command
My end of the crosscut and loved the gold
Revealed and the rich sawdust spilled and watched
The growing pile wonderfully mix with snow,
And how, afterwards, I warmed cold shanks and read
By the grateful fire. But yet there's a present hedge,
Of elm brush mostly, which is better, I think,
Than none, however insipid and thornless. I'll walk
Within and view—what? Decayed and decrepit
Old trees in an old fruit orchard! Yes, but,
My God, it's true, *these* in my day were not!
How long is the life of a man? And under the grass,

Somewhere, close up by the hedge, are the graves
Of our white dog, Queen, and Don, best driver
Of cattle, Don, who never knew Queen,
But grew old like her and then died, dog
Generations ago. A little way on,
I think here, when I was eleven, we camped
Among the persimmons, Griffith and Leith and Herb,
Cousin Charles, brother William, and I,
And dug by the hedge our latrine, where never in all
Of two weeks could Charles do the least good,
Which surely I thought was the reason he died
Of appendicitis short months later.
But here, at orchard's end, comes now the incipient
Forest. No more the trees with the puckery
Too-soon-tempting fruit, but these,
An invasion, a very crusade of the saplings, spilling
In through the gap in the hedge, which now I myself
Will go through . . . and so I confront them. "Saplings!"
I say (for it hits me). "You're in our far pasture!"
Useless. They'll never stir for a hint, and if
I could order, I'd best get a hatchet. Besides, I
Recall that I gave them, and rightly, my blessing.

Yet, oh,
For the pasture
to be as it was! Treeless, of course,
And grassy, but overgrazed, a little too weedy,
With needed grubbing to do. Up in the corner
Are thistles, and here's purple ironweed,
Escaped from the orchard, a small clump of jimson,
In the low place there milkweed, and, scattered,
Wild potatoes, ragweed, and sandburs,
And tall yellow sweet clover, bright
With its butterflies, loud with its bees. And fresh
Cow and horse droppings, not to be stepped
In, gaudy with flies. And—the animals.
Yonder they graze, five muley Jerseys
And one horned Guernsey "with papers," the proud
Velvet Lady, a beauty unfavored by me.
Papers? Registration? Pure piffle.
Don't Betty and May outproduce her? They
Should be worth more than Lady. A kid like me can milk
Either, and gentle May likes to be petted.
But tamer than May is red Peggy, who keeps
Away from the cows since they butt her. Behind
Her overhung ears a rough corncob
Elicits expressive soft gruntings—but step back.

Dinner time! She's rushed and toppled by piglets.
Scattered and blacker than shadows, busy with bugs
And the grasshoppers, far range a score
Of Minorcas. Not by chance, the only one close
(He'll be closer) is Black Steve, the rooster.
Oh, he's mad, he's possessed, he's obsessed. He crows at me
And wants me to see him. I do, and he's busy;
Forget, and he's behind me and at me, on my poor
Summer legs, with beak bite and spurs
And wing flogging. Vengeance is mine if I choose,
But why choose it? I've chased till he barely
Could stagger and his breath rasped my heart to relenting.
What did it teach him? Why, just in a matter of seconds
He was wheezing an arrogant crow. And once in the tank
We boys held him deep under, halfway
To his drowning, released him and watched him. He staggered
Off filmy-eyed, dripping and sodden, but soon
Seemed to pause and consider. It was a clear eye
That fixed us. No death gurgle that but Steve's crow.
But now comes a long frantic barking with running
And cackling of chickens. It's Queen in chase of a rabbit.
Cows lift heads and grow curious. Peggy
Lies still but is watchful. All's over. Bunny
Has slipped through the hedgerow. But too long
I've lingered in this spot when Jim is away
Across pasture. I go and a pointing of ears
Says he sees me, but he won't stop his grazing
For that. (He did for the dog and the rabbit.) He'll stop
If I show him a bridle. Still grazing at first, he'll walk
Away slowly until I draw close,
Then gallop off to the end of the pasture. What
Jim likes is tending to business, which of course
Is perpetual eating. Let him eat and he's wholly
Complacent. Kids on his back never bother,
Nor does leapfrog up on his buttocks, our favorite
Manner of mounting. But if really I'm bent
Upon riding, hide the bridle, keep it behind
Till I'm up to him, pet him and speak, then out with it,
Bit hard against teeth, never mind
That grimace. Reach high! Over ears quickly!
All's straight. Got ya! Let's go to the barn
For the saddle.

Ah, me! Think of the barn and I think:
"Phantoms—Jim and saddle and barn." For I know
What I saw from the dike: just neighbor Whitaker's
Barn, all spruced up with white paint and added

Outside stairs to the loft. An apartment perhaps?
There's only one reason for asking: the barn's *there*,
And naturally a wholly abhorrent vacuum does not
Exist when *some*thing is there. Yet I care
No more for Whitaker's than ever I did, for it
Was the lesser barn, dinky and dull. The only
Stall housed chickens; the carriage room, junk;
And the empty loft just wasn't worth sneaking
A second visit to. But our loft was
A place of pursuits and brilliant escapes and the deeds
Of various war. The sweet new alfalfa, mounded
Almost to the roof braces, we mined with deep
Shelters and tunnels, following the dim walls
Around, seeking the buried north door
To unhook and breathe the clean air. Then back
And out on patrol, fierce in our danger, ready
With broomstick guns, crawling and cowering in craters,
To shoot it out in the end with a whole platoon
Of Heinies and naturally kill them all, except
When we chose to be realistic and cried with our wounds
And died, but rose again in three minutes,
For the life of a corpse is boring. But hark now! Someone
Below! A foot on the ladder! How escape?
Leith dives into the tunnel. I know what he'll do,
Jump from the north door, but not me.
A nearsighted boy can't judge heights.
A nearsighted boy is afraid. I'll run
For the hay opening into the leanto stable
And clamber down with a foot on the wagon room
Window. I can go in there if I choose—
But what has *he* done, the one on the ladder? I'll guess
He has heard us. He's back in the entry and listening.
Quiet he'll run and open the door and shoot me.
No, I'll step on down on the manger and jump
And run join Leith on the outside and we'll catch
This intruder together. Much more could I tell
Of such warring and all the fine hiding and seeking
And more ways to escape from the haymow,
But enough. I want now to tell of the drawing.
Alone or with Leith (for we both aspired to be artists,
Or, more exactly, cartoonists) I'd draw our cat
And her kittens, Billie, the mother, and Hobo, Whiskey,
And Booze, for so I in my wit had named them.
Or Jim I would draw on a wet day in stable.
I didn't draw cows. Cows I put off
Till I'd mastered the others. I can see that I'll never draw
Cows. Often for long I'd lie on the hay
Beside Billie and watch her and listen, at first

Just to her, but soon to the sounds of the barn,
The sough of the wind under eaves, assorted small creakings,
The click of bird toes on the shingles, sharp
Chirp of sparrows, the song of a hen below
In the entry, and then, close above, in the pigeon loft,
Startling in loudness and softness, the cooing of pigeons.
Now they trace human illness to pigeons. Perhaps
It is so. And poetry may or may not
Be an illness, but it is an infection, and the barn was,
I think, where I caught it. Some birds,
You'll agree, are singers, but the pigeon's not singer but poet.
More people should listen to pigeons. And rain and dread
I remember, the hard rain beating to deafness
And the crack of close thunder, which made me eye
The board splits running down by the stall
Where twice had come lightning to kill a calf
And render the mother barren. And in winter
Sometimes the chill sleet brushed the roof
With its bristles, while the cows below, in
From the storm, moved and stepped in their stanchions or sighed
Or blew or rubbed or loosed an occasional bawl.
And lonely (or hungry) Jim if he heard me
Would whinny so nicely I had to go down.
At once he'd manage to wangle at least a nubbin
Of corn, and I'd comb from his mane the tangles and whisper
A boy's sweet nothings into his sensitive ears,
And finally climb on his back and loll there, letting
Arms dangle, my head on his warm, strong shoulder.

O Jim, Jim, long gone I know you are
To the rendering works or your carcass canned for the dogs
In a practical way. And the barn is gone as you are,
Lightning burned at last or canted in storm
And then knocked down for the lumber. Building and creatures
Gone, and who knows how or knows why?
But this is true about creatures, all are betrayed.
Then who's the betrayer? Man? Say yes, and the answer's
Too simple. Think again, creature man.
Jim was sold while my brother and I were in college.
And why? For the sake of the cows' rumination.
For Jim, whom we used to ride to drive
The cows to and from rented pasture,
Learned his job a little too well,
Since he, in the winter, having no better to do,
Took to driving the cows for fun, around
And around the barn, diligently biting their rumps
To keep them moving. I saw him once, a summer

Or two later, as I was walking north
On Main Street past the jail. I heard his clear
Whinny, confiding and gentle as always, but prolonged
And repeated, and I looked and went where he was,
Hitched to the last of the buggies and tied to a post
On Third Street, strange among cars.
Since no one was around, I held his head
And talked to him as I petted. I said
I was glad to see him looking well fed,
Even if not so well groomed, and I
Was sorry he wasn't our horse still, very
Sorry, and if I just weren't jobless and still
In school, I'd do something about it, but now,
I was sorry, I just couldn't, and my father
Wasn't rich either or he'd have worked out
Something in the first place. Anyhow,
Believe me, I *wanted*—but wishes weren't horses,
Not even a single horse named Jim.
And Jim waited, patient as he had never been
In the old days, not nudging me or tossing his head,
But hoping, believing in me, almost believing
That I the next moment would untie
And drive him home to the pasture. Suddenly my lingering
No longer seemed to me kind but almost
Cruel, and so with a touch and a last word
I turned away. He neighed again briefly,
Sweetly, but I kept on to the corner before
Looking back. His head was toward me still,
His ears pointing. I walked on, I walked
From his sight, and my throat ached with all
My farewells, to Jim and my youth and the pasture.

Robert Day

I LOOK OUT FOR ED WOLFE

Being Twelve Notes on University Days, the Craft of Fiction, Coincidence, the Mind's Eye, Significant Details, Multiple Sclerosis, One Teacher and One Character from Fiction, and a Snowy Winter Afternoon in a Now Defunct Campus Building—All Written With Correct Spelling and Punctuation, plus a Modicum of Sentimentality for Which the Author Does Not Apologize.

1. The Nature of Titles. The Nature of Coincidence.

One of the things I learned from Ed Wolfe, my writing teacher at the University of Kansas, is that you can't copyright titles. I could have called this essay "Of Education," or *War and Peace*, or *Casablanca*. I could have called it "Penny Lane"—a song that was popular during the years I learned about titles and other literary matters from a man whose name happened to be Ed Wolfe—as in the famous short story by Stanley Elkin "I Look Out For Ed Wolfe." Coincidence, my Ed Wolfe will teach his students, is one of the energies of fiction. It turned out my Ed Wolfe and Stanley Elkin met each other one sad day, and that years later I met Stanley Elkin on another sad day; these coincidences are the rough stuff of life, but more on that later. For now, back to the present/past: You were first in print, Mr. Elkin, but I here-by exercise my muse-given right as an author to be a literary thief. I too look out for Ed Wolfe.

2. An Old Campus Building. Harris Flora and John Donne.

I am sitting in Fraser Hall, now defunct, the victim of some dreary university administration that thought it would look better as a pile of rocks than as the aging ivy twin tower building it was—and still is in my imagination, where I have held both Ed Wolfe and his Fraser Hall office like a hologram against a practical and efficient world.

"Imagine the specifics of the objects you are describing," Ed Wolfe will teach me. "Imagine them in detail."

Part of whatever ability I have to express what I imagine about such places as Fraser Hall I owe to Ed Wolfe. It is not enough to have talent, he has told me (although he's never told me I have talent), and it is not enough to want to be a writer (although he knows I want to accomplish that)—what I need is a sense of

duty to the craft. A patience with myself would help (I have told him at our previous meeting if I don't get published in the *New Yorker* by the time I am twenty-two, I'm going to stop writing and take up a job with the Lawrence, Kansas, police force.) And finally, Ed Wolfe will repeat once again: eye for detail is important; it is, Ed Wolfe insists, where honesty in fiction rests.

Beyond these lessons, Ed Wolfe suggests I might also want to do plenty of reading. Long before Saul Bellow made his famous remark, Ed Wolfe has been teaching his students that writers should be readers moved to emulation. "Learn to write dialogue from Ring Lardner," Ed Wolfe has said to me. Since I'd never heard of Ring Lardner I kept my mouth shut and later bought a Scribner's copy of *Haircut and Other Stories*. My library of books as texts to learn the craft of writing grows larger than my literary course library. It is a good beginning.

Ed Wolfe, like E. M. Forster before him, thought of literary tradition not so much as a great long historical queue of English authors, but rather as a round dinner table where we all ate together and talked books.

"Pull up a chair, Mr. Donne and Miss Austen. That's Bob Day and Harris Flora sitting across from you. Why don't you read your work aloud and talk. Mr. Day, Mr. Flora, you listen and learn." It is through such *en famille* literary meals that I have begun the process of becoming a writer.

By the time I am sitting across from Ed Wolfe in Fraser Hall this particular winter afternoon I have read my Ring Lardner. As well, I have learned from Katherine Anne Porter, William Stafford, J. D. Salinger, Jack London, Vladimir Nabokov, Ed Wolfe, Robert Service, and Jane Austen.

Harris Flora, my friend and fellow student writer in those days, has been instructed to learn from Dos Passos, Anderson, and the English novelist Meredith. Harris and I have been trading what we have learned over lunch at the Gaslight Tavern. Ed Wolfe is teaching us how to teach ourselves: he knows that, we don't. It is called dramatic irony.

3. God Knows We Are All Unbearably Sentimental.

God knows we are all unbearably sentimental about our college education. Our American minds are full of guitar songs, wine bottles with candles in them, old Studebakers, the back seats of old Studebakers, good friends past and forgotten with the rest, campus dogs and ducks, and the hallways and staircases of old stone buildings. I sometimes wonder how the chairs and benches of our college memories can be sat upon at all—they seem so precious and painterly.

Is Fraser Hall really all that worn and splendid? And my teacher, Ed Wolfe? Is he as instructive as this memoir makes him out to be? Or are they both wasted space: a campus building that when you cut away large swatches of the ivy on its sides reveals to the prying eyes of the engineer witch doctors (who knew "it" all along) large "significant" cracks placidly making their way among the stones; and what of Ed Wolfe, an "Associate" Professor (remember Elizabeth Taylor nagging Richard Burton in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*: "Associate Professor, 'Associate' Professor") with but one novel under his belt, no Ph.D., and a slow and deliberate fashion of speech that is at odds with the impatient generation he is teaching? What to make of the long pauses between your questions and his

answers? What to the prying eyes of academic promotion engineers does Ed Wolfe reveal?

4. Mecurical, Mercurial, and Nina Wolfe.

Ed Wolfe's Fraser Hall office slants toward the exterior wall of the building, and when you visit him you sit in the only other chair in the room—a swivel chair of the professor whose desk is near the door but who is seldom there. The chair you sit in, the desk where you sit, the book shelves that rise up the wall in front of the desk, all combine to give you a feeling of importance: it is the seed of pretentiousness, and it is difficult when you are nineteen and have the week before just written your first really long story—it is difficult not to swivel and rock back in your office chair, as if you were debating in your mind the influence of Sartre's work on your own.

Ed Wolfe doesn't seem to notice: he points out you've yet to spell "suburban" correctly, and that it took "both of them" (by that he means that his wife, Nina, who is bedridden with multiple sclerosis, has been consulted), to understand that "mecurical" was "mercurial." And then there are some matters of punctuation. Is it impossible for me to learn where in a quoted question the question mark is to be placed? So much for Sartre.

5. Cornucopia Finance Corporation and the Mind's Eye.

The Ed Wolfe that Stanley Elkin looks out after is a telephone bill collector who loses his job because he's too aggressive in collecting his accounts for Cornucopia Finance Corporation.

"You're in trouble. It means a lien. A judgement. We've got lawyers. You've got nothing. We'll pull the furniture the hell out of there. The car. Everything . . . If you're short, grow. This is America." His boss fires him.

Elkin's Ed Wolfe takes his severance pay, adds in some money from selling his clothes and car, empties his checking and savings account, so that taken together his net worth is $2,479.03—all of which he accumulates in cash with the idea of making it through the rest of his life. In the end, Elkin's Ed Wolfe throws it all away: one night both life and money get tossed onto the damp dirty floor of a dreary tavern. So much for the American Dream.

Stanley Elkin's Ed Wolfe and my Ed Wolfe have little in common: true; they both play handball (my Ed Wolfe was a champion), but beyond that nothing. Still, there is something magical about their mere coincidental existence, if not their antithesis; it is as if all concerned (the two Ed's and the two authors) have conspired to make fiction fluctuate between reality and the hologram of the mind's eye—between the real snow I see falling outside my Ed Wolfe's office window and the snow we see in the glass ball of winter scenes.

6. Wallace Stevens and Snow.

Fraser Hall is old and drafty, a fire trap, and full of wasted space. "Wasted space" was a great sin to the university administrators who never bothered to look out their windows at the broad sweep of prairie around them. Looking out

of Ed Wolfe's Fraser Hall office window I can see east twenty miles down the Kansas River Valley toward Eudora and Kansas City. Even in the huge brush strokes of the panorama I can see the details of small farming roads and teardrop-shaped ponds among the larger lovely space. It is blue outside. Blue and gray and white. It is winter; it is snowing. And, as Wallace Stevens has predicted in a previous class, it is going to snow.

7. Some Events Narrated Out of Time

Because he cares for his wife with the same combination of duty and affection that he cares for words, Ed Wolfe knows a great deal about multiple sclerosis. At some point Ed Wolfe meets Stanley Elkin, the unwitting author of "I Look Out For Ed Wolfe." At that meeting Ed Wolfe notices certain symptoms in Stanley Elkin (having to do with the eyes) that are precursors to multiple sclerosis. Ed Wolfe tells Stanley Elkin what he knows.

Years later in San Francisco I meet Stanley Elkin in a hotel lobby. I do not know the story about Ed Wolfe telling Stanley Elkin what he has told him. Nor of its prophetic truth. I say: "My teacher was Ed Wolfe at the University of Kansas. Do you know him?"

"Yes," says Stanley Elkin, and when he gets up to greet me I see that he has a cane and that he is shaking. "He was my teacher too." Mr. Elkin sits back down and looks to his left as if searching for a window out of which he can look. I do not know what any of this means, but I sense I have walked into an office where I should not be. I back away without saying anything more. It was not all that long ago that I learned this part of the story.

8. What I Am Writing.

I see I am writing these sentences to discover what I think about these matters; just as I am sitting in Ed Wolfe's Fraser Hall office to discover what I have written. There are twenty-five years between my two selves. By what name is that space to be called. If it is a question, should I try to answer it?

9. The Sentimental Education of Young Writers at the Gaslight Tavern

In those days, before the boom in college Creative Writing Programs and all the modern techniques that go with them, which, I want to confess up front, I am as guilty as the next writer/teacher of spreading, you learned not so much from "the writing program" as from your teacher—and you learned writing not so much in the class room as from the other end of the log. In Ed Wolfe's case this process began when he returned your story—usually a week or so after you had turned it in. What you got back was an annotated edition of your work with a long hand-written survey of its accomplishments and faults.

The survey would start on the back of your final page and proceed from your story's conclusion toward your story's beginning. You'd find Ed Wolfe's account was complete with samples of what you might have written; whole sections of your story would be reworked, complete with dialogue and narration. Often

when you'd turn your story's pages over from Ed Wolfe's writing to yours you'd discover that his comments matched page for page the very text he was rewriting. It was a twice-told tale, and it was enormously flattering. For reasons I cannot explain, this process did not violate your sense of artistic honor— which at age nineteen could easily be violated in a thousand small ways.

Harris Flora and I would take our Ed Wolfe/Flora/Day stories over to the Gaslight Tavern and read aloud what we had written. Is it to our credit (and I think it is) that we wondered then if energy for Ed Wolfe's own fiction was being spent on ours, that for every sentence he rewrote for us, he used up a sentence he might have written for himself? It was the kind of simple equation you believe in when you are young and talking about literature and drinking beer. What does it say about me that I believe it even now?

At the end of Ed Wolfe's survey you'd get your grade and a small drawing of a wolf. Well, sort of a wolf. It was a most benign wolf, and it seemed to have been drawn out of the very script that Ed Wolfe used to critique your work, almost as if letters that might have gone into yet another rewritten sentence had found themselves rearranged into a modest-size drawing of a mildly amused wolf— harmless, teeth and all.

10. The Slant of Ed Wolfe's Office. The Nature of Fiction. Duty.

The desk chair where I am sitting in Ed Wolfe's office has wheels, and over the course of your conversation with Ed Wolfe you have a tendency to roll downhill toward him, which turns out to be necessary because the longer Ed Wolfe talks, the softer he speaks. The important criticisms worthy of a good story are put very softly and near the end of your conversation, so it is a good sign if by the end of your meeting you wind up more or less bumping chairs with Ed Wolfe. It is a bad sign if you don't spend enough time in the chair to slide very far downhill. Your progress down the slope of Ed Wolfe's Fraser Hall office is something of a barometer of how well you have written. This afternoon I won't make much progress toward the window where my teacher is framed in the fading light.

"I have decided," Ed Wolfe says, "to return to an old system of reading your stories." Here he holds up the front page of my work. I can see even in the gathering darkness (the office lights seemed never to be turned on) that my great opening scene is heavily penciled. Ed Wolfe turns the story around to show me that there is nothing written on the back of the final page. That is not a good sign at all. The longer the critique of your work, like the longer roll you make in the office, the better your story is. One page of rewriting is no compliment at all. There has always been that folklore/rumor about the student who wrote so badly that Ed Wolfe wrote nothing in return. In the gloom of Ed Wolfe's office I am beginning to feel like someone who has become a character in a fiction not of his own making.

"You need," Ed Wolfe says, "to have some respect for the spelling of the English language and the punctuation of English sentences. I have corrected the first page. I have not read further. You can correct the rest. When you have, return the story to me and we shall talk." He hands me my story and leans back in his chair and puts his left elbow on the window ledge.

Oddly, I notice for the first time that at the edge of window along the sill there is snow blowing in: a small drift is collecting just where Ed Wolfe's elbow is resting. I am wondering if I will ever be able to use in a short story what I am seeing: how to describe this thin, light crescent of snow assembling itself inside the window of a professor's office. How to match that up against the feeling of the weight my story makes in my hands as I realize there is a lifetime of work to do and yet I don't know what a lifetime of anything means?

"Words," Ed Wolfe says leaning away from the window, "words are the first element in writing to admire. There are other things to like about writing. Sentences. Plot. Character. But you must start with an affection for words." He pauses and turns his chair away from me so that we are both looking out his window. "What are you saying about a word when you don't bother to know how to spell it? What are you saying about a word if you abbreviate it? Cinn. M.S. If you do that, who's to say if you'll describe anything correctly? Or admire the fullness of it? The snow outside my window. The color of shadows. The way the snow comes in through the crack and onto the sill." He turns back to face me. "The first detail of fiction is the word."

11. A Question of Fiction in Search of an Answer

Suburban, mercurial. The crescent of snow along the edge of the window. The hologram in my mind of Fraser Hall that is lit by the laser beam of afternoon light coming through Ed Wolfe's window. The glee and sorrow of coincidence. The flux of life and fiction. The Gaslight Tavern. Harris Flora. Ed Wolfe. Ed Wolfe. Stanley Elkin. The table where we all sit, words and question marks alike pulling up chairs along with Ring Lardner and John Donne and asking out loud, how do we know one another? And what will become of our fellowship? What indeed. If that is a question, do I have to answer it? I think I do.

12. "I Look Out For Ed Wolfe," a story by Stanley Elkin.

I look out for Ed Wolfe.

22 April 87

Thomas Fox Averill

HOW TO GROW OLD PLAYING HANDBALL

for Edgar Wolfe

First, quit diving for the ball.
Let your aging body teach you what your mind already knows:
A good player lets the ball come to him.
When it does come, hit it well—
Every shot must be the last.
Conserve what strength you have.
Get used to going from tired to more tired.
Let your eyes learn the slow burn of sweat.
Let your shoulders wince as your arms move in that high arc above your head.
Let your knees stiffen and
Stalk the ball in a crouch, neither straightening nor stooping,
Compromised, but always at least half ready.

Then quit playing singles. In doubles your partner can take up your slack.
You won't see the ball as you once did.
It will blur, then be there in your hand, a small black surprise.
That fine spin,
That six-inch hop left or right,
That calculated deadness from a corner shot,
That crackling kill-shot off the back wall:
All of these will be beyond your control as
The ball you've hit bounces straight from the wall into
Younger, more certain hands.

When your arthritic shoulders keep you from lifting your arms,
You will look like a small bird, flapping your short reach furiously at your sides.
When your neck is a stiff column,
You will rotate your body with the slow precision of a periscope.
When your breath comes short,
You will rest longer between games, between points.
Play only three times a week, then twice, then once, then sporadically.

Last, you will sit stiff in some chair.
Its squeaks will always remind you of new tennis shoes on varnished courts.
Your heart will thud like leather gloves striking that small rubber ball.
The smell of the court will live in your old man's nostrils.

To All the Islands Now by Edgar Wolfe. Topeka, KS: Woodley Memorial Press (Washburn University), 1986. 105 pages. $5.00, paper.

This short book of three stories by Edgar Wolfe, with an introduction by William Stafford, sells for the unheard of price of just five dollars. You have only to give up five packs of cigarettes or ten cups of coffee and you'll have enough to buy Wolfe's fine stories.

The first long short story, "Nor the Furious Winter's Rages," is set in the winter in Coyote, South Dakota. Superficially nothing much seems to happen—the narrator and his companion arrive in Coyote to teach in the high school. They talk with the local inhabitants, are invited out to "dinner," make a fearsome trip over unplowed roads to a larger town in order to pick up Mr. Pesek's new radiator, and return home. But as has been noticed often about Chekov's stories, momentous things occur beneath the surface. "As Nice as a Dog" is a delightful tale about a pet rooster, and "Instead of Bread?" is primarily concerned with a young farm girl who becomes disillusioned with what we would call fundamentalist religion.

Wolfe, an important American poet, gives us some of the same qualities to be found in his poetry—lucidity, a remorseless forward movement approaching that of the Bible ("And Ahithophel, when he saw that his counsel was not followed, saddled his ass, and arose, and gat him home to his house, to the city, and set his household in order, and hanged himself, and died, and was buried in the sepulchre of his fathers.") and above all, the touch of love that appears in anything Wolfe writes. Some years ago I was talking with a great Irish dramatist who was just celebrating his eightieth birthday. Congratulations had been sent to him from all over the world, among them a letter from Beckett—"To my great Irish compatriot to whom I owe more than I can say." O'Casey asked me if I liked Beckett and I hedged my approval by saying that only a strong stomach could keep down all the misery. "Yes," O'Casey replied, "but he has such a great love for people." If you think this remark is tame, you're mistaken. Not a single Beckett critic has made this observation about Beckett in spite of the fact that it enables us to see into the very heart of Beckett's stories and plays.

O'Casey could have said the same thing about Wolfe's poems and stories, but he would have added, "and all living things." For Wolfe's love touches all things, from the shy, almost-child-bride in "Nor the Furious Winter's Rages":

> "Wish I coulda gone to high school," said Hazel. She ought to have been about a junior like Rachel Javaux, who came from near Owl Butte and roomed at Tom Ramsay's.
>
> "I guess you know Rachel Javaux?" I asked.
>
> Hazel nodded. "She was in my grade." Then she said matter-of-factly, "She wasn't no smarter than me." After a little, she asked, "Is she smart?"
>
> "Yes, pretty smart. She gets good grades."

to the distressed Ruth in "Instead of Bread," to Hardicanute, the marvelous rooster in "As Nice as a Dog," and to the weeds themselves in one of his poems.

There are two other Beckett parallels I would like to make without suggesting their influence on Wolfe. In both "Nor the Furious Winter's Rages" and in

Beckett's plays and stories the characters find it almost impossibly difficult to move from one place to another. Vladimir walks with short, stiff strides, Dan cannot talk and walk at the same time, and another characer is in a wheelchair. In "Nor the Furious Winter's Rages" the characters find it next to impossible to move about. Going from the house to the barn is slow going. On the excruciatingly slow trip to town Mr. Pesek slams his old Dodge into the unplowed drifts, making as much as three feet forward. The radiator boils and stops are made to refill it from a five-gallon milk can. As in Beckett, all motion is slow motion. Beckett, I suppose, is saying that in our faithless, self-conscious culture the modern intellectual has immense trouble simply putting one foot ahead of another. Wolfe, I'm sure, does not start out with a metaphor. He looks steadily at the object to be described and if metaphor arises from this observation it is the reader's metaphor.

Again, Beckett's characters are all touched by the Devil and we find them on an ash heap, scraping themselves with a potsherd withal, but they do not curse God and die. The reader of "Nor the Furious Winter's Rages" is likely to assume that the natives of Coyote, South Dakota, have also been touched by the Devil and that the Devil has left them, not on an ash heap, but frozen in an ice cake in the unending Dakota winter.

> "But when does spring come?" the narrator asks.
> "Can't say it ever will," the native replies.

But if you spoke this assumption to the inhabitants of Coyote they would be astonished. In Dante's Cocytus, the last circle of Hell, Satan is frozen into immobility, but in Coyote the natives, in their own cake of ice, move, live, love, and have their being. It doesn't occur to them to curse God and die.

Both Wolfe's and Beckett's characters love their property, however mean it is. In one of Beckett's stories a desolate character is taken to the hospital. There they empty his pockets—a knife with a broken blade and a few pieces of string—and put them on the night stand. The character dozes off and when, awakening finds that his "property" has been removed, becomes hysterical with anxiety. Mark and Hazel live in their very own tar paper shack in frigid Coyote. Mark says, "If we just had a bigger stove I reckon we could manage along pretty comfortable," and proudly, "Ain't ever shack in this country got wall board like this one." Wall board is ugly, brown cellulose, a half inch thick. Its only function is to hide the open two-by-four studs!

Wolfe's Hazel, the intelligent child bride who never went to high school is a triumph in characterization. She says so little in Wolfe's story, but you will remember her. At the end she need

> Fear no more the heat o' th' sun,
> Nor the furious winter's rages;
> Thou thy worldly task hast done,
> Home art gone and
> ta'en thy wages:
> Golden lads and lasses must,
> As chimney-sweepers come to dust.

"Instead of Bread?" is the last story in Wolfe's collection, but it should be the second, and the last should be the tale of the marvelous rooster, Hardicanute. As the Greeks presented first, three tragedies and then concluded with a comedy to clear the air, so Wolfe should have presented his two tragedies and followed with the story of Hardicanute to get us all back on an even keel. "Instead of Bread?" is primarily about a girl just past adolescence, a true believer, who, nevertheless, idolizes her father, a scoffer. The scoffer meets with accidental death, and the fundamentalist Methodist preacher cannot reconcile Ruth to the death of her father;. Ruth leaves for greener pastures, the state university, where she hopes to find her own way, which will be a different way from that proposed by the fundamentalist preacher. I would say that Wolfe doesn't succeed with his portrayal of all the characters. The girl, Ruth, is good, as is the fundamentalist preacher, but the father is a problem. There is too much in him of Robert Ingersoll ("If there is a God, let him strike me dead in this very place.") In Wolfe's defense we need to remember that the events in this tale happen in the 'twenties. In the 'twenties there was still much hard dying and the fundamentalist preacher was there, on hand, when the hard dying occurred, to offer solace to the bereaved. And then Wolfe faces a problem in presenting the death and the funeral. Death itself is an almost unmentionable topic and a funeral totally unmentionable. But all I can say to those who would laugh away Wolfe's fundamentalist preacher, a real power in his time, is to recall the culture that has succeeded him.

"In principio
Mulier est hominis confusio."

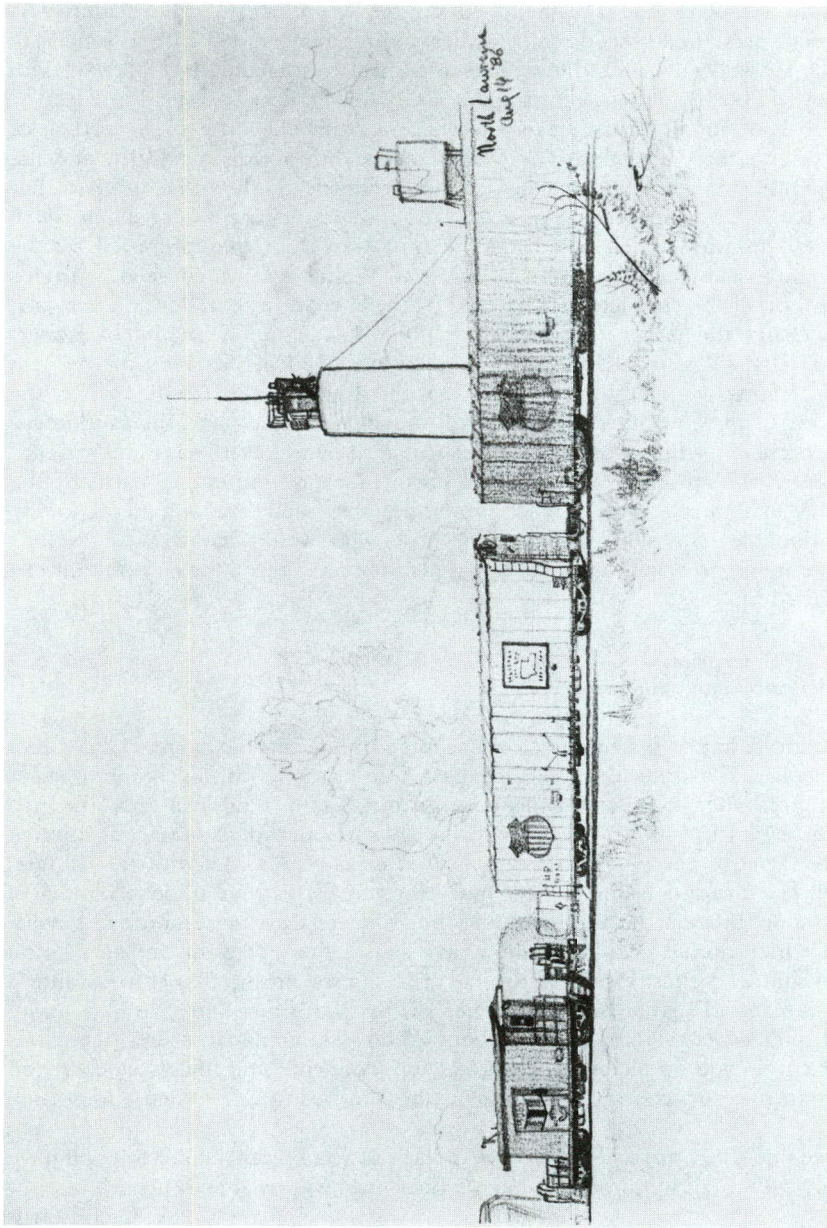
Not since Chaucer's Chauntecleer has there been a chicken as smart as Wolfe's Hardicanute. Chauntecleer was perhaps a little more deft in his handling of his women, and after all he could speak Latin, but, again, there were no little girls around as Hardicanute grew up, and his association with the ladies is aborted and too short to allow us to see much of Hardicanute's way with the women.

Well, Hardicanute is one of those marvelous creatures who, under the touch of human love, blossom into individuality and change their very natures. Anyone who has had animal pets knows how love causes them to grow and to take on human characteristics. When, in the story, the guests exclaim that Hardicanute is "Just like a dog!" what they really mean is that he is just like a human being.

You will have to read for yourself about Wolfe's phenomenal rooster. If you do, the next time you go to the supermarket for some cold and lifeless chicken you will try to reassure yourself: "That can't be Hardicanute. He died a long time ago."

Three fine short stories for only five dollars. If you buy this book you will have not only a first edition, you will have a book that will become a classic.

A. C. Edwards



North Lawrence

FICTION

Randy Michael Signor

THUMPED

His eyes froze on something across the bar. We looked.

He said, It's her.

Two women stood close together against the wall; talking, laughing, touching.

Who's that with her, Angel, we said.

He said, You had to ask. Another woman. You heard the stories:

live shows at the Quad-X; sapheads and punks and hoods.

Sure thing, Angel, we said. We looked at the two women: orange spikey hair, both; plaid flannel shirt, one; black turtleneck, the other.

He said, I can't help it, I look at her, I see her, nothing else. It don't matter she don't see it that way no more. Women. They get chummy and the next thing they're off on their own, man haters and woman lovers. Can't let things be. It ain't right.

He said, It ain't right to thump them either, no matter what, but women and trouble and me seem to be full-time partners and I've always had one solution to every kind of trouble.

Sure thing, Angel, we said.

He said, Got jumped today in a garage by three clowns with razors. Left them splattered all over the walls. Like grease. One sorry mess.

Have a beer, Angel, we said.

He said, Vacation in the sun; water and sand; rum days and nights, that's what I want.

The neighborhood needs you, Angel, we said.

He said, Cabin in the mountains; hunting, trapping, fishing; skiing on the slopes, that's what I need.

The creeps will take over, we said.

Angel scanned the bar wall to wall: jukebox, booths, stools, long mirror, bottles in rows, pinball machines, pool tables.

He said, Did you hear that?

People, glasses, gush of crowded-bar noise.

What, we said.

He said, I heard it. Creeps.

With a whir Angel stood up, grabbed a wooden chair in each hand, and brought the chairs crashing together like cymbals. Some creep's head was caught between the chairs. A knife clattered to the floor. Angel smiled and released the chairs.

He said, See? I can't get a beer without some cowboy looking for a cheap reputation. Back stabbers and losers and longshot freaks.

He kicked the heap out of his way and walked to the john. Six men ran out.

He returned a minute later and the men slipped back in. He sat down and jerked his head toward the john.

He said, Everyone ducks out when I come around. It ain't good.

You do what you got to do, we said. Who else is there?

He said, I know. But I'm letting it be known that I am looking for something better.

He pounded his fist on the table and we jumped.

He stood and walked away to watch a hot game of pool on the number one table. Soon he challenged the winner, a loud goofhead from across town.

Angel ran the solids and called the 8-ball in the far corner. He was lining it up when the goof broke his cue stick over the edge of the table. He held the piece of wood like a bat and shouted at Angel:

HUSTLER!

Angel bent over the table across from the goofhead and readied his shot.

CHEAT!

Angel slowly drew back the cue and then whipped it around in a blur into the goof's throat.

It's time to go, we said.

* * *

Walked the streets, strutted stuff and looked loose, past parked cars and bars and stores.

He said, Cowboys and clowns and creeps. Any jerk with half a notion of hot stuff. There must be a freak convention around here. It could be dangerous.

Sure thing, we said. We know about danger and you, Angel.

He said, I ain't looking for it but I know already it'll be there.

We neared an alley.

He said, Look.

Sure thing, we said, A shortcut.

He said, Ain't no shortcut. What it is is trouble.

Angel leaped into the alley. Four jerks crouched facing Angel; each held a three-foot piece of heavy chain. They all drooled and their heads were topped by bowl haircuts.

He said, Punks!

Creeps! GO!

They slashed the ground with their chains, bashed cans and bottles.

He said, Filth! Garbage! SCRAM!

They came at him spinning their chains like airplane props.

He said, BASH! CRASH! SMASH!

The chains flew from their hands, bounced off the walls and fell out of reach. They each looked at the chains and at each other and then at Angel.

He swung his leg in a wide roundhouse that snapped each man's head 180 degrees.

That was close, we said.

He said, Don't think about it.

He walked away from the alley. We caught up with him.

We weren't worried, Angel. Not really, we said.

He said, It's fine; ain't got sloppy yet. There's always been women and creeps. Right now I got less of one and more of the other. Just waiting for it to balance out.

* * *

It was night and beers. Angel had been telling stories.

He said, The streets are getting rougher. It's cut and slash out there. Punks and troublemakers everywhere.

It'll clear up soon enough, we said.

We looked at each other, fidgeted, stretched, shuffled.

He said, I've been thinking.

Sure thing. What about, we said, looking at each other. Something in his voice said *look out.*

He said, Maybe it's time to move on, computers or pre-law. I can't keep this up forever. I need to diversify. The only things I know are things to do with my fists. I'm a stand-up guy but every jerk who hears my name has to see for real and someday that'll be that.

He said, I'm thinking maybe it's started. There's too many of them out there lined up for turns and I don't see no end to it else I end it myself.

Angel, we said, It's you against them.

He said, It's all I do, thump crazies.

Have a beer, we said.

He said, Sure thing.

As he spoke his eyes swept the bar and stopped midway around the room. His mouth turned into a wire.

He said, It's her again. I don't believe it. Two wimps and a fat lady. A regular circus act.

We didn't say a thing. They sat huddled over a pitcher in a booth by the wall. The fat lady had one heavy arm draped over the other woman's shoulder. This time the woman's hair looked purple. The wimps laughed at everything.

He tore into the crowd and tossed people out of his way until he was next to their table. He stood there and looked at her. It was real quiet; his fists were shell white and quivered at his sides.

He said, Two wimps and a fat lady!

He pounded their table. It shattered. He took the pieces and crushed them into sawdust and splinter until that's all there was. The four of them sat rigid and the fat lady glistened like a pool.

He said, Move! Out of here! GO!

She got up to leave with the wimps and the fat lady. Her mouth looked tight, her jaw set hard. As she reached the door she turned and looked at him. Her face and eyes were red.

You're wrong, she said.

He said, Stay.

She said, No.

He said, STAY!

She went out the door. It was dead quiet. Angel looked at the door until a bunch of guys came in five full minutes later. He grabbed a handful of sawdust and looked at it, then back at the door. Then he did something that made everyone scared, more scared than when he had raged through them: to the sawdust in a voice almost too quiet to hear,

He said, I got to stop with the fists.

* * *

Angel pulled up to the curb where we talked. He drove what had once been a Yellow Cab. It was brush- painted a flat maroon.

He said, Pile in.

Sure thing, we said. Where to?

He said, Here and there and around. Business.

The radio blared rock 'n' roll through the car. Everyone bounced and slapped their legs to the beat. Angel drummed better than anyone and drove smoothly through the downtown traffic.

He swung the car into a warehouse parking lot where there was a black limo and nothing else. The limo's windows were blacked out. Angel stopped the car facing the side of the limo.

He said, Don't move a muscle.

Sure thing, we said. We sat still as wood dummies.

He got out and closed the door and walked over to the limo. The window in the back door slid down a bit and a small cloud of smoke rolled out. Angel stood three feet from the back door and talked. He gestured and slowly got worked up, started to hop on his toes and bounce around. He punched the air a couple of times. Then he stood dead still and jerked his thumb toward us. The window slid down further and two pairs of dark glasses looked at us and then up at Angel. We didn't move. Angel tilted his head and smiled. The window slid closed and the limo squealed away. Angel watched them until they were gone and then he returned to the car.

Things go OK, we said.

He looked around the car and smiled.

He said, I told them you knew the score. I told them you knew everything I knew. I told them I wasn't anything without you.

We looked at the space where the limo had been and then at each other and then back at Angel.

He said, I told them you ate chili for supper. Every night. They wanted nothing to do with you.

He smiled and laughed and banged on the steering wheel so lightly we could feel it better than hear it.

* * *

He said, Listen. Hear that?

What, we said.

He said, Creeps, jerks, punks. I hear them all.

We heard talk, shuffle, spill; pool balls clicked, beer glasses broke; we heard laughs and shouts.

He said, I'M COMING!

Angel went out the back door and into the alley. Then we heard new noises: grunts, smashes, cries, breaking, crashing, crunch and splatter.

The noise in the alley became louder than the noise in the bar. People stopped to listen.

BASH! CRASH! SMASH!

Then it was quiet. Quiet enough to hear footsteps. The back door opened and in walked a woman. It was her. She walked over to where we sat. She nodded at us. Her face was red but dry, grim. Her hair, tonight streaked blonde and pink, barely touched the collar of the plaid shirt.

She said, He's gone.

Gone, we said.

She said, I was coming in through the alley when he came out. He yelled and jumped around. Then he tore up the alley. Cans, bottles, boxes, glass and wood and garbage. Everything. He destroyed it.

There wasn't nobody out there, we said.

Me, she said.

Alone, we said.

Alone.

We looked at each other and then at the back door in wonder.

She said, He said you know what to do.

Do, we said.

She said more: He looked me right in the eye. I didn't say a word. He said so long. He said he couldn't take no women and no punks no more. Then he butchered that alley.

We got up and walked to the back door to see for ourselves.

She said, It's all there.

She hadn't lied.

Marcela Davison Avilés

HIGH NOON

For those of you who do not speak Spanish: there are a few Spanish words in this story so I thought I'd tell you what some of them mean before you read it. Otherwise, you might do something like go out and get a dictionary which isn't necessary because there are really only a few words and I'll bet you already know a lot of them. You'll probably be surprised at how much you know. So here they are, not in any particular order:

1. "*Hombre*"—man. As in "*un bueno hombre*" (a good man) or "*un malo hombre*" (a bad man) or "*que* malo, *hombre*" (you be bad, man).
2. "*Brutos*"—literally, brutes; bad guys; people who are not civilized.
3. "*Que hacen?*"—"What are you all doing?" or "What's up?" or "What's happening?"
4. "*Comadre*"—a term of endearment used by and between close women friends. For men friends, say "*compadre.*" As in "Hey, *compadre*, hand me a beer" or "Listen, *comadre*, about that stock deal I told you was going to hit the roof. . . ."
5. "*Amor*"—love. This word can be used as an object of a preposition as in "*lagrimas de amor*" (tears of love) or as a term of endearment between lovers as in "*Amor, tu sabes que no puedo vivir sin ti*" (Darling, you know I can't live without you).
6. "*De Veras*"—it is the truth.
7. "*Chorizo*"—a spicy Mexican sausage usually served at breakfast.

Now we can start the story which is about all of the above.

Down in an old western town on the border, Joe fell in love with a Mexican girl. He fell just like the song says, right into his own heart waiting to be dived into and splashed around, for joy. Elena's her given name. Mariaelena Vincente y Santacruz. Vince for short. She has long black hair and black eyes that'll pull you in and let you drown for all their softness. She's liable to appear slightly cool to some but, really, she's more passionate than both sides of the border.

See, Vince's got this way of feeling very intensely about things, which isn't surprising because her family is known for their emotional ways. Even for Latins they have quite an emotional streak. For instance, if the two o'clock afternoon movie doesn't come on for some reason, Vince's mom goes batshit. Especially if it's on account of a Special Report. One time a Special Report came on right in the middle of the movie, right when Gary Cooper is falling in love with Jean Arthur in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*. Right when old Coop says to Jean Arthur about

how people working too hard makes them forget how to live. I thought Mrs. Santacruz would have a breakdown or something.

"*Brutos!*" Mrs. Santacruz is exclaiming all over the place and waving her arms around very theatrical-like while Harry Reasoner reads off more figures on the casualty reports from Laos. "Un beeleevable! How could they interrupt Gary Coop-ér? Tell me the name of the barbarian who invented Especial Reports."

I like the way Mrs. S. says Gary Cooper. She says "Gary Coop-ér" with an accent on the "er." Gary Coop-ér. Good old Gary Coop-ér and Yean Arthur.

"Uh, gee, Mrs. Santacruz," I say. "It's the war and all."

"Huh," says Mrs. Santacruz. "*Brutos.*"

I guess you could say Vince's passion is a family trait. Joe fell in love with her right away. Boom, like that. Like old Coop and Yean. Vince took her time though, because of this family trait of hers. She says when you come from a family with an emotional streak you have to learn to be careful, because it's easy to give away too much of yourself. But now Joe loves Vince more than dreaming and she loves him back. They have themselves a fine little swimming hole for love.

I'm familiar with all this mutual affection because we hang out together a lot, me and Vince and Joe. Lots of times we'll go out to Sabino Canyon on the weekends. We live in Nogales which is on the Arizona borderline into Mexico. It's a little town, full of tourists and Americans and Mexicans and sometimes it gets kind of schizoid. So we take off for Sabino, up to the mountains outside of Tucson. If you go north of Tucson and halfway up the mountainside it's still half desert and the trees are short and scrubby. There is a shallow creek with big flat rocks in the middle of it for lying in the sun and Hutch's pool for swimming if it's rained enough. And the sky up there's a fantastic blue that looks fake. It looks just like the sky you see in those postcards, the ones that have a picture of a giant jackrabbit with antlers and they say "Arizona, Land of the Jackelope." That's what the sky really looks like at Sabino, like one of those Jackelope postcards.

So we're lying on the flat rocks and Joe asks me how I got stuck with my name.

"*No*body names their kid Mildred. People are named Mildred only in the movies. And then it's only World War II movies."

Joe asks me this from over on his rock. I can see him squinting at me through the sun, his body tan and lean and relaxed. He's got on a pair of green and red jams and he looks pretty damn cute.

"Because, asshole," I say sitting up. "My family comes from a charming yet unpretentious place known as the Midwest, where generations of women have felt humble gratitude to have been bestowed with names such as Mildred, Mabel, Millicent and Jane. Furthermore, the Midwest has never had to stoop so low as to import its trees or any other type of foliage."

"I'll take the desert, thanks," Joe says. "Except there is one bad thing about cactus."

"What's that?"

"Those little thorns are a bitch to rake up in the fall."

"*Hom*bre. That's pathetic!"

"So jocks don't have a sense of humor?" Joe says laughing. He's from the American side of the line although it really doesn't matter what side you live on except for having enough hot water which the Mexican side never has. Anyway,

Joe happens to live on the American side. He looks American, too. Like out of an Arrow shirt ad or something; he's got those facebook kind of looks. The kind that jump at you when you open your high school facebook to see how stupid you look in the orchestra picture, and there they are, the facebook jocks grinning out from their little frame boxes. But Joe knows that I know the facebook is all bullshit anyway so it's o.k. He doesn't have an attitude or anything.

"So, Milly."

"So what?" says I.

"Here comes Vince." Joe happily watches Vince walking up to us with this very eager look on his face. Brother. She's only been gone about twenty minutes but he still gets this happy look on his face. He isn't satisfied until Vince looks up and allows her eyes to rest in his for a moment. I always get the feeling those moments are never long enough for Joe.

"Hey, you guys," Vince yells. "*Que hacen*?"

"Nothing. Wanta help?" I start rolling a joint and Vince comes over to watch. She's as tan as I am but the effect's different on her because of her black hair. I have blond hair and blue eyes and when I get a tan I look like one of those dips on *Shindig* or *Beach Blanket Bongo* or whatever those stupid surf shows are called. You know, very perky and cute. I'm about as exotic looking as Betty in the Archie comics, which would be great if we still lived in Minnesota. But on the border blonds are somewhat unique, especially across the line. Over there I might as well be a tourist. Until I start speaking Spanish, that is, and then I am transformed into a truly rare phenomenon: I could either be a tourist who speaks the language, or I could be a Mexican of European extraction, which as far as I can tell is the next best thing to being sainted. The only problem with that cover is when people ask me my name.

Vince does not look perky and cute. She has those beautiful Spanish features that can pass for anything that is vaguely ethnic. But I wouldn't characterize Vince as your basic hot-house flower. She's got a sunstroke intensity; it's hot but quiet. It sneaks up on you. Her hair is more noticeable than usual today because she's wearing an old T-shirt that's been bleached white from the sun. You can't help but notice the whole effect; black on white on brown.

Vince's dad was a colonel with the Green Berets. Colonel Santacruz was in Vietnam before anybody knew where the war was, back when we were all in the first grade and everyone else's father was a businessman or a plumber; you know, not anything you would do a "show and tell" about. Nobody was in the army except Colonel Santacruz, who by virtue of his not being either a businessman or a plumber was inherently cool. He had a big black mustache with twisty ends and he smelled of Old Spice. Every night he'd come home from work and tell us stories about the World War II ghosts that haunted the planes at the air force base in Tucson.

"You don't have to be scared of these ghosts," he'd tell us. "They're just flyboys who never made it back. Every night you can see them, sitting in the cockpits of planes that have nothing left inside except a pilot's seat—looking for a way to fly back home."

"Oh, that's just an old story," Vince would say. "No such thing as ghosts."

"Sure there are, honey," Vince's dad said. "Can't have wars and not have ghosts. It just isn't natural."

Then one day our first grade class came in from recess and our teacher stood in front of us with a very serious look on her face. She was this jolly red-cheeked Irish type who never treated anything seriously because she had too much fun teaching us. She used to tell us funny stories about her sister and how she would play jokes on the nuns when she was little. First grade was a laugh a minute. So when our teacher stood up there with this serious expression we all knew something very bad had happened.

"Elena Santacruz is in the principal's office," she said. "And I want you all to be very nice to her when she comes back because her daddy was killed and her mother is telling her right now."

When Vince came back her face was red and we could tell she'd been crying. But she didn't cry in class that day and now she tells ghost stories to Joe and me every time we camp at Sabino. I expect she'll tell us one tonight.

"Say, Mil, who taught you how to roll joints?" Vince has noticed my lack of progress.

"You did."

"Well, lemme do it, *comadre*. We'll be here all day." She takes the papers, which at this stage look like tiny samples of used Kleenex and starts over. "The trick is not to put too much weed in the paper. You're always trying to roll logs, *comadre*. Where did we get this stuff anyway?"

"Across the line," Joe answers. "There are some things, Mildred, that our little town will never have to import."

"I like our little town," says Vince. She finishes rolling a cigarette and twists the end close. It is true that Vince rolls joints better than anyone else I know. From her fingers they emerge, perfect and slender, rolled as tight as a violin string. It's almost a shame to smoke them, they look so pretty. But I'm able to overcome my reluctance and Vince offers me a light.

"There are no clear lines where we live, but still, it's all of a piece," she continues. "My dad said living in Nogales is like living in a perpetual state of osmosis. All the American and Mexican amoebas keep moving in and out and into each other until finally, you end up in a single unique organism where the hamburgers all come with taco sauce."

Joe takes this in with a barely concealed look of surprise. Vince doesn't talk about the Colonel much.

"What else did your dad say?" he asks now, and he leans over to take the cigarette Vince has been smoking. Gently, he brushes away a strand of tobacco from her lip. He's waiting for Vince to answer, and trying to understand a little more about this particular ghost.

He won't fight in the war for this reason: the odds are too stacked against him if he survives. So he searches Vince's face for some kind of clue toward solving his problem, which is how to be heroic and not die trying.

The answer to this question is very simple. If you ask me, all Joe has to be is Gary Cooper.

See, if Joe were Gary Cooper then everything would be perfect. Then he wouldn't have to prove himself by dying in a war we know practically nothing about except from *Life* magazine and Especial Reports. All he'd have to be is vulnerable. And everyman. Also forthright and maybe slightly eccentric. It's true, old Coop almost gets himself killed in *High Noon* but not because he's into

fighting. It's only because the rest of his town is gutless and if Coop doesn't prove himself then the bad guys'll get Grace Kelly and take over the town. So if you're stuck between a rock and a hard place, the bad guys are riding into town and your girl friend is gonna cut out, the High Noon Standard of Heroics is definitely called for. Except I'm not sure if this applies to what's been on the Especial Reports lately. How do you apply the Standard when you're the one riding into town?

"*Amor,*" Joe says to Vince again. "Tell me what else did your father say?"

"He said, 'No matter what happens, don't complain.' But it's not original. He got it off a two o'clock movie."

"Still, it's good advice," I say.

"Yeah, except he's still dead and I'm running out of ghost stories. Latins should never try to be stoic, you'll end up either going crazy or die from trying. Then your kids end up listening to high school counselors for advice."

"That's not true," Joe says firmly. "You can turn to me. And Milly. Ain't that right, Mil?"

Go cowboy Joe. I can see Coop-ér whispering in your ear. I can hear the voice of earnest hope; I can hear the two o'clock movie singing.

I nod to signal that, by all means, Vince may depend on me. These are my friends and I'll signal such things to them if they need it. So this is love, I say to myself. Joe wants to be a hero, Vince simply wants Joe and I want to get in on the act. Not their act. An act. As in an act of love. *Una esena de amor.* I wouldn't mind getting caught in one.

Vince looks down at her feet self-consciously now, and Joe sits a little taller. He wants to hear more about Colonel Santacruz. The afternoon around us slowly steps into evening colors, and then the evening does arrive, along with a few crickets. They join us down there on the rocks to hear tales of spirits and abandoned towns, and of a soldier's attempt to explain his job to his kid, who didn't believe in ghosts but had a passion for the cadence of the telling of a story.

"I've got a good one," she says settling in. We all lean in close to hear. "After the revolution in Mexico," Vince says solemnly, "religion was outlawed throughout the land. The Catholics had sided with the dictators Diaz and Huerta during the war, and when the new government came into power it had to make sure the Church wouldn't try to challenge them. Priests and nuns were persecuted if they failed to follow the government's new rules. So the Church had to go underground to do its own thing. Convents went underground too."

Oh boy, underground nuns. We lean in closer to hear. Vince's black hair sparks with highlights of red from the campfire and her eyes are within her story. It's the turn of the century and Mariaelena tells us of little women heroes in black habits.

"In the town of Puebla," she says, "there was such a convent. It was a convent of cloistered nuns: they kept to themselves, never leaving the nunnery, never communicating with the outside except to receive deliveries of food and supplies. They lived in a hidden world, behind the house of a family that would smuggle supplies to the nuns through a secret panel in their home.

"Through the years not a single nun ever stepped foot outside those walls. '*Pero que es esto?*' 'How can this be?' the family wondered. 'How is it that no one ever returns from there. Not even in death.' But they kept their thoughts to

themselves, and when they needed to contact the nuns they would use a special signal. Three rings of a bell meant 'open the panel door.'

"One day, the chief of police was visting the family and he noticed a little bell sitting on a sideboard. 'What a charming bell,' he said and the family quickly tried to distract him, but it was too late— once, twice, three times he rang the bell.

"In a moment, a panel behind the sideboard slid open, and the chief was face to face with the Mother Superior of the convent. And that afternoon when he descended a steep, winding staircase into the basement of the convent, the family learned why it was that they never saw anyone step out of there, not even in death. For buried in the very walls of the convent were the bones of all the nuns who had come to live there. The only way the government could have found them out was to tear down the building. Or ring a bell." Vince pauses.

"The end," she says, and for awhile I'm still lost in the stark and mysterious quarters of a cloistered house.

"So what happened to the nuns?" Joe asks.

"Nothing—they weren't killed or anything. They just had to start playing the government's game. Which I'm not sure if they did because that's all I can remember."

"Imagine living shut up like that all your life," I say. "Yow."

"I can see it," Vince says. "I can see doing just about anything if you love someone enough. So nuns just happen to love God most of all. Shutting themselves up is what it took to make it happen. They were standing by their man."

Joe laughs in spite of himself. "Come on. Those nuns were crazy! What kind of person cuts off the rest of the world, on purpose? Don't you think they were slightly fanatical?"

"What lover isn't," Vince says quietly. "How are they different from you and me? Is it any different?"

Joe is silent; he looks at me sharply, takes a stick and jabs at the fire. Oh what'll you do, cowboy, with women and ghosts? He continues staring into the fire, stirring coals into dust, looking for an answer.

"Yes, it's different," he says not looking up. "It's different because I can't forget what your father was to you. It's not so simple, you and me. I can't. . . ." Joe falters, the stick in his hands falls into the fire. "I can't just love you, Elena. Without giving more—I'd be a dirty cheat." His eyes haven't left the fire and the coals are raked through. The fire's light is very dim but, still, I can see Joe wipe his eyes with the back of his hand.

"*Que brutos*," he sighs. And then, as if suddenly seized with an idea, Joe's on his feet and he starts pacing. All of a sudden he just starts pacing, and then, just as suddenly, he stops. And he yells. "*Brutos*! You bring him back! Bring him back!" Screaming bloody murder, Joe is. "*I don't know how to be a damn hero!*"

The last word echoes around us; hero, hero—heeerrooo. It fades away finally, and the desert stays silent. We're all of us silent now. Slowly, Vince walks over to Joe and stands next to him, placing her arm around his shoulder. Their heads come together in a way that's at once intensely personal and remote from the rest of us. They could be on another planet. They could be Yean and Coop-ér.

I'm not sure of my signals here. "Joe?" I hear Vince say. "Is it different from

you and me?"

Joe's voice seems shy in the dark. "*Amor*," I hear. "*Tu sabes que no puedo vivir sin ti.*"

"It's true then?"

"*Tu sabes*. More than God. I guess I'll go to hell for it."

The water in the creek at Sabino is clear and clean and most nights you can see the stars of the desert reflected in it. That's practically the entire universe the way I figure it. Either way, looking up or looking down, the night sky in these foothills opens up before you, always like something you've never seen.

When the morning comes the moon still hangs back ever so faintly in the sky. There's a smudge of moon shining in the creek as I go to wash my face.

"Morning, Mil!" Joe's voice greets me from his sleeping bag. "What a fine morning though! Did you dream good dreams? I did. I always dream when we come out here. I always—"

"*Hombre!* Go talk someplace else!" Vince turns over in her sleeping bag, pulling it over her head and rolling up inside like one of those bugs that curls up when you touch it. Vince isn't a morning person.

"What did you say about dreaming?" I ask.

"I dreamed about a herd of wild horses," whispered Joe. "They ran together in the hills near the Superstition Mountains. There were ten of them running in a group and the leader was a black and white pinto, the fastest of all the horses. I dreamed we lived in the hills, Vince and me. And I was trying to capture the pinto for her."

"Did you get it?"

"I'm not sure—I started running after the horse. I had a lariat in my hand. It was new and rough and it kept cutting my hand. I had to tie my bandana around it so that I could keep hold of the rope. So I'm sitting there, no one else around except the hills and the horses and I'm trying to fix the bandana on my hand as fast as I can because I don't want the horses to get away. And then out of nowhere, the pinto comes up to me."

Joe pauses and rubs his hand, flexing his fingers to make sure they still work. "He just, sort of trots up to me, real soft like and nudges my hand," Joe continues. "The one with the bandana."

"What happened, *pues*?"

"I woke up." He yawns and gets out of his sleeping bag, stretches his arms, looks over at Vince.

"She always wanted a horse," he whispers again.

"Shoot, Vince doesn't even know how to ride," I say following Joe's gaze to the subject of his chivalrous vision, who is still inert. "Do you know how to ride?"

"She'll learn. Say, do we have any food left? I'm starved."

Wild horses are abandoned for the moment in the search for a better alternative to granola mix, beer and cold tortillas. But our breakfast is interrupted suddenly by the appearance of a man astride a very large horse. The man is dressed in white except for his hat, which is a green baseball cap that says "Arizona Feeds" on the front, and his boots which are black.

Joe watches the horse paw at the dust.

"It's Gary Cooper," I say looking at the stranger's horse. It is a pinto. A beautiful black and white pinto.

"Close," says the stranger, "but no cigar. You all live nearby?"

We explain that we're from the border, that this is a favorite spot particularly because of the creek, and no one else seems to know about this place and did the horse have any trouble negotiating past the park rangers.

The man on the horse takes off his baseball cap, wipes his brow with the back of his hand and replaces the cap. "We keep a few ponies away from here," he says. "I ride the creek all the time. Ranger knows me. Border town. Huh." The stranger speaks slowly, as though unused to questions about navigations of any sort. "What side of the border?"

"Both sides," says Vince emerging at last. Her large brown eyes quickly take in the scene. "We're from both sides of the border. Nice horse. What's your name, cowboy?"

"Raymond."

There we stand, the three of us from both sides of the border and Raymond and his horse from a dream out of nowhere. We three are romantics so we think to ourselves, "What does this mean?" and then we answer that it means nothing. It's just a man riding the Sabino Creek on a fine morning. No big deal. Strange, but no big deal.

"You some kinda wetback?" the baseball cap says, "or what?" He sits still and straight on his horse and looks at Vince. A shot of tobacco juice squirts sideways in a straight jet.

Although you might think that Vince has been addressed in like manner before this, although she plainly has the features of a heritage packaged by Spain and Mexico and refined by a Southwestern culture known for its serene and gracious neighborliness, Vince has never before had the occasion to answer such an inquiry. *De veras. Te lo huro.*

"I mean to say that it's a problem," continues the hat, "those wetbacks coming from the border."

Joe is flexing the fingers of his hand, rubbing the rope burns he got in his sleep. "Just exactly what do you mean?" he says quietly. I can see the veins in his neck begin to stick out.

The hat regards Vince and Joe from atop the horse, who is also chewing steadily. I don't seem to be encompassed in the stranger's unwavering gaze; blond midwestern types must be invisible in situations like this. And slowly, as if he really did come from some dream or a movie western, the hat delivers his message.

"Why don't you folks go back to where you came from? Stop mixing things up. We keep to our side. You keep to your side." Another stream of tobacco juice splats on the ground. The pinto shifts his weight.

From where he stands Joe can see clearly the gray, unblinking eyes of the stranger. The sun is already making rapid progress in the sky, burning the edges of dried out scrub trees and pear cactus and the mountain which sits silently behind the stranger and his horse. It'll be *medio dia* soon, I think to myself. Noon and time enough. Billy the Kid would shoot the son-of-a-bitch. Colonel Santacruz would walk away, sure of his step on the cutting edge. But cowboys and heroes aren't on the cutting edge of anything anymore, in spite of the two o'clock

movie, in spite of Harry Reasoner. In spite of facebook jocks.

"*Dejalo, amor,*" says Vince. "Leave it alone."

She turns to walk away but Joe stands where he is. He shoves his hands in his pockets and speaks to the stranger.

"It's too late," says Joe. "Things are already mixed up. They're all jumbled up. No one's keeping to anyplace especially where there's a border to be crossed. And happiness to get. So why don't you quit your complaining and just ride the creek. It's noon time. Be too hot soon, for riding."

The stranger keeps looking down at Joe a minute and then takes his cap off and wipes the sweat from his face, confirming the state of the weather. "It's too hot already," he says putting his cap back on. He reins his horse away from us and proceeds to make his way back down the creek. About a quarter of a mile away he stops and dismounts, takes his cap, fills it with water from the creek and gives the horse a drink. Joe watches him leave until he's out of sight.

"Did you see the way he rode that horse?" Vince says. "Like he was a part of it. Like he's part horse. *Pendejo* jerk. *Que bruto.*"

"So you'll learn how to get up on a horse," Joe says in a different voice, a satisfied voice. "You can ride. It's easy."

"Yeah, and then I can teach you next."

On the way back to Nogales we stop at Zula's restaurant. Zula's is on the outskirts of town and all the waitresses there wear Mexican peasant outfits and white hospital shoes. They are pleasant, hearty, rounded women. They fill those outfits pretty well along with serving the best apple pie in the state. Besides the statue of Strength Killing the Dragon of Adversity across the line, I have always maintained that Zula's pies are Nogales' greatest gift to mankind.

"Two pies, two coffees," the waitress says adjusting her blouse. "That it?"

"I'm still deciding," Joe says. "Uh—*chorizo* and eggs, I guess. And a glass of milk."

"That it?"

"And water for the horses." Joe gives the waitress a wink.

" . . . milk and water for the horses. That it?"

"That's it."

"O.K., cowboy." The waitress heads for another customer and we sit and wait, Joe and Vince and I, for our pie and coffee. Vince leans back in the seat and closes her eyes and Joe watches her with this look on his face. From across the booth I can see their faces are sunburned and I start digging around in my backpack for the skin lotion.

Randolph Parker

MANHOLE

Jacob was feeling strangled like the fountains on the town square which were always being pulled up by the necks and then allowed to shower back down into themselves. The world had been too tolerant of him. He had enjoyed each day and every night, and how long, he had asked, could such an oversight take place? Then the bosom that had drawn him like a mother's, the very softness of his wife, repulsed him, and he left with a terrible feeling, feeling throated with a new sense of finality. He sat in the Redwood Bar outside of town where the people were supposed to be strangers. There, perhaps, he could decide where he might go. In his pocket he harbored a small map of the world, a world of destinations. Against the wall, an old statue continuously urinated into a large shell full of pennies and dimes.

"We can't always be concerned with other people's business," said a stranger who rubbed his bare chin as if he were wearing a beard. There was a moral in his voice. "You can't go poking your nose into other people's embarrassing moments."

Jacob looked out the small window and squinted at the silver car. Nothing had ever wielded a sharper image than that Cadillac out on the bridge. Inside, his eyes would not adjust to the darkness of the room. He could see the orange caps glowing over the eyes of a few hunters and Saturday men, eyes which shone wetly when the front door was opened. His own eyes watered with straining and took refuge by gazing out the small window which hung slightly open at a slant, slanting with the treed horizon, looking like a guillotine blade. The air that entered was cold but not unpleasant. In the foreground was a twisted willow reclining on the winter's own slant of afternoon sun. It was the dormant season in the country and in the city, where the street was a manless place full of cars, light posts, and manholes with no men in them; and the people were inside where people liked to be. More distant, beyond the willow, was a bridge, part of the highway standing low over the Hatchie River; and on the bridge's edge, having torn through the guardrail, was a long car shining silver, its rear end hanging over the water. Above was a small piece of sky and in it nothing but a black speck of buzzard or hawk flying within the bounds of Jacob's small window as if it knew Jacob were watching it.

He found that he was sitting across from himself except when the bartender stood in the way; and down at the dark end of the bar sat the beardless man who had only minutes earlier poured in with the front door's light to cry the news.

"Hey Farris," he said, "did you see that car out on the bridge, just hanging

out there on the bridge?"

When Farris asked, "What car is that, Henry," Jacob knew that the beardless fellow was Henry and that the bartender was Farris; and he knew that everyone would saunter over to his small window to see the car; and they did, and Jacob, still seated, stuck his head under Henry's arm to see it, too. These men were too close to him to be strangers. He could smell their clothes and feel another's flannel sleeve against his arm. Everyone strained to get his view of the world.

"Nice car," said one of the hunters. "What kind is it?"

"It's a Cadillac," said Jacob. His voice was muffled by his glass.

"No it ain't," said Henry, "it's a Lincoln Continental. Ain't it? All those cars are big as hell. I'm not sure what they're for; you can't hunt in 'em or maneuver in the city or get out of your own wake in 'em."

"That's where they drive those kinds of cars—in the city," said Farris. "I wonder what stupid idiot would leave his car out on the bridge like that." Farris was washing beer mugs. He was the sort Jacob wished to avoid. Jacob sensed that he commuted from the city; he had a city sneer. In fact, most of the men in the bar seemed to be from town, for they all enjoyed the rustic element, the chaotic darkness of the country bar like a country man might enjoy a weekend at a luxury hotel in town.

"You know," said Jacob, "I got a car like that one out there." Farris became embarrassed by what he had said. The men stood silently for a moment and then returned to their tables and talk, leaving Jacob alone to look out beyond the willow. He saw a muddy-colored woman, her shape indistinct but somehow feminine. Her hands she kept carefully by her side. The torn guardrail was silver water frozen in the middle of its fall, and Jacob wondered what it would be like to ride down such a falls in a big Cadillac. Soon the woman was joined by another, and they looked at the car together, the two women and Jacob. The women huddled together against the breeze which was funneled between the river banks. Jacob wished they would leave the car alone, and he ordered from Farris another Henry McKenna.

He studied himself in the mirror before him which doubled the many bottles of vodka and bourbon. In the mirror, all he could really see beyond himself was the orange hunting gear of the hunters. Their pitcher of beer seemed to hold the only light in the room, a thick, golden, liquid light. He took from his pocket the world map and spread it carefully on the bar. In the dim room, all he could make out were the general shapes of the continents and the darkened blue color of the surrounding oceans. Jacob rubbed his eyes which soon took refuge once again by looking out the small window. He wondered if this was the place he wanted to be, in a bar on a seldom used highway. He had the money to go some place far away like Greece or Italy where great marbles fell from ruins or to California where ruinous conversations fell from marble tabletops. But then London had more of Greece than Athens did, and it had as much Hollywood as Los Angeles. Perhaps London was the place to go.

He asked, "Shouldn't somebody call the highway patrol?"

"It doesn't belong to anyone around here," said Henry.

"It don't belong to you, does it?" Farris asked Jacob.

"I got one like it."

Farris leaned over the bar to look at the car again. Jacob could tell that he was

always trying to be a good ol' boy. "It's a stupid thing out there on the bridge with its butt hangin' out over the water like it's takin' a crap in the river."

Jacob was forced to smile, for he saw that the car looked much the way Farris said it did. It must have spun wildly to end up that way, and now it was mocking the most basic of human acts. If only everyone urinated in public, watched each other, realized that to affirm their goodness and humanity they needed only urinate in their hands, then there would be no need for crapping Cadillacs, no need for those curly-haired statues that relieve themselves in shell-shaped fountains.

Henry asked, "What do you mean, you got one just like it? Is it yours, or isn't it?"

"If it is, if it was, I'd push it on over. I'd send it to the bottom and make all those people go home." There was a small group of people huddled around the car; the car was a cold furnace, an attractive, provocative, if not meaningless altar looming before them like a frozen whisper, clear and distinct but in need of thawing. What were those people doing there? What was Jacob doing there? He held his map up toward the window light so that the faint outline of the United States became visible. He could visit his sister in the Midwest where they raised corn specially for the animals and all the women were corn-fed, big and harsh, like they were just getting on the wagon train. But one could get lost in the maize. His sister was fat and brainless.

"Yeah, I'd shove it on over," he said again without thought. His words sparked the interest of two tanked hunters who were obviously not going to get to the hunting part of their planned afternoon.

"That's what you should do, then," said one. "Push it off the bridge, so that it won't be a hazard to others."

"I could if I wanted to," exclaimed Jacob, teasingly, acting drunker than he really was.

"Why don't you?" asked Henry.

"Why don't he?" asked Farris. "He don't want to be doin' anything like that. He don't want to be pushin' somebody's car off into the river."

"It's his car," assured Henry.

"You don't know that."

"You know what the problem is with this place, Farris," asked Jacob, "there's no women, only these evil-meaning men."

All the men laughed. "Why aren't there any women in here, Farris?"

"Why would a woman want to come in here?" The constant hiss of the urinating fountain grew louder.

Jacob looked at all the men around him, and they really did look ugly and mean, and Farris did not look at all, just kept pouring, wiping his hands clean.

Outside his small window, the willow whipped in the late winter air, and beyond, the small group of curious people were still bowed toward the Cadillac. Jacob wanted to send those people one by one down the chute-like guardrail which would deposit them cleanly into the cold Hatchie River.

"You know, I could probably pull it back on the road with my truck," said Farris.

"Shit," said Henry. Jacob calmly drank a beer. He looked out at the car which was fast becoming the green color of the surrounding trees.

"No one needs a car like that," said Jacob.

"Now you're talking," said Henry.

"No he's not," Farris warned.

In the mirror, Jacob saw that his eyes looked somewhat different, like they were not his own; yet he saw with his own eyes. He had seen his wife's breast only that morning, but it was not beautiful. Her breast was revealed to him as a deterrent rather than a seduction. She had told him to get out and had flashed her breast in contempt and rage, in a teasing, tempting ugliness. She murdered him with her breast. He knew she had the right. It was not murder so much as it was proper execution. It was like when he walked in on his mother, and she said, "Get out, dear, mother's not dressed yet," and he wondered why, and he wondered why not. And he knew that somehow he wanted to walk in on her again, for excitement was what a boy wanted but did not need, and he walked in on her again, no longer innocent, and he was sorry.

Jacob saw that his window of light was dimming and that his world map was soggy. The whole damned town belonged to his wife, but then the town was considerably smaller than the rest of the world. As the brightness of the day went, Jacob noticed that Farris had turned on a few neon signs behind the bar, and one cast a peculiar purple glow over the room. Jacob looked at Henry in the mirror and said, "I need this. I need a new time of it. I quit my job yesterday. I told those guys that I could do better and that there's no future in doing the same old crap. I thought I might take scuba lessons and explore the Caribbean."

"You ought to go to Key West," suggested Henry, pointing to the general area on Jacob's soggy map. "I got a brother down there, and he says it's real fine, the weather and everything. Everybody's happy down there, even the ones eating from garbage bins—the seafood and tropical climate, you know."

"Oh, I don't know. Too many gay Hemingways down there."

Jacob did not want any advice. He fingered a penny in his hands and drank with himself. The red sun hung in the willow branches, and the car had become red and green. The crowd was gone. Where did they go? To what purpose was his sitting in the same place all afternoon? He wanted to know. Jacob stood up into the smoke cloud which hung in the room, and he felt almost overtaken by the redolence of his wife's perfume which seemed to linger there. He tossed the penny toward the fountain. The copper caught the light and brought it down lightly into the shell-shaped pool.

"Fellows," he said, "let us meet at the bridge!"

All the men became excited at the idea of a late afternoon adventure, something they could tell the families at supper. Their coats swooshed in the dim room, and all eyes were lit wetly as the front door creaked open and the almost horizontal rays of the sun streamed in. The evening was crisp and clean. The men kicked at the brown leaves like school children. There were two girls and their mother, not before seen, who stood in solemn reverence as the procession of men marched their way onto the Hatchie River Bridge. It was a small mecca, a solemn, unifying span, which connected two stretches of highway, one which bent through a forest of planted pines, and the other which went uphill, a ramp to the red clouds.

The Cadillac was reflective of its own environment, reflecting each face which gazed upon it, shining the faces out into the evening, out to the men who had to

live with them. The only face it did not show was the face of Farris, who chose to stay in the bar, wiping his hands. Jacob looked down into the swift current of the river, bending like the brown reeds bent toward their watery and fading reflections. The men laughed in expectation, and one of the little girls giggled at their drunken manner. Jacob placed his hands firmly and with conviction on the top of the grill on each side of the hood ornament and began pushing. He laughed aloud and grunted as he worked the car up and down on its shock absorbers, but he could not move the car forward. Its chassis was caught on the concrete curb. The two hunters joined him in the effort while Henry went around to the side to see if progress was being made. His eyes were wide and happy, and with every scrape of chassis against concrete, with every inch gained by the men, he shouted in approval.

When the car seemed just about ready to fall, Jacob said that he could do the rest by himself, and the men stood by. Farris came running onto the bridge. "Wait!" he called. When he caught up with the men, he said, "Let me pull it up with my truck. Let's pull it back up." But Jacob sent the Cadillac over the edge. On its way down, the car flipped so that it landed on its back in one loud, sobering crash which echoed through the trees. Henry cheered softly, and the little girls clapped. Jacob watched the car sink, tires up, into the shallow but turbulent Hatchie. One of the girls giggled as her mother led the children down a side road which ran along the bank of the river. Jacob stood on the bridge with four strangers who smiled at him. "What have I done?" he asked. "What have I done?" He watched the black water wash over the car, flotsam too heavy for the river to carry.

David Galef

ACCOMMODATIONS

The homemade biscuits with clover honey were quite edible, though too sweet and in too great abundance, like everything at the Lancer Hotel. Charles Asher jotted down this observation in his notebook as he reached for his teacup. The brew was not very hot, some kind of hearty pekoe which was intended to be drowned in milk and sugar. That was the way the other guests were drinking it, Charles noticed: the old retired people, the spinster aunts, and the occasional couple complete with two moody children. They had gathered around the picture window to look gloomily out at the rain which had postponed the afternoon croquet match. Evening bingo would go on, of course, since that took place indoors. The headwaiter, who doubled or tripled as counter clerk and manager of the entertainment, would be presiding over the wicker cage in the game room, calling out the numbers this evening. "F-ll, F-ll . . . no? All right, then, the next draw is . . . T-25. Ah, Mrs. Kempton." It was not a prospect Charles looked forward to, though he was making an attempt to follow the routine set out for the guests. He was reviewing the Lancer for a guidebook called *The Accommodations of Britain*, and it was only a two-nights' stay, thank God.

If Charles had a problem as a reviewer, it was that he was too fault-finding for most of the establishments he stayed at. The Wellington Arms, with its oversized tankards and brassy coat of arms, was trying too hard to be the England of yore; the Cherbourg, the most highly touted stay on the tour, was an overdone imitation of Louis XVI finery, and he found the carved four-poster beds oppressive. It was 1937, after all, and a modern spirit of moderation was in his soul.

He had a regular job as a columnist for *The Monitor*, and in his columns he put forth his view of good taste. Elegant spareness, or as Browning put it, "less is more," the way some of the newer places in London were set up. A light soufflé delivered by a waiter dressed in bottle-green, who brought you the wine you asked for from a small but well-stocked cellar. Charles was aware that there were places which would serve roast beef and pudding well into the next century, but he didn't have to like it, and he didn't.

"An inevitable homeliness pervades the Lancer Hotel, a combination of overstarched linen and the heavy breakfasts which start with porridge." He wrote on, practically alone in the dining room by now. There had been some talk of getting out one of the old jigsaw puzzles and working it in the game room. The children would be making nuisances of themselves, the older people looking on

indulgently. The puzzle, when near to completion, would be found to have a few crucial pieces missing or a few extra from another box. And that expressed the atmosphere of the Lancer quite well, thought Charles, who attempted to get this idea down in writing. "To say that the Lancer is seedy is to underestimate it, since there is nothing mean about it, and the copious meals are enough to put an Irish trencherman under the table. The sheets are clean if ironed badly, and the badminton net is in the shed if anyone cares to put it up. The Lancer is a bastion of comfortable decay" —he crossed out the last two words and substituted "well-meaning mediocrity." He sat back and looked at what he had written.

It was the kind of incisive disparagement he equated with good modern writing. A more discerning reader would have noted an epigrammatic style rooted more in the 1890's, but Charles had a carefully circumscribed sense of history. In any event, the whole paragraph was far too literary, he knew that. The tenor of all his reviews would have to be toned down and simplified for inclusion in the guidebook. In the meantime, he would not martyr his craft.

Despite the omnipresent drizzle, he wandered around the grounds for an hour or two—anything to get out. Besides the croquet field, there was a garden of sorts, an area for badminton, and an ornamental pond with no fish. Beyond lay an unmowed field which might attract lovers on a moonlit night, but there were no young faces, and the night would be overcast. There was only warmth and food and coziness, in quantities that dulled the senses. Stodgy traditions of hearth and home— no, the only thing to do was to blow the place up, and start again on its foundation. Aesthetic rigor was needed: better a well-executed meagerness than this—this bloat. His temper was exacerbated by the wetness which had invaded his shoes and the afternoon tea which sloshed around his insides. He felt distinctly uncomfortable, even a little fatigued, and he went back to his room for an afternoon nap.

The room was clean enough, well enough lit, with the usual picture of a fishing boat opposite the bed. A seascape the visual equivalent of furniture. The bed, too, was lumpen proletariat, if not actually lumpy, but he was tired and fell asleep soon after he lay down. He had a minor dream, in which he was being pursued by a fat nurse insisting he eat his custard. He got his feet tangled in the badminton net while running away, enabling the nurse to squat over him and ease the custard down his throat. He woke up at five-thirty with a headache, splashed water on his face, and wandered downstairs.

Dinner was being served at this early hour. A few cold dishes, some kind of casserole, and a trifle. He ate a little bit of everything, leaving a lot on his plate, and walked out into the parlor. An old woman, one of the Sakieque aunts, as he had mentally tabbed them, followed after him.

"You shouldn't waste food like that, young man." She spoke with an admonitory flash in her eye, waving her forefinger. "It's a sin."

Charles felt an emotion rising in his throat, not anger but weariness. He could have made a sarcastic comment about what a waste the food was anyway, but it would have been lost on her. Rather than start an argument which might bring the whole hotel down on him, he opted for peace. "I'm sorry, but something disagreed with me halfway through the meal. I feel a little nauseated, actually."

"Oh, well you should tell the cook. I hope you're all right." She was all sympathy now, this Miss Bentley, as she introduced herself. He told her his

name, too, though she persisted in truncating his last name to Ash. As the evening wore on, the card tables were set up, and though Charles was invited, he didn't play. Bridge was too clubby for him; he just sat on the overstuffed settee in the parlor and smoked. He therefore laid himself open for Miss Bentley, who showed him pictures of her nieces and nephews and talked about the kind of future they would have.

"I don't like that German Hitler, or what he's doing. I can't imagine my nephew John in a brown shirt, singing about the Fatherland. Doing exercises outside in freezing weather!" She was more aware than he had realized, though her world news was interpreted personally.

"I think he's Austrian, actually. He changed his name from Shickelgruber."

"Oh? Just like those foreigners." Her lips were set in a tight line.

Miss Bentley's mind was not all that interesting, he saw. She obviously cared fiercely for her relatives, but she cared little about art or letters or any of the other subjects Charles was interested in. At ten o'clock, as the first of the card games was beginning to break up, he excused himself. Tomorrow, he had to travel to Swindon to visit an inn with the unpromising name of Harr Manor. At least he would be leaving the Lancer, though. He tramped up the stairs to his well-meaning but boring room and changed into a pair of cotton pajamas. He thought of reading something, but the only available text was a King James Bible in the top drawer of the deal dresser. Of course. Just before he turned out the light for the night, he took another look at the fishing boat picture on the far wall. The sails were slack. In the exact middle of a smooth sea, the boat looked absolutely becalmed.

By ten o'clock the next morning, he was riding a rickety bus toward the station, feeling every bump through the breakfast which he had overeaten. "Any food heavier than a croissant should be banned until after eleven a.m.," he jotted down somewhere in his notes. He arrived at Harr Manor by one, in time to contemplate the *soupe du jour* with equanimity. It looked like cream of cream soup with greenery in it, but he did have a job of rating these places, after all. He bit the bullet, as well as the steak and kidney pie.

The tour included three more hotels, none of which met his exacting standards. He then spent a few days in London revising his prose, though he hated himself for it, before handing it in to the editor. He went back to writing his newspaper column, "The Jaundiced View"; he was still one of the younger writers on *The Monitor*, and the monotony hadn't gotten to him yet. In due course, the hotel guide came out, and though the editor had soft-pedaled Charles's complaints even more after Charles's own revisions, the few reviews of the guide remarked on its caustic severity. It sold badly, possibly because people had their minds on other things.

It was September 1938, just after Chamberlain's trip to Munich, and the slogan "peace in our time" was plastered all over the newspapers. A column like Charles's which dealt with urban modes of living tended to get shunted aside. Some of his colleagues were developing a sharp political slant to their commentary, but Charles maintained his aesthetic balancing act. The Germans might be oppressive, but that was their unfortunate nationalism spilling over. Almost exactly a year later, Hitler invaded Poland.

It was more than a shock. It was the beginning of a massive shift in England's

way of life. Charles heard the reports coming over the wireless and felt not so much terror as numbness. And then the solidity of newsprint made the first impact against his non-feeling. Chamberlain announced a state of "armed neutrality." A girding for the inevitable, a new martial spirit filled the papers. People talked about it in the streets and brought their talk into the pubs. Norway and Finland, countries Charles casually associated with herring and aquavit, were suddenly under Nazi control. The endless news bulletins were like troops advancing over Charles's soul.

The war grabbed up people, leaving sudden vacancies all over. Charles was transferred to reportorial work, which didn't worry him nearly so much as the reality of England at war. He had occasional nervous spells, provoked by an action as simple as boarding a bus. Churchill declared a coalition government; Hitler attacked Western Europe. Charles was scared now and freely admitted it to himself if not to others. When Bunson, the editor of *The Monitor*, became an enlisted man, the paper began to fold. It all happened in a rush: England suffered its first major defeats in France, special wartime measures were declared, and Charles, who was then thirty-four, was drafted in the third wave.

He made a tolerable recruit, eager to achieve competence as a foot soldier in order to better his chances of survival. In his first month in the army, he dreamed of death in myriad fantastic modes. In a way, it was an escape from basic training. Reduced to the status of an infantryman, he still claimed the right to think, but his sergeant denied that right, and Charles was mixed in with truck drivers from Liverpool and Piccadilly sharks.

He curbed his impatience with the stupidity of others, or at least he thought he did. He found out soon enough that most of the men regarded him as a snob; others saw him as an egotistical idiot. A short-order cook from Brighton named Laughton made his training particularly hellish, and Charles's clever insults just got him into a fight. After receiving a black eye, he made a hasty effort at reform, but he had already acquired a nickname for himself, an obscene variant on his last name. He endured the sadism and deprivations of training with the conviction that it was a mock-up of sorts. Food was mush stirred in gravy, beds were wooden cots, and reveille was at six. He lost weight, suffered continuously, and told himself that it all wasn't real.

Then he was transferred overseas and saw a far worse reality. He was stationed in Amiens along with five hundred others. It was July 1940, and the British were fighting a rear-guard action that was slowly being decimated. There were dead men in the trenches and pieces of men left from grenade explosions. Charles's company leader was a man named Dawson who had a magnificent mustache and a missing left hand. He preached victory and Charles tried hard to believe him. The war was entering its bleakest phase for the Allied forces, and there were never enough blankets to keep covered through the night, never sufficient bandages for the wounded. Men lived and ate in the mud and frequently died in it. Charles learned to move on the bounce; there really did seem to be some truth to the Biblical phrase, "the quick and the dead."

News from England was welcome for most men, but for Charles it had become almost irrelevant. There was war there, too. He heard about the hardships people were undergoing at home, the strict rationing and billeting of soldiers at private houses, not to mention the daylight bombings in London, but none of it reached

him anymore. He slogged through the months: his company, what was left of it, moved and dug in, then moved again. At one point, he made a friend, a fellow Londoner named Richards, but he died a week later in a shrapnel blast, and Charles had to join an attack on a designated hill the next day. He had deeply-etched hollows under his eyes now, and a perpetual blue-black shadow across his face. He had acquired the soldier's knack of falling asleep in any surroundings when given permission, but he had horrible nightmares of mutilation. Reading lost its hold on him; talk with his fellow soldiers was more immediate, and easier once he accepted that they could suffer as much as he did.

A first private named McDonnell was found to be a poet, and Charles almost laughed before checking himself. It was admirable in a way, he supposed, to go on writing as if it mattered, but it was not for him. The few letters he wrote were to his father, evacuated to Shrewsbury; only one letter was answered. He became a corporal through vacancies caused by death. It didn't seem to make much difference: he was still living this walking dream, going through the motions of smearing butter substitute on crackers and ducking for cover when something whizzed by. He heard about the going price of eggs in London and tried thinking back to the last time he had eaten one. The problem with the gray food and gray bed and gray life was that one day was just like the next, and time couldn't be measured. He thought it had been nine months; he couldn't be sure.

Then came an interruption in the form of an injury. A bit of shrapnel caught him in the backside, and though it made him the laughingstock of the group for a few days, the wound was incapacitating. He was rotated home for treatment and recuperation. He arrived in Reading by troop train in early 1941, with an odd bandage around his middle. He was met by no one he knew; it was just as well. He wouldn't have known what to say to any of his old acquaintances.

London was unsafe because of the bombings, and he was taken to a military hospital in Coventry. There he was properly treated, but since there was no room for convalescers, he was driven to one of the large old buildings co-opted by the military.

The moment the jeep rounded the curve of the long gravel driveway, he recognized the place. The dilapidated manor with an attempt at a spire, the unkempt hedges—it was the Lancer Hotel, looking more or less the same as he recalled it. It brought back memories of his jaded tour when he was writing for the newspaper, millions of years ago.

The hotel desk had been taken over by a billeting officer who assigned Charles a room on the third floor, to be shared with a Sergeant Dowd. Sergeant Dowd was not in when Charles reached his room, however, and he promptly lay down on his stomach on the unused bed and fell asleep. When he awoke a few hours later, he stumbled downstairs to see where the mess hall had been set up. To his delight, he found high tea being served in the dining room by the Sisters of the Holy Trinity. In their white habits, they looked a little like waitresses. One of them piled Charles's plate high with sandwiches, cheese, and biscuits and jam. He accepted a cup of tea from another nun and located a seat near the picture window. He sat down gingerly—his wound was far from healed—and attacked his food.

The tea was milky-sweet and went down his throat like balsam. A few sandwiches followed. And real raspberry jam on the biscuits—he ate as if it were

a religious experience, savoring each sensation. Outside, the sky was overcast, but a few men had rescued a croquet set from somewhere and were putting balls through wickets. Apart from the thud of the mallets, everything was green and quiet. A squirrel descended an oak head-downward, then scurried away into the shrubbery. A blackbird zoomed from a high branch like a Halifax bomber, but Charles repressed the image. He sat by the window a long time, enjoying the first pastoral view he had seen in months.

After tea was over, the first of the card games started up in the game room. Someone offered Charles a cigarette, and he hardly knew what to say. He puffed away on it as if it were the most expensive Havana cigar, smoking it to the very tip. There was an overstuffed settee out in the lobby which was kind to his backside, and he lounged on that for a while. The local women's military aid group had contributed a wire stand of popular novels by the desk, mostly romances. He looked over the titles and decided on one he might take to bed with him later.

The nuns were solicitous about taking care of the guests, as they were called. After a cold supper with real meat, there was bingo in the parlor. Charles decided it was too rich for his blood and went for a walk of the grounds instead. With a fuzzy sense of *déjà vu*, he remembered his uncanny dislike for the Lancer Hotel, though for the life of him he couldn't think why. Everything was so homey and peaceful. He investigated a small shed by the edge of a well-kept green: in a cardboard box slightly damp with the dew were shuttlecocks and badminton rackets. The net seemed to be missing, but could be improvised somehow. Then it came to him that he was hardly in any condition to be jumping around. Still, maybe he would get well enough for it before he had to leave.

Back in the lobby, a young Sister was tidying up. It was already past nine, and many of the guests had already retired to their rooms. He decided to ask her a few questions.

"Tell me, this used to be a place called the Lancer Hotel, didn't it?"

The Sister stopped sweeping and stood up. "Yes, that was the name of it. Why, were you ever a guest here? A very comfortable place it used to be so I'm told."

"Yes, but a—." He stopped. There had been a phrase ready to leap out, "bastion of well-meaning mediocrity," something he must have written in his review. He wondered how he had thought of it; it wasn't at all what he wanted to say, not at all. "It's all so pleasant and relaxing," he finally came out with. "How long will the Lancer serve the soldiers?"

"For the duration." She fixed him with an ambiguous eye, possibly sympathetic. "You look as if you've been injured."

He put his hand near the small of his back, causing an involuntary grimace. "Oh, it's not much. Easily bearable."

"Well, take care of yourself."

"Thank you. I guess I'll be going upstairs now." He shuffled toward the stairs.

The Sister's voice floated after him. "Good night."

The other bed was occupied when he got in, a large red-faced man snoring through a soup-strainer mustache. Sergeant Dowd, presumably. They would meet in the morning. Charles undressed down to his underwear by the moonlight coming through the clouds. The fresh smell of clean linen embraced him as he

slid between the sheets; this was a real haven. As he lay back, he realized with a twinge of regret that he had forgotten to take a book from the wire rack. But he was already tired, he told himself, and a light would only waken Sergeant Dowd. Tomorrow he could start reading right after breakfast, position himself near a window and hope for some sun. The prospect pleased him. He would accommodate himself.

He looked up at the high old ceiling, confident that nothing would fall on him during the night. The clouds had parted, and the room was vaguely illuminated through the curtains. He looked around the interior, noting the solid night table, the bureau which undoubtedly contained a Bible in its top drawer, and his own kit bag, half-unpacked by the edge of the bed. He was about to lie back against the pillow when he noticed a framed picture on the opposite wall, a white fishing boat against an expanse of green-blue water. There was no wind in the sails, and the boat looked as if it were drifting nowhere on a sea as smooth as glass. He watched the soothing scene until his eyelids grew heavy and closed in sleep.

Lynn Domina

NEW YEAR'S EVE

Mickey already had both sheets to the wind when I carried the Inebro-Meter down his basement steps. I figured he must have tapped a keg about eight a.m.—it was only ten o'clock now—since I didn't want to think he'd been at it all night. If so, he would pass out long before midnight and miss all the fun. Mickey was a great guy, bowled in the 180's, boxed with the best of us, could grill a steak like nobody you ever met, but he'd been hitting the sauce a bit more than anybody would like since the big split-up, the desertion, the Legal Separation. When Mickey said it, he stretched it out, "leeegal," and then spit on the s. Although I seldom considered alcohol anything more than a fact of life like a Swanson's dinner, we'd all been bending the elbow a bit more than usual, all eight of us, the eight guys who were going to be there that night, since our once-beloved spouses had served us with complaints for divorce. We weren't all friends, or even acquaintances, but once Mickey and I hit on the idea for this party, we decided to invite everyone either of us knew, however vaguely, who fit the qualification. As it turned out, we were all members of that most neglected American minority—the middle-aged—in addition to being ex-husbands, but age was incidental.

Mickey and I filched the idea for the Inebro-Meter from his Test Your Love machine. Now, of course, I'd convinced him to change it to Test Your Virility, since I said he already knew all about the strength of his love. Life is, of course, most convenient when love is dependably weak and short-lived. He paid twenty bucks for the contraption at an auction about three years back, and it had been sitting in his basement ever since. You gently squeezed a little metal handle at the bottom, and one of ten red light bulbs acquired a soft glow, the healthy glow of a maiden's cheek, I liked to say. Formerly, you discovered whether you ought to start seeing some sweet sorority sister on the side or whether yours was a match made in heaven, depending on which particular bulb lit up. Now, you discovered whether it was time to pull out the embroidery hoop or if you needed only spread out your towel under the nearest beach umbrella, and your presence would make itself known. We coded a pattern into it so we'd know exactly when it was our turn—testing your virility among your cronies is always safest when you already know precisely what the answer is going to be.

I modeled the Inebro-Meter, frame, light bulbs, the whole kit and caboodle, after Mickey's Test Your Virility, née Love, machine. We expected that even the most refined, subdued, and discreet individual in our crowd would get drunker than a boiled owl that night, so I painted that phrase in an ellipse around the bottom bulb. I drew a boiled owl, too, though I forgot to pluck it first, hugging a

telephone pole for support. I also realized that unless one of them chose to get dead drunk, literally, or as I preferred to call it, to carry his cork to Jerusalem, or as the case may be, to guard the gates of Hell, he couldn't be any more lit up than a French king in a cathedral, so I stencilled that, together with an original rendition of Louis XIV, at the top, and the rest of our favorite euphemisms for drunkenness and debauchery in descending order: had a thump over the head with Samson's jawbone; stole a manchet out of the brewer's basket; contending with the Pharaoh; got the Indian vapors; half-way to Concord; anchored in sot's bay; sniffed the barmaid's apron; and swallowed a tavern token. We weren't going to allow anyone to drive home who was already more than half-way to Concord.

"Lean that gizmo up against the pool table and have a mugfull," Mickey suggested. It wasn't bad advice. We still were obliged to create a festive atmosphere, which would be quite an undertaking, since the tax collector considered Mickey's basement a root cellar (he'd been intending to convert it into a rec room for the kids— he'd chiselled out seven to date—since the conception of the first, but now that necessity had become somewhat less pressing), and I still had to make a safari through the Piggly Wiggly in search of pork rinds and cheese curls. Ten hours seemed like plenty of time.

Mickey's shirt might not have been laundered since Dewey went down in defeat, but I didn't mention it. When Mickey was juiced, he could sometimes smack a man across the jaw easy as pissing his name in a snowbank. This usually occurred only when he was so out of control that his follow-through landed him facedown on the floor or street or pasture, even if his opponent barely flinched. Mickey never quite forgave whoever had prodded him to this violence, and I didn't want to deprive him of any more friends.

Although he had appointed himself president of the sign-making committee and had promised a glittery one that said "Happy New Year," the only evidence of gaiety was an unmolested box of tinsel propped up on the table in front of him. He hunched over it like it was a new strain of fungus he wanted to observe without endangering his good looks, but then Mickey had never caught so much as athlete's foot. Gold garland hung like a lei around his neck, but I kept my mouth shut about that, too.

"Did I ever tell you what Peggy used to call this?" he asked, fingering his adornment.

"Never," I said.

"Garlic. She used to beg me to let her put the garlic on the tree. Of course, it figures. First born like she was, she was probably influenced by the ring bear."

"The what?" I asked, assuming he was slurring his words already.

"The ring bear. My four-year-old nephew stood before the congregation and growled while I said 'I do' because his father had told him he was going to be the ring bear."

I'm sure he elaborated because he knew I didn't know which one Peggy was. Mickey seldom referred to any of his progeny by name; usually he said, "my first boy," or "my one girl," and this time he said the name like he wanted me to reveal something I'd never revealed to anyone, to confide in him as if we'd ever done anything more together than drink beer and shoot pool and win each other's money. That's what we did. I thought we were both past the need for

confidantes or shrinks or friendly advice.

But face it, this was New Year's Eve, and Mickey hadn't had a date with anybody other than his wife and John Barleycorn in seventeen years. Not me. I loved my wife, no question about that, but all too often her response made me feel like a necrophiliac. The righteous liberals among us will claim that there is nothing actually wrong with hurdling the white picket fence in order to more effectively covet your neighbor's wife, that it's deception which will condemn you quicker than wet pants on a dry day, but I didn't consider deception particularly evil, either. Avoid pain at all costs, was my motto. Why welcome trouble when you can lie? My wife, eventually, lost her objectivity, which was why I was in hock for $450, prior to any trial that should become necessary, to Bigger, Bigger, and Betts, attorneys at law.

"You talk to Larry today?" I asked Mickey.

"Was I supposed to?"

"I wondered whether you knew about his latest predicament."

"Larry's always in a predicament," Mickey said, rubbing his cheek. "I need a shave. But you don't mind, do you? Remember when Larry bet me his life savings that he wouldn't shave until he got a deer and his wife told him he could sleep with his rifle?"

"This time's much worse," I said. "You knew he planned to fight over custody because he figured his wife would give him anything in a property settlement if she thought she was going to lose the kids. Apparently, he doesn't know his wife so well after all, and she knows him better than he would like. After his motion was filed with the court, his wife called his bluff and said, 'You want the kids, you can have the kids. Starting now.' She dropped them off yesterday afternoon. He's been looking for a babysitter ever since."

Mickey looked up in alarm, and I could see him worrying about dull poker if too many others wanted to play pool.

"Don't worry, he'll be here," I said, "even if he has to tie them all to their beds and leave them alone. You know Larry."

"But the oldest one is only seven," Mickey protested.

"I'm only kidding," I said. I don't know how Mickey kept track of all of our heirs. As far as I was concerned, one batch was as bad as another. "Imagine Larry being a mother, flipping pancakes on Saturday mornings and finding Johnny's socks and remembering Susie wants oreos instead of twinkies."

"I can't even imagine Larry being a father," Mickey said.

"What do you mean?" I asked, wondering if Mickey was perhaps usurping the role of his virility machine. Anybody can father a child; it was the idea of Larry doing the mothering that amused me.

"Larry's made a science of absence at crucial moments."

"He'll be here tonight."

"That's what I mean," Mickey said.

Refusing to look at him, I grabbed the tinsel from the table and hunted for some cardboard. I had raised my kids fine, there or not. Tonight we were supposed to be celebrating the absence of women, and I wasn't about to let Mickey louse it up.

Although he had all kinds of ideas for the rest of us, he could hardly qualify as one to cast the first stone. It was *his* kid, after all, *his* daughter, the first one,

Peggy, garlic Peggy, he couldn't wake up one morning because she'd swallowed too many pretty little pills. My kids would never be beatified—the oldest one had ricocheted between juvenile homes and jails so many times both of us had lost count—but he had never killed himself to prove how much he hated me. Of course, Mickey claimed it was an accident. They concocted some story about contradictory prescriptions, even got the doctor to go along with it, but any Neanderthal could see differently.

That wasn't the only reason Mickey was different. The rest of us had been evicted by our wives because of our foreign interests, but it was Mickey's wife, not him, who treated the opposite sex like a cartel to be negotiated with en masse. I knew she was preparing to leave Mickey long before she packed her cosmetic case. We worked for the same firm, and she spent a lot more time than seemed crucial to the progress of free enterprise in the office of Jay Wohl, regional manager. They would launch his little Porsche together at noon, and coast back together at precisely one o'clock. I began scribbling mental memos regarding his morning ties, in case they differed from his afternoon ties. It's funny how time constraints can distract a fellow from important details. The couple inevitably returned carrying blue stoneware mugs or white china cups, and though the containers weren't always identical, you knew the coffee came out of the same pot. Office gossip is as unreliable as any other, so I avoided its influence, but I still couldn't feign surprise when Mickey told me she'd left. What I hadn't realized was that Jay would allow her to bring all those sons and daughters with her. I've shared a few beers with Jay myself, and half-a-dozen pubescent and prepubescent tongues would be just enough to send him to Bedlam. When I reassured Mickey that she would be back within six months, I didn't give him any reasons; I didn't want him to believe I considered him a viable option only after others had committed hara-kiri. New Year's Eve marked over nine months, though, and I was almost ready to conclude that I didn't know human nature as well as I thought I did.

"I've already made the sign," Mickey said. "It's upstairs until the glue dries. If we hang it up now, glitter will sift off every time somebody lets out a good 'God damn' tonight."

"And we certainly can't ban blasphemy," I said, pouring myself another beer. I didn't have any idea what I was supposed to do with the tinsel. I doubt if Mickey did either. It had probably been on sale. Mickey loved sales. He had once bought twelve turkeys the day after Thanksgiving because they were on sale. Just a week before, he'd started palling around with my pick-up because Stop Leak was on sale at the True Value Hardware Store.

"I stopped off to see the kids yesterday," Mickey said. Every time he opened his mouth, I decided he must have been drinking a bit longer than I'd previously assumed. I knew he wouldn't dare get maudlin on me—I got relieved of my duty to my country because a sergeant wanted to cry in my beer. We weren't the kind of friends who could cope with each other's vulnerability. "It was a bad day all the way around," he continued. "First I stopped at the grocery store to get some Pepsi for them, and the cashier called the security guard because I wanted to pay with a twenty. Apparently, some counterfeiting gang has all the retailers in town on the edge of paranoia. The serial number on my bill wasn't even close, but the cashier was sure I was one of them."

"Must be your menacing appearance," I said, "or perhaps she was simply suffering visions of glory. You obviously escaped relatively unharmed."

"Yes. Relatively. Then I went over to the house and nobody was there except my first boy and a bunch of his friends in the basement. He said it was The Bob Newhart Club. They watch re-runs every afternoon. Whenever one of the characters says, 'Hi, Bob' they all have to chug a beer."

Mickey ignored my laughter. To me, chugging beer has always seemed to be the best antidote for television sit-coms.

"What I want to know," Mickey continued, "is who bought it for him. Nobody would sell it to him, that's for sure. He's fifteen, but until last year, we passed him at the movies for eleven. Who would buy a fifteen-year-old that much beer?"

I had bought beer for my fifteen-year-old plenty of times. I hadn't actually bought it for him; I had lugged a couple cases home every Saturday for myself, and we both pretended I drank it all. It was easier that way, and he'd be drinking soon enough regardless of what I did.

"I can't stop it," Mickey said. "It's not my house they're living in."

In my opinion, the only thing that needed to be stopped was this dull conversation. Mickey would be as embarrassed as I about it the next morning. "Looks to me like it's about time for you to relieve yourself of some blood," I said, "unless it's the beer and disgust which is turning your face purple." I was weary of his tribal absorption, and he could almost always be persuaded to discuss his disease. He had polycythemia, a harmless disorder which simply caused him to produce too many red blood cells and occasionally required him to have a pint removed. All it meant was that he could sell his type A-negative blood to a plasma center more frequently than the rest of us. He didn't, though—he donated it to the Red Cross. If I ever develop such a problem, I'll elect the money over philanthropy. I've sold blood and I've sold sperm and I've been a simulated patient and I'd sell my left kidney if I could get a good price. And what Mickey said to me a few minutes later, and what I did doesn't change anything.

He looked up at me like a toddler who's just discovered his father slapping his mother, his mother afraid, his father infuriated by her fear. He looked at me like he'd realized, finally, against his will and to his horror, that there wasn't a civilized act that had ever been committed for its own sake. I've always been the first to acknowledge that we're all out to get what we can, be that the ripest tomato or the oldest whiskey or the cheapest labor. If it's easier for me to get what I want by sidling up to a fellow and flattering him about his wife or his car, I can be that nice, but that's seldom the case.

I was bending over to replace the cardboard I'd pulled from a shelf when my back was drenched with what I assumed was beer, and a white plastic cup somersaulted past my head. That's not what angered me; as far as I was concerned, that was simply a waste of good beer.

"Listen—" he ordered, more sharply than I'd ever heard him. "Listen, I've been trying to talk to you today. I'm Mickey, remember, the one guy who's stuck by you since that dishonorable discharge, the one guy who's ever had anything good to say about you, the one guy who knows you're not what you seem—"

He began striding toward me, but stopped in front of my Inebro-Meter. There, as methodically as a connoisseur testing a glass of wine, Mickey squeezed

each of the light bulbs until it shattered. Then he pried a large piece of glass from one of the sockets and scratched mild obscenities into the paint that had just dried yesterday, watching me intently for the entire six or seven minutes it took. I let him finish; the machine wasn't as important as he believed, and it could be renovated fairly easily. Although I assumed an attitude of fury and smashed the bulbs in his machine, too, ignoring the stinging in the side of my hand when a sliver of glass stuck there, that wasn't what angered me, either. I've never attempted to control my pride in not being what I seem. But Mickey was confused. I was what I seemed to him; he didn't have so much as a pair of needle-nosed pliers I wanted. That's why I liked him. I knew we'd always be friends because I would never have to kiss his cheek in order to earn enough silver to pay for a cemetery. I hit him only to shut him up, or sober him up, and because it was expected. This was New Year's Eve, and I didn't have time for any self-righteous proclamations. I wanted to empty a couple kegs with a few buddies and win their money. That's all I wanted to do, drink and win. What infuriated me was how he continued to speak instead of hitting me back. I had been trusting him to react as I predicted. I wanted to jar him out of his Howdy Doody freckles that simultaneously invited and repelled violence.

"You think you've got life—" he kept talking, even after I shoved him backwards to the floor— "all figured out." Pinning his arms down with my knees, I hit him first over one patch of freckles, then another. Connect the dots and find a camel or a weasel or a whale. "All you've got is a beer gut—" I closed my eyes when one cheek started bleeding— "and a cockroach-infested apartment—" he still lay there beneath me as impassively as white bread under egg salad— "and a different coquette—" I opened my eyes then— "on your arm—" and I didn't have to pretend anymore— "every time I see you—" that he was a dumb animal or wild beast or anything other than Mickey.

He was Mickey, sweet, cuckolded Mickey, refusing to strike back, even after I stopped and just sat there, breathing so loud I couldn't hear anything else. My lungs hadn't been so tired since I'd been an Eagle Scout diving for cat-eyes and steelies at the bottom of a lake and coming up a winner. Later that night, the loser had ignited the new underwear my mother had bought so I wouldn't be embarrassed and flung them pair-by-pair into the lake. The next morning, someone had tied the remains onto a ladder and hung it from the chimney of the Girl Scout cabin nearest our tents. Since then, I've never felt shy about arranging overdue face-lifts or tummy tucks for my aging acquaintances, though this was the first time I was ever concerned about post-op recovery.

Even before I touched Mickey's cheeks with the wet, cold cloth, I knew I hadn't hit him anywhere crucial. There have been many times when I've hit men harder, though never with more fury and never as conscious of my own proscription against truly hurting him. I've come to realize that physical pain is as good as any to prevent all those innocents from loosing their bright faces on the world. I've never walked away from a fight as unscathed, either, and once I lathered my hands with Mickey's pungent industrial soap, again ignoring the sting in my cuts, I felt an indescribable relief that made me think the word *justice*. While I wiped his blood from his face, he curled his fingers almost gently around my wrist, more like a woman than a man, and for a moment before I shook his hand and the thought away, I wanted to be kinder to him than I've ever been to

anyone. It was a fleeting, foolish impulse, though—I know I've never been particularly kind to women, and I have been especially unkind to men who act like women—an impulse which only forced me to stand up and walk away, up the stairs and out to my pick-up, leaving Mickey to explain to the others that I would be unable to attend our celebration.

Deborah Miller

PRETTY BOXES

Of the small tract house we lived in when I was a girl, my father often said, "Ticky-tacky, and they all look just the same." I thought he was a poet, even without the rhyme. They did look alike. Every last one was painted white—some had brown trim, others black; all of their picture windows were shuttered to match the trim. He would stand in the yard and survey our house, all the houses in a row, and say that, "Ticky-tacky," as if the sameness cast a pall over them. I thought my father was a poet, but I did not share the sentiment. *We* were in the dark, compared to our like-painted counterparts—compared to them, unenlightened, but when the sun pulled itself up over the mountains each morning, it reflected off all of our bright, white coats with the same measure of intensity. I liked basking in their light.

Some of the things that went on at the white house where I grew up shamed me. My mother kept losing babies. And I kept on being an only child—the only only child on a street of many children. I was never child enough to think that my mother's babies had been misplaced or left in spots she couldn't find her way back to. It might have been nice to imagine her looking under rocks for small, flannel-wrapped packages, in the culvert across the way for noiseless bundles with fists frozen in minute protestation. Nicer than having it whispered about, again and again. By nine, I was a skilled eavesdropper and knew everything there was to know about accidents of nature. Almost a brother. Nearly a sister. The womb was either tipped or hostile and I was just fortunate enough to have been leaning the right way, stubborn enough to have stayed without the Welcome mat. So, *I* knew, but the neighbors didn't, and I was sure they believed that people like us devoured our young.

Martha Kelly had three brothers and two sisters. Kate Ryan was the only girl in a family of seven. They were my best friends in the neighborhood, amazed from the start that I had my own room. I knew I was an oddity, that their parents were kind to me out of pity, that they would never have anything to do with mine because of the way they had deprived me. *My* siblings had been gobbled whole. Eaten alive. That the Ryans and the Kellys could believe this and still accept me was broad-minded and big-hearted. I dreamt of being adopted, and though I wondered sometimes where they would put me, I never doubted there was room.

We were always the only Jews in that neighborhood. Maybe in the whole, wide

world. There were others, two towns away where the synagogue was, but I saw so little of them I was convinced they ceased to exist once we drove away from services. I saw so little of them because, quite apart from the fact that the synagogue was a long ride away from us, we could not afford the dues. We were not rich like we were supposed to be. Only during the season of the High Holy Days did we go to shul and that was more than time enough for me. The rest of the year we worshipped in our own way, which, my father believed, meant loving God and being nice. Doing unto others was a concept I embraced with all my being. I did not have to go to Hebrew school to do that, did not have to learn how to make those deep, wet sounds that no one I cared about would ever understand. My mother roasted chicken and lit the candles on Friday night and we did, or thought about doing, unto others. We, as my father said time and again, lived our religion from within and did not require a place to do so. *I* craved a place. Not, however, the sort of place he had in mind.

The Sacred Heart Church, a few blocks from where we lived, was hot pink. I thought hot pink an odd, amusing color for a church, but a luscious one, all the same. There was a Dairy Queen across the street that lent the church extra desirability. Sundays, I would stand at our picture window watching cars crowded with polished faces pass by on the way home from church and wish for patent leather shoes and one stiff, white, lacy collar to get me into the kingdom of the Sacred Heart. Jesus Christ wanted to be my personal saviour, Kate's mother assured me all the time. *If* I needed to be saved, and I wasn't one-hundred percent sure that I did, I couldn't think of anyone finer to do the job. I knew enough to be dubious about those offers of salvation, but only just. I was, for the most part, flattered.

Once, and a glorious time it was, too, on a Saturday, I had biked over to the church with Kate and Martha when they went to confession. I was going to wait across the street for them after we'd finished our cones. When they took out doilies from their pockets and bobby pinned them to their heads, chunky Kate and scrawny Martha became beauty queens, backlit, infused from behind with a brilliant, golden luster. Ordinary girls, one a washed-out blonde, the other an uninspired brunette, ordinary girls who, at that moment, could have posed for Breck. Longing and envy overcame me. "I want to go in," I said.

They looked at each other and then back at me. "Great," said Martha. "Sure," said Kate. "Only you can't. You don't have anything to cover your head with."

I didn't have a doily, but I did have a Dairy Queen napkin. "Yes, I do," I replied, waving the napkin at them. I borrowed a bobby pin and clipped it in place. They seemed uneasy, but I didn't care. We went in together. My mousey-brown hair felt shimmery, warm, and, as I had hoped, haloed. Hallowed. While they confessed, I stayed in a back pew studying the altar, transfixed by Jesus and his bleeding palms. I would have given anything to have gone inside the confessional and begged absolution for my murderous origins. Mrs. Kelly had recently explained to me who had killed Christ. And to think he could still consider saving me, *if* I needed it, after something like that.

I had a small, upturned nose and perfect vision. Even on a muggy day, my hair did not frizz. My hand in school was on the desk or in my lap far more often than

it was in the air.

That is how they liked me. I did not seem Jewish to any of them. My friends' parents loved to tell me that I did not seem Jewish. Unpushy, unfrizzy, unbespectacled me, a marvel to them all. That was a marvelous, glowing warmth. I could see things in it. With my perfect vision.

I could always see that my friends' parents were quite nearly perfect. I could certainly tell they didn't drink. None of them had cocktails beforehand or wine with their meals. They were good Catholics. They never drank. Beer, my father tried to tell me, lots of it, kiddo, all day long. Blasphemy. I knew he lied.

My parents drank. Socially, they called it. Humiliating, I called it, for they always seemed to be especially social in my cringing presence. Whenever my parents went out of the house for an evening, they took me with them. I always wished they would just get a babysitter and leave me home, but these were family events. To prepare for these events, my mother would bring all of her make-up into the living room and use the mirror in there. She claimed the fluorescent bulbs around the mirror in the bathroom gave off unnecessary rays. The living room had only one fixture and, as she put her various colors on, the rays from that fixture gave her the face she must have envisioned. I would watch and be smitten with her muted glamour—soft teal eyes, pursed coral lips, wispy caramel-colored hair—until she began teasing that hair and then I would remember. Remember as she teased her hair until it looked full and solid that tonight was another one of those nights and that we were going to another one of those restaurants that I hated. My mother would collect her make-up and go to her room to get dressed. Chiffon blouses, capri pants, high, spikey heels—party clothes. I regarded them as frivolous. When she put on the party clothes, it meant we were all stepping out. The other women in the neighborhood wore housedresses and penny loafers and never stepped out in them.

What I hated most about the restaurants were the candles, the ones in the center of each table that sat in short glass cups and flickered at my parents' faces. After the first few martinis, their faces invariably clouded with annoyance and in the shadows my eyes would tear with the strain of trying to determine just when it was they were going to begin arguing. Not that I ever could have prevailed upon them to forego the evening's quarrel. They were tenacious sparring partners and I was an ineffectual referee. Still, I watched them, always I watched them, hoping for a sign in the candlelit scowl, the dark, dimmed calm before the shrill, harsh words.

According to my father, the world we inhabited was filled with only two kinds of people—Nazis and peasants. The Nazis were out to get us and the peasants wouldn't lift a finger to stop them. My mother hated for him to talk this way in front of me, but when we went out, he would talk of nothing else. *My* friends, he was sorry to have to tell me, were nothing but little Nazis, and the sooner I knew it, the better. He was, at least, pleasant enough to them when they came over. He would kid around with them, he would tease, he would act as if he liked them. "Martha," he might say, "Why don't we have you for dinner tonight? Let me just see if we have a pan you can squeeze inside," and Martha would usually giggle as I steamed. Remarks like that did little to enhance our reputation in the neighborhood. My father could easily make believe and make his point to me at the same time.

My mother clung fast to a more charitable world view and was glad of my friendships on the block—hadn't we come a long way in twenty years and wasn't it nice that we could all get on? "What, get on. What, get on?" It was my father's favorite rejoinder. He'd say it quietly, shaking his head, and when she would then attempt to explain, he'd either pound a fist so hard on the table that hot wax would fly out of the cup, or else he'd call her ignorant loudly enough to turn heads. Sometimes a turning head would come equipped with words like *Who you calling a Nazi?* because my father was never able to resist a direct confrontation. If he saw that he was attracting attention, he'd gladly rise to the occasion. Or, better yet, he'd gladly rise to the occasion for even more attention.

One night, some people in the booth behind us overheard him and began discussing the topic quietly amongst themselves. I say quietly because *I* could not hear them, but I knew what they must have been doing from his reaction. They could have been using sign language. My father still would have heard. They need only, in fact, have been thinking about it—he still would have known. At a thousand paces, my father could pick out even the quietest Nazi, or the most pensive. Whatever he heard turned him red. He rose up, all six, broad, rangy feet of him, draped himself over the tall back of the seat and dove in. His hind end was about all that was visible to me; the people in the next booth had the rest of him.

"So!" he shouted, "What's this about Hitler? Did I hear someone mention the name Adolph Hitler, scum of the earth?!" My mother and I held on to each other, both of us shaking. My father shouted a few obscenities, his enemy a few more back; a waiter appeared and requested civilized behavior. My father got in a good, loud "Nazi pig!" parting volley and then sat back down and ordered another round of drinks. My mother proceeded to scold him for the rest of the evening. Scenes such as this were not uncommon. I blew out the candles whenever I could.

All the way home, out of the car and into the house, the fights would continue. I wanted to close the shutters around the picture window and seal them with epoxy. Anything to muffle my embarrassment. The Ryans and the Kellys were much more serene.

The Halloween that I was ten, one of my last ghoulish appearances, was anything but serene. "Red!" my father told my mother, "Fire-engine red, maybe like a candy cane. No more of this 'just like them' baloney!" he said to her out in front that evening, declaring his intention to repaint the house. "Now do you see what I've been trying tell you?" he asked softly. "I'm calling their parents. Don't cry. Please don't cry."

He spoke to both of us when he said not to cry. As we had come around the corner a few minutes earlier, I in my witch hat, he in his suit, we had seen my mother on the front porch jumping up and down, stomping out what seemed to be something on fire. Two boys disguised as hoboes were running from the yard. As they turned back to shout something, a beam from the streetlight cut across their charcoaled, grinning faces; familiar faces—Jack Ryan and Eddie Kelly. By the time we got to her, the fire was out and my mother was crying and shaking her foot. Then the smell hit me. Dog do. Her foot was stuck inside a brown paper bag full of it. My father got it all over his hands when he removed the bag from

her shoe. "Take the shoe off," he said, and when I saw that it was her prettiest pair of heels, I started crying, too. She had dressed up for the trick-or-treaters and they had made her step in shit. Shit. That's what it was. I even said the word aloud. I had never done that before.

She refused to concede that the boys had called her a kike and wanted to dub it a typical Halloween prank that could have happened to anyone, but my father was adamant. Did she want to poll the neighborhood to find out if Eddie and Jack had been busy elsewhere or did she want him to call their parents? She wanted no part of any of it, especially the new paint job. Who ever heard of such a silly thing?

The Ryans and the Kellys were very sorry for our trouble and sure that no one around here harbored such hateful, old-fashioned ideas. Certainly not their boys. Could my father prove it? Would he care to try? That's what they said that night, but must have thought better of it by the next day when the boys made a full confession. I wondered about that confession until Kate called to tell me that she had overheard her brother and Eddie afterwards and wasted not a moment telling on them. The Ryans called to apologize and the Kellys put a note in our mailbox which said "Sorry" on the inside and "Jesus Loves You" on the cover. Even my mother thought that was a bit much.

That weekend my father went out and bought the paint. I didn't want him to do it, to do what he did; I thought he was a maniac turning the house red like that. No more basking for me. Sorry wasn't good enough for him. Red with red trim. Red with red shutters. I thought he might even be breaking some kind of civic law with all that red. Now we had a pall. I brooded beneath it for at least an eternity. It took a long, long time for me to forgive him, to see him there in a different light—my father on a ladder with a poem all his own.

Troy Boucher

SEMPER FI

As far as JW Rooker was concerned, the whole damn country was going to hell in a hand-basket. "Goin' to hell. Just plain going to hell," he told Cora. And, as he said it he gave his rocker a shove and picked up his can of Coors and started another list of things that needed to be done.

Some people called JW lazy; they were wrong, of course. JW wasn't lazy; he was just averse to work. The idea of work he could tolerate; it was the actuality of doing work that sent a surge of blue, electric fear streaking deep into his bowels. JW remembered vividly digging postholes for the chicken pen. On the third one he threw the hand-auger to the ground, hurried into the house and dropped into his rocking chair, terrified by the sweat that ran into his eyes and dripped from his nose. What JW could do was to make lists that were damn near art, and he was generous to a fault. His lists always included work that someone else needed to do. Cora kept most of the lists and tried diligently not to do any of the work on any of them. His two sons, Carl and Mort, however, were not so considerate. Frequently, they would sneak into the house, and silently rummage through the drawers finding the ignored lists. And then just as silently they would sneak back outside and do all the work on the list.

JW thought his wife was doing the work and as a result he didn't bother to kick her ass. His wife—seeing that the work was done—was elated that her ass hadn't been kicked. And the two boys, well, they were just elated that the whole damn place wasn't falling down. After all, if they wanted an inheritance, it was up to them to make sure it was of some value. They often kicked each other's asses when the work didn't get done. All-in-all, they were one happy family.

Except for the daughter—Havolene.

She wanted a man. Not just any man, a real man, the kind who'd get her the kind of things she wanted, do the things she wanted to do, and take her to the places she wanted to go. Havolene dedicated herself to the task, as a matter of fact, she dedicated whole nights to it.

That's how it started. Lene, as her dad called her, began to look for a man. Even if it was against her husband's wishes. She believed that if he really loved her, he would want only the best for her. Often, Rupert would sit in the kitchen, his hand almost touching the table and say something like, "Lene, I swear I don't understand what it is you want. I try my best. Give you all the money I get from my disability check." Then he would light up another cigarette and stare listlessly out the window. "Hell, I got to go down to Mel's and wash dishes just to

have tobacco money."

Lene would just put a hand on one of her hips and then in a way she knew would drive her husband crazy she'd slide her hand down her thigh and walk off like a cat in heat. He would hear the door slam then and go to the window and watch her walking down the dirt road, swinging her purse. "God, I'd like to *screw* that woman," he'd say to himself, and vowed that someday he would, even if he had to rape her to do it, which he knew he'd never do. He was determined to make their marriage work and he would do anything to give Lene what she wanted, even if she didn't want it.

JW didn't get along very well with his son-in-law Rupert. He made it a point to call him Rup, which he knew Rupert hated. But JW only replied, "What the hell's the difference. No one but a shit-head would have a name like Rupert anyway." But what JW said really chapped his ass was that Rup seemed dead set against Lene getting what she wanted. The fact that Lene wanted a man and Rup seemed dead set against it was proof enough for JW that Rup was indeed a shit-head. "Ain't like she's asking for a helluva lot. Christ Almighty, you'd think he'd want his wife to be happy."

Before JW could tell his wife to get off her fat ass and go to the door, Lene sauntered into the room and dropped into the overstuffed chair that was almost as old as she was. "Daddy," she would say, stretching the word out like a rubber band, "Rupert don't want me to have any fun. He thinks I should stay at home and do what he wants to do. All he wants since he came back from overseas is for me to act like his wife, all the time."

"Knew when that bastard came back from that Nam place with that gimp leg of his and those medals all over his chest that he was up to no good. No self-respecting man would go and get himself shot. Must not of been much of a soldier. Burns my butt, he goes over there and then comes home to collect money just because he let some half-assed, near blind commie blow off his leg."

And Lene, knowing that she had an audience, would lower her head and reach for a Kleenex tissue. "Daddy, it's so dreadful. Some nights he sets down in the kitchen, right where I'm trying to cook, and pulls up his pant leg and unstraps that horrible thing he wears in the day time. Then he just sets there rubbin' his leg where it stops." She dabbed her eye where a tear had almost formed.

"Sonofabitch. I ought to go over there and knock him on his ass. That's what I ought to do." JW's wife would shake her head and click her tongue. "Now Cora, don't go gettin' yourself in a sweat cause we're gonna figure this thing through, right to the end. Lene don't have to put up with the likes of him." JW would then give his rocker a slight shove. "Just don't you worry, Baby Doll," he would say to Lene, "we're gonna work this thing right through to the end or by God, I ain't no Rooker." And figure they did. At least JW and Cora did. Lene was already out the door on her way to the Terminal Cafe and Parlour with a sense of dedication.

Being a Rooker, JW didn't waste any time. No Rooker had ever let grass grow under his feet when the stakes were really big. Four days later JW took out his knife to sharpen a pencil so he could make a list that would take care of Rup. He started to rock, building his momentum, the harder he thought, the faster he rocked. He was rocking so hard the old chair began to move across the floor and soon JW found himself in the kitchen, his clothes damp from the vigorous

pumping and the strain he had put on his brain. The chair slowed, then stopped. JW started trembling. Fear dilated his pupils; his eyes bulged; his hands tightened on the arms. He sat immobilized. After a while the red began to fade from his face; he returned to his more natural palid gray. He was sure of one thing—he had overdone it. It was the second time he had broken into a sweat since his wedding night. On his wedding night his zipper stuck and he fell over when he raised one leg to put his foot on the bathtub. He had ended up wedged between the bathtub and the stool, his feet sticking straight up in the air and his chin pushing against his chest. "Shit," he said to himself, "I've got to be careful. Just not as young as I used to be." He decided to take it slow and easy. No need to get in a hurry. Rup wasn't going anywhere. JW eased down into the chair, put his feet on a stack of catalogs. Sleep was what he needed, and sleep was what he did.

What he didn't do was come up with a list. By the end of three weeks JW had a pile of paper around him that was almost knee-high. He had made pieces of lists, half-lists, lists with nothing but the name Rup on them lists with nothing but cuss words on them. But still he didn't have a plan. He needed help. He called his two sons in. They sat across from him and stared with their long mule-faces at the pile of papers that surrounded JW. "Well, don't just set there lookin' stupid. Say something." JW waited. The two mule-faced sons waited. It was apparent to JW that neither one of his sons could offer him a plan. He should have known better than to ask them. The last time he let them carry out their own plans, JW ended up with a pickup in his living room and three of his best Rock Island Reds smashed all over the porch. He knew that if Rup was to be dealt with, he'd have to do it himself. Man-to-man—if he had to.

* * *

When Rupert walked into Mel's, he poured himself a cup of coffee and headed toward the table where three of the town's most prominent citizens sat drinking coffee. At one time or another each had been blamed or praised for almost everything that had happened, or failed to happen, in their small Kansas town. Chink Shandler stirred his coffee and tried to find his Zippo lighter. He was hampered by his glasses which were not only covered with five days' worth of red dust, but were also as thick as the bottom of a Mason jar. The only time he could see was when he took them off, but when he took them off the only things he could see were at least fifty feet away. Next to him was the town's current mayor and barber, Hod Gibson Butts. Hod bragged that he'd never spent a dime going to one of those fancy barbering schools to learn how to cut hair. His skill, he said, was the result of watching his father shear sheep. It would have gotten a laugh except most of his customers were an honest testimony of his apprenticeship. Louie the Wop sat with his feet propped up on the table, sipping his coffee and blowing on it at the same time. No one knew for sure where Louie came from—or that he was a Wop for that matter—or how he made enough money to live on. Every one assumed it was on something illegal, so they never bothered to ask. He disappeared from the first of December until the first of June every year, and then like clockwork he'd be sitting at his regular spot sipping and blowing his coffee.

Rupert pulled out a chair, turned it around, and lowered himself onto it like it

was a saddle. "Well guys, what's new?" he asked and took a deep drink of the steaming coffee. He'd gotten used to drinking hot coffee in Nam. Too many times he spilled entire cups on his crotch, the ground, or into his M-16 when some idiot yelled, "INCOMING."

"Saw Havolene at the Terminal last night. Shoulda' been there." Hod looked at Rupert as he spoke, then waited for a reply. Rupert shifted his weight on the chair and straightened his leg. "She sure is some looker, that Havolene. And dance, too, I tell you." Hod could still see her spinning around the floor, her blue skirt billowing up and out, revealing, momentarily, bright red lace panties and what he told Chink was one of the cutest little asses in the county. "Hand-size," he told Chink.

"You know," said Chink, "she's damn near a spittin' image of JW. Tell you, Rupert, I'd be watching out for those two if I was you."

"Watching out for what?" Rupert asked.

"Well, she was telling Boz how JW's goin' to take care of things and from what I could tell, 'things' is you."

"He can sure as hell try. We all know JW needs something to keep him busy. Hell, he might even pull his fat ass out of that rocker for something other than a beer." Rupert watched Hod, Chink, and Louie pretend they hadn't heard. JW, they knew, didn't like being crossed. He'd stood in their doorways more than once with a loaded 12 gauge shotgun just because they'd slipped up and mailed him a bill for some work they'd done. Rupert pushed himself up. "Next time you see JW tell him that next to a couple of whores in Nam, his daughter's the best piece of ass I ever had." He laughed and disappeared through swinging doors.

It was just one of those days, like dreaming you're in a rice paddy up to your ass in mud and water and waking up to discover you are up to your ass in mud and water in a rice paddy. Things were destined to go wrong, even if they were only sloppily done. Rupert Sinclair might have been destined, but he definitely wasn't sloppy. The bandage on his hand and the three broken plates on the floor were evidence that it was just going to be one of those days.

At least Mel would be understanding. He would only demand the cost of the plates plus 10% to replace them. The cut on his thumb would be a different matter. Mel would have to think a while before he could come up with a way to turn that into a profit. Mel was a sheer genius for making money on everything but his cafe. At the end of each day he threw away more food than he served, but he also managed to lose more money than food. Even so, on other days it was a close race. But give Mel a second-hand pocket watch and before you knew it he'd turn it into a Buick Skylark or twelve acres of land down near the river.

Actually, Rupert should have known that JW was up to something. He should have guessed. He had reason enough to. It was JW who convinced Lene that a one-legged war veteran couldn't qualify as a man. It was also JW who refused to accept his calls after Lene had her phone removed. And it was JW who told Lene that staying in a VA hospital was worse than taking food stamps. No one with any pride would do either.

Rupert picked up the remains of the plates and tossed them into the trash. After he finished washing the dishes, he hung up his apron. He walked into the storage room at the back of the cafe and began to move boxes. Finally, he found what he was looking for. The green chest sat solidly on the floor. Rupert pulled on

the padlock; it was worth every bit of the fifty dollars he'd spent on it. The green chest was all he needed.

* * *

"He said what?" JW's face went from its natural gray to red, then to a grape-juice purple. His mule-faced son Carl backed up a step and repeated what he'd heard. "Who did Louie hear it from? Did he say those were shit-head's exact words?" JW started rocking. A tinge of gray began to creep back into his face. "Where does that son of a bitch git off sayin' I got a fat ass, anyway." He picked up a pencil, bit the eraser off, and spit it across the table. "Ain't no way he's going to git away with saying things that . . . that belittle Lene and me. I was going to do this thing man to man, but that's off now, by God. By God, it is."

* * *

Lene noticed the heavy silver padlock the day Rupert rolled the green steel chest across the porch and into the house. "Where di you get that?" she asked.

"Been stored in LA since I got back. I decided to send for it." He slid it off the dolly and onto the floor. Its dark green bulk gave it the appearance of a Wells-Fargo strong box.

"What's in it?" Lene asked. She leaned against a doorjamb and slid her hands into the back pockets of her jeans.

"Just some things I brought back from Nam. Junk mainly."

"You gonna open it?"

"Nope. No need to. I know what's in it."

"Why can't I see what's in it?" She pushed away from the door and walked across the room. Rupert sat on the coffee table and pulled his leg up onto the top of the box. He rested a moment and watched Lene curl a string of hair around her finger. "You just going to leave it here? In the front room?"

"Yep." Rupert stood and walked to the front door. "I'll be back later." He turned to see if Lene had heard him. She was in midstoop, one hand cautiously inching its way toward the heavy padlock. Rupert smiled, headed out the door, and sat down on the porch. He looked across the yard to the windmill. It was strange living in his parents' house. The house was the same—yet it was different. It was still hard to accept that both of his parents were gone. Their old Pontiac was no match for the fifty mile an hour freight train that smashed into them on a foggy Sunday morning two weeks before Rupert was to be sent home. His eyes focused on the windmill and he remembered all the times he'd climbed to the platform and just sat there. It had become his refuge when he knew he was in trouble or when he just wanted to get away. As a child it had been his castle, his fort and his pirate's crow's nest. He had never lost a battle from there. He pushed himself off the porch and walked toward the tall, skeleton structure.

The climb wasn't as difficult as he had expected. He leaned back on the rusted remains of the gearbox, gazing beyond the hills of Kansas. The cold blue stretched from horizon to horizon. High above him he could see the wispy vapor trail of a jet. The wake of the jet was the same as he'd watched in Nam before hearing the distant rumble that told him they had reached their target and would

soon be returning to the safety of ships or guarded landing strips. He looked at the pasture land, and the tan wheat shafts that were almost ready to harvest. A hot blast of wind hit him in the face.

The hundred-foot-high tidal wave of jellied flame and black smoke that ripped through the dense jungle convinced him that he wasn't in Kansas. He was also convinced that he wasn't going to stay. Living in Kansas might be crazy, but being in Vietnam was a hell of a lot crazier. There had to be a way out and he was going to find it, even if it meant he had to stay in Vietnam for the rest of his life to find a way out.

For three months he planned and plotted, plotted and planned. He stole maps and finally decided that the best way out was to take the one least likely to succeed. That way no one would suspect that he was trying to get out of Nam and back to the rolling hills and blue canopy skies of home. After spending two nights smashed into the side of a rice paddy dike pinned down by sniper fire and torrential rain, he said, "Fuck it," and decided to head for Kansas. First, he would walk up through Cambodia, then sneak into Laos. In China, he'd find some Methodist missionaries who would hide him for awhile and then follow the Great Wall to the nearest ocean—he didn't care which one—and hitch a ride or build a raft. With a little luck he could be in Acapulco by Easter.

Rupert realized it was a desperate act; he also realized he was a desperate man. Not only was he desperate, he was terrified. For the first time in his life there were people spending hours stomping through the jungle trying to kill him. He knew it because they had shot at him and forced him to spend two nights with his face stuck in mud, water, and ox-shit. "Enough of this shit," he said and almost stood up. He bent over quickly, jumped the dike, and darted into the undergrowth. He started up the slope, placing each foot in front of the other like a child learning to walk. He eased his way to the edge of an opening and turned around.

He was perplexed. He could see the sniper wedged between a rock and a tree about ten yards down the hill. Rupert reviewed his options. He thought about the women on the sandy warm beaches of Acapulco and swung his M-16 off his shoulder and leveled it. He concentrated on the outline and slowly squeezed the trigger just like his dad had taught him. The sniper rose straight up, turned, and Rupert fired again. He watched as the sniper fell backwards and disappeared. Rupert cautiously moved down the hill, ready to fire again. He looked over the small rock ledge. The sniper lay on the ground holding his stomach, trying desperately to keep the blood from leaking through his fingers. Rupert tossed the sniper's rifle into the bushes, lifted the body to his shoulder and started down the hill.

The idea of receiving a Bronze Star only pissed him off. He could have been half way across Cambodia had it not been for the rat-shit sniper. One thing Rupert was sure of—he wasn't going back out again. There was no way anyone could force him to return to those fucking hills or those shit-filled rice paddies. He'd, by God, die first. And take half a platoon with him, if he had to. Four days later he was up to his ass in mud and water crossing another rice paddy and heading into the dense undergrowth. At least, he consoled himself, he was closer to Kansas.

When he was sure no one was watching, he walked off into the jungle. Cambodia was just on the other side of the hills in the distance. The hills turned

into mountains, the short walk into miles. Before noon the next day he was hopelessly lost. By the end of the second day he was even more than hopelessly lost. He was just plain hopeless. He fought bushes. He tangled with vines that wrapped around his legs, sending him crashing to the ground. He was close to being discouraged. The third day he stumbled down a small embankment, landed with his face against a huge pair of muddy boots, and looked up into the face of the ugliest damned Indian he'd ever seen. Rupert started to move but the grenade launcher aimed at his crotch changed his mind.

"You're up to your ass in trouble, man," the face bellowed at him.

"Well, I'm usually up to my ass in something—mud, ox-shit. You name it; I've been up to my ass in it. They send you after me?"

"They who? I've been out here for damn near a month trying to get my limit. I've been tracking you for close to a day and a half."

"I've heard of you guys. LURPS. Right?"

"LURPS? Forget it. I work alone. What the fuck you doin' out here, anyway?"

"I was on my way to Kansas."

"You're one crazy mother. Bet you thought you'd find a yellow brick road out here, too. Shit, man, even I know Kansas is the other direction. You're headed for Saigon."

"Just my fuckin' luck. My name's Rupert Sinclair."

"Edward Murphy Lame-Wolf. Cheyenne-Arapaho-Irish. Call me Murphy and you can get up."

"Ok, Murphy." Rupert slowly pushed himself to his feet while keeping a close eye on the grenade launcher. "You always carry that blow pipe with you?"

"Depends on whether I'm out to kick ass or waste ass. Right now I don't much care which I do." Murphy flipped the launcher up and onto his back. "Well, Sinclair, what do ya figure I ought to do with you?"

"Getting back to Kansas is not as easy as I thought. Guess you might as well show me how to get back to my squad."

"Get your shit together. We got a couple hours walk ahead of us if we're going to get there before the Cong start coming out of the woods."

Captain Ross was generous. He gave him a choice—face an unofficial firing squad or return to his outfit. Rupert thought about it; the idea was intriguing, even somewhat romantic in an Errol Flynn kind of way. But after spending one night in a rat-infested cell, the idea of rolling around in ox-shit didn't seem so bad. Finally he decided the firing squad was out of the question; he wasn't going home full of holes with the cause of death listed as "Friendly Fire." Besides, his father, even if he was just a farmer, was smart enough to know that "Friendly Fire" was pure bullshit for shot by your own men, and officially or unofficially, he'd be just as dead.

When he returned to his squad, Jumper Johnson laughed and shook his head. "You dumb prick, you should have taken the firing squad. We're moving out, man. The word is now Search and Deeeestroy."

And search was exactly what they did. Day after day after day. When the monsoon season ended and the heat began to build up, they were still searching. His squad waded across rivers, rice paddies, and hacked its way through jungle so dense the sun was blotted out. Twice they spotted enemy troop movement, but

each time they were unable to make contact and fulfill the destroy part of the mission. The enemy, however, managed to take his toll. Mines, Malaysian swings, pit traps and snipers kept them constantly on guard, increasing their anxiety, their frustration. But it was dysentery, malaria and foot-rot that forced them to turn back.

They headed back to the lowlands. The return trip was no easier. The heat built up in their helmets, sweat rolled into their eyes, and the vines and dense undergrowth entangled their feet. But the important thing was that they were headed back. Captain Ross pushed them hard. He had to. They all knew he had R&R coming and there was no damn way he was going to let foot-rot, dysentery, or mines filled with ox-shit slow him down.

"Spread out. Spread out," he yelled at them. They moved closer together. It was only watching the boots in front of him that gave Rupert the feeling of safety. As long as they were there, he knew he wasn't alone. They spread out. They bunched up. "Take Five." The men dropped to the ground and leaned on their knees or whatever was handy.

They had just started to move again when the jungle erupted with pops and cracks. The dirt jumped up; tree branches snapped and fell. The radio man screamed, grabbed his leg and fell to the ground. Rupert was knocked over when the man next to him turned his half-blown-away face toward him and grabbed his arm. As they fell locked in a strange love embrace, the shells dug into the ground and trees around them. Rupert crawled from underneath him and crawled away. He jumped for a small rise of rocks. As his body touched the ground, he felt himself rising. He was in the air, surrounded by debris, smoke, and the smell of ignited powder. When he hit the ground he was looking at the sky. A small cloud drifted by. He raised up and looked at himself. He could see his left leg torn, the raw red inside exposed and ripped. He was humiliated. The leg wouldn't move. He couldn't have tripped a mine. He was on his way back to the base, to Kansas. It couldn't happen. It was then he heard the deep throaty Ka-Pump to his left. It was a grenade launcher. Then he heard machine gun fire. Just before he passed out, he twisted around and thought he saw an Indian standing at the edge of the clearing alternately firing a grenade launcher and a machine gun.

Kansas and Vietnam. Somehow they didn't seem very different anymore. He climbed down off the windmill and headed for Mel's.

* * *

"Whatever's in that goddamn box has got to be pretty damn important. Why else would he put a lock on it?" JW hooked the phone under his chin and lit his cigar. "Damned important." His cigar glowed red; he thought about the box. Puffed harder and chewed. The more he thought the harder he chewed, and the harder he chewed the closer he got to the glowing end of the cigar. Before he knew it the red touched his lip. "Fuckin' bastard." He spit the butt across the room.

"He's not *that* bad," Lene replied.

"Wasn't talkin' about him. Don't make it any less true, though. Have you tried to open it?"

"Daddy, you know Rupert would kill me if I tried that." She reached into her

hair and retrieved another bobby-pin, bent it and inserted it into the lock. The first two had fallen onto the floor.

"You got a right to know. You're his wife. If he brings it into the house, then it's part yours." JW rubbed his chin. "Bastard box could be full of dynamite far as you know. You could be blown plumb to hell." At the word "dynamite," Lene dropped the third bobby-pin. "Know where he keeps the key?"

"Probably on that chain . . . around his neck?"

"Well, seems to me you're going to have to git it. For your own good."

"But he never takes it off, Daddy."

"He sleeps don't he?"

Lene was confused. Rupert slept. She slept, too. But they didn't do it together. How could she explain being in his room if he happened to wake up.

"Is that shit-head around?"

"He's gone to Mel's."

"Well, then you stay right there. I'll be over pretty quick."

Lene shifted her weight and put one hand on the padlock, and with the other searched for another bobby-pin.

As far as JW was concerned Rupert was a doomed man. Everything was falling into place. He knew how to take care of him. Whatever was in the box was important. JW was no dummy. Even he knew that you don't put a padlock on worthless junk. Rup had to be hiding something. And JW damn well knew it was his responsibility, his fatherly duty, to find out what was in the box. After all, he had Lene's safety to think about.

JW had watched TV talk shows and knew all about drugs in Vietnam. He had also heard that some of them even bought and sold the stuff. And then smuggled millions of dollars worth back into the US. He was sure Rup was one of them. It also explained why Rupert always wore long-sleeved shirts. "Damm box is probably filled with that cocaine stuff they smoke and shoot into themselves," he told Cora. He stomped to the refrigerator for another beer. "And Lene's right smack-damn in the middle."

Cora shook her head in disgust and clicked her tongue. "Shameful," she said, "Just shameful. And to think how much you gave up when you had to back in World War II."

By the time JW got to Europe, the fighting was over, so he established himself as the unofficial inspector of prostitutes. He gave himself totally to his job and before he left he had inspected at least 25 of the busiest whorehouses in Paris in addition to another 35 women who were working freelance. The fact that he had twelve separate cases of gonorrhea was proof of his devotion to his fellow servicemen—and his country. He had saved untold numbers the pain and humiliation of penicillin, blindness, and possible brain damage.

"Well," he said to Cora, "By the time I finish with that shit-head, he'll wish he'd never come back here." JW pushed himself out of his rocking chair and walked to the cabinet. He reached in behind the Betty Crocker silverware and the Duz dishes and pulled out his .45 pistol. He inspected it and then loaded it with all the ceremony of a Methodist communion. "Shit-head's ass is mud now."

* * *

Together JW and Lene tugged and pushed the steel box across the front room floor, out the door, across the porch—then stopped. JW sat down. His face worked at controlling the various shades of red and blue. "I'll kill that shit-head. I'm too old for this kind of crap. Sonofabitch'll pay for this."

"What we gonna do now?"

"Gotta git it out into the yard." JW pushed himself up, grabbed the chest and pulled. Lene got on the opposite side and pushed. The box teetered on the edge of the porch, then toppled onto the ground with a dull thud. JW scratched his head. "Didn't make a noise. Not even a rattle." They heaved and pushed. Then waited. They heaved and pushed some more. The sweat rolled off JW's face; his shirt was drenched. They had moved the box almost two feet. "Good enough." He walked to his pickup and came back with his .45. "This'll, by God, open it. Move back Lene."

Lene moved back.

The first bullet careened off the side of the trunk, hit the ground and dug a hole in the dull red dirt. The impact of the gun—it'd been a while since JW shot a .45—sent his arm straight back. The barrel of the gun smacked him in the head, almost knocking him to the ground. JW wiped the blood from his forehead and pulled back the hammer; this time he braced the gun with both hands and planted his feet firmly on the ground. He closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger. The second bullet slammed into the padlock. The padlock popped up. The bullet bounced off and went through the front room window. "Goddamn worthless gun." He aimed again and pulled the trigger. The padlock swung to the left; the bullet ricocheted off the hard metal and lodged in the windshield of JW's pickup, creating a spiderweb of cracks.

Lene moved farther back.

JW walked around the chest, felt its edges, kicked the padlock and then walked around it once more. He sat down beside it and rested the gun on his knee. "One damn good box," he said. "Rup may be a real shit-head, but he sure got himself one hell of a box." He hit the padlock with the butt of the gun and looked at Lene. "Like your grandpa used to say, 'Even a blind hog can root up somethin' now and then.' " JW studied the box for another five minutes. "Well, Doll-baby, looks like it's up to you. We gotta have the key."

Lene backed up even farther.

"Probably nothin' in it but junk."

"Don't put no three-pound lock on junk. Damn box must be three, maybe four inches thick." He put the .45 back in his pickup. "Let's git the damn thing back inside."

* * *

Rupert looked at the box. The frilly cloth that covered it was a thin attempt to hide the scratches on the sides and the dent in the padlock. A vase and two *Reader's Digests* had been put on top. Rupert looked at the floor and noticed the grooves that zig-zagged across the front room and onto the porch. He walked into the kitchen. "What did you do this afternoon?" he asked and reached into the cabinet for a glass.

"Nothin' much. Took a shower and watched TV." Lene had changed to a pair

of shorts and a halter top. As Rupert poured his iced-tea into his glass, he let his eyes drift down her body. He marvelled at her slim legs, her smooth shoulders and small hands. He stopped when he reached the gold butterfly pendant that she was wearing.

"How are things going on 'The Young and the Restless'?" Lene, he knew, never watched it, perhaps because it was her mother's favorite show, but more likely it was because of her attention span and all the "back and forth" stuff they did.

"Okay. Only I didn't see all of it." She crossed her legs and rubbed the gold butterfly between her fingers. "Want to go somewhere and get something to eat?" She looked up at Rupert with one of her innocent wide-eyed-Daddy's-little-girl looks—the kind that made JW's billfold fall open to the place marked $20.00 bills.

"Sure," Rupert replied, "Why not."

The meal at Mel's was one of his most forgettable. The only thing that made it bearable was Rupert's 20% discount and the beer they drank. The usual crowd had evidently chosen to stay at home. Lene and Rupert and some truck driver in a green T-shirt were the only occupants, besides Mel.

"Did you like what I did to the box you brought in," Lene asked as she shoved her half-empty plate aside.

"You sure made it look different." He looked out the window and took another drink of beer. "You didn't waste any time with it. I'll sure say that."

"Well, I just thought if it was going to be in the front room that it might as well be used for something."

"If you want I could move it upstairs so it'd be out of the way and you wouldn't have to sweep around it."

"It's no trouble. Really." Lene had visions of her and JW dragging the thing down the stairs. A frown bent her mouth down at both edges and then disappeared just as quickly.

"If you're finished, we might as well head for home." Rupert picked up the check and handed it to Mel. "Make sure you remember to deduct the right amount. Next time, make the portions smaller and the bill more. Maybe that way people can tolerate the place better."

Mel laughed and rang up the ticket on the cash register. "Don't see you gittin' no skinnier eatin' the stuff."

"Hell no. Eatin' your cooking is like eatin' live grenades. Only difference is you know when they're goin' to go off."

* * *

By the time Rupert and Lene got home, the sun was still high in the sky and heat still intense. Rupert went into the kitchen and got both of them a beer and then set down in the front room. Lene had turned on the TV and was watching "Dallas" when Rupert sat the beer down next to her. He sat down and put his legs up on the green box.

"You ever gonna open that box?" Lene asked.

"Sometime maybe. Not much in it."

"Why you got that big padlock on it?"

"In Nam you kept everything locked up."

"I really would like to see what's in it."

"When the time's right, it'll be opened." Rupert stood up and moved toward the kitchen. "Right now I'm going to bed. See you in the morning." Once in the bedroom, he turned on the light, took off his clothes, and spread-eagled on the bed. He was almost asleep when the door opened.

Lene stood in the doorway.

She untied her halter top and let it fall. Her breasts, firm and arrogant, looked like two tiny perfect moons.

She moved closer.

She unbuttoned her shorts, pushed them off and stepped out of them.

She stood at the foot of the bed. Then she stood on the bed. She was poised like a virgin about to plunge into the volcano. She closed her eyes and jumped. Rupert moved just in time to keep her knee from destroying everything that made him a man.

"Goddamn, woman, what the hell are you doing? You crazy?"

"Maybe."

She straddled him and lowered herself down on his body. Rupert could see that she had her eyes closed and her teeth clenched. Her lips were drawn tight, her face that of a small child waiting for the belt to strike. He took her by the shoulders and pulled her down gently so that her head was cradled on his shoulder. He ran his fingertips up and down her spine, rubbing the small of her back in slow, cautious circles. Lene remained still and quiet. When she started to move it was like someone firing a diesel engine and then running it wide open. Her whole body bounced and shook. A couple of times she made a noise like a transmission about to explode. But Rupert decided that she was probably just grinding her teeth. Afterwards, Rupert looked at the ceiling and the light that intensified the ugly cracks.

He was aware of the bright light, before he was aware that he was awake. He could hear groans and wondered why he hadn't been Medi-Vaced out. What was taking so long. He looked around. Someone was touching his leg. He pushed himself up and saw the nurse pulling the sheets back to the side of the bed.

"'Bout Goddamn time you woke up. You been lazying around long enough."

Rupert turned his head and looked up. Murphy was leaning against the wall. "I been out long?"

"Long enough to miss out on the orgy they had a couple hours ago."

Rupert was aware enough to know where he was. He also remembered his leg and the pain he felt when they loaded him on the chopper. "Is my leg . . . you know . . . is it?"

"Afraid so. They didn't have much choice."

Rupert moved his hand down his side to his thigh, then stopped. He knew it was gone, but he didn't want to believe it. "Murphy, I want my leg back. I can't go home to Lene this way."

"Tell you what, man, you go back to sleep and get some rest. I'll see what I can do." He pushed away from the wall and walked out the door.

A week later Murphy walked into the hospital with a box wrapped in bright red and green Christmas paper under his arm. He stood by Rupert's bed waiting for the nurse to leave. "Well, man, you wanted your leg back. I got it. Merry

Christmas." He pushed the ribbon off and untaped the end of the box.

"You what?" It took Rupert a moment to understand exactly what Murphy meant.

"Yep. This is it. Don't look quite like it did when it was hooked on, but it didn't turn out bad. Did it the same way I use to do rabbit skins and birds. Legs, rabbits, birds—don't make much difference." He slid it out of the box. "What do you think?"

"Christ. Git that damn thing away from me, you crazy son of a bitch." But Rupert didn't turn away. He looked at it, repulsed and attracted at the same time. "How do you know it's mine?"

"You think I don't know my legs? Shit man, I can recognize a woman by just looking at her ankles. Give me an ankle and a piece of calf and I can tell you how old she is and how many times she got laid since she was sixteen. Give me a glimpse of thigh and I can tell you things she won't even admit to herself."

Rupert laughed. "You're crazy, you know that."

"Not as crazy as anyone who thinks they can walk to Kansas from Vietnam."

"If I'd had a decent map, I'd made it. I be on a sunny Mexican beach by now drinking Scotch and water."

"And I'd be shacking up with Ho Chi Minh's mother-in-law."

"When you goin' back out?"

"I'm not. I bagged my limit. Got enough tails and ears. I'm going back to the States, man. Back to Oklahoma, just as soon as they git my papers processed."

"I guess I'm headed back, too. Doctor told me I'd have to spend some time in a hospital doing therapy and getting fitted with a leg. Also want me to check in with a shrink. But I told him it was a waste of time. No shrink can grow me a new leg. Maybe I'll just show him this one and tell him to make it like it was."

"Tell you what, you get your ass back to the U.S. and get your shit together and I'll be sittin' on the steps when you walk out. We'll make the trip back to the flatlands worth all the crap we put up with over here."

"You just be damn sure to be there. And take care of yourself."

Murphy put his hand on Rupert's shoulder, then picked up the box and put it under his arm. "Take care. I'll see you later." He turned and walked out the door. Rupert could hear him singing as he went down the hall. "Leg bone connected to the knee bone, knee bone connected to the. . . .

But nothing had worked out. The day after Rupert was released from the hospital, Murphy was jailed for knifing an LA bartender who refused to serve him a drink. He thought about his parents and how he lost his leg. It was all as senseless as Lene's lovemaking.

He got up, turned off the light, and quietly walked out into the hot blackness of Kansas at night.

* * *

When Lene awoke the next morning, Rupert was gone. The closet door was open and Rupert's clothes were missing. Wrapped around her hand was the chain he wore around his neck; the key to the chest was still attached. She put her shorts and top on as she stumbled into the front room. The chest was gone. So was her butterfly pendant. She looked out the window. Rupert's pickup was also

gone. "Goddamn you, Rupert." She walked into the kitchen. A glass of orange juice, and a pot of coffee stood on the cabinet next to the refrigerator. A place had been carefully set for her on the table.

She picked up the phone and dialed. "Daddy, Rupert's gone. And so's the box."

"He may be gone but the damn box is settin' over here on the porch. That shit-head's gone boar-crazy."

"Daddy. I got the key."

"You mean. . . ."

"I got the key."

"Well, git over here girl. We'll find out what's in this box that's so damned important that it needs a twelve-pound padlock."

"I'll be there as soon as I get dressed and eat something."

Lene was there in less than ten minutes.

When Lene got to JW's, JW, Cora, and the two mule-faced sons Carl and Mort stood on the porch guarding the green box with grim anticipation. Lene walked over to them and dangled the key in front of JW. "I hope it's worth it, especially after what I had to do for it." JW grabbed for the key, but Lene jerked it back. "I'm gonna' open it."

"An what if it's filled with dynamite?" JW asked.

His words broke through Lene's belligerence; she faltered. Indecision flashed across her face. "My box. My key. I open it or it don't get opened."

"Look here, Lene, he brought it over here. He meant for me to have it."

"Well, he gave me the key."

JW could tell that if he wanted to see the inside of the box, he had no choice. "Okay, but first we get it the hell away from the house." JW looked at his two sons. They evidently remembered the pickup in the front room and the dead Rock Island Reds. They immediately got in front of the box and started pulling as hard as they could. JW and Cora pushed. Lene held the key and watched them slide the box across the sand and the grass. "That's far enough. No sense killing ourselves moving the damn thing."

JW backed up.

Cora, Carl, and Mort backed up even farther.

They waited.

Lene kneeled down. She carefully and slowly inserted the key into the lock. Then she closed one eye and turned the key.

Nothing happened.

Lene removed the padlock gently and then tossed it on the ground, as if it were an empty Coke cup.

She waited.

"Come on, girl, open it," JW yelled. He moved back a little farther.

Lene slowly lifted the lid and peered into the box. For a moment she was silent, then her face bunched up around her mouth. Her eyes narrowed, like she was looking into the sun. She slammed the lid shut. Lene stood up, put her hand over her mouth, and leaned against JW's pickup.

"Good God, girl, what's wrong?" JW yelled.

Lene pointed to the box.

JW walked to the box, waited a moment, then lifted the lid. "Holy shit," he said.

Cora and the two mule-faced sons looked in. "Holy shit," they said.

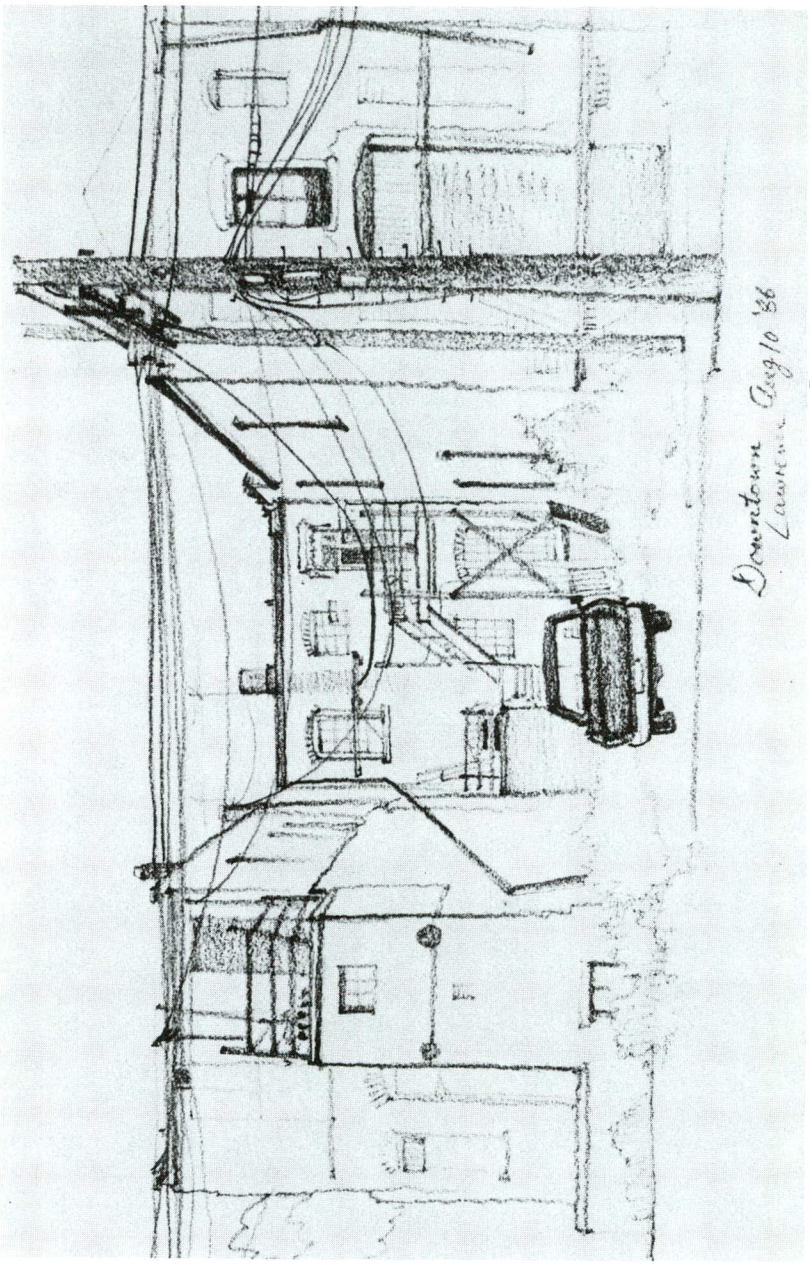
Inside the box was something that looked like a boot, only it wasn't a boot. It was part of a leg, a human leg—knee down. The toes stuck up in the air like frozen tulip bulbs. The rest of the leg had withered to the same black color as the toes. Pinned to the leg were Lene's gold butterfly pendant and a piece of paper. "Holy Shit," they all said.

"Would you look at that?" Carl said.

Cora clicked her tongue, backed up and clicked her tongue again.

JW reached down and quickly plucked the paper and the pendant from the leg. He looked at the piece of paper. Two words were written across it in large red letters—SEMPER FI. He handed them to Lene and continued to stare at the leg. He muttered something about a shit-head being the same as a Rup. "Good thing that shit-head's gone or I'd Semper Fi his ass." He walked around the box. He stopped and looked in to the box again. Then he looked at Cora, then at his two mule-faced sons. He shook his head. He looked at Lene and stuffed a cigar in his mouth. "Well, by God, looks like we got ourselves one hell of a box."

Lene tossed the paper back into the box and shoved the pendant into her pocket. "Ugly thing, ain't it." She took out her brush and ran it through her hair. "I got things to do." Then, she turned and headed for town. She still had a man to find.



Downtown Lawrence (8-10-86)

REVIEWS

A Fish to Feed All Hunger by Sandra Alcosser. Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1986. 63 pages. $10.95, cloth.

The Beds We Lie In: Selected and New Poems by Kathleen Spivack. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1986. 176 pages. $13.50, cloth.

Kathleen Spivack's *The Beds We Lie In* provides a good sample of her poetry from the past twenty years, plus fifteen new poems, grouped in the section "The Moments-of-Past-Happiness Quilt." This section focuses, as much of her poetry does, on the often painful love relationships we bind ourselves to in "the beds we lie in." Sandra Alcosser's *A Fish to Feed All Hunger*, winner of the Associated Writing Programs Award for 1984, finally appeared in 1986 and demonstrates her acute ability to develop a precise sense of place and to write strong narrative poetry.

Spivack's poetry has moved away from the speaker as observer of the world in early poems such as "A Child's Visit to the Biology Lab" and "The Snapping Turtle," where the speaker watches the snapper feed in an aquarium, tossing it "gobbets of girls. / In the fishfood fall the shapes / of shaved women, twisted, imploring." In later poems the speaker becomes a more active participant and at times becomes the woman as victim. One of her best poems about painful love relationships is "The Peregrine," which describes a love affair through the imagery of falconry: "Desperate now, / I am breaking myself against glass, / . . . you enter the airless room softly, cover / my eyes with a glove of black leather, hood / the fierce questions, and bandage my mind."

The final section of Spivack's book develops an extended comparison between patchwork quilting and the memories of various stages in a relationship. Though this comparison seems forced in "Rocking-The-Baby," it works very well in many of the poems, particularly in "The Moments-of-Past-Happiness Quilt" and in "The Quilt of Stay and Go," in which "The pattern is made up of / torn scraps and rags; how / he held you once gently, / . . . The baby's nappy / towel, your mother's / shroud, one corner, / a lock of hair."

What is so striking about Alcosser's work is her ability to provide a specific sense of place in dramatic narrative poetry, with the observant eye of a naturalist. The first section of *A Fish to Feed All Hunger* is mostly set in Montana, where Alcosser lived for some time, and the poems are filled with startling images of that wilderness. In "Fox Fire," the speaker comes to realize that "All I will ever know is right here / in the wash and till of my own ten acres. / . . . There will never be more than twilight, a valley, / receding to glass. In this tiny paradise / of common flowers, the waist-high marigolds / blaze up like golden dowagers."

Her most dramatic narrative, "The Journey," about a couple suffering "cabin fever" in an Alaskan winter and attempting the dangerous river trip to town, demonstrates the potential she has to switch to novel-writing if she so desires. Their canoe soon lost to the river, and the wife seriously injured in trying to hike

out, the couple is forced to build an ice cave and, in desperation, eat their own dog. When her husband has left in search of help, the wife finally crawls out of the cave to find "everywhere my husband's confused tracks, / his fragmented crosses. / Staring into the blank sun, I am content / to lie alone, to call back days so precise / they are like the red patches of a kestrel / in dark flight."

In describing male/female relationships, Alcosser's "The Trap," from the last section of her book, is similar to Spivack's "The Peregrine," but in "The Trap" the victim, the wife's formerly estranged husband, sleeps calmly with his back to his wife as she admits to us,

> All night I wanted to turn, open
> my arms, but I remembered last summer,
> alone in the new place, how I watched
> a mouse lick soft brie from a trap
> I'd set. The spring was rusty. It took
> a long time to snap.

Images such as the mouse licking brie from a trap and "the red patches of a kestrel / in dark flight" have drawn me back to Alcosser's poetry again and again and lead me to highly recommend reading her work, as well as that of Kathleen Spivack.

Philip Wedge

Cats in the House by Philip Miller. Topeka, KS: Woodley Memorial Press (Washburn University), 1987. 56 pages. $5.00, paper.

As the title poem "Cats in the House" suggests, the poetic world of Philip Miller's first poetry collection draws upon the domestic. The poems take us, carefully, from room to room, from porch to yard, as we discover old hats in attics, photographs in trunks, houseplants, and the always present, ever watchful, housecat. Poem titles ("Snapshot with Grandmother," "Christmas Children," "Neighbors") indicate that we will meet no one new—just the people next door, the children, our spouse, our families (living and deceased), and, to no surprise in such small spaces, ourselves.

But if Miller's poetic world is domestic, it is by no means domesticated. It often surprises in the ways in which it is constantly, and sometimes demandingly, "alive":

> The house is alive with the pattering
> and scampering of small bodies and claws:
> in the daylight, they cling to us, purring
> and lapping until we groom and nourish them.
> ("Cats In the House")

Behind or beneath the everyday objects we happen on to, always poised like the cat to pounce, are the hesitations brought on by stalled relationships, the uncomfortable burdens of our familial past or present, or the simple yet uneasy realizations of exactly who we are and how we got here. Miller is most successful in presenting to us the extent to which our small, immediate world can determine the real depths of our lives, and one of the strengths of this volume is the number of themes Miller is able to pull out of such a little space.

One such theme is that of bonding, or more specifically, the odd ways in which we bond ourselves or become bonded to our world. In "Cellar Dancing," two playful brothers engage in a made-up game of "Here's to Your Old Man":

> My brother grabbed some old work boots,
> tramped around the furnace belly.
> I followed at his heels, dancing.
> We shook hands, grinning like giant killers,
> slapped each other on the back
> like long, lost friends.

This process is not always so playful. In "The Potion," a dream of "roaring drunk" father pushes the speaker awake and down the hall to his father's old room, where he finds

> hidden inside his old armoire,
> a half-empty pint of gin
> which I couldn't help but try—
> just as he had done
> every night about that time—
> curious to taste a potion
> that went down like seasoned blood
> and find out what it took
> just to get some simple sleep.

Other poems offer the subtle difference between what is "familiar" and what is simply "close." "Strange Kisses" explores the unforgettable feeling "When you pick up something strange:/ a piece of luggage from the airport carousel."

"Neighbors" presents, season by season, our relationship with those who live just next door. In winter, they are "as shadows / behind drawn window curtains," but by summer, we all become "good neighbors trying / to keep cool, winking at each other for nothing. . . . " By autumn, we find ourselves "searching for each other through the haze" of burning leaves. In "Winter Starlings," crumbs are tossed out because "we want to see some feathers against the snow." Miller gives us not a poetry of revelation, but of quiet realization, subtle awareness, or simple acceptance.

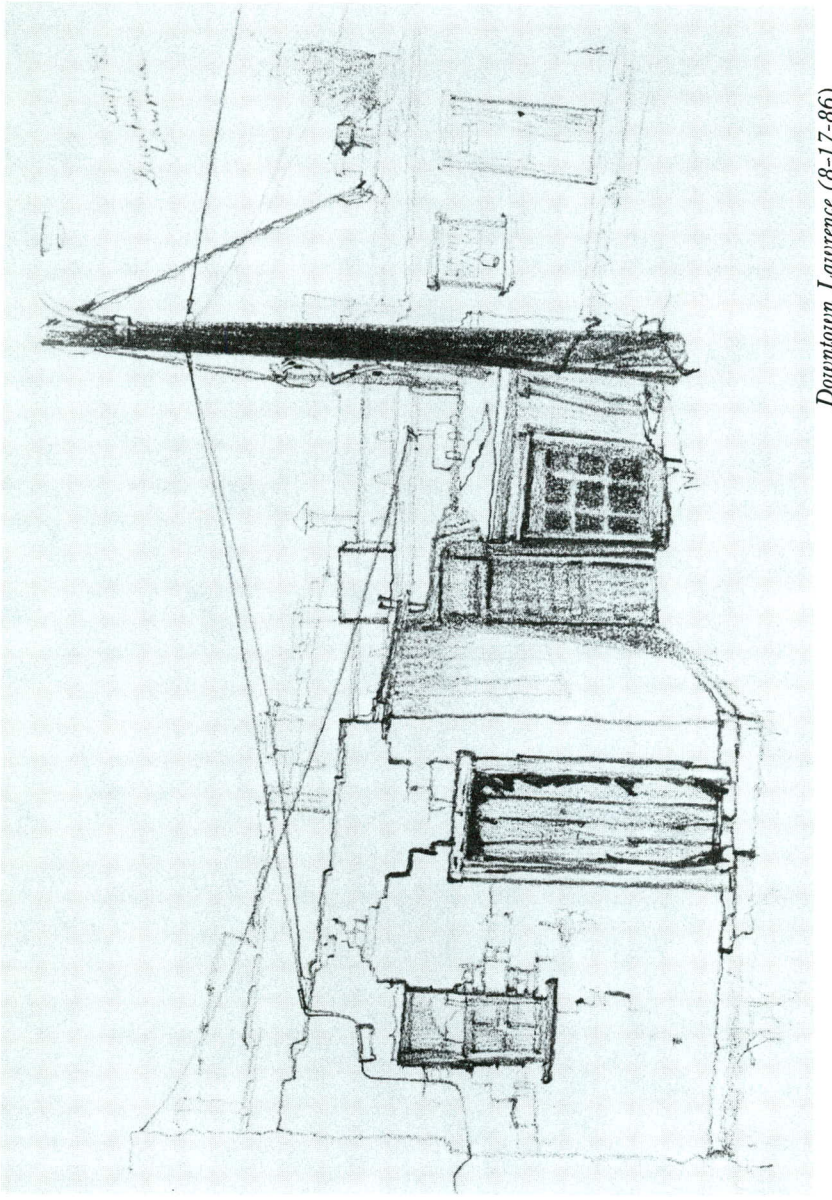
The housecat is one of Miller's favorite subjects; several "cat poems" open and close the volume. These domesticated beasts seem to share with the poet the role of ever-present observer, the smug eye that helps us to define just what it is that we are aware we lack. Both share the uneasy task of "keeping eyes ajar: / the gods of home and hearth can never be trusted" ("Our Old Cat"). "Blood

Brothers'' perhaps best presents this uneasy alliance, prompting George Emery in his introduction to the *1984 Anthology of Magazine Verse* to cite it as ''no doubt one of the best cat poems since Eliot. . . . '':

> I am slicing raw meat, pink rounds
> of fragrant, fresh veal. It brings
> the cat to the kitchen, his claws
> scratching the air, his groans,
> deep, his mews, shrill, clean to
> the bone, as he circles the table,
> leaping, before I can blink, then
> seizing a fat slice to chew up in
> a corner with firm, careful bites
> growling with pleasure, giving me
> the bad eye as he swallows it down,
> the cold stare, not of victor,
> but of one blood brother to another.

Each poem in the volume, in one form or another, gives us this brief ''cold stare'' at things so close, and in so doing, Miller gives us a sharper sense of that which makes up our blood.

Mahlon Coop



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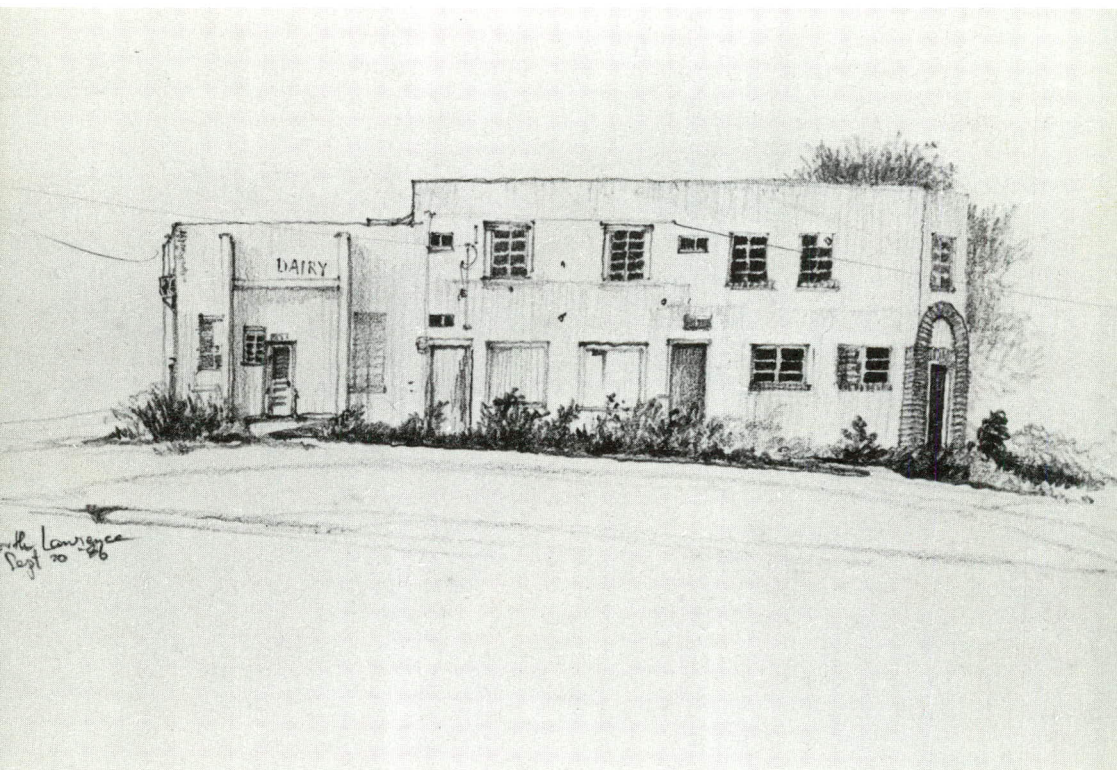
Also in this issue, *Cottonwood* announces the winners of the first Alice Carter Awards: Kathleen Spivack (poetry), and Andrew Brown and Russell Binkey (fiction).



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