COTTONWOOD 43

WILLIAM KLOEFKORN

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William Kloefkorn Issue

Cottonwood Magazine & Press
Lawrence, KS

Cottonwood 43

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

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Contents

Poetry

William Kloefkorn

Fiction

Reviews

EDITOR'S NOTE

The first issue of *Cottonwood* appeared in April, 1965, so that with the new year, we will be celebrating a twenty-fifth anniversary. No special events have been planned, since we did a special retrospective to celebrate our twentieth. But there are plenty of signs of vitality.

Consider that in this issue we present an interview with William Kloefkorn and three of his fine poems. He is an old friend to *Cottonwood*, and I feel privileged, like the editors before me, to be welcomed into his companionable world. One of the poems in this issue I have heard read in my classroom, at a public reading on campus and at the KWA meeting in Kansas City. "Undressing by Lamplight," even two years later, seems to me as fresh and wonderful as it did in my classroom. Everywhere in it, in the other poems here, in the interview, I hear his strong, happy voice and am glad that he is a friend to our publication and to us.

Other old friends are tremendously productive. Michael Johnson and Robert Day have helped us put our press back in business, joining Denise Low among authors whose books we have published in 1988-89. Low's, collection of poems, *Starwater*, appeared in April '88; Johnson's translations of Spanish poetry, *The Birds from I Know Where*, in June of '89; and Day's collection of short stories, *Speaking French in Kansas*, in November. One more book, a collection of poems by Edgar Wolfe, will appear in December as a joint publication by Woodley Press of Topeka and Cottonwood, under the aegis of still another longtime friend of our press, Thomas Fox Averill. Tom's own collection of stories, *Seeing Mona Naked*, was issued this year by Watermark Press of Wichita. The title story of this collection, of course, appeared in *Cottonwood* 42. Johnson has also a new collection of poems, *Ecphrases*, published by Woodley in November. We would like to hear from the rest of you who are publishing volumes at presses farther from home base.

Issue 44 will announce the winners of Carter awards for issues 40-42.

George F. Wedge

Poetry

Jared Carter

Ceremony

Finally a time would come somewhere out
in the parking-lot while the fathers
and uncles were bringing out the coffin —
in later years I would learn what this
maneuver involved, how the object is not
to avoid dropping it (since it really
doesn't weigh very much) but rather
to keep from antagonizing some bonehead
of an uncle who's criminally hung over
from all the booze consumed during
the last three days and who's actually
hanging on to the damn thing rather
than carrying his share of the load —
long before that, as I was saying, when
I still wore short pants and a cloth cap
like a cub scout, and while the grown-ups
were milling about on the sidewalk
waiting for the hearse doors to close
so the procession could get underway —
my brother and assorted male cousins
would gather somewhere out of sight
for the only ritual which really
mattered to them, one repeated each
time the family came together for such
occasions:
the moment when cousin Stella
who still lived at home and had no
real father and was not of sound mind
but who was hands down the best athlete
any of them had ever seen and who could
hit a fast curve-ball or skate flawless
figure eights — when she would come over
slim as a knife in her blue suit and three-
inch high heels and without saying a word
simply fold over at the waist (not bending
her knees) and lace her fingers underneath
those heels —
no one ever spoke but even
before I had started to school I could grasp

that I was seeing something more important
than all that talk back there in the church —
and in the next instant she would be standing
upright, smiling at us, the secret still
intact, and we could hear the grown-ups
calling from the cars, some of them even
honking their horns, all of them anxious
to get to the cemetery and angry because
we were holding them up — saying Come on,
damn it, it's time to go now, where have
you been, can't you show a little respect?

Diann Blakely Shoaf

Home

"The soul has to stay where it is"

—John Ashbery

I am no fan of bodies,
always glutted or hungry, I myself would feed only
on air. It has long had more uses
than breathing.

And their eyes can see nothing,
just houses and trees,
on the clearest nights, maybe one star.
The glasses at forty help little.

Their mouths can form words, yes,
but no one is listening, the oceans roar,
making no sound.
Yet I too have scrawled on bright postcards.

What will I miss most?
not the pink smiles of babies, not the touch of my hand
on loved flesh. I'll regret only wind,
its long sighs and rages, I'll at last be transparent, won't care.

James Langlas

Mr. Gildner

One of the last proper men, he
believed baseball was a game
of manners. And one watched it
the right way.

Surrounded by beer cups and
empty curses, signs of decadence,
he and Grandpa would sit and talk
about the daily paper.

One hand on the iron rail, the other
holding his hat in his lap
like a cake, he lived in a world
of silk and cigars—

His wife at home in a dress, steaming
the white into his shirts, pressing
style into his collars, arranging
his shoes.

Before the 7th inning he would rise
and go home to her, moving down
the concrete runway as though
he walked on marbles—

His hands gone soft, motioning
the white cigar smoke
over the outfield wall
out into the night.

Berwyn Moore

From a Fourth Floor Window

A man and woman
huddle in shadow

beneath the sill of a window.
He holds her from behind,

rests his chin in the space
between her cheek and shoulder.

She grips with two hands his arm
held tight against her waist.

They are not old:
their faces, colorworn as the sill

long stipped of paint, shine with heat.
Their eyes search

past the tiny room,
the shadow, the hazy light

hovering around their still lips.
Neither are they young.

They cannot see
the black and white figures

moving without shadow
on the street two storeys down,

nor the two grey mattresses
flung on the curb days ago,

stuffings pulled out
in pieces by the wind

and collecting in feathery piles
in doorways and alley corners,

nor the tailless cat sleeping
in the window of the diner

three doors down.
Nor do they see me as I watch

from a high closed window,
hands pressed white against the glass,

wishing for this picture
to blur.

Veronica Patterson

Never at the Cafe Francais

for my mother, Margaret M. Shantz
December 1921-April 1974

At the cafe
I wait for a friend. Glass cases
hold bread, rolls, napoleons.
Inside the front window
an older and a younger woman
lean toward each other
against the light. Then I too
lean forward, daughter bones
secretly waiting for you.
But never comes, and then May.

What did we do so wrong
we couldn't have this?

We could float on the polished table,
raft of menu, steer
with the words for ordering
the vichyssoise you loved.
We could eavesdrop and make up
an ordinary conversation.
I could tell you
of your granddaughers:
how one sister took the other on her birthday
to a restaurant like a castle and
as they climbed the steps,
wind lifted their hair into light
at exactly the same angle.

Nothing would change
your careening disappointment,
the deliberate slide into dark
and its undertow. I am not a better swimmer
but less afraid of drowning: your path
just one of my choices.

Robert M. Chute

The Crotched Tree

The doubled oak divides
the logger's dream, forking
too near the ground, makes the figure
of a muscular, diving man.
Great logs of legs thrust up
a thousand branching toes. Arms,
shoulders, head, hair of roots
buried below three feet
of February snow. All around
the sun struck bole, insects,
spring tails, are pepper on the snow.
Two squirrels run a double
helix race up and down
the leafless tree. I put my ear
against the bark to see if I
can hear sap-blood begin to flow.

D. Nurkse

Black River

The canoe picks up speed
and forges north with the weight
of our bodies and the thwarts
and the folded tent
and the ash paddles, the prow
cuts its notch in horizon,
and my daughter points to the riverbank
and says: "house," "tree," "bird,"
though she never used the words before
she pronounces them calmly
as if they were always there,
on shore: here in the Black River
the stars bend with the jay stroke,
the dipper becomes a funnel, the plough
a jackknife, and when the moon rises
in a new part of the forest
abolishing all degrees of shadow
the child says "night."

Matthew Anderson

memento

i

the old man
who lived here
nearly eighty years
escaped from the home
and pulled up in a taxi

so feeble
he couldn't open
the front door

his cataract blurred eyes
made out the shape
of a clock
that used to be his mother's

and he asked
almost sheepishly
if he could take it

i i

he didn't seem to mind
that i'd thrown out
his anacin bottles
neatly stacked
in the bathroom cabinet

he said he just wanted
one last look
before i hauled his junk away

he tottered
back to the taxi
and i watched
until black and yellow checks
faded into traffic

inside i found
his one memento
mother's clock
forgotten by the door

Barbara Horton

Trout

he is still, quiet, passive
underneath the water he is
deep
underneath the water
that is still, that barely
breathes
containing him he is
deep, quiet and
unseen
he can be
felt, sensed if you
look where he is
still where he is
barely moving in the
hush beneath the water
he is there because you
hear
or do not hear
the place
beneath the water where
he is

Michael Swofford

Winter Morning
(Western Kansas/'86)

a pickup bed
filled with
corpses
of coyotes.

shot & poisoned.

all bloody
mouth & haunch,
hair still
flinching
in the too-bright wind.

stiffly heaped
together
& frozen solid
in the night's drive.

legs stick angled-up,
like thin, tossed
fence stakes or
chinese pick-up sticks.

hunters finish
their morning coffee,
laughter, lies

and pull-on winter
coats, billed & logoed
caps, gloves

the scuff across
the graveled parking lot,
glancing bright-eyed
at the stilled
coyote dancers

and drive them
quickly
towards Missouri
for the
bounty.

Dean Stover

Rites of Passage

My father pounded the bed
one night waking mother
with the one good arm
left from a stroke scrambling
his brain and body, then weeks later
my mother's short breath and chest pains
signaled cancer and all the teasing
about who would die first
and where they'd be buried
ended, except they still couldn't agree
as my mother talked to my father
who couldn't talk
about the site of their burials,
near his family or hers, so their oldest
helped them compromise
on the cemetery near the church
where they married. For three months
my father, helplessly silent, watched
his wife slip away, her days filled
with lying down and saying a few
morphined words until she wobbled
into the hospital for her life's last ten days.

Everyday I appeared at lunch when she ate
two bites of jello, took a few sips of water,
as I read from Psalms: Even before a word
is on my tongue thou knowest it all.
For thou didst knit me
in my mother's womb.

I listen to the God coming out of the minister's mouth
at my mother's funeral—she has reached
a beautiful sunset and we
are the rays of her life—
and feel the cliches of death
distancing me from the true ceremony
of my mother's weak and flabby arms
reaching out above her while mumbling
Take me, Take me, and briefly opening

her eyes, clouded with a distant stare
of an animal deep inside us
looking across a landscape it must cross,
before falling back to the cold air of space
surrounding her bed, her body silent
for nine/ten seconds
then gasping for breath,
her spirit
already warm inside us
when we look at her casket
and our family name in granite,
the fields around us planted, yet bare.

Jim Bell

Snow Down

It fell like flakes of pure
logic overnight; it made the world
at once more clear
and difficult. The scrambled eggs
are gritty with pepper; the paper says
they found a lost car in the woods.

The paper says it three more times
before story's end. Outside,
a cardinal lands sharply, hops
and flaws the fine white lawn.
On newsprint, grains of salt
rain down, letter by letter nibble
chips from what was learned.
None of the neighbors' cars can move.

Judith Roitman

May Lieberman

I dreamed my mother was still alive
unaccountably in the crazy house
where we thought she died forty years ago.

"Who's buried in her grave?" I asked
and they said "We don't know
but you can take your mother home now."

Her hair had gone pure white
and she smiled all the time,
nodding her head. In the evening
she played gin rummy with my other mother
who'd had a stroke but still played a mean game.

My father could not believe his good fortune.

Philip Miller

For the Moment

We must have bits of bric-a-brac
sitting everywhere the eye might
find an empty space—jade buddhas,
soapstone cats, a ruby-eyed
bird of cloissone perched
on the claw foot coffee table;
these things to look at only,
the black and yellow Aztec masks
someone brought back from Acapulco,
that catch the eye and stare back:
here in the parlor with its
quartet of wicker chairs
and the oblong davenport,
with its busy symmetry: an oval
Karastan, its tawny grapes and
jungle green ivy richly entwined,
and at the parlor's heart, or at its
eye, the inlaid fruitwood table with
toad-splayed feet, a rarity, God
knows; yet each knickknack, every stick
of furniture can bring back some
half-forgotten place or time
we want to keep track of, hold on to,
recollect, and here we sit on our
Edwardian love seat, afternoon sun
bending a green light caught between
two April thunderstorms:
your eyelids gilded greengold
as you close your eyes to laugh
or yawn or kiss before you look
away, or turn back, having taken in
some glittering item in this museum
we've gunched and cluttered up
to summon like magic a remembrance
of things as they may have been,
the two of us posed, yet poised,
our eyes meeting in exact embrace,
and for a frozen moment we become
one with our own furnishings,
two more lovely artifacts.

William Kloefkorn

William Kloefkorn

Undressing by Lamplight

It's the uneven wick that does it,
a flickering that motions the body

already in motion—that,
and the slight sensation of kerosene

sending me to that spot behind the ear
I cannot easily come away from.

Look, monkeynuts, this is the tailend
of the twentieth century, you say,

megawatts enough to outdo the sun,
and I say Hush, I say

This was my grandparents' lamp,
how at the stroke of nightfall

grandfather took the fresh-toweled globe
from the hand of grandmother

to fit it then to the lampbase,
how in lamplight the kitchen

mellowed, flickered and jumped,
this lamp is holy, I say, I say

Help me work the combination
on this infernal bra,

and we are undressing by lamplight,
undressing each other by lamplight,

and she is quiet now,
her eyes in the mirror

when she looks at me
like the eyes you sometimes come across

in the album you seldom open,
large and sepia and

dark with the lovely pain
of human understanding.

William Kloefkorn

After Breakfast with my Wife
at the Hy-Vee Diner

Softly on spring snow
I walk the twelve blocks
back to home,
an early-morning sun

about to burn its way
through a grey overhanging
of clouds. Where is the wind?
Where are the friends

who coughed their last
sweet bitter days
into a cauldron
sufficient beforehand to the brim?

Heavy with flakes
hang the limbs
of cedar and pine and linden,
cardinal on a green white bough.

This is the postcard
I would send. My wife
drove off to work,
where probably just now

she is speaking to youngsters
of their options,
preserving the baby
high among them. Meanwhile,

softly on spring snow
I walk the twelve blocks
back to home,
already on the lilacs

buds not far from bursting.
This is the postcard
I would send. Flake and cedar
and pine and linden,

cardinal on a green white bough.

William Kloefkorn Interview

[George Wedge interviewed William Kloefkorn at Nebraska Wesleyan University, Lincoln, Nebraska, in March, 1989. Wedge's poem "Heroic Versus," to which Kloefkorn alludes at the start of the interview, appeared in the Spring 1989 *Cincinnati Poetry Review.* The Lawrence *Observer* appeared only from March to September of 1989.]

WK: One thing I like about [your poem] is it has something to say and it says it quietly. I think that I have a kind of inveterate affection for understatement in writing. I just am convinced that it makes a point sometimes that overstatement doesn't. Don't you think so? When a writer gets up on a soapbox, I don't know, I think he stops being a writer to a certain degree.

GW: I think that was what worried me. When I make any kind of statement I consider political, I fear I may get on my own soapbox—even if it's no bigger than the box that contains one bar of soap.

WK: Yeah. But even that can be a soapbox too high to be comfortable on.

GW: What was the poem that you were working on when I came in?

WK: I was working on a poem called "Turtle Rock."

And it's a poem that...Well, actually, most of the poems I write come about in very strange ways. Or maybe they aren't strange ways—surprising ways; they surprise me.

My grandfather's farm down in southeastern Kansas near Cedarvale is a very rocky quarter section and very hilly. When it rained the soil became gumbo—the kind that sticks to your shoes and makes you taller whether you want to be taller or not. And the rocks—you probably know that country down there—Arkansas City, Winfield—well, the rocks, some of them take on the nature of boulders. Anyway, out in front of his house, which is on the slope of a hill, they had a lot of rocks, of course, but one of them was shaped like a turtle. Amazingly like a turtle. My little brother and I used to take great delight in riding that turtle, or pretending that we were riding that turtle.

Well, that farm was dilapidated; my daddy sold it—it wasn't worth much—several years ago. And my wife and I were going from my hometown in south-central Kansas to Hannibal, Missouri, last summer and we stopped by it. I said, "I'll betcha I can find my granddad's farm." My wife had heard me talk about it a lot. So sure enough, by golly, I found it. It's about seven miles southwest of Cedarvale. And I found it the first time out.

Well, the house had burned down—it wasn't much of a house. The henhouse had burned down. The granary was standing, the old leanto that served as a kind of a ponybarn was still standing, and I ran across that rock. And sure enough, it by God looks like a turtle. She had heard me talk about that too. It's a heavy rock; it's a huge rock. Well, for some reason yesterday, a couple of days ago, I was thinking about that and I decided to go ahead and write about it, or try to write about it.

But what came into the poem as I was working on it was not what my wife and I actually did as we wandered around that farm. I took a crowbar and tried to pry that rock loose, and I got it to move, so it's small enough to be moved by one person. I don't mean picked up and moved, I mean pissanted, by one person. So, when I started on the poem, I thought at the outset that I'd write something about what had already happened. And what I discovered was that I'm not really interested in that. What I'm interested in is what's gonna happen. And what's gonna happen is that my brother and I, next summer, we're going to go out there and we're either gonna buy that rock from the current owner if we can find him—there's a scenario, George. [GW: Yeah!] You know, we find this guy, we introduce ourselves and then at some point in the conversation we offer him some money...for a rock. Now, he's gonna look at us really funny. And I just hope he says, "OK." Otherwise, if we can't find him, we're just gonna flat have to steal it. And I can see us—there's no way to get a vehicle up there, so we're gonna have to take a sled or some little wagon or something, maybe a...I don't know what...and get her up there and get that rock in there and I'm gonna bring it home.

GW: Well, if you steal it, we better suppress this interview. [WK: Oh. That's right.] I mean people have heard of pet rocks. But...

WK: But this is ridiculous. This sucker is probably gonna weigh three, four hundred pounds I know. And I'm gonna bring it home and I'm gonna put it out by the house at sixty-third and Huntington. I suppose I'll feel like Emerson felt when he did that, you know, brought in some rocks from the seashore and he got 'em in and he discovered that they didn't look the same away from their natural habitat. But I suspect that that rock's natural habitat is right where it is right now. And shouldn't be moved.

GW: It probably got carried there at one time or another by something. [WK: By somebody. Unless it's a turtle and just sort of made its way there and then somehow fossilized. But, anyway, that's what...] Well, didn't the glacier go down that far? [WK: I don't think so.] It came down pretty far. [WK: I think it came down as far as Oscar Kimball's farm, just east of there, stopped just short of my granddaddy's. 'Cause any glacier that had gone over that farm would have helped it. Let me read this.] Yes, do.

WK: It's on my mind. And I call it, of course, "Turtle Rock":

TURTLE ROCK

It's the rock I rode
on my grandfather's farm,
rock among rocks, shaped like the turtle
that in my favorite illustrated story
challenged the cocky Br'er Rabbit and
by way of slow motion ingenuity
won.

We bury grandfather in a rocky plot
due west of town.
The minister, obese with an oilslick of hair,
quotes more than I believe he understands.
The rigging that lowers grandfather
whines higher than the south wind. For luck
I toss a fistful of gumbo onto the coffin
where something more than ashes
to ashes, dust to dust
had been.

With my brother I pry the rock
loose from the fingers
of a tenacious sod. We are
trespassing, Lord forgive us, the land
long since sold to a name
neither of us can remember. Inch by inch
the rock gives way, emerging,
until into a wagon we hoist it
to take it downhill to the pickup
to deliver it home.

Now the rock sits immobile
in a bed of hotline salvia
between the east porch and the north edge
of a bunch of grass lawn. On my lap my grandson,
tired of his favorite story,
relaxes into the slow
dead weight of sleep, gravity
doing its unremitting best
to tuck us in.

WK: Well, things kept creeping into it, into the poem. The turtle did remind me of an illustrated story of Joel Chandler Harris's with Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox and so forth, the most wonderfully colorful illustrations that go with the version that I remember. Well, that association crept in.

And then when I got through with that third stanza, "To take it down to the pickup to deliver it home," I thought that the poem has to have something in it more than myself and my brother. It has to have another generation at least, so as it turns out it's two generations; "my grandson tired of his favorite story" becomes dead weight in my lap. It just seems to me that the whole thrust of my memory of that rock has to do with gravity taking us in, to the earth, burying us eventually. Though I don't mean that to sound glum.

GW: No. It doesn't sound glum; it sounds matter of fact.

WK: It happens, settling. Just you settle in, tucked in. [GW: All of us do.] We do! Some of us faster than others. [GW: Well, I don't think people our age can claim that any more. We're the some of us that are slower.] Yeah. That's one of the nice things about being our age, isn't it. You know. I can stop worrying about living to be fifty. [GW: That's true.] That's out of my hands now. I've done it. And it was kinda fun. [GW: Mm-hmm. But now you've got another fifty to work on.] That second one's a little tetchy some of the time. But I do what your good basketball coaches say they do. I take it one game at a time. I don't think we have any choice anyway. Do you?

GW: I was very interested in "inch by inch the rock gives way emerging until into a wagon we hoist it." You're not talking about something that has already happened; you're talking about what you know the process will be like, because you tried it with the crowbar and you know one person can do it. [WK: Yeah] The patience. A lot of what's in the poem speaks to the patience. [WK: Yeah.] The rock is there; the rock...

WK: has been there for a long time.

GW: has been there for a long time. It waits, and for you there's something generational about that rock. It waits.

WK: That's right. And all sort of in due time, I guess.

GW: Yeah, and if you and your brother don't go there and get the rock now, the poem tells your grandson that he can go there.

WK: Absolutely. And I've gone there to get it in a way that's very important to me, that is, on the page. Though I would still...I'm going to see my brother over spring break, and I'm going to propose to him that we go get that sucker. And John will go along with it. But if he didn't and things didn't work out, I'd settle for the experience on the page. Yeh.

GW: Those feelings, I think a lot of us share in one way or another.

As I mentioned to your colleague, I'm from upstate New York, and the family had a farm there, were farmers. My grandfather lost the farm and had to move into town. But the family remembers the cemetery at Church Hollow, which was a small family cemetery for Wedges and Stevens. My uncle took me there. My immediate ancestors are not there—it's my great grandfather and his collateral relatives who are there. But my uncle took me there sometime before he died and we saw that it was kind of run down.

So I began, in my own mind, thinking that I have to go back there and find some way to get that cleaned up or taken care of or whatever. Well, a few years ago Margaret and I and my son and daughter-in-law were coming back from a reunion with her family—I don't have any family to reunion with—and came through Nineveh, N.Y., where this graveyard is. Somebody else had done it—I would assume one of the Stevens family because there's now a marker that says "Stevens Cemetery." They've gone through and straightened everything up; the stones are in their proper places and so on. Of course, now I'm thinking I need to find out who did that and talk with them because there's a piece of my responsibility of some sort there, for things so far back in time that I never knew anyone connected with that particular plot—except my uncle—who grew up on the farm somewhere nearby.

I'd like to find the farm because I tried once to write a poem—it was a terrible poem—about the well there. The house was so built that it surrounded a well that had very cold water. And my grandmother used to store things she baked by the well to keep them cool. [WK: Right] And I can remember when I was a kid loving my grandmother's cakes—by then she kept them on the cellar stairs to cool—and, oh, they were heavy. I mean, they were ninety-five percent water. Wonderful moist, moist cakes that you ate and they just sat there inside you somewhere. [WK: For long periods of time.] And I suppose that's the kind of thing you associate with your rock. [WK: Mm-hmm] It isn't just the rock, and it isn't just the house that wasn't much of a house and isn't there any more. Or the hen house or any of the other things that you were talking about. It's that the rock represents everything that made that place a place.

WK: Right. That's right. And for me it has a lot of associations that encapsulate both the good and the bad of that place.

It's a wonderfully—is "beautiful" too strong a word?—beautiful area to drive through. It really is. The hills, and the rocks. But to buy a quarter section and try to farm, that was just murder. Either the slope was too great or the rocks were too many. So on the one hand you have the rock that's getting in the way, but on the other hand there's a certain stability left by those rocks—and he had rock fences. So those rocks are two edged swords, and they carry all kinds of connotations for me. Well, a rock always has, from my youth upward probably, Biblical connotations—I grew up with a lot of that, with the notion of religion as being a rock, or God as rock against whom you can cry your pains because it's solid, unchanging, dependable, strong. Oh, hell, God is almost strong enough to be an insurance company. You know, a piece of the rock. You didn't have a piece of the rock, but you could always lean against it. And, I don't know, there are a number of connotations that word has for me, both good and bad.

GW: Of course, I don't think it's too much to call any part of Kansas beautiful.

WK: I don't either, as a matter of fact.

GW: I wasn't born there, but I've come to prefer it to where I was born.

WK: The first trip I made to the West Coast, I was, of course, anxious to photograph everything, and did, and came back and showed these one thousand photographs to people who couldn't escape me. They were slides. I can remember so well showing these slides to my wife's father, a little gathering there: Eloise and her father and her mother and me and maybe two or three other people, making an evening of this presentation. And my wife's father had grown up in that area, lived all his life in that area. And I can remember flashing this one slide on the screen and her father jumping up and exclaiming, "My God, it's gorgeous! What part of California is that?" And I said, "That's not California. That's the area twenty-two miles due west of where we're sitting, over by Medicine Lodge." Those buttes out there west of Medicine Lodge. When you drive through those you just think painted ponies. It's just gorgeous.

GW: How long have you been here at Nebraska Wesleyan?

WK: Since the fall of '62. I came here from Wichita State—well, it was Wichita University then, a municipal university. I was there from '58 to '62, and came here. I came here to work on a Ph.D. at the University of Nebraska, thinking that I probably wouldn't remain in Lincoln more than maybe two years, two or three years. And I didn't know much about this college. But things went well and I grew to like the town a lot. I still do. My

first child started first grade here, so there's that kind of—I have four children, two boys and two girls. And I sort of expected that I'd get fired here, because Wesleyan's a Methodist-related school and I have a real deep and abiding doubt about church-related institutions. So I figured, well, since it's Methodist-related, it'll take them a year to find me out, because Methodists couldn't find anything out in under a year. Then it will take them at least a year to decide what to do with me, because Methodists can't decide what to do with anything in under a year. So that's two years absolute minimum, and I probably could hang on for another couple, if I showed any indication to repent. Not that I would do that, but it would be a possibility. Well, I was wrong. I was just dead wrong about the school. I like it a lot. I was the one with the narrow mind, the school wasn't as it turned out. That doesn't mean that I would let all church-related colleges off the hook. [GW: Of course not.] But I prejudged the place, and very happily I was wrong. It's been a good place to write and to teach.

GW: It would certainly seem that way from the amount that you write.

WK: Well part of that is due to the school, it really is. I have small enough classes. I have considerable freedom. I can stay here in my office and write, I can go to the library, I can go home. I can give readings whenever I want to without any red tape involved. All I have to do is tell the departmental secretary where I'm going to be. I tell my classes where I'm going to be. I let them in on where I'm going and who's going to be there. My students last year, when I was down at your school, saw, most of them for the first time, your magazine. I introduced them to it before I left, read them some poems from it, told them some things I did while I was down there, read some more poems. And, maybe I'm just trying to use that as an excuse for my being gone from time to time, but they're interested in that when they have the chance. They don't know much about contemporary poets and poetry. In my experience, entering college students just don't know much about it. Now that's not to their discredit. They're busy, you know. They've got hormones, for Christ's sake, at that age. And they nab you, hormones. It's incredible. [GW: Not if you have a memory, it's not.] Is that hormones or memorex?

But, you know, it's interesting. Like I take *Cottonwood* into class and read them a few things; they're amazed, some of them to hear what's being written. And why not bring it into composition class. Say, "We're all writers. These people I'm reading are writers. You people are writers. Learn something from it." And they do. I really believe some of them do. They're just a little bit stunned to learn that there are people *alive* writing poems.

GW: I meet that every once in a while, because I'm as likely as not in a linguistics class to give them a poem for linguistic analysis. How does the

language work here? Is it different? How is it different? What makes it different? And I get these funny looks—you aren't supposed to bring literature into a language class because somehow they don't have anything to do with one another.

WK: Yeh, Yeh, Yes. I know. The categories can get so strictly narrow that to bring anything outside is kind of a revelation.

GW: I stopped at a bookstore, actually I didn't know how to find the bank I bank at in Kansas City, so I stopped to go to a restaurant to look at the telephone directory, but the restaurant was closed, and there was a bookstore next door. [WK: But you really love bookstores.] Oh, yes, I love bookstores, but I hadn't wanted to ask a bookstore to look at their telephone directory. And while I was doing this, I said to the lady that I was the editor of *Cottonwood* Magazine, and I knew a small bookstore like hers didn't carry magazines of that sort, but we did have a book of poems by Denise Low that perhaps she would be interested in. And she said, "Well, we don't stock poetry except around Christmastime because poetry really has gone out, though it seems to be coming back. We have a little more demand around Christmastime than we have had some other years." So it's not surprising that your students arrive...

WK: No, I don't think it is at all.

GW: The magazines don't publish it any more the way they used to.

WK: And I tell them that, you know, they won't find these things on the newsstand at the grocery store. You're going to have to seek them out and subscribe and that sort of thing.

GW: I assume the Br'er Rabbit stories you remember were pre-Disney... [WK: Oh, yeah, yeah...] with wonderful color illustrations.

WK: And there's something in my memory yet about those color illustrations that just tripped my trigger. [GW: I can practically see the ones you mean. They were much different from—] There's no color quite like that. Technicolor is close. It's those basic colors on the page. And it's not only the colors, but maybe as I remember it's some of the stylistic characteristics of the drawings that make them so memorable. Now, maybe I'm misremembering, George, but it just...

GW: I don't think you are, because we're about the same generation and I'm seeing the pictures you're describing as I remember them from the same period. And of course, then, we had poetry in a lot of magazines

around us. It was in the *Saturday Evening Post.* It was in *Good Housekeeping.* It was in the magazines our mothers would subscribe to. And there were so many magazines then that had good story writers and good poets. It's not like that now.

WK: No. And we don't get any, or very little, you know, trickle down poetry from the heads of governments. The last one I remember, well, I guess Jimmy Carter sort of nodded in the direction of James Dickey, but he didn't nod very often. I remember, what was it—"The Gift Outright"?—that Frost read at JFK's inauguration. That was a very moving thing.

GW: Yes, it was.

WK: But to have, you know, Ronald Reagan or George Bush name a favorite poet and talk about that poet...

GW: Might be embarrassing.

WK: ...would be, yeh. Now that I think about it, forget it. You're right.

GW: I heard Robert Service somewhere around the corner. Or Edgar Guest. And Service wouldn't be as bad as some they could come up with.

We've started something—I don't know how long it will last. One of the conservative columnists had a column a little while ago about lack of education in poetry, and pointed out that in the old days most newspapers carried poetry on a regular basis. And what he was remembering was Edgar Guest and some fellow who used to write poems that I remember in the Binghamton *Evening Press* that would give you a line and then ellipsis dots, because they didn't print it as poetry, and then another line and ellipsis dots, and they were all... [WK: Uh huh. James J. Metcalf.] Okay. The columnist said some syndicate ought to take up publishing poetry in newspapers again, because we had a poetically uneducated populace. Well, I said to a couple of colleagues, we ought to go down and talk to the paper that ran the column, and say, "Hey look, why wait for a syndicate? Let's do it here in Lawrence now." We never got down there, but a new weekly newspaper started up called the Lawrence *Observer.* One of my colleagues spoke to the editor, and she asked me to supply a poem a week for the *Observer.* Yesterday would have been, I guess, the third issue of this newspaper. I assume it had another poem in it. [WK: Uh huh. Good.] One by Phyllis Becker. But I collect poems from people in Lawrence and Kansas City and Emporia and send them down to her and every week there's a poem by a local poet. Edgar Guest, it isn't; it's probably better... [WK: I haven't read it, but I would guess it probably is.] We had one by Keith Denniston there last week.

WK: Oh, really? I think Keith is very good.

Well, I had, a couple years ago, a letter from a fellow who was going to be one of the editors of a new magazine called *Midwest Living*. It's envisioned as a fairly considerable, slick magazine, and he wanted a sampling of poems. He said, "I've written some others in the area asking for poems, also, and we'll get back to you." Well, he didn't get back to me. And finally I wrote him and asked him—oh, I know, I wanted one of the poems back. I don't remember why. So I wrote and asked him to send that poem back if he wouldn't mind. And he sent 'em all back. He said they were not—that the magazine was not quite ready yet to publish poetry. Now, the poems I had sent him were not really difficult poems. I like to think they weren't simplistic poems, but they weren't ditties. I think they were accessible poems.

GW: I don't think of you as writing the kind of poems that would make my students say, "This is too puzzling for me." They're more likely to say, "Why would he say this?" But they understand it.

WK: Well, apparently, this guy had written all the other people and told them the same thing, "It's not ready for this." As if, "Our readership can't handle these poems." Now, I've seen that magazine since, maybe you have, too. And it's quite slick and does, I think, talk down to a lot of people... [GW: Uh huh] and therefore, it's probably going to be quite successful. I think the newspapers, a lot of them, fit into that category, too. The Omaha *World Herald*, I don't know if it still carries a column—it was at least a weekly thing, I don't know whether it's become daily, or what—of poetry, little poems. And you couldn't find worse poems if you sent a real qualified echelon of detectives out—you just couldn't do it. They're just absolutely miserable. But I think, probably, the newspaper knows that and is simply pandering to the lowest common taste denominator.

GW: Sort of on the assumption that a person who really wants poetry will go to a real poetry place.

WK: Yeah. And, maybe, the assumption, "Many of our readers will think this is decent poetry. And we will be sustaining their notion of what decent poetry is." [GW: Uh huh.] But they won't touch any other kind. Just won't do it.

GW: Well, I was sort of pleased to be asked by a newspaper editor to supply poems and have her say what I was giving her was what she was looking for. [WK: I should think so.] Because it suggested to me something about the audience she has in mind and it's an audience I think my poets would like to be in touch with.

WK: Uh huh. Yeah. Well, that's a hopeful note. In this... [GW: A small hopeful note...] in this otherwise...a small hopeful note [GW: A small weekly newspaper that may not last forever.] in this otherwise not altogether hopeful symphony.

GW: I'll have to send you a copy or two of the paper...

WK: Yeah, I'd like to see it.

I think about the only way you can get a poem into a local paper here is, oh, sneak it into a letter to the editor, say—or maybe an occasional poem—something like that.

GW: Well, yes. Our local newspaper did publish my letter about finding those Nazi slogans and printed—lined out as poetry—a quotation I had given from Marianne Moore's "In Distrust of Merits," the part that goes "Hate-hardened heart, O heart of iron, iron is iron until it is rust." I was pleased they did that. [WK: Yes. Yeah.] 'Cause of course most papers reserve the right to edit your letters, and they might have seen my quoting a poet as pointless.

WK: Yeah. Well, I think most newspapers just reserve the right to do whatever they bloody well please. Period. Especially sit on stuff that you send them. And that's like this *Midwest Living* editor. You send it to him with a self-addressed stamped envelope, anticipating in your lifetime—don't you think it's fair?—a reply? [GW: Right.] But many editors, newspaper editors, they just sit there at the desk and say, "Come in to me." You know, "Stuff, you come in to me and I will do with you what I want to do with you. And if I want to send it back I will and if I don't , I won't. And if I want to use it, it'll be there. Maybe I'll want to use it eight years from now, who knows? You know, and I'll have all this reservoir to draw from." Meanwhile, the person who sends it in wonders if maybe it didn't get lost, or whether it had ever gotten considered. And that kind of thing.

GW: Is that so different from a poet?

WK: I don't think I would have heard. I really don't think I would have heard from this editor. [GW: Mm...I was thinking in a different direction.] Ever. What was that?

GW: I was wondering if it was so different from a poet. You know, you've got turtle rock, all your life and just let it sit there.

WK: You just let it sit there. Yeah, that's true.

GW: Then something happens to make you think about it, and suddenly, whether you go back and get it or not, you've had the experience of going back and getting it in the poem. And putting it where you want to put it.

WK: Yeah. And I think that's—well, I know for me—that's kind of important. And even in writing the poem in present tense I am doing that. [GW: Uh huh.] As opposed to, this is what I am going to do. No, no.

GW: This is what I am doing.

WK: I'm doing it. And when the poem ends, I've done it. And that's that. I had a gal... [GW: And yet you let it sit there all those years.] All those years. That's true. [GW: You had a gal...]

I had a gal last semester in freshman comp who wrote a paper about her high school graduation. Always get several of those. And that's all right. That's all right. Because I know a lot of comp teachers recoil at the notion of a student writing about high school graduation—or what I did last summer. But for me those are the real exciting things. I think everything happens at recess. So write about it. But, write well about it.

Well, anyway, she was writing this essay about her graduation and she—the paper was clear, coherent, she had crossed her t's and dotted her i's—her sentences were complete. But almost all of the paper you had read many times before. Her concerns were concerns that you had heard so many times before. As, for example, should my tassel go from left to right when I graduate, or right to left. Major dilemma. What if, while I'm walking across the stage, I trip? I'll be wearing heels a little higher than I normally wear. So what if I happen to trip and embarrass myself? Wouldn't that be awful? How I expected something big to happen to me that night, but nothing really, no big change, took place. But right in the middle of the essay, she had this sentence or two about her grandfather. She said, "I wish he could've been there. Because he didn't graduate from college and he always was sorry about that. But he had to work. And I was his first grandchild to attend college. But he was very ill." (Quietly) "And couldn't be there." And then she went on to finish the paper with the cliches. Well, that little section in the middle kind of jumped out at me. And so I went to bed thinking about that. And decided that the comment I would write on her paper would come in the form of a poem. So I wrote a poem called "Upon Reading the First Freshman Essay of a New Semester." And in the poem I finally get around to asking one thing of her. And that is that before the semester ends you write your grandfather into the poem. Write him in there. Let him sit with you on the stage. Hell, let him go with you across the stage. When you pick up your diploma. Because probably you will trip on those high heels. And he'll be just the person you need. To pick you up. Well, I gave her the poem as a critique. Two or three papers later, sure

enough, she returned to that subject and wrote a knockout paper, wherein the high school graduation became her taking her grandfather with her in her head and she did it without being sentimental or maudlin. It was just a by-God-good-imaginative-and-tough wading through of what she would do if she had her druthers. And I've never read a graduation paper like that one. Fresh.

GW: Isn't that nice.

WK: 'Swonderful. And I'm convinced, George, that that essay that young woman wrote was and is and as long as she lives will be hellishly important to her, not just because she's writing about her grandfather who's dying. She wrote about it well. She's a good writer. She just didn't know she was just writing about what everybody else had written. That's all. And once she was given a chance to write something of her own, she banged it out, she knocked it out. Wonderful essay. Someday I hope she writes a book of poems about it, a novel about it.

GW: Or about something else. Because you taught her ... [WK: To just open up a little bit?] that it's all a dialogue. She's written something—you've responded to it. You saw something in it... [WK: That's a good way to put it.] that pulled a response and then she responded to your response and in the process found out what writing was all about.

WK: Yeah, I really like that, that word "dialogue."

GW: So you *can* hope for a lot from her.

WK: That's a good word for that. And you don't see that too often. Or, you don't have that happen too often.

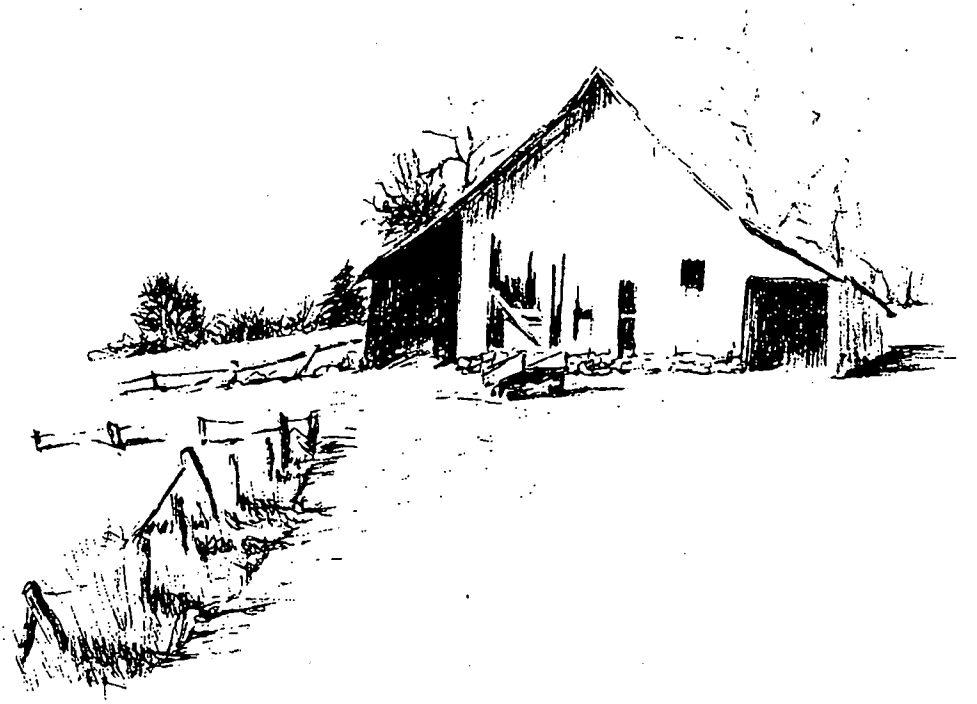
GW: It doesn't happen too often.

GW: Well, I think we probably have enough material on the tape, one way or another.

WK: If we don't we can add some. Or you can add some. You can just say Kloefkorn, what do you think about this? And then give the answer. 'Cause probably, you know, you might know the answer better than I would.

GW: Well, what do you think is the answer?

WK: (Laughter.) I don't really know.



Fiction

Michael Kun

Did She Jump or Was She Pushed

Though it fit as if it were, Jules Matthewman's argyle vest was not his own. Nor was his Burberry overcoat for that matter. They used to be Mackie's, and their father's before that, and he'd noticed that evening as he buttoned the coat up against the February wind that two of the buttons were missing, the top one and the second one from the bottom. The top one was the more troublesome, and he held the coat closed at the collar with his left hand to keep from getting a chill. His right hand he stuck in the coat's huge side pocket, and, surprised to learn that it wasn't empty, he removed the contents to find the two brown buttons and a ticket stub for the Brooklyn Symphony Orchestra, November 28, 1979. The buttons he put back in his pocket, and he dropped the stub into the snow, as dark and watery as oatmeal, burying it with the toes of his loafers. He checked his watch. Six twenty-five.

There were a half dozen other people at the bus stop, all wrapped up against the cold, all having done a better job of it than Jules, and he'd been paying only the slightest attention to them, thinking instead of his phone call from his father and of Trace, who was to meet him at the Port Authority building at eight-fifteen.

"Trace," he'd said, calling her at work, "I need a place to stay tonight. Just one night, I promise. It's my father." There was no one else to call in New York since Mackie and Kate had moved to Cincinnati, no one he knew well enough to ask, and he had neither the money to afford one of the better hotels nor the patience to tolerate the seedier ones downtown. Plus, it had been nearly six weeks since he'd seen her last, since she came to pick up her furniture.

"Of course, Jules. Let me know where I should pick you up." He'd been surprised that she'd said yes, and he didn't know whether it was because she wanted to see him or because he'd said it was about his father.

Jules shook his head side to side in an exaggerated way, then let out a laugh almost girlish in its pitch, wondering about it.

An old woman with crazy, white hair, her face sympathetic and neatly round, was nearest Jules. With navy yarn, she was knitting what looked to be a scarf, and one of the same color was turned twice around her own neck. Concentrating on the movement of her needles, the woman lifted her head on occasion to inspect the traffic. A grandmother, Jules guessed, going to visit her son and daughter-in-law. He liked to do that. He liked to try to figure out who people were, piecing together little clues like a detective. The navy yarn was what made him think that she had a son, not a daughter, though the scarf could be for a grandson.

Not that it mattered. She was a grandmother, that was for sure, and it was the scarves now that Jules was interested in, eyeing them greedily,

consciously tightening his grip on the overcoat. He couldn't remember ever owning a scarf. No, that was wrong; there had been a scarf, a plaid one. Trace had given it to him on his nineteenth birthday. Or maybe it had been his twentieth. He'd lost it somewhere.

Jules tried to remember how Trace had dressed in this kind of weather, and though they'd lived together for nearly two-and-a-half years, though he'd known her since Freshman Week at Duke, he thought it strange that he could only remember her in white shorts and summer dresses, or better, the cheerleader uniform. The white-and-blue skirt that cut across her thighs, the white sweater with the script "Blue Devils" cutting through the outline of a megaphone. Even when there were puffs of cold breath coming out of her mouth, her legs were bare. There were no coats that he could remember, either in her dorm room or, later, in their closet. She must have had one, though. She must have had dozens. If he couldn't think of her wardrobe, it was just because that wasn't what had stuck with him about her.

At the curb was a man in a camel's hair coat and grey fedora, holding *The Wall Street Journal* in front of him, the paper folded into thirds like a letter. To Jules, he had the look of an advertising executive. Clean, sharp, smooth, scary. He was probably going into the city to take a client to a show, maybe to meet one of the ladies from the secretarial pool at the Waldorf. The one who laughs at his jokes. Probably the same one who'd complimented him on the hat, said it made him look dapper. It didn't. It made him look dated. Warm, though.

Behind the advertising executive, two teenage girls stood in the gutter, knapsacks slung over their shoulders, each smoking a cigarette, each trying to make the act look so natural so as to make it that much more unnatural, Jules thought.

He let go of his collar, trying to hold it closed with his chin as he reached into the back pocket of his slacks to get a cigarette himself. Trace had always hated it when he smoked, hiding all of his ashtrays beneath the sink, and he had only started smoking again recently, around Christmas. He was already back up to three packs a day.

He pulled a pack of Winstons out, tapped it against the heel of his palm until the brownish tip of a single cigarette slid out, brought that to his mouth, and dragged the cigarette from the pack with his lips. He put the pack back, drew a thin, silver lighter from one of his front slacks pockets, and lit the cigarette. His coat collar popped open when he did this, and he winced, anticipating the cold. He put the lighter in the coat pocket where the buttons were and pinched his collar closed, trying to remember what had made him think of pulling this coat from the closet in the first place. The London Fog he'd picked up at O'Donnell's last winter was still in fine shape, all of the buttons secure, and, in fact, he'd worn it to work just this morning.

"Which way is this one going?" someone asked. "The tunnel or the bridge?"

"The next one's going by the tunnel," Jules answered, cordially, though he didn't turn to see who'd asked.

"That's good news. The last time I went in I didn't even think of asking anyone, and wouldn't you know that I got on the wrong bus. Ended up on One-seventy-eighth."

Jules drew deeply from the cigarette and turned to face the speaker. He was fifty-ish, with deep wrinkles on his forehead and dead capillaries on the bulk of his nose. A drinker, and a heavy one at that. "Yeah, that's happened to me a couple of times."

"Then you know what a pain in the ass it is. It's not bad enough that you wind up an hour or two late for wherever you were supposed to be, but then you have to take the A-train down to the Port Authority. Might as well take a ride straight through Africa, if you know what I mean." The man smiled widely, looking for Jules' approval, and had he been closer, he might have nudged him with his elbow.

"I'm not sure I do."

"Blackies," the man said, dipping his head toward Jules as if sharing a secret, but not lowering his voice accordingly, "by the boatload. Black as my shoes and enough to start their own planet for chrissakes."

Jules puffed again on his cigarette, exhaled, and drew the smoke up into his nostrils. "I'm married to a black woman," he said, matter-of-factly, and he looked down the avenue past the bank as if he were looking for their bus. It turned the corner and came into view.

The man was preparing to explain himself when Jules turned back. "Don't worry," he said. "I know what you mean."

Jules picked up his gym bag and moved closer to the curb as the bus pulled in.

The bus was nearly empty when Jules climbed on, kicking his shoes against the metal steps to free the snow, and he chose a seat near the middle, sliding in beside the window. He put his gym bag on the seat beside him, then unbuttoned his coat and rubbed at the stubble on his neck until the area was pink and irritated. The air in the bus was stale and warm, and Jules wiped the condensation off the window with his palm, watching the rest climb on.

When everyone had taken a seat—the grandmother in the seat behind Jules, the ad executive three seats up on the opposite side, the drinker behind the sheet of plexiglas that separated the driver from the passengers—the driver asked the two girls to put out their cigarettes. They protested, "Hey, what about the skinny guy?" and tried to find Jules on the bus. Before they did, he crushed his cigarette against the armrest. There was still half-an-inch of tobacco left, and he dropped it to the floor,

unzipped his gym bag, and searched its contents until he'd found a legal pad and a ball-point pen.

Mackie-

he wrote. He stopped to shake the pen to bring ink to the tip. Writing to Mackie had once been a habit, one he'd fallen out of when Mackie and Kate lived so close to him, in New York City, just across the river. He'd written Mackie twice a week when Mackie went off to Boston College, and three years later, when he moved out of the house to go to school at Duke, he kept writing, the letters dropping to one or two a month.

Mackie had been the first one he'd told about Trace. "Trace Sain is attractive," he'd written in his first letter from college, "in a stunning sort of way. Like Natalie Wood in *Splendor in the Grass.*" He'd met her at a mixer in the dormitory cafeteria, even danced with her once, and he'd stayed up to write Mackie about her, writing on notebook paper at his desk as his roommate slept.

> This very minute I'm on a bus bound for the city—God only knows why I'm on a bus bound for the city—I thought I'd pass the time writing the letter I've owed you for three months. Or is it four? Let's not be nit-picky about this, okay? Just be thankful and don't complain.
>
> Before I forget, please say hello to Kate for me. Tell her thanks, but Trace and I won't be able to come out for a visit since Trace and I aren't "Trace and I" anymore, if you catch my drift. Suffice it to say, things didn't work out as I, we, and everyone else had expected. A million reasons, all of them small. The funny thing is that I'll be seeing her tonight, sort of out of necessity.

It was beginning to snow again, lightly, and, Jules imagined, wetly. He watched people running along the sidewalks with their umbrellas, pulling their knees up high as they sloshed through the mess that had been a perfect layer of snow-white snow only a dozen hours earlier.

The bus stopped every half-mile or so to take on more passengers, all with umbrellas it seemed, and Jules was surprised at the short time it had taken for the bus to fill with people and packages. He could smell the dampness of their clothes, the sharp, warm smell of wet burlap, and he was consumed by the smell of their body heat, the perspiration from their armpits and collars.

Jules took his bag off the seat and placed it on the floor, squeezing it between his loafers. There was a tickle rising in his throat, and he made himself cough to get rid of it, then wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

I guess the big news is that I've become a terrible liar of late, terrible meaning that I'm actually quite good at it. Even worse than when we were kids, Mackie, if you can believe it. At work they all think that I dine regularly with William F. Buckley Jr. And I can't even *count* the number of times William Styron and his wife have dropped by the apartment to chat—and they don't even call first. How rude. I should think a southern gentleman like Will (Styron, not Buckley) would know better.

It's horrible, and I can't stop. Not ten minutes ago, for no reason at all, I told this guy at the bus stop that I was married to a black woman. No, that's not true—I had a good reason for doing it. The guy was so goddam *casual* about thinking that all blacks are like the ones who've harassed him on the subway, and I felt like throwing him off balance a bit. You know the way I get sometimes. Used to drive Trace up a wall. One of the million reasons, I suppose. She said I was always trying to teach people lessons and what was I, pious or something? Anyway, maybe it was a rotten thing to do to the guy. I mean, he seemed like a nice guy, and maybe he has good reason to be afraid. Maybe he's been mugged a couple times or his wife was beaten up or something like that. Who knows. I'm a horrible human being, aren't I? Don't feel compelled to answer that.

As Jules finished the paragraph and thought of another, a heavy man in a navy trenchcoat dropped into the seat next to him, both of their seats jumping when he did. Jules turned the corners of his mouth up and nodded to acknowledge the man's presence, then leaned forward awkwardly and tried to pull his Winstons out of his back pocket without standing. When he'd finally wriggled the pack out from beneath his overcoat, he spotted the NO SMOKING sign at the front of the bus, remembered the girls, and writhed in his seat once again as he pushed the pack into his pocket.

The man next to him frowned and pulled a copy of *The New York Daily News* out from beneath his coat, throwing the paper open in front of him. Before the man turned to the horoscopes, Jules caught the headline on the front page, DID SHE JUMP OR WAS SHE PUSHED.

What can I tell you about work except that nothing's changed a bit since the last time you heard from me, three (or four) months ago. I'm still writing articles for that old witch about the company picnic and about so-and-so being selected "Shithead of the Year" by the Kiwanis Club because he cuts his yard twice a week or took the Boy Scouts camping or something stupid like that. I have learned something useful, though, and that's that if I take the cap of my

pen and practically engrave the word SEX into my copy, the old witch'll come in and tell me what a wonderful article it is. No kidding. Works every time.

That had been another reason Trace had moved out, that he hated his job. He hated his job, and, worse, he never stopped talking about how much he hated it. Every night over dinner, every night in bed. He hated his boss. She was rude and condescending. He hated what he did. It was demeaning. He could do it in his sleep. He hated his office, too small. He hated everything about it, but he wouldn't leave. Jules had tried to explain to her that everyone hated his/their job and that it did him good to talk to her about it, but she'd said that it didn't matter, that it was just one of a million reasons for leaving anyway.

Saw a great movie the other night. I don't remember the name of it. Or who was in it. Or what it was about. But you really should see it if you have a chance. (Joking, Mackie, joking. I haven't lost my mind or anything.) The odor of this bus is amazing, the same, unmistakable aroma found in most alleyways, and, to make matters worse, THERE IS A VERY HEAVY MAN SITTING NEXT TO ME READING OVER MY SHOULDER.

And he could be nasty when he didn't need to be. Never to her, but to others, and that had bothered her just the same.

In the reflection of the bus window, Jules watched as the man's mouth flew open, presumably to take exception to either the accusation or his harsh description, then slap shut when he must have realized that to say anything would have been an admission that he had, in fact, been reading the letter. The man turned the page of his newspaper noisily instead, and Jules could see him behind the counter of a candy store, bellowing, "This isn't a library," to the boys reading at the comic book rack.

Beyond the reflection, Jules followed a group of young girls, most dressed in down-filled jackets, two or three in thick sweaters, as they dashed from awning to awning along the same route as the bus, shielding their heads from the snow with their purses or their hands. It wasn't long before they filed into a pizza parlor, shaking themselves dry in the doorway, and as the bus left them behind, Jules tried to decide how old they were. He could only place them between fifteen and twenty-two. He thought he should sigh, but didn't, and the man in the navy trenchcoat snapped his newspaper again.

There, he stopped.

Jules flipped the page up, folded it behind the pad, and began a new one. Though the tickle hadn't returned to his throat, he made himself cough again as if to ward off the next.

So you probably want to know what I'm doing on this bus, and to tell you the truth so do I. When I got in from work today there was a message on my machine from Dad. He's in the hospital again—nothing to worry about, so don't. It's just his gall bladder again. He'll be fine.

Anyway, there was a message that said he needs to see me tonight, though I can't imagine why. I'm sure a doctor would've called if it was something urgent, and Dad was sleeping when I tried to reach him to see what this is all about. Trace is going to pick me up, so I figure we'll probably go grab something to eat, talk a bit. Who knows. Maybe we'll straighten things out. I wouldn't mind a bit. In fact, I'm not ashamed to say that I still have Trace Sain on the brain.

Enough of that. Do you remember Artie? My old roommate down at school? Well, he stopped by for a weekend in November and dragged me out to see a Brazilian band in Jersey City. Strange experience. First of all, there was a woman dancing on stage with fruit on her head, which is something I didn't think people did in real life, but obviously they do. Secondly, my Portuguese may be a bit weak, but I could swear that in one of their songs the lead singer was saying, "Your mother smells real bad, and her cooking tastes like trash." Okay, I made that part up, but I'm dead serious about the fruit. Really.

The big news is that he (Artie, that is, not the Brazilian singer) is going to ask Shell to marry him. I think you met her at graduation. The blonde, remember? Now, everyone knows that this is a mistake of Hindenburg-ish proportions, but of course, I said otherwise when he asked what I thought. The way I figure it, if you can't lie to keep a friend happy, what good are you? And, besides, I'm a regular whiz at lying these days, so it's no skin off of my nose.

That was something Trace could never put her finger on, but she'd suspected that he was jealous of his friends, that he didn't want them to be happy, that he was afraid they wouldn't need him anymore if they were. Jules had said that was absurd, that she was overanalyzing everything again.

I'm thinking about going back to law school.
I'll let you know what I decide.

Law school was another matter. He'd talk about going back, but he could never decide. All the time, "Trace, do you think I should go back to school?" It didn't matter if she said yes or no. He still couldn't decide. It had been driving her crazy. It would drive any woman crazy. He was like a ten-year-old that way. She'd tell him that it was his decision to make, that she'd be happy no matter what he'd decide, and Jules would nod then hug her, but she could tell it hadn't taken.

As the bus passed through the tollbooth and moved into the tunnel, Jules bent forward and put the pad and pen in his gym bag. When he did, he found the laundry ticket he'd been using as bookmark lying among his underwear. He picked a hardcover copy of *The Search For Bridey Murphy* out of the bag. It was about reincarnation, and it was already a week overdue at the library. Jules worked his way backwards until he found a familiar passage on page ninety-six, then tucked the ticket in. Stuffing the book back into the bag, beneath his boxer shorts, he tugged the zipper closed and lifted the bag to his lap.

Jules maneuvered in his seat until he had a Winston in his mouth again and waited until the bus had pulled into the Port Authority building before lighting it. He rose from his seat, returning his lighter, buttoned his coat as best as it would allow, and all the while tried to keep from looking at the man who'd been seated beside him.

"Jackass," the man finally said as he stepped into the aisle, leaving the *Daily News*, opened to the television listings, on his seat.

Jules waited, letting the woman with the scarves into the aisle. "Parents couldn't afford charm school, could they?" he said, and he grabbed the newspaper and looked through it to make some distance between himself and the man. He pushed up his coatsleeve to take a look at his watch. Seven fifty-five.

When the man had left the bus and started down the escalator, Jules got off. He dropped the newspaper into the trash can, pausing first to examine the front page, DID SHE JUMP OR WAS SHE PUSHED, a head-and-torso photograph of a light-haired woman, face down, her neck twisted, a shiny grey ocean of her blood.

Jules shook his head in the same exaggerated way that he had when he'd thought of Trace at the bus stop. He stepped onto the escalator, empty now, and played with the buttons in his pocket, clicking them together like castanets. Halfway down, he balanced his gym bag on his head and pretended it was fruit.

There hadn't been time to eat when he'd returned from work. He'd taken off his suit jacket and overcoat and tossed them on the bed, then pushed the playback button on his tape machine. Hearing his father's message, Jules had made an unsuccessful attempt to talk to him, speaking with the floor nurse instead, and then he'd called Trace. Her work number

was on a slip in his wallet. He'd dug a sweater vest out of his dresser drawer and pulled it over his work shirt, thrown some things into the gym bag, pulled the Burberry off its hanger and headed out to the bus stop down the block. It wasn't until he'd left the apartment building that he'd thought about making a sandwich, and then he hadn't felt like turning back.

The apartment. The apartment was a disaster, his things everywhere. She'd have to cook and clean for the both of them, and if she was late getting back from work, he wouldn't know enough to put a pot on the stove. He'd just make a sandwich for himself. It was frustrating. "So I can't cook," he'd said when she mentioned it. "Big deal." She'd admitted that it was a petty one, but it was just one of her reasons, one of a million.

Jules was hungry now, so hungry that he ordered a hamburger and grape soda from a shop in the second floor of the Port Authority building. He knew that he shouldn't, that he'd wind up with an upset stomach from the grease, that he'd be eating later, but he did, and he soaked the hamburger in catsup and ate it standing, then hurried to wash the taste from his mouth with the soda.

He took another escalator down to the building's main level and headed toward the doors that open onto Eighth Avenue. There were people everywhere, too many to count, too many to try to figure out. He tried not to notice anyone, to block them out. Passing the news stand in the foyer, he looked over at the collection of papers beneath the magazine racks. *The New York Times. The New York Post. The Wall Street Journal. Newsday.* At the end, spread out like playing cards, *The New York Daily News.* DID. DID SHE. DID SHE JUMP. DID SHE JUMP OR. DID SHE JUMP OR WAS. DID SHE JUMP OR WAS SHE. DID SHE JUMP OR WAS SHE PUSHED. DID SHE JUMP OR WAS SHE PUSHED. DID SHE JUMP OR WAS SHE PUSHED.

On the sidewalk outside, Jules stood in the damp air for a moment to get his bearings, looking left then right down the avenue. He checked his watch. Eight-twenty and no trace of Trace.

Jules waited in the cold for five minutes, smoking, a hand at his neck, searching for Trace's Pontiac, before he went back into the building and took a seat in the Greyhound terminal. The seat looked out into the foyer, and he hoped that, being late, Trace would have the good sense to park and come in to look for him.

He took the pad and pen from his bag and reread what he had written on the bus, nearly two pages.

> The problem with being a lawyer is that it seems like it can get pretty goddam gloomy at times. People going to jail and killing each other and everything. Jesus, if I want to be depressed I can do it all by myself pretty much whenever I want. You know, I can't tell

you how many times I tried to talk to Trace about this, and she was absolutely no help at all.

He folded the page back and checked his Winstons. Three left. He shook one out of the pack, put it in his mouth, and lit it. He looked at his watch. Eight thirty-five.

She's late picking me up, a good twenty minutes already. Some things never change. I figure I'll give her about another ten minutes and then I'll grab a cab. I don't know about you, but I've never been especially fond of spending my Friday nights in the Port Authority. It's like I'm waiting to get mugged.

She'd hated the way he expected so much of everybody. He'd never consider that there might be reasons why she did certain things.

She was always late, Jules thought, lifting his head to check the foyer. Picking up the dry cleaning, meeting him for dinner, paying the bills. It was maddening, but because it was Trace, it was still endearing. He suspected that he forgave her for everything because she was so pretty. Maybe she'd had an affair. And he'd have forgiven her if she had. And he'd forgive her now, for moving out, if that was what she wanted. If she ever showed up.

He stubbed out his cigarette on the sole of one of his loafers and looked out into the foyer. There she was, all black hair and cornflower blue eyes, walking right past the doorway of the Greyhound terminal, not looking in. Jules let her pass, no more than twenty yards from him. He was thinking of Duke again. Her, driving through campus in her sports car, the top down, her hair pulled back taut by the wind. The cheerleader uniform. Then her on stage, her hair dusted grey, the heavy makeup, Lady MacBeth. There was the time Jules had found her outside the student union, when she'd just broken off with the football player she'd been dating, the crazy look on her face as she tried to laugh through tears. That's how it had started, as friends. Jules was someone she could talk to, someone she didn't have to be afraid of.

Then the apartment. He thought of her in the kitchen, baking cookies and tossing salads. At the kitchen table, late at night, her work spread in front of her, tapping at the keys of her calculator. On the floor, in front of the television, stretching. In the bedroom. He'd loved sleeping with her. He'd loved putting her hair in his mouth, his tongue in her ear.

"Jules," she said, approaching him, smiling thinly.

He stood and slipped an arm around her, and he kissed her on the neck. "It's good to see you."

She nodded. "How's your father?"

"Fine. At least I think so. It's his gall bladder again."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." She gestured toward the pad. "What are you working on?"

"Letter to Mackie," Jules answered, raising his eyebrows, and he pushed it into the bag.

"Well, be sure to say hi to him for me. Kate, too, okay?"

"Sure." He lifted the bag, and she led him out to the street, jingling her car keys, her car parked in the tow-away zone in front of the building. Jules walked a step behind her, off her left shoulder, and he watched her hips as they walked. They used to be mine, he thought, and he hoped that Trace wouldn't catch him looking.

If there were a million reasons, that was one of the greatest. Jules lived for it. Anywhere, anytime. She'd complain about it, but he'd always act as if she were joking, as if a girl who looked like she did must have wanted it all the time. She'd have to lock the doors when she'd take a shower, wait until he'd left to do her exercises, lie about when she was having her period. A woman can't live like that.

Trace started the car, the engine turning over immediately, still warm from the drive over. "How have you been?" she asked him.

"Same as always," he said, sneaking a look at her at she focused on the traffic. "Same lousy job. Still working for the witch, still writing trash, still being paid next-to-nothing."

Trace didn't say anything.

"How have you been?"

"Nothing new. Just been working on the apartment."

Jules turned the vents up so the hot air would blow on his face, and Trace turned onto Thirtieth Street.

"Have any plans for tonight?"

"I was meaning to talk to you about that." She looked at him briefly, then back at the road. "You know, you called me so late, and I'd already made plans."

"I understand. I wouldn't want you to change your plans. I just appreciate you putting me up for the night." He tried not to sound disappointed, and since she hadn't looked back over, he guessed that he'd succeeded.

"Good, good. The keys to the apartment are in my purse. You know where I am now, don't you?"

Jules opened the purse and found the keys at the bottom, beneath the assortment of cosmetics. He slid them into the pocket of his overcoat. "Seventy-third and Broadway." he said.

Trace made a left onto First Avenue and pulled the car in front of NYU Hospital. Looking up at the building, pretending to be taking note of its size, Jules tried to think of something to say. "Look," he said, "I really do appreciate this, and I'm glad we'll have a chance to talk." He hoped it didn't sound phony, too much like a come-on.

"Listen," she said, embarrassed, apologizing, "I might not be in tonight, so if you could just leave the keys with the super."

"Of course."

"And make yourself at home, okay?"

Jules waved a hand toward the building. "You're not going to come up?"

"I really don't have time to, Jules, but please give my best to your father. And don't forget to say hi to Mackie and Kate."

"I will." Jules stepped out of the car, holding the bag in one hand, pinching his collar with the other.

"It was good to see you," he said plainly, and she gave him a half-smile.

Jules closed the door with a swing of his hip, then walked into the hospital. He stepped up to the reception desk and said, "Henry Matthewman?"

He didn't notice who answered him and handed him the pass that read "Room 213." It may have been a man, and there was just as great a chance that it wasn't. He went to the elevator, got on, pressed a button, then stepped off on the next floor.

Room 213 was the seventh one down on the left side. Jules pushed the door open and poked his head into the room. "Dad?"

There was no answer. His father was sleeping, all of the lights on, the Rangers game on the television, the sound off. Jules switched off the lights and kissed his father on the forehead, then took a seat beside his father's bed, folding his overcoat over the back of the chair first.

The *Daily News* was on the windowsill, folded in half, twisted neck facing down. Jules reached for it, and, by the light of the television, he read the article, DID SHE JUMP OR WAS SHE PUSHED. A woman, in her early thirties, found dead at four in the morning by a neighbor walking his dog. An open window on the eighteenth floor. No note. Her apartment door locked, the furniture in place, seemingly nothing missing. No scream. No witnesses. The police were looking for her boyfriend, though he should not be considered a suspect. At least not at this time.

Jules folded the paper again and slid it into the crack of the chair, where the back met the seat. He watched the Rangers skate back and forth, back and forth, across the screen. He wasn't sure who they were playing, but, despite the chill of the rink, they all looked warm in their sweaters. And his father, his blankets pulled tight to his armpits, looked warm. Very warm. And Trace had looked warm, hadn't she, though already he couldn't remember what she was wearing.

Jules took the pad from his bag, trying to think of something to write, but, other than to say hello from Trace, there was nothing more he wanted to tell Mackie. Maybe he'd toss the letter in the waste basket and call him instead.

Soon, sleepy, he turned sideways, drawing his knees up close, and he slept that way through the night, the Burberry draped over him, the letter on his chest, DID SHE JUMP OR WAS SHE PUSHED tucked behind him.

Richard Malloy

Dumps

"Self centered old man, huh? Well, at least I'm centered."

"You're centered, all right," Harry's wife said, belching. "Centered, nailed in place and super-glued."

"I don't need getting slam-danced around out at that goddamned mall if that's all right with you."

Harry's wife got up slowly from her sofa place. "Your daughter-in-law's birthday is next week and we can surely afford something."

"Yeah, right. To show our gratitude for the used chair. Maybe we could find them an old ringer washer somewhere, at a garage sale or something. Have it delivered. Plopped down right in the middle of their living room. But then, I'm guessing it'll be the grandkids you'll be looting up, for their mother's birthday. Loot that'll wind up in a pile right back here at Harry's Storage."

"You make my stomach hurt." Harry's wife applied kneading finger pressure. "That chair is staying."

He could argue just so far with her these days. He needed her—like a kid needs a mother. The thought rankled. "Well sure," Harry said, sarcastically, kicking at the wooden rocker from his sofa place. "It's kind of a duty for a parent, isn't it, to make space for their kids' every whim? And when they go off on their next tangent and decide to live on a houseboat somewhere, we can just store the rest of their cast-off junk too." The rocker nodded agreement. "Who asked you?"

Harry's wife gave him a queer look. Injected him with a real fear of an impending tenure at *the home.* She had grown dumpy and gray, but retained some auburn streaks, still puttered out a garden in spring. He was tired.

"Why don't you call one of the neighbors? I think I'll stay here... near my rocking chair."

Harry's wife had left with the old bag across the street, the one who never came in the house any more, since he'd set her straight about never speaking to him—in his own house. Nobody cared about him. Maybe they could give *her* the goddamned chair, as a return of favor for her lousy magazines.

He bent-walked over the carpet-pacing a path out to the kitchen to grab a beer out of the fridge. Found one on the bottom shelf, but wanted it colder. Opened the freezer. Stuffed. Goddamned fish the kids had brought from the lakes six months earlier. He tossed a couple of packages. Inserted his can.

The phone rang. He turned. The ringing continued, invisibly. The phone stand, already objectionably placed, partially blocking the kitchen to living room doorway, was stacked with neighbor-bequeathed year old

Newsweeks. He grabbed some, stuffed them in on top of the fish. Any bastard that wouldn't let the phone ring at least six times wasn't worth answering anyway.

"Hello," he said, weakly attempting a disgusted bravado.

"Hi, dad.—We're coming up this weekend."

"Oh, uh huh. That's nice."

"Thought you and mom might like to keep the kids."

"Oh, uh huh..." From across the room, the chair commanded his attention, sullen, like a skinny wooden invalid. The call seemed intrusive. He unplugged the phone cord. Would blame AT&T. Needed time alone...

Harry's wife came in with a sack of crap: a couple of blouses in colors fit only for costume parties, a doll—carrot patch, or was it celery—a pair of plastic shoes, a slime barfer and a shit dooby.

"The kids are coming," Harry said. The kids the Russians...

While Harry listened to his daughter-in-law moderate contemporary issue talk, like how human beings were meant to be vegetarian since they didn't have canine teeth, he watched number one grandson do number two on the rocker's wooden lap and was tempted to set the whole mess on the curb. He felt just a twinge sorry for the chair though. Knew what it was like to have somebody take a dump on you.

He kept his eyes open. A lapse of attention would invite a bludgeoning. The rocker was catching hell from the lettuce head of demure granddaughter's plastic baby. What a great mom she'd make someday.

"We thought you'd enjoy having the kids for a couple days. We want to look around for a boat."

"That sounds nice, doesn't it, Harry?" Harry's wife was optically burning in.

"Oh, uh huh."

"Say, by the way, before I forget it, I've got some tires out in the back of the pickup. We bought all new. I thought I'd just stick the old ones out there in the shed for you and mom. Still a lot of good wear left on those, you know."

"Oh, uh huh," Harry said. "It's nice that you'd think to let us have your left over good-years."

Harry's wife was burning in again.

The odor was rising. "Does somebody want to change the chair?" Harry said.

"...meat eating causes cancer, you know..."

Harry tried to stop the rocker agitans with his foot. Carpet ruts were forming under both creaking chair rockers. "Maybe the kids would enjoy running naked in the yard."

"...when you really get to studying your enzymes..."

The living room was really only a small parlor. Close. Harry got up from his sofa place, allowed his joints to lubricate, kicked the coffee table leg, moving the table out, squeezed past the rocker, nudging it close to the wall, careful not to nudge the brown-on-brown finger painting in progress. Continued his statement with a soccer kick to the hassock earlier upended in mid-room. The house was small, and the city dump was expensive nowadays. It irritated him that nobody else seemed to worry about things like that.

He threaded his way into the kitchen, found the can of beer froze-up like a bomb-pop. Tossed it and another package of fish to boot. Jesus, he didn't want a bunch of tires in the shed, now. Couldn't get at the lawn mower as it was.

The house seemed suddenly to drop floor space like the cat dropped fur. They didn't need that cat, either, with its litter-box cluttering up the porch. He was ready to cease with the pretend gratitude for unsolicited gift horses. And now the kids had a Shih Tzu. How long before there were little shits to be divvied out?

Adrenalin surged in his veins. He straightened up, went quickly back to the front room and peeked into the bedroom. The toy box overflowed, threatened to come up over the bed like a high tide. He turned around, loudly interrupting Nutrition 101, his scowl fully intentional. "Why don't *you* kids take some of *those* kids' toys home with you?"

"Oh, that's all right. It's nice to have some toys here for the kids..."

Jesus, why couldn't some people see a serious problem where one existed? The garden needed thinning. It was time to act. What if there was a fire? What if they had to call a junk hauler eventually? Who would pay for that? And what about him—what if he wanted to bring something of his own into the house? Where would he put it? But nobody gave a goddamn about that.

"I'll get those tires..."

Harry's wife was staring scared at him. She knew he was getting worked up. Why wouldn't she say something to the kids? If she was so damned afraid he'd say something to embarrass her, why couldn't she be the one to say something? Well, he wasn't embarrassed. "I think we'll just have to have a yard sale," he said deliberately.

There was no acknowledgment. He marched to the rocker announcing as he sat, "I guess I've got to just *sit* in the shit." He rocked in it.

Harry's wife pressed her fingers against the pit of her stomach.

"...you have to be really careful about which foods you mix..."

Nobody was listening to him. He jumped to his feet, setting the chair in motion. Went straight into the bedroom, stepping over the clutter. He changed his pants, brought the dirty ones back with him to finish cleaning up the chair.

"I set the tires on the ground out beside the shed. You probably want to put them in there a certain way."

"Oh, uh huh." Harry was still holding onto the dirty pants, and the rocker's lap was filling up again; Harry's wife's ceramics class project came crashing off the end table. A small blessing, a tiny deduction from his wife's habit of making junk. Harry's wife lifted her knees, held them momentarily against her stomach, then dropped them and leaned forward from her sofa place...

The next few days were hectic what with not knowing till the tests came back. The kids had helped some. Had hung on back at the house, holding down, loading down...probably boat hunting. He'd spent a lot of time at the hospital. Hospitals were big places.

The gall bladder looked beautiful, the doctor said, but the duodenal opening was swollen twice normal size, which had necessitated the NG tube and intravenous feeding for a few days.

He'd been happy to hear the doctor say that he was going to try to avoid surgery. And now, he *was* grateful to have the Mrs. home again, even though the kitchen table was loaded up with Tagamet and crap. He knew she shouldn't overdo... Had a hard time today keeping her down on her sofa place... The kids would be leaving tomorrow...

"Boat World said, when the boat we decided on comes in, they'll just deliver it over here. So the next time we get up here..."

Over in its carpet place, the rocker was half hidden with a lap full of yarn, magazines and dolls...

Harry addressed his kids now with deliberate assumption. "It's lucky you kids have that spare bedroom and all..."

No answer.

"I mean since mom and I will be coming to stay for awhile..."

Stephen Cormany

The Soldier

There was a soldier, probably on leave, in the town square in Medina, Ohio, on a mild day in February. No one knew him—he must have been passing through town. The old-timer who sits in the square, who likes to call himself Ed the town scholar, made a special note of the soldier as he went from the bank to the restaurant half a block off the square. The soldier stopped and looked at two possible places to eat and chose the restaurant over the ice cream parlor. We can report that in the restaurant several people saw him (you notice a soldier in uniform in Medina), and that he had a donut, orange juice, and coffee. Two customers recall that the soldier flirted with Elise Potter, the new waitress—but Elise denies it. "He was a real nice, quiet fella. Just asked for his food and didn't give me no trouble." What happened next is of little dispute in the final act of it: the soldier left a quarter on the table, bought a newspaper in the box in the lobby (some of the witnesses actually saw him reading the paper inside the restaurant—but this hardly seems possible if he only bought it on the way out), walked up the street, waited for a moment for the green light—and was gunned down by a little boy playing with a cap pistol—at least that's what he'd always thought it was before, according to his mother— "a two dollar cap pistol."

Here is exactly where things become very confused. It appears that the little boy could not hold himself from firing more and more bullets into the soldier, even after it became quite plain that the bullets were real, and that the soldier in his peril was crying out, "Don't kill me!" Such a strange thing does not often happen in Medina, which is a quiet little town, although some people complain that the trucks make too much noise driving through on Rt. 18. Here is another strange fact—when two men ran from the restaurant to the middle of the street to look after the soldier (another fellow had snapped the gun out of the little boy's hand), they found that the soldier had turned to stone. He is now awaiting a coroner's inquest—and it is not certain to some people that he has even yet died. One of these people is the soldier himself, who although quite immobile in the rock of his dented body cries yet, "Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" in a voice that cannot be quieted; in a voice, I might say, that has the whole town disturbed. No one can sleep at night—for it seems that the soldier has invaded the dreams even of people who block his screams by closing their ears (the sporting goods store reports that there has been a run on ear plugs quite out of swimming season, that they are sold out and are being re-ordered). It has been decided, therefore, and preliminary procedures left up to the mayor and his council, to hold a special meeting to see what can be done about the soldier. A year has passed, and the soldier remains where he was carried the day he was shot, in the middle of the park, on the gazebo (he

is so heavy that he cannot be moved further). And no rest! No rest for a year—it has been very troublesome and vexing. We are quite at loose ends, and we are looking forward to the inquest beginning, which all the town is invited to attend.

One of the most troubling aspects of this event is the condition of the little boy who pulled the trigger—not once, but repeatedly. Just what kind of little boy is he? He is now seven years old. He is receiving counseling, but whether or not it is helping him, it is very hard to tell. He has admitted to being a bad boy with many evil thoughts that he cannot control, and we hardly know more about it than that, except that his mother believes him to be healthy and normal, showing no signs, up to and since the soldier's shooting, of abnormality, save his obsession with torturing insects and small animals, but that is common in many children we are told by Dr. Glasby, who is overseeing the boy's care as, presently, we try to decide what to do with the soldier.

The unfortunate man's wallet is immersed in the stone case of his body and cannot be dislodged except with a blowtorch; therefore, we do not know his identity and cannot notify his next of kin of his condition. He is adamant about yelling, "Don't kill me!", and nothing seems to placate him, yet a clue as to what can be done to make him more comfortable has not been discovered, and the answer of how to transform him from his stone mass has eluded everybody. Even a helicopter could not budge him, although at the time he was gunned down the men were able to bring him to his present spot with relative ease. I have only one mild warning to make to the soldier, in case he is interested or can even hear me above his own screams: the mayor and the band director have made it plain that the gazebo must be cleared by June and band concert season. If no solution is found to our problem by then, we will have to take whatever steps are necessary to move and silence the soldier. I do not mean to mention the most drastic measure as one we feel most likely to choose, but it has been suggested that we bury the soldier alive (or is he dead? Could that horrible cry be that of a dead man?), digging a pit next to the gazebo somehow so he will roll. It is not what we mean to do, except as a last resort, but the people ought not be deprived of their band concerts for another year. The sound atop the gazebo is much richer than anywhere else in town. We expect that some measure short of burial can be arranged. There must be a solution. I and some of the others are going out to the soldier now to speak with him, although all such efforts so far have only provoked his screaming, "Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" when that was the furthest thing from our minds.

Well, it is February again, and this year we're having some very cold weather. How the soldier keeps from freezing to death none of us know. We are a party of three committee men plus Ed the town scholar, whom we

will rouse this early morning. Ed drinks a bit too much since his notoriety has increased, since the soldier's peril began, but he seems to know things about the soldier that no one else does, and once, a few months ago, we even fancied that we had communicated our vexation and despair to the soldier, with the help of Ed. That may have been an illusion, though. Ed took a claw hammer and stuck it in the soldier's mouth to keep him from yelling at such a high pitch. We were planning to talk with the soldier—we would at least like to learn his name—and we thought that if he could not scream he would listen. As soon as the claw hammer was in place in the soldier's mouth, Ed said, "Calm down and don't bite. We've got to talk with you. Understand?" He gave the hammer a twist. The soldier was now apparently so frightened that he could not talk or scream. We heard him panting.

"Where could that panting be coming from? What could it mean that he don't really have a body?" Ed asked. "When I first saw him in the square he had an itch on his hind end. I wonder if I could give him something to think about, like an itch—," and Ed yanked hard, pulling the hammer out of the soldier's mouth, along with several of his teeth. This is when I began to get a bit disturbed. Was this really the way that we ought to go about things? I could not help but recall that Ed's trade in Medina, when he had one, was a horse trainer, and that he had said more than once, "A hard, heavy hand will be remembered longer than a soft, gentle one."

When I was a boy—that was a long time ago—my father invited Ed to "teach something" to a pony who would not let us ride him. Ed tied the pony up to wagon with a short rope and battered him all afternoon with a board. But this was a man. The soldier was an unfortunate man who had turned to stone, except for his face, and that cry that would not stop, no matter what you said, "Don't kill me!" and Ed was not able to reason with him by using the claw hammer. The fear in the soldier's eyes grew incandescent, and at last I suggested to Ed that we ought to go no further with this torture.

"Then bury him—bury him and forget about him," Ed said. "Bury and forget."

I am afraid to announce, in my official capacity, that this regrettable course of action is what we have decided on if something else cannot be thought of soon.

"He will roll," Ed the town scholar said. "He may not move when we try to pick him up—but he can't defy the law of gravity. Dig a pit. We can dig a pit deep, and he will roll." But I have been asked to try to reason with the soldier. Yet he will not speak! Except to cry over and over, with lungs more cracked each time, but which somehow have gone on all year, "Don't kill me!" I have decided now that with the committee and Ed we ought to also bring the little boy over for a conference. Maybe we can settle the soldier down some if we all camp out overnight with him and cook him a nice meal.

The truth is, we don't have any idea what to do. We are terribly desperate—but goodness, I am sure, will prevail in the end; and I have never heard anyone suggest that the soldier is not a good man.

"The soldier is evil." It is the mother of the little boy who says it. She has followed us out to the square. "The soldier is evil. Why do you think my little boy shot him?"

I ask her cautiously to go back—we are not ready yet for her and her son—but suddenly her boy has jumped out of their parked car, and he runs quickly up to us. He has never come so close before, and I wish his mother would tell him that we don't want him here right now.

"The soldier is evil," the mother says again. "He gave my little boy a funny look. We were coming out of the ice cream parlor. We were minding our own business until he came. He wanted to touch my little boy, no doubt, or take him some strange place. Do you think I'm as gullible as all that? The soldier must die!"

"You've got the right idea, yes ma'am," says Ed the town scholar. "I can round up plenty of people who will say the same thing."

To my astonishment, Elise Potter, who is the waitress who waited on the soldier, says now, "The soldier flirted with me. He flirted with me shamelessly!" I reminded her that she once had good things to say about the fellow. This does nothing to deter her from making up a wild story about how the soldier follows her every night and then sneaks back to his place on the square. He whispers things in her ear whenever she passes him, Elise claims, and she has to pass him every week on her way to the bank. "The soldier is demented," Elise says. "There is nothing to do with a bum like him but bury him alive!"

Suddenly, there is a crowd around us of twenty or thirty in the February cold, and I am beginning to be worried. What can be done, I ask myself, to save the soldier? If I can distract the crowd for now, its mood might change in an hour. I think carefully, as Elise tells a lurid story about what the soldier does to her on the way home at night.

"If we were to consider our most drastic measure," I say, "—even our most drastic measure—we would have to all wait until spring when the ground thaws."

"Murderer! You would murder our park ground," someone in the crowd cries. "You would disturb our natural beauty! Let's find a way—the soldier can't not die. We can kill him any way we please. Is he magic? Is he a god?"

"Cut-throat rascal," Ed the town scholar says, pointing at me. "I've followed you around town a time or two and I know your tricks. You're trying to save the soldier. You're going to cart him away in your car—it's been your plan all along."

"What does Billy want to do?" somebody asks the little boy.

"The soldier got in my way," Billy says "—that is his crime."

"What do you mean by that?" I ask him.

"I was aiming my cap pistol where I wanted to aim it," the boy says. "The soldier is a real soldier. He is real and not pretend. I am too young for real life. I must have pretend. So I taught him with pretend coming real. I taught him that I can kill in pretend as well as any soldier."

"Is he a soldier for our country?" somebody wants to know. "A soldier for our country?" For a while, everyone is silent. If the soldier were clever, he would pick this time to leap away—if he were clever enough to follow Elise Potter. But all the soldier can do is cry, "Don't kill me!" Is this a human sound to hear day and night? It begins to grind on the nerves. But we are not listening to him now; his cries are so frequent that we block them out most of the time.

"If he's not a soldier in a uniform of our country, then he must be a thief," somebody says in a voice that has the outward calm of frenzy. "Look at the uniform for yourself." We all look—but there is no uniform on his stone body any longer. He is trapped in the gray stone. He has practically no color to his face, and he screams so. His face is the same gray color as his body after all the weather he's had in the square. "Thief! Thief!" the little boy cries. "The soldier is a thief! He stole my youth!" "Thief! Thief!" Ed cries. "The soldier stole my old age. He made me realize that there is a form to death."

"What are you talking about?" I ask. "This fellow is simply an unfortunate man. We can provide for him in the state home."

"You are a thief, who steals money out of the taxpayers' pockets on such a case," someone says to me.

Now things have gotten completely out of hand. I only hope that I can put off the crowd a little longer.

"Kill me, too," I say. "If you are going to kill the soldier—kill me, too."

"Oh! He talks of death!" cry the townspeople. "We aren't going to allow it. He can't talk like that. What will become of us? Do you believe that we are going to die? There is no death in the world. The councilman is a monster! He has dirty thoughts. Strike him down. Kill him!"

But in the speaking of it, they have lost their nerve and cannot do it.

The Council and the Mayor are looking for an appropriate place for the soldier. Any suggestions or assistance from any home or agency would be greatly appreciated. We expect that, if action is not taken soon, come the spring thaw, the soldier will be buried alive.

D. E. Steward

Dark and True are the Mountains in the North

Valgoid notions of standing there at the door and then instantaneously uncontrolled outside committed to the irrevocable vastness of the fall, and all this before there was the reality model of Gemini–Apollo tumbling weightlessness to think about. A serious thing to think of doing, jumping out of an airplane. The same fear as that of going to bed with somebody for the first time. Parachutes, their packs, straps, buckles, rings and shroud lines, fetishistic in the same way as it was endlessly fascinating to think of how it would be and smell standing by a bed with your face and hands there around the straps and pressures of her underclothes. Stockings, girdles and the pressuring of bras something very close to the imagined snapping yourself into a jump harness, adjusted, well designed, tight and close. The same individuality of event. Wondering if you could do it when the time came becoming as matter-of-fact as your worry about being able to perform sexually with the opportunity. Neither problem having much to do with capability, both a matter of opportunity.

To jump in the Army meant enlisting, basic training and then going through advanced infantry before the long-awaited event. And then thirty more months of duty time. Too much for simply finding out if you actually could jump out the side door of a plane. In the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management getting the opportunity meant only proving yourself on fires first. To jump with the BLM you had to work in Alaska and you did not much want to go way up there, so the day after you graduated you went and got a job as a Forest Service crewman right there at home. It was close; all you had to do after your days off was drive back up to the hill to camp. You were a GS-2. They paid you a dollar ninety-seven. That winter you started at the community college because your parents wanted you to, but in May you left before exams to go to Redding, one place where the Forest Service jumpers train.

One night when you were still a crewman you spun out at eighty-five alone in your Chevy in the rain. You went through a safety fence and started over the side on Devore Cut-off near the Lytle Creek Bridge. You didn't roll and got caught up in the trees before the canyon dropped away. Your car was totaled but you could walk back up to the road so much alive that you were most worried about what the rain was going to do to your new white sweater, angry because you had no jacket along, sure about insurance because there were no witnesses to tell anybody that you had been doing eighty-five. And when you had scarlet fever at fourteen you ran a temperature of a hundred and eight and thought you were going to die. Otherwise no close ones that you knew about, no bad sicknesses, no bad falls. Your nose's bridge notched slightly from a facemask injury once when you were at the bottom of a fumble pile, and then when you were six you burned a

forearm on a stove so that the skin there was tight enough to notice. But nothing else to speak of; no that was all. Just clap you picked up in TJ your senior year, and that you had cleared up in a week and a half with shots from a clinic off Hollywood Boulevard.

Once there was a buzztail on the shelf along a canyon trail and he would have hit you in the neck if you had not been carrying your shovel with the blade held high. His head donged into the shovel like a clapper in a bell and you fell away and almost went over the side. He was back up in his coil and spitting when you got your feet again and came close eye to eye to take his head off with the sharpened shovel blade. Those, lightning, traffic accidents, getting burned on hotline, cutting an artery with a brush hook, a Pulaski or an ax, were what you had to worry about.

In Jump School at Redding you did everything you had to do and stayed on there all that second season before you went career conditional and came back to work on your old district in the South. By your fourth season, a patrol and two pairs of Whites, continually breaking a new pair in by wearing them for a half a day a couple of times a week. Your fire bag was ready on your truck. Like everybody who keeps their jump status, you were always set to go. In August or in late July in the afternoons the thermals far out over high Nevada flush up to cumulonimbus and even deep down in the Arroyo on the Arcadia side there near your station the hot freshening air starts the aspens cliddering and you look up hearing the breeze sloughing down across the sandstone slides and know that it is lightning time again up on the Sequoia. So every year you adjust yourself waiting for the telephone or for them to call you on the radio; you adjust yourself so that when it comes you will be ready.

Jumping after rain is strange. Cleaned air and behind the storms the horizon often looks too far away to ever come to meet the ground there rolling out, sprung when the jump master finally hits your calf. The horizon shadowed by the low purple walls of clouds behind the rain, the DC-3 slipping a bit, and then back, as you wait there at the side door looking down and out ahead to see the little smokes coming up. The precise point where you want to land, where the lightning strikes volted in and exploded the moisture in the wood of each snag that drew a stroke so that the sand-colored splintered mast hangs above where the smoke is rising from the duff and needles on the ground or from deep in the snag's bole itself. The plane slips again, irritably comes right back on course with a nudge that slightly overcorrects, nudge back. Now the first of the smokes is just ahead. The tools go out. And now your slap. Purple, purple, sunlight bars, tumble, plane itself away, the cold of open air, the silence of the motors past, the creaking presence of yourself in all that air and it is too far, too much, that horizon will never narrow down to meet you on the ground. But your static line trumps, you catch, your feet swing and again there is an up, there is a down.

It is all a matter of equipment and when they pack the chutes each is registered so that if any jumper has to go to the small emergency chute hung in front because the main shroud lines come out wrong, then it is known who packed a dud. But this does not happen often and in all the time since there have been smoke jumpers in the U.S. Forest Service not one has died on a jump, not one. They always tell you that as though it would keep all of you, jumpers, crews and overhead, from ever being killed. In military jumping it is the accepted wisdom that on all big jumps people will be killed slamming down into wires, trees or rocks, or land badly some other way and get busted up. The thing is that smoke jumpers are trained to get hung up on trees and then climb down. The helmets that you wear with the mesh masks like fencing masks allow that, steering in to catch high up a tree and then taking a line off your belt, tying on and climbing down.

All in the equipment: your fire bag left back at the base in the locker where your jump things are when you arrive. You always take a lot of extra socks from your fire bag and stuff them in your pack. Always extra socks because sometimes it is raining by the time you are walking out. Usually the fires are in snags to be brought down with your partner and a saw. When you get one down and put a line around it you go at it until it is out, and then you camp and watch it for a day. After that you leave, packing everything on out. You are on the payroll until you make it back.

There is even snow sometimes late in the season or the electric storms turn to North Pacific five-day rains where up near the timberline the ice comes out on everything. Or in the warmer months, very often showery hours following the lightning, virga hanging low and kicking the humidity up so that nothing could take off on the ground without gale winds or a napalm drop. The irony of rain after all the expense and care of dropping you. But you never question the why of anything that works for you and if they told you to go and jump near a volcano, put a line around it and wait a day, you would. You would try anything once as long as somebody who had the right to told you to or it felt good.

Dark and true are those mountains where you go to jump, so different from the chaparral and oak canyon country of your patrol. Every time you go north on a jump, looking at the somberness of the big timber from the side door of the DC-3 makes some center in your chest tell every bit of you that you are in a place and doing a thing that is fine and right for you to do.

But you were to be the one. Your fifth season jumping, when you'd been around long enough to think you knew all there is to know. On the jumping pass you went out the side door and your static line slammed across your neck. You snapped your spine high at your neck and that was that. Was it the turning to throw the quip back at the jump master as he slapped your calf, was it his fault for not having the static line rigged right when he checked you out, or was it the way you had yourself strapped up? Now at Redding and in every forest in the West they always tell the jumpers, crews

and all the overhead about you, that you have been the only one so far, as though it would keep all of them from dying, ever, from anything at all.

John H. Timmerman

The Wages of Sin is Death

We were going along to beat on the gates of hell itself, St. Louis. I remembered if from my sinning days, but just barely. That ain't just a play on words. For instance, they had this three-hundred-pound stripper named Little Ady. Her name kept changing. Same woman. Sometimes they called her Kool-Ade. Onct they had the sign up Brom-Ade but I couldn't figure that one out. The sign didn't last too long. She was big. She was the only stripper I knew that could strip every last little thing off and you still couldn't see nothing.

She may have been the heftiest of the lot then, but not by all that much. St. Loo favored its women on the meaty side. Me, I liked a little hard curve now and then rather than bulges, but I wasn't born in them parts. Pratt's Forks, Illinois. That's where I was born, down along the river.

They has some powerful religion in those parts then. They had this pennycostal preacher come around onct a year or so dangling rattlesnacks around his neck. Ain't nothing worse for scaring a man outta hellfire than seeing a preacher with a bunch of rattlesnacks around his neck. They had their teeth in too. I sat up around the third row onct to see.

Now me and Homer, we don't need no props like that. We just stand on the plain word and me with my selling ability—we won't have no trouble. Homer's been kind of silent since we set out for St. Loo. I got a hard time shutting up, even with this old van rattling noisesome. Guess that's why he took me on after I got saved. When I'm going good I can pitch a man outta his last nickle and sure enough outta hellfire. I got me a better product now, best product in the whole world. And I'm a natural when it comes to selling. It's a gift.

The very day after I got saved I had an appointment with Jefferson MacIntosh who was Sheriff over to McComb County, Illinois. I was working out of Red Rock then selling insurance. I was in and out of McComb pretty regular, getting to know the people there, letting them see me drinking coke at the drugstore, my hair combed neat with a touch of pomade, shoes polished, passing the time of day with anyone who wanders by. Kids, old men, ladies; building the old image, friendly like, someone you'd want to talk to. Before long I'd get around to talking about dying. Always read the obituaries pretty careful before I worked a town, then I'd pass an offhand remark like, "Sure was a shame about Gert Spinks."

"Yup," the other'd say, and I'd be able to tell if they knew the deceased at all.

"Shame. Warn't but what? Forty-two?" I get it wrong by a year or two on purpose.

"Forty-three."

"Yes, that's right. Four kids?"

"Yup. Two married though."

"My, I hope she had some insurance." By then I usually had a sale signed, sealed, delivered.

Well, I had Sheriff MacIntosh for a sure mark on an insurance policy. Fifteen hundred, maybe a two-thousand dollar policy. Most people never stopped to figure that angle, selling to upholders of the law as I like to call them. Back in them days the county didn't cover like it does now. Nowadays you got to see a county clerk just to get your foot in the door, got to take about six people out to lunches at the diner just to get to talk to the right person. "Oh, you want to see Mr. Pearson," they say after you blow three-four bucks on a meal, them stuffing their face while they says it. Then you learn this Mr. Pearson's got a nephew or something working the same market. Easier back in them earlier days, but I'm back at the game now.

Anyways, I went up to see the Sheriff the next morning. "Jefferson," I says, "I'm here to make a sale like you've never seen." I always took the direct approach with them kinds.

"Figured that," he says, "but listen here Joshua. I been thinking now..."

"That's good," I says. "I want you to think upon your sinful life." I don't know how them words came out the way they did. Must have been the effects of the meeting.

"What's that?" He grew a mite angry, I could tell, so I switched it around to me.

"Jefferson, I got saved last night."

"Saved? Oh, my. Joshua McCabe saved. What the hell were you doing, Josh?"

"Not saved like that. Saved like Holy Ghost saved. I've been borned twict."

"What?"

"Borned twict."

"Oh, so you were at that traveling minstrel show, too. Seems half the county comes out to hear some freak strut and holler in an old barn. Tell me, Joshua. How many times you expect to die, anyway, if you's born twice?"

"But onct. I died to sin; ain't never gonna die no more. That's what the Preacher says."

"Josh . . ."

"But if I hadn't been born twict I would of died twict. Died in sin and died from eternal life."

"You're a fool, Josh."

"I got me a home in glory. You want a home in glory, Jefferson?"

"How much it gonna cost me?"

"Will you get this, Jeff"—no one ever called Sheriff MacIntosh Jeff, but either he didn't notice or didn't mind—"it ain't gonna cost you a thing. Lemme see, I got it here in this Holy Bible . . . had it underlined somewhere

last night by Reverend Tidball hisself." I hoisted the book out of my briefcase, leafed through it to the passage. "Here it is: 'The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.' Do you know what that means, Jeff? It means that without salvation you're going straight to hell. But eternal life is a free gift."

"Free, you say, Josh? And don't call me Jeff." He screwed his eyes down as if trying to see through this thing to where the pitch started. He was a shrewd old bugger. And I was tempted, mind you. But I fought it down. I thought, well, what will it hurt to ask for a kind of tip. You know, if you give someone something you can get a little tip for your trouble. But I fought it down. Homer had warned me about what he called "the old man."

"Not a cent, Jefferson."

"Joshua," he says, "when you say that, I do believe you've been touched by something. Maybe you oughtta see a doctor." That irritated me some. I figured if I—the ace salesman of Red Rock Mutual—could get down on my knees and accept the free gift of salvation then this here Sheriff had better. Maybe I oughtta sell him a policy after all, I figured. And that's what I said.

"Sheriff, you know I was the best damned insurance salesman in these parts, but if you won't take this gift then I had better sell you some insurance because there ain't nothing more I can do for you and I better do it for your heirs."

"Josh, I ain't even married."

"Well damnit, that's right. And may God have mercy on your soul when you fry all by yourself in hell. Because that's what the wages of sin is."

"Are."

"What?"

"Wages are."

"Ain't writ that way."

"Then something's wrong with your book."

"Ain't so."

"Is so. Think about what I said about seeing a doctor."

"I ain't never been better, Jeff."

"I told you . . ."

And who walks in at that point but Doc Carter.

"Ain't that providence," says Jefferson. "Doc, you best look to Josh McCabe here. He done got saved last night. Needs a cure."

Doc Carter lifted an eyebrow. "So?"

"That's right, Doc. Borned anew last night at Homer Tidball's revival meeting."

"Borned anew, huh?"

"Twict born."

"Biggest gathering of freaks and quacks in the midwest," Doc says. "Half of em swearing off medicines and doctorings, getting touched by the

Holy Sperit and hallucinating all sorts of cures. Yes, Joshua, I know the troupe; Homer's packing up anyway, but his Model T broke down. He's down at Charlie's right now trying to save him out of a Buick coupe."

The Doc looked over at Sheriff MacIntosh who had his feet up on a low, dust-covered file, his back to us. I could hear him snickering down in his beefy chest. I had an idea I was losing him fast.

"What do you think, Mac?" asked the Doc.

"Hunh?"

"What do you think?"

"Still think it's wages are, not is."

The Doc sighed and stood to leave. He held out a pinkish hand. It felt like a bunch of baby pigs in my hairy paw. I had the thought that he was a natural for a $5,000 policy but shoved the thought down. The old man, Homer said, would creep up on me for a while.

It was like a lizard shedding its skin, Homer said. For a while the old scales of the devil hang on. You got to keep ripping them off. I didn't know lizards shed their skin. Thought only rattlesnacks did that.

"Reverend Tidball," I had said to him, "I was the number one salesman with Red Rock mutual in that old skin. I could sell a death policy to a new born babe, a house policy to a hobo, and a car policy to a blind grandma. The way I figure it, I gotta use part of that old man selling Christ."

Homer's eyes glazed over a minute and turned kind of blank. Like he was seeing something I didn't see way down the line. That's when he asked me to meet him for coffee the next morning. I headed to the diner after leaving Sheriff MacIntosh's office.

His hands had grease marks on them, wiped and ground into the skin as if rubbed nearly raw by a rag. He dipped a powdered-sugar doughnut into his coffee, leaving little white specks on the surface that slowly disappeared.

"Joshua," he said. "I've been thinking for a long time about going to St. Loo. Why, you ask. Here's the way I've got it figured. First, I thought of going to New Orleans. No, too far, I reckoned and just too damned sinful."

The way he said it made the curse sound kind of righteous. I nodded.

"But St. Loo. It ain't but a hundert fifty miles. And there are the seeds of wrath sown there. They way I figure it is this. Who needs saving the most? That's where we go—also the closest. All we gotta do is make em mindful of their sinful ways. That I reckon you can do, if you're half as good as you say. Them what needs it the most are going to give the most. Have you ever reckoned what a good strip joint makes in a night?"

"Strip joint! No."

"Pretty near a hundert dollars."

"No!"

"A hundert dollars." His eyes sparkled. He sloshed the remains of the doughnut in the coffee cup, now a creamy color. "Listen, Joshua. Here's the way I got it figured. Me—I can put my fingers on about fifty dollars cash. I ain't made enough here to keep body and soul together. Now," here he squinted, looked hard, as if seeing something I couldn't, "now, tell me, Joshua. I gave you salvation?"

"Yes."

"A free gift? Eternal life?"

"Oh yes."

"You're a new man?"

"Hallelu, Brother Tidball. Born twict."

"I want to see just how real this conviction is. We got ourselves an obligation to spread the truth, you know. How much, how much Brother Joshua, can you put your hands on?"

"Money?"

"Money."

"About three-four hundert dollars."

"About three-four hundert! I thought you were the best salesman at Red Rock Mutual!"

"Well, it ain't exactly a gravy train, you know. Making three percent on them policies and having to cover expenses for all southern Illinois."

"You wouldn't be holding out on me now?"

"No!"

"Three-four hundert?"

"Maybe four-fifty. Course I got my old sedan."

"How soon could you get it?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow night, Joshua McCabe, we leave for St. Loo. Watch out, here we come!"

"Amen!" I shouted. Some people drinking coffee in the diner looked at me kind of startled.

It came to four hundert and six dollars and some change. Homer got ten dollars junk for his Model T and tent both. We traded in my sedan and drove out in a 1932 delivery van for $215 flat. It wasn't but ten years old and the rubber seemed good. Although it looked like it had been through a bit. We spent the day fixing it up. Homer bought some lumber and built a couple of prayer benches in the back, bolting them to the walls. I got a couple of gallons of bright green paint and had a shiny new coat of enamel on it by the time we left. Across the back, where it had read HOLDTRUP'S EGGS & PRODUCE, I painted in bright yellow letters: THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH. The green paint wasn't quite dry and it ran together some. We figured the paint would dry while we drove to St. Louis.

The van took to the roads pretty well, except we discovered that the tires had been painted to look new. The old casings popped like gunfire.

I changed one flat and we drove into Jefferson City on another. We bought four new tires there for $57.00.

It was pouring rain when we cut down the highway along the Mississippi toward St. Louis. Lightning sizzled and cracked along the sky line. Bang-Crackle! A bolt of lightning seemed to rise up out of the Mississippi and shake a huge white fist at us. The river turned a sudden white with chunks of tree limbs, roots, and bushes shivering in the water. Then it would go dark, blacker than ever, while rain thrummed on the van and the wheels sloshed in the ruts. Water began to seep down through the roof and around the windshield. Homer swore it was a sign. The devil was trying to keep us out of St. Loo.

"You know, Josh," he said. "You got to memorize some Bible verses. You're pretty raw, boy. This is our big take."

"Anything you say, Brother Tidball. I'm mighty obliged to you taking me along like this."

"Yes. You're right. It's a risk. But the Lord can use some pretty crude instruments, Joshua."

"I won't let you down. "I've got the Holy Ghost working inme now. Ain't that so?"

"Just memorize the verses, then." He handed a wrinkled sheet of paper at me scrawled thick with verses.

"Here's another thing," he said. "That little Bible I gave you ain't no good. It's a hand-out Bible. I get em free from some Ladies Society over to Ohio. We'll have to get you a good, big one. We'll beat it up a bit. Maybe drive over it a few times to break it in. Folks like that. You gotta thump that thing you know."

"You don't mean that, Homer. That's God's word."

He looked over at me kind of strange for a minute, then turned back to the road, winding like a serpent along the Mississippi. "Here's another thing," he said. "We gotta attract attention. Like this green van. I like that. Nice touch. Tomorrow we both buy ourselves green suits, see. Maybe a green tie and socks. But white shirts. Folks like the white shirts."

"Green?"

"Yessir. Color of money, see. Gotta work on their instincts. And a green, no, make that a gold cross. We can get a cross somewhere, set it up on the back of the van."

"Gold cross. That's nice."

I was pretty excited. I took a good look at Homer there behind the wheel of the van, hat pulled forward because of the condensation dripping down through the roof, face lit up and squinting in the fierce glare of lightning. Each time the lightning cracked he shook a little. His bony, narrow face poked stonily forward under the hat, eyes squinting each time the lightning came.

Myself, I kind of liked the storm. The wilder the better. But that's the way I am, I guess. Always in the thick of it. When I played football for two years at Illinois, before the big war broke up the game, if you catch my drift, I was at center. Had to be there. That way I was in on every play. Never got my name in the papers though. Same in the Army. I was right there at Verdun with all the others, but my name never got in any hometown paper. Maybe if I had a girl left behind or something it would. I did get a purple heart though. Got the scar right here on my ankle and it's pretty hard to argue with something like that. The one thing I was good at was selling. Always was. Born natural to it. I can cozy up to a guy without him figuring I'm some limp-wristed fruitpie. Man-like, you know. Arm on the shoulder and squeeze the elbow.

And it strikes me that I'm so wrapped up in what's happening the last few days that I haven't really had time to get to know Homer Tidball. Here we are on the way, in a full-out, gates of hell lightning storm, to save the whores of St. Loo, and I don't hardly know the guy I gave up my number one spot with Red Rock Mutual for. Looking at him now with this thin, gray face peeking out under that hat like some kind of nervous bird it surprises me kind of. He ain't on the surface, what I'd normally call a real man. Kind of skinny and weasel-like. It's hard almost to believe that he saved me. Or, to put it better, that he led me to God.

It really wasn't just the crowd either, the way I look at it. Sure I went to the revival because I knew there were three, four good marks I was working on that would probably be there. Understand that working small towns you got to be where the action is. When I saw Jonas Lapham, who I had pegged for the sure $5,000 life policy, and home and auto to boot, walk into the tent I kind of had to follow out of good business sense. And I made sure he saw me.

When we got to singing that verse, "Jesus, I come, Oh Lamb of God, I come"—which I hadn't heard since I was a boy and I couldn't hardly stand there singing nothing—I don't believe it was just the song pulling me down. That happens, you know. Like it did in the Army. One guy goes and the rest follow like a bunch of mules headed toward a watering hole. But that wasn't it. I was first down the aisle, walked right past Homer's outstretched hand and gave him a manlike hug, dummed tears falling down my face and all. That was a sure enough Jesus saves salvation. Ain't no doubt about that.

"See there," Homer said.

"What's that?"

"Up ahead. Lights. That's St. Loo."

At two in the afternoon the first piano started grinding in the back streets, the "Tenderloin" Homer called it. By three-thirty we were out on the street, green suits, ties, socks. We looked like something blown out of a tree by the storm, but we attracted attention.

The air was clear and sharp that afternoon, as if the storm had kind of whipped a load of haze and sluggishness out of St. Loo. It made me feel good, want to suck a big lung-full of fresh air and just swell up like a balloon until it hurt. And that was the first time I had even thought of a cigaret in, well, four days now. Brother Homer made me leave the cigarets at the altar that night and swear never to touch them again. Three fresh packs of Luckies. Seemed a bit extreme to me at the time, but I hadn't even thought of them till now. It did feel good to get a lung-full of clean air. It hurt right down to my belly.

The street almost sparkled. You'd never dream any sin could be there. Except for here and there some whiskey bottles lying in the gutter that the clean-up crew had missed.

Standing there by the front door of our hotel, Homer said, "Josh, each one of them whiskey bottles is thrown away money. That's what we gotta save people from. Tonight we'll work the strip joints like we planned. Tomorrow morning start on the drunks. Gotta head em off before they get started good. Nothing's harder than to separate a drunk from his bottle once he gets started."

"We can do her," I said. "If I quit smoking, they can quit drinking."

By late afternoon the street was flowing with people. There were a few couples here and there, but mostly men, walking singly or in small groups. Some of the men wore fine business suits, some old jeans and cheap jackets. We stood out nice and sharp in our suits, and I strutted a bit. Every time someone looked a bit too closely, I went into action, arm around the shoulder so they couldn't slip away.

"Listen, Brother. I want to give you something and it's absolutely free."

"Whatsat?"

"Eternal life."

"Don't want it."

"You got it either way. Except your sinful soul's going to fry in hell!"

Homer looked a mite uneasy over my technique, but he was trying hard himself, talking quietly whenever he could with someone.

I saw a group of four wildcatters come my way. You could tell by the way they walked they were out for trouble and had thought about little old me for it. I outfoxed em quick. The guy on the right was the biggest, bigger'n me even, but I walked right at him with a ferocious scowl on my face, sort of like I was going to belt him one out of pure spite. He stopped dead in his tracks, almost turned around to run.

"Brother, your soul is all in a torment," I says.

"Hunh?"

"Why dontcha get the peace that passes understanding instead of boozing and whoring and helling down here." I didn't give him a chance to edge in. His other three friends had kind of sidled off. Something told me they had met up with the word of God before, that maybe they were just

letting off steam by sneaking around down here, maybe even that there might be wife or kids waiting on some of them.

"Listen, Brother," I didn't give him a chance to get in his own 2 cents yet, not until I had my deal on the floor. "Listen, I've been up, down, and all around this kind of mess until Jesus made a new man outta me. Now, I ain't scared of no man, woman, nor the devil himself. But I am scared of what that old roaring lion Bezelbub can do to some people. Break up homes. Drag daddies down here when they should be with wife or child."

This hit him. I'd guessed right. It came from selling insurance all these years, I guess. You always sell something a person needs. Whether they know it or not.

"But all that can be changed, Brother. Now let me ask you, are you tired of sinning?"

"It's only six-thirty," he said. "I ain't even begun." That brought a weak laugh from his friends.

"Brother," I said, "your life is such a stinking cesspool of sin it stinks in the nostrils of God Almighty. The Bible says the thought is as bad as the deed and what you've been thinking in the last hour or two I'd hate to live with."

His eyes kind of burned inward.

"But all that can change," I ripped on. "I can give you a new life."

In another two minutes I had him in the van. We had put a little bench in the back, a praying bench. The inside of the van was painted gold, with a green cross above the bench. Just the opposite of outside. So someone entered the van through the doors marked: THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH and left with the peace of the cross. Pretty nifty, I thought. We were down on our knees and I had the big guy praying after me. It was pretty awkward, me not being used to it yet. As an extra, I added "I pray I'll treat my family better," even though I didn't have no family, never had time rising to the top of Red Rock Mutual.

I swear that kneeling bench was covered with the big guy's tears, though, so it had its effect. He cried like a baby. I hugged him, man-like, and told him to get on back home.

Homer was waiting at the door pointing at the collection box he had put at the end of the bench. He had painted it green with a big yellow $ sign on it. I shook my head at him and he scowled fiercely. My, it was a thing to see that man scowl. Those weasel eyebrows kind of squinched down until his whole face looked like a prune.

By ten o'clock I had led three more men through that door and into the peace of the cross. By then the street was in full swing, hopping like a toad full of poison. Music blared from the strip joints. The air was gassy with the smell of smoke and alcohol. We decided it was time to hit the strip joints.

Every joint had its pitch man, stationed near the front door. What a pathetic pitch they had. Silly, long-eared bastards pulling on coat sleeves with limp little hands, gesturing obscenely. One latched onto my sleeve like he was begging for a handout. I knocked his hand loose with a blow that set him wringing his hand.

"Son, if you're going to sell something get a product you can be proud of," I roared. "Let me sell you salvation. And it's absolutely free."

"Weirdo," the man spat, but he was backpeddling by then.

"Josh," Homer whispered. "You're pushing the free things too far. We gotta eat you know."

"Lord will provide," I said.

"Listen, Josh. You had four men in the van tonight. Know what's in the collection box? Fifty cents! I bet each one of them had ten bucks for licker and whoring in his pocket. That's $39.50 what's slipped away. We gotta eat, remember."

I looked at him to get his drift, but he hustled inside. Homer was good in a crowd. I've got to admit that. No matter what I thought of him later, the man knew how to work in a crowd. Quick. Slick-tongued. Me, all I do is boom. He slid from table to table, whispering to those poor sinners. I watched him. They slipped bills over to him. Quick. Slick. He was all right, that Homer.

The piano started banging. A little shriveled peanut of a man with a bowler hat was pounding away at it. On to the stage, through the smoke and haze, walked the tallest, biggest woman I'd ever seen. Must have been over 300 pounds of her. She had a green dress on that wasn't a far shade from my suit. I took it as a sign.

I had seen this routine more times than a fox visits the henyard, but I wasn't quite ready for it. She seemed to shake a bit all over, trembling like one of those big locomotives getting going. She worked up a head of steam and started gyrating, trying to balance through some tiny, jerky dance steps. Her eyes, though, her eyes kind of drifted off into space while her body got going. Just onct they lit on my own eyes and I stared back hard, straight back. She jerked her head aside and looked off at the smoke-choked ceiling.

By that time the audience was into it. Boots stomped the board floors so hard the tables trembled. The few women in the audience watched with pinched, pale faces. I wondered what they were doing there.

Some men at a table right under the stage began to roar, "Take it off!" They stomped harder, drowning out the honky-tonk piano that ripped up and down, notes spiking the air like knives thrust back at the men.

The big woman pulled awkwardly at the green dress. She was reaching up her back and couldn't quite reach far enough. Suddenly a large button popped, ricocheted off the stage, and landed in the crowd. The men roared and charged after it. The green dress floated to the stage like a tent.

Her mountainous breasts, like bushels, swayed out in front of her like something sewn on. Watermelons they seemed like. She worked them into a slow, deliberate twirl, the tassels spinning crazily, carooming around and around.

A man with those new-fangled tortoise-shell glasses jumped up on the stage and grabbed at the tassel. You could hear it pop when it came off. He lunged for the other one: Pop!

A bouncer moved to the edge of the stage and the man with the glasses scuttled backwards off the stage waving the tassels like he had just won a ten-dollar bet. Others clapped him on the back and leaned forward to touch the tassels. The bouncer stepped back into the wing, sipped a drink straight from a bottle, while the big woman, sweating a bucket now, ground through her routine. But her eyes! She stared off at the ceiling and past the ceiling as if she wasn't there at all, as if her body was doing this thing on the stage and she had left it for a time because she couldn't bear the trick the body was playing on her.

It was then the spirit came upon me. I bulled my way to the stage like an old lineman clearing a path for one of those over-glorified star fullbacks, except in this case I felt I was plowing a path for Jesus himself. And I made deliberate for the table of the men with the tassels, knocking three-four of them aside as I hopped onto the stage.

I stared down into the face of the skinny guy with the glasses, him still hanging onto the two tassels like he had been caught shoplifting. The big woman, I swear she had six inches on me and I stand six foot, jumped back staring at me with round eyes and the ends of those watermelon, bushel-basket bosoms. For a minute the piano kept on kniving, then sort of ran out of notes.

"Say!" she said.

"Say nothing!" I bellowed. "I've come to cleanse this den of iniquity in the name of Jesus."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the bouncer move off the piano in the wing, kind of flip the bottle around in his hand, and signal another goon in the room. Homer caught sight of the them and started sliding toward the door.

I roared out at the crowd, "I ask you tonight what you'd say if Jesus hisself stood on this stage. He knows what's burning in your heart. He knows your families back home, your little children, your wives. You can't hide from the Lord. Yea, the day of wrath is coming."

The two men were moving up behind me. I barreled along.

"I tell you if you want real peace, real joy, there's only one way and that's through Jesus. You quit this fire of hell you're playing with here."

The two bouncers didn't fool around. The first twisted my arm up behind my back until I heard muscles starting to rip. The other rapped the bottle upside my head, grabbed a handful of hair, and started dragging me

toward the door. I caught sight of the stripper holding her gown over her breasts, her face white like the ashes of a burnt out fire.

The power of the Lord had been upon me, that was clear.

I hardly felt the bouncer kick me square in the slats while the other hammered at the back of my skull with his hamhock fist. I doubled over and caved in in the gutter outside the front door.

A puddle of water slapped gently at my face.

In a few minutes Homer snuck over to investigate the damage. Inside, the piano had started again. I made back toward the door, but Homer steered me aside.

"Damn, Joshua," he said.

"Don't swear," I answered.

"Why did you have to go and ruin that for? I must of had twenty, twenty-five bucks going already."

"What?"

"What nothing. Listen, you ham-headed fool . . ." He stared at my soiled suit. "Oh, what's the use. Come on."

We walked back down the street, jostling our way through the crowd. My head had begun to hurt something fierce. I touched the lump behind my ear, found blood sticky on the fingers. Someone hooted out, "Hey, Preacher Man!" Homer slunk at my side.

"Let's get back to the hotel," he said.

He tugged my arm and turned down an alley. By that time my head was hurting so much that I didn't much care where he took me. We clattered by some broken bottles and litter to our hotel a block over. In a doorway a man in an Army uniform pressed against the wall. I was almost past him when I realized it was a them. He had wrapped his overcoat around their bodies.

Judas Priest, in broad daylight, I thought. Never mind it being near one in the morning.

I grabbed the Army man by the cuff of his collar and hurled him out into the alley. He spat curses at me while he pulled his trousers up. I guess that in the dark he must have thought me and Homer was police. Fat chance. No police down here at night.

"Run!" I shouted at him. He lurched down the alley fumbling at his buttons. "Run!"

The girl looked at me with wide, staring eyes, her skirt still pulled up around her waist. She hadn't moved an inch. Her skinny white thighs stood out against the dark brick. She moved them fetchingly.

"Damn. You ain't nothing more than a child," I said.

"I'm sixteen," she spat. "Old enough for you, buddy."

"Sixteen! Fourteen at most. Pull your skirt down, girl. The Lord don't like looking on your sin."

"Mister, you just cost me two bucks. If you ain't got two bucks you best let me go. Make it quick and I'll charge you a dollar. How about you, Mister?" This to Homer, who was standing in the dark shaking his head. "Make it a quick one and the same goes for you."

"I've seen all I want to," I said. "Get along home."

"Fifty cents?"

"Know what the Bible says about whores, girl?"

"I ain't a whore. I need the money. Know a better way? Who's the whore, anyway? Ain't it these creeps that come down here for their quickie?"

"I know a better way, darling. You need the Lord and you need to change your life. You run on home and tomorrow you come and see me down by that green van on the next block."

"It'll be two bucks then."

"It'll be your soul then, child. You come right to that green van there." I pointed up the alley to where the van was parked. "See what's painted on that door. THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH. That's what's in store for you unless you get right with God. And little girl, you're too young and pretty to die."

She was crying then. I gave her a hug. She shook her head and ran off down the alley the other way. Later I figured out that it was her that slipped the two bucks out of my pocket.

Homer was shot by then. He couldn't say a word anymore. We walked down the alley toward the green van. Someone had slopped paint over the verse on it, crossing out the *is:* THE WAGES OF SIN ARE DEATH. Below they had splotched on with the same paint: ANOTHER FOOL FOR CHRIST.

Maybe so, I thought, and walked up to the hotel room. Homer was asleep in two minutes.

Even though we had been going like a rip for more hours than I could count, I couldn't sleep. Every time I'd lie down the room kept spinning around. Maybe it was that clout on my head. The pillow seemed to lift my mind right out of my head and twirl it around. I got up and sat by the window. A small square of light from the street outside tumbled through the window and lay trembling on the cheap table. The table had stains on it that rippled the wood. Outside a few drunks lurched and shouted in the street.

If only we could of caught them earlier, I thought. How can anyone catch them all? You start by ones and twos.

I heard the van door squeak open and looked out. A large body was struggling inside the narrow door. The door pulled shut. I wondered whether I should go down. Probably some drunk sleeping if off. Well, let him. There ain't nothing to take but a Bible and an empty collection box.

I wanted a cigaret. I wanted it so bad and so sudden it hurt like a knife had been twisted up in my guts. It felt like a fire in me, burning an empty hold in my belly. Damn I needed a cigaret.

An empty ashtray lay on the table mocking me. A few tar smudges were ground into its glass bottom. I reached out a hand, fingered the ashtray, and then—I couldn't help it—I lifted it and sniffed at it. No, I'll be honest. I smelled at it like a hound. I felt in my pockets. That's when I noticed that the two bucks was missing. Maybe I could find an old butt in the street outside. Anything that smoked. A big fist knotted up in my belly and rose white and hot and heavy behind my eyes. It was pounding. It was awful. Any old butt. I pulled on my pants and my old bluchers.

Homer's coat lay over a chair. Maybe he had a smoke in a pocket. What did he do with those cigarets? Maybe my Luckies were there yet. I rifled through the pockets. Homer's voice cut me like chill ice.

"Just what are you doing, Joshua?"

"A smoke, Brother Tidball. I need a smoke."

"You ain't looking for money?"

"A cigaret."

"Money ain't there anyway. Cigarets cost money, Joshua. Lie down and sleep."

"Okay. Okay, I'll do that."

I lay down with pants and shoes on. Homer snored next to me. Somewhere toward morning I dozed off.

I woke wanting a smoke more than ever. I slipped on my jacket and snuck outside. The sun was just reddening the sky up above the saloons and strip joints. A gray mist hung in the air like it was gathering together to rain again. I poked hurriedly in the gutter. Whiskey bottles. Trash. Damn, a used prophylactic. Some people ain't got no couth at all. Then I found it. A hardly touched smoke, store-bought brand. It was a bit damp but smokeable.

I felt like a thief. Cupping the unlit cigaret in my hand I slipped to the van. The crossed-out IS dripped paint down the door. That was really an ugly van. The door groaned open. At the awful groaning, a figure inside sat up.

I jumped back and whacked my head against the door frame. The cigaret tumbled into a puddle. Hand to head I watched it sink and drown in the slime. My head hurt. I felt like bawling.

A hand grabbed me, pulled me in the van, steadied me against the kneeling bench.

"Are you okay? I didn't mean to frighten you."

In the half light I saw her face take shape out of the shadows.

"You're . . ."

"Yes. I'm her. Don't I look so big with my coat on?"

"Not at all. I mean, I'm glad to see you."

"I'll bet."

"I mean it."

"All the others want to see what's underneath. You too?"

"No. Especially the way my head hurts."

"Will you talk to me?"

"Yes," I said, wondering what to say.

"I don't have any one to talk to."

"Why do you do it?"

"What?" she asked. "Oh, you mean the routine. The big strip?"

My but that was a tight little cabin back there on the delivery van. I shuffled around some, avoiding her question. Woman wanted to talk, so let her talk. "You ain't got a smoke?" I asked.

"No. Sorry. You got to understand . . . all my life, see, I'm a freak, you know?"

"No," I protested.

"No? I'm six-foot-six, mister. Where else do I go? A circus?"

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Sorry's one thing I don't need, see? Tell me . . . listen. All my life, all I wanted was to have a normal life, see? I want children. Can you understand that? See, I can get used to the idea of not being married. Who'd want me? But I just can't get used to the idea of not having children. I can't. But can you imagine me pregnant? Or my kids? They'd come out three foot long and fifty pounds."

I had to laugh. What could I say? All of a sudden—that picture of her giving birth to these kids!—I just plain busted up laughing. And she started laughing with me. That old van shook with it. Then, just as sudden, there were tears in her eyes. She was rubbing her large hands against her temples.

"You're different," she said. "You know, you're the first man that ain't looked at my body first. Know that? You looked me in the eyes. That's what scared me. No one has done that before. Looked me in the eyes."

"Maybe I've changed."

"What do you mean?"

"It would have been different a week, two weeks ago. I think it's true. I looked at you, and saw a child of God."

Her whole body kind of sagged forward. Even with her coat on, those huge breasts sagged out and fell on her knees. Right then I caught the words in my mouth: fuzzy, thick noises.

"What am I saying?" I muttered.

"What?"

"I came out here sneaking around to have a smoke. I was dying for a smoke. And I thought I had died to that. What Homer said anyway. I thought I had it beat, anyway."

She looked at me, her eyes hardening with an edge of anger. "You're still human, ain't it so?"

"Yeah, I know it."

"Does your God want you to be anything more than that? Do you have to be a little God to be saved? Why you got to be dead to smoking if you're dying for a smoke? If that's so, mister, there ain't much hope for me. I'd make a great big God, but not much of a good one."

She was angry. A nice, clean anger that had the drive of some kind of truth I didn't understand behind it. I started to say, "But, now, I got to . . ."

"Shut up," she said. And then she started laughing. Really laughing. I began to let it go. And it felt good, you know? Laughing, I mean. Really letting go. I'd forgotten how good a laugh could feel. Thing I realized about Brother Homer, right then. He didn't laugh. A man what don't laugh ain't a whole man somehow. And I wondered if Jesus laughed. Especially at this poor fool he died for who was dying for a smoke sitting in the back of a rickety van with this six-foot-six woman who was busting a gut laughing. Kind of cleaned things out a little.

"What I really wanted to ask," she said in time, "was this. If you got a piece of a God like that, can you give me some? I need it. Lord," and she chuckled deep in her throat in a way that it sounded like a sob, "how I need it."

"Well. . ." I was kind of reluctant, like I had to force myself on. I wondered why it had been so easy last night. "I just been wondering myself . . ."

"Please," she said. "You know, when I'm up there, like you saw last night, I can't look at none of their faces. I just gotta look out. And I don't see nothing! Can you understand that? Nothing. I look out and out and I pretend I'm looking some place, some time, somewhere; but I don't see nothing but a blue cloud of smoke up around the ceiling. I got to see something! Please."

"Well," I said again, "you can try praying with me. I ain't much good at it myself yet, and I really don't know what you might expect to feel from it all. Don't hurt to try none."

If anyone could have seen the two of us hunkered down over that kneeling bench, almost busting out of the sides of the van, they would have laughed till hell froze over.

"Lord Jesus," I muttered, and she repeated words after me, her voice very much like a soft rain, a surprising voice for so large a woman, a gentle voice. We knelt there a minute or two, like we were half-expecting some kind of sign like a peal of thunder from heaven which wouldn't have been far-fetched given how hot it was already. But the quiet felt good, anyway, even if nothing much happened. A bird sang outside the van. I remembered hearing that and wondering what on earth a bird was doing down

here in this general cesspool of a city. Light crept up into the van from the rising sun, inch by inch it slipped in lying, finally like a small pool of gold at our bent knees. We were so close together I could hear the gentle sighing of her lungs when she breathed. At last she shifted her weight awkwardly and tried to get up. She had to stand hunched over like a huge beast bearing human flesh in the tight quarters. I wouldn't have called her a pretty woman, even then with the morning sun throwing a kind of quiet pool around her. Nor in the years since.

"Gonna rain today," she said.

"Reckon so."

"Goodbye."

When I shuffled back on up to the hotel room, Homer was running around like a crazy little puppet jerking at the ends of the electric wires. He emptied the drawers, flinging clothes into the suitcase.

"Where you been?" he shrieked. He hadn't put his shirt on yet, and his skinny little arms kind of flapped about like awkward wings. A man shouldn't be that skinny.

"Outside. Homer, what're you doing?"

"We're moving on, Josh boy."

"Moving?"

"Chicago. I had a vision lying here in bed. Wondering where you had snuck off to. I heard the voice of the Lord telling me where to go."

"Why Chicago?"

"Lotsa sinners there."

"But, Homer, the devil's got a fair share here."

"Boy, after the way you screwed up last night, we ain't nothing but an old joke here, and there ain't nothing worse than being laughed at in our business."

"I don't understand, Homer."

By then he was hustling downstairs. He threw the suitcases in the back of the van.

"Ain't you gonna pay?"

"Already did." He stopped for a minute. "You coming?"

I clambered in the passenger side. I looked back in the van, thinking about the woman who had spent the night there. I don't even know her name, I thought. There seemed to be something tragic in that. I really should have known her name.

The van lurched into gear and bucked down the road. Water geysered from ruts, splashing sheets of mud up over the windshield. The leak above Homer started dripping a thick juice. He kept the throttle down and St. Loo disappeared in a cloud of smoke and water spray.

"But why we leaving, Homer?" I finally asked.

"Josh, there weren't no money there. Least not the way you operated. Bellering up to that fool woman while I was hustling tables as slick as could be. Joshua, I was on my way to a fifty dollar night, first one in months. See, the idea is for you to sort of side me, learn the moves, you know."

"But, Homer. We were doing the Lord's work, weren't we?"

Homer had the odd habit of being able to look out of the side of his eyes without swiveling his head much. His eyes were flat and lifeless. "Why don't you wise up, boy?" He flicked his eyes back to the road, his knuckles ridged white around the chattering steering wheel.

I should have left then. I guess a wise man would. But I had to ask this: "Homer, you mean it ain't real with you? I mean you ain't a born twict believer?"

He let out a long sigh. "Joshua. Understand me now. I looked and looked and found . . . you know what I found, Joshua? There ain't but one God, and his face is green."

"Green?"

"I'm talking about money, Joshua. And you ain't done too well by it."

The van rattled down the rut-rippled road. Once the back door banged open when we cracked a hole, thunked against the frame, and just as sudden slammed shut again.

"Homer, you got me saved."

"Naw."

"It sure enough felt real to me, Homer. But if it weren't real for you . . . *never*, Homer?"

"Oh, maybe onct. But it all sort of leaded out, Joshua. I was running around empty-pocketed while fat cats full of cash were getting saved by me. I started to change my pitch a bit. A starved body ain't gonna save many souls. And then, well, here it is, Joshua. On the road."

"Stop the car, Homer."

"It's raining, Joshua. Don't be a fool."

"Stop the car!"

The old van lurched to a stop.

"You know," I said, "I got to find out for certain, Homer. You understand how it is. If it weren't real for you, then how come . . . . Well, I gotta know."

"Where you gonna go, Joshua?"

"Back. Just back. I'm gonna find out."

"You're forgetting your money bought this here van?"

"Keep it. I can walk."

"Here. You get part of the take, believer or not." He shoved a ten at me. I was going to push it back. It would seem the right thing to do. I took it and shoved it in my coat pocket.

"Like you say, a starved body don't save no souls. Goodbye, Homer."

I shut the door before he could answer. The van lurched into gear and bucked up the road in a cloud of smoke and rain.

The rain drizzled down my neck. I turned the coat collar up. Looking back over my shoulder I could just make out the words splashed across the van door: THE WAGES OF SIN ARE DEATH. And this. The van had caught in a pothole on the curve. The smoke was belching and the tires rutting. But it warn't going nowhere.

I headed back down the road to St. Loo and the rain came harder.

Sam Longmire
"Tell Me You Love Me"

Already married three years, Will went along with Shirley when she had new ideas about food, sex, and vacations, but he wanted no changes in the little domestic rituals that they had established and refined to help them make their way through the complicated intimacies of married life. And the bedtime routine was most treasured by Will, particularly on the weekday nights that were never passionately special. After turning out the little table light on his side of the bed, Will would always roll to his left and rest his right arm on Shirley's hip while she lay on her side with her back to Will. After patting Shirley's thigh for a few tender moments, Will then would say, "I love you," and as he rolled over, he could always hear Shirley whisper, "I love you, too," no matter how far she had drifted away from him into slumber.

On a very cold night in February—Wednesday perhaps—Will issued his nightly declaration, "I love you," but he heard no echo from Shirley when he swiveled into his sleeping position. The silence in the bedroom, disturbed regularly by her deep breathing, was disconcerting to Will. He knew with alarm that he had only two choices: he could allow her to escape into her soundest sleep or he could act decisively and extract from her the comforting litany. He chose the latter plan of action.

"I love you, Shirley," he said with a formal tone that reminded him briefly of his wedding vows not too long ago at the United Methodist Church in Goshen, Indiana. Shirley responded only with a long, unthinking moan that meant she would not easily be retrieved from the darkness of the long night. Will, however, opened his eyes, fully awake. In spite of his reputation that he was a considerate husband—Alice, his subordinate in the personnel office at ALCOA, often said Will was a "peach of a guy"—Will was annoyed. "Is it too much to expect her to tell me once a day that she loves me?" Will asked himself. And he quickly gave himself the reasonable answer: "No, it is not too much to ask."

"Shirley," he said with annoyance, "tell me you love me. Are you awake?" He poked her hip bone twice.

"What's that?" Shirley cried out as she raised herself shakily and leaned on her elbow. She was drugged by sleep yet strangely frightened, as though something had moved toward her from the dark corner of the room.

"You forgot to tell me you love me," Will said tentatively, knowing anxiously that he had stepped on a thin layer of ice.

"Did you wake me for that?" she hissed in disbelief, as though her toes had just fallen off.

"Yeah, you forgot to tell me you love me," Will confessed, embarrassed but still annoyed.

"Oh my God," Shirley sputtered irreverently, and she threw her head back to her pillow with such force that she would have brained herself if she had hit the head board.

Will sat upright in bed, Indian fashion with his legs pulled up and crossed. He looked down at his wife, whose white cheek shone like ivory from the moonlight that seeped through the thin window blind. He was troubled that she appeared so cold and dead. Will did not know exactly what to do even though he was in his thinking position. Good sense told him to forget the ritual for one night and to restore it when his wife was in a better mood. But Will did not like to lose, even though he had known some defeat at the hands of Shirley in both Ping-Pong and pool. He therefore abandoned good sense and pushed on for victory.

"Just tell me you love me," he said angrily. "It's not too much to ask." He firmly patted her bottom, which was now safely hidden under a sheet and two blankets.

"Will," said Shirley with sleepy defiance, "I'm not going to be coerced into telling you that I love you. Now go to sleep."

"But you do love me, don't you?" Will interrogated Shirley with theatrical urgency, but what he heard in return was the subtle movement of her hand toward her face. Will leaned closer to her face to detect what expression she had assumed to add to his torment. Seeing that her knuckles were lined up on the side of her face, he surmised that her right index finger was plugging up the opening of her right ear.

On most occasions Will was a genuine peach—Alice was right—but he could get angry. Those who applied for a job at ALCOA soon learned that they had to please Mr. William Smith before their applications were forwarded to a more powerful person in another division. He was firm, demanding, and fair. He maintained that all friendships worth cultivating had to be 50-50. No more, no less. He had always thought that Shirley understood the rules, that they gave and took equally. Neither was expected to walk the extra mile, but the first mile was certainly obligatory.

"Shirley," he cried out as though she had accidentally kneed him in the groin, "don't be stubborn, for God's sake, and tell me you love me. And take your stupid finger out of you ear. That's childish."

Shirley drew her knees up close to her stomach and buried her finger deeper into her ear canal. She was tense and ready, as though an executioner would soon land a cruel blow to her back and shoulders.

Will's anger was now well developed and sharply focused. He saw Shirley's behavior as perverse and foolishly rebellious. She was once again one of the irrational students he had watched at Indiana University in the early '70s during their undergraduate years. As they had protested against everything, including the Vietnam War, Will had watched them with disdain, and he had concluded that constructive disagreement with authority (he had never defined constructive disagreement) would do more to

cure social ills than pot-ridden chants along the Jordan River. A small cavity in Will's brain hinted to him that he should now disagree constructively with Shirley, but the regular drumbeat of his blood called him to win the war.

"Shirley, I know you can hear me," Will shouted. "I'm going to turn on the light, and I'm not turning it off until you tell me you love me. You can't sleep with the light on, so you might as well give up. You can't win."

As soon as he turned on the lamp, Shirley slipped her head under the pillow. Will recalled briefly the rust-speckled lizards that lived in his grandmother's stone wall back in Goshen: each summer when he was a child, Will tried futilely to catch them before they disappeared into dark crevices. He had accepted his childhood defeats with equanimity, but always with the determination to win more than he lost.

"You can't sleep like that all night, Shirley. You will suffocate. You will die. Tell me you love me, goddamn it."

Will rose up on his knees and glared furiously at his wife's headless body. He knew that by now he had stepped over some boundary of appropriate behavior and that his marriage was perhaps damaged in a way that it could never be wholly patched up. His brain therefore continued to send subtly coded messages of restraint, but they were, alas, too subtle to overrule the rage in his heart. It was the rage that comes not simply from being opposed but by being contradicted by a person whose personality one has totally miscalculated. Shirley had always taken care of him, and he had always reciprocated. If she went to art class, he prepared supper and did the dishes (the dishes, he believed, put some stress on the 50-50 formula, but he never said anything). If he suffered a setback at the office, she always cheered him up. And they had always been good pals, dodging skillfully the slings and arrows of marital misfortune that seemed to hit their friends with amazing accuracy. He knew that he could still save some of his dignity, not to mention his marriage, if he could bring himself to turn off his light and fall asleep without making any more demands. Since he was basically a real peach, Will decided to surrender. But as he leaned toward the lamp, he accidently pulled the covers from Shirley's shoulders. As quickly as if she were backhanding an elusive Ping-Pong ball—she had won three out of five earlier in the evening when they went to the basement for a little fun—Shirley aggressively yanked the covering back to her exposed shoulders. This violent movement, this implied retaliation, drove Will out of bed, and he screamed with a volume that would have penetrated three pillows:

"Shirley, I'm leaving right now. I will not stay here with a wife who does not love me."

He waited. No answer. Her breathing was deep and controlled.

"You are faking, Shirley. You aren't asleep. You are awake and you are perverse. Do you hear me? You are perverse, and I'm leaving."

Will knew that he now had to leave quickly. He found his slippers in the dark, slammed the bedroom door on his way out, and stomped to the closet in the hallway. He then remembered that he had not hung up his coat; he had thrown it across the chair in the bedroom after their evening walk. And all of his other jackets were in the bedroom closet. He hit the wall with his fist and winced in pain. He then thought of himself as a martyr cruelly persecuted by the forces of evil. "A martyr," he thought, "does not ask favors of the hangman. I will leave this house and take my chances."

When he plunged into the cold night, he knew immediately that he had made a foolish exit. Ice from the half-melted snow made walking on the sidewalk treacherous. The temperature had been dropping since late afternoon and it was probably below 20 degrees. "Lynville, Indiana is not Chicago." This insight came to him as a shock. He thought affectionately of Chicago where he had recently spent three days at a personnel convention. "This is not Chicago," he repeated quietly, "and I have no place to go."

Standing on the sidewalk in front of his house, he looked at his neighbors' houses, and he imagined them as one-story brick fortresses with killer dogs, loaded shotguns, witches, and torture chambers made to look like bedrooms. He had to keep moving, but he had nowhere to go. His only recourse was to walk or shuffle around the block and then return to his house. Perhaps by that time Shirley would see her folly and tearfully welcome him back.

As he moved down Jefferson Street, he tried to avoid the murderous ice ridges created by bicycle tires and hiking boots. The world seemed to be tight and frozen, ready to crack into little pieces. The frigid lawns were tainted by large patches of dirty snow, and the bare maples (all of them 20 years old) stood exposed to the cold light of the moon.

"Unbelievable," he thought, "she wouldn't say she loved me." And he wondered how he could have fallen into such a predicament. Shirley had never shown any sign of resentment toward him. In fact, he had just told Shirley the other night (as she browned the hamburger) that he had perhaps the best marriage of any employee at ALCOA: he and Shirley had, after all, good sex, enjoyed Ping-Pong and the Cubs, cleaned the house together, and liked the same friends. Before he could figure out the cause of Shirley's rebellion, Will's attention was diverted by the howling of Montezuma, Johnson's indiscreet basset, and by the sudden spray of light from Benson's kitchen. Will's awareness of other kinds of life in the neighborhood made him painfully aware of the folly of his pilgrimage, clad only in light blue pajamas. He quickened his pace for fear that Montezuma would overtake him or a well-meaning motorist would offer him a ride. Leaving Jefferson for Berry Street, Will knew the wind was colder and stronger. He walked with his arms straight and his legs stiff to protect his flesh from touching his meager clothing that had become as cold as the tin roof on his storage shed. He thought of the story by Jack London that he

had read years ago in Goshen Central High. Something about a guy freezing to death because he could not light his fire.

"Yes," Will thought, "the light has gone out in my marriage, and we are dead to each other." Will was grimly pleased that he had the mental powers to apply the story to his life, but he had no leisure to recall other clever analogies to his situation, for his left foot suddenly took a circuitous route on the dark ice and compelled his slightly overweight frame to follow. His elbow took the full blow on the darkly gleaming pavement. Tears came to his eyes as he rolled to his back and lay in a stranger's front yard. He imagined that his elbow looked like a splintered ice cube after it had been exploded by warm Pepsi.

"Unbelievable," he muttered, "unbelievable." But the cold that burned into his skin was nothing compared to the numbing thought that he had been betrayed by his wife. Their courtship and marriage flashed on the screen of his tormented mind. It had all seemed so easy with Shirley. Getting a job with Central Insurance Company in Indianapolis enabled Will after graduation to drop down to Bloomington on weekends to keep his eye on Shirley and to stay in the running as her top man. Finally she did graduate with a sociology major, and sure enough, Will was her man, and he was pleased that she had matured enough to see what he could offer her. But there had been delays before they could fall into connubial bliss. She wanted half a year of freedom to get settled into her profession with the Mental Health Association. And he needed another six months to work up to a proper mood for marriage. Finally, they had a fabulous wedding—Shirley's father went deep into his savings—and their lives came together without conflict: Will threw a memorable party when he landed the ALCOA job, and they went out to dinner to celebrate her first major promotion.

Now, lying in the snow, Will wanted to blame Shirley's mean rebellion on her new friendship with Murphy at work, the freshly liberated Murph who had told her husband their marriage was finished because his dullness was intolerable. "Can't blame Murph," Will thought, "that's too simple. Of course, Shirley may be crazy." And then his position reminded him that he might be nuts, too. The cold of the snow had encased his body and held him to the spot.

"I could die here," he thought. "Who would be the first to discover my body? School children? The mailman? Montezuma?"

And then the thought of Shirley lying warm in bed made him so angry that he sat up, pushed himself to his feet with his uninjured arm, and walked heroically through the arctic blast that awaited him when he turned on to Red Bud Street.

"Halfway there," he told himself, "halfway to my house. And it is *my* house. I can't forget that."

During his long trek down Red Bud, Will sneezed regularly with exaggerated convulsions, as if to get back at Shirley for her cruelty. The light of the moon on the dark patches of ice reminded Will of his father's old back yard cistern when the cover was off and the sunlight invaded the dark hole and fell against the black water. When William Smith, Sr., mowed the grass, he often partially uncovered the cistern to allow his son to glimpse the deadly and forbidden pool. Frightened and delighted, Will often dropped stones into the water, thinking murderously that they would never see the sunlight again. And the amazing thought struck Will that Shirley was like that cistern in Goshen: he might watch her with fascination but he would never really discover what lay below the mysterious ripples of her mind. Will leaned against the battered wooden telephone pole at the intersection of Red Bud and Findlay. The solid separateness of the pole startled him, and he caught a glimpse of himself in a universe of unconnected shapes and surfaces.

"I don't know her," he admitted, "I have lived and slept with a stranger." A new sensation of loneliness flowed through his ice-clogged veins. He had never been so profoundly isolated, and he fought this new condition with the noble resolve to apologize to Shirley. "I had no right to force her to say, 'I love you.' The whole episode was absurd."

When Will entered his house, his good-natured impulses were chilled by the dark silence of his bedroom. "She slept right through it all. She doesn't care for me." Shirley's stoic refusal to mourn Will's departure gave him new anguish, but he refused to continue the battle. He would never know Shirley, and maybe not even himself, but he must act as though he did. What else could he do?

While he shed his cold, wet pajamas in the bathroom, Will fought against his rising anger. "I will apologize, yes, but she owes me something, too." A cockroach made a run for it across the back of the sink. Will impulsively smashed it with his open hand.

"If she leaves me," he thought, "she kills her own damn bugs. And she empties her own mousetraps and takes out the stinking garbage, too."

When he finally slipped into his bed, Will's body shook uncontrollably, partly from the frost in his lungs and partly from the heat of his rage. "It's no good," he thought, "I can't say I'm sorry. I can't." Suddenly he felt the other side of the bed moving rhythmically. No question about it, Shirley was laughing. It started as a suppressed snicker, one that a teenager might use during Holy Communion. The laughter expanded and pushed itself into her stomach and soon overtook her whole body. Before Will could rise up and break her nose, she spoke:

"You foolish, foolish man. Why did you get angry over such a small thing?"

"But why couldn't you just say it? Why were you so stubborn?"

Shirley touched his arm. Her hand was warm and gentle.

"What did you want me to say?"

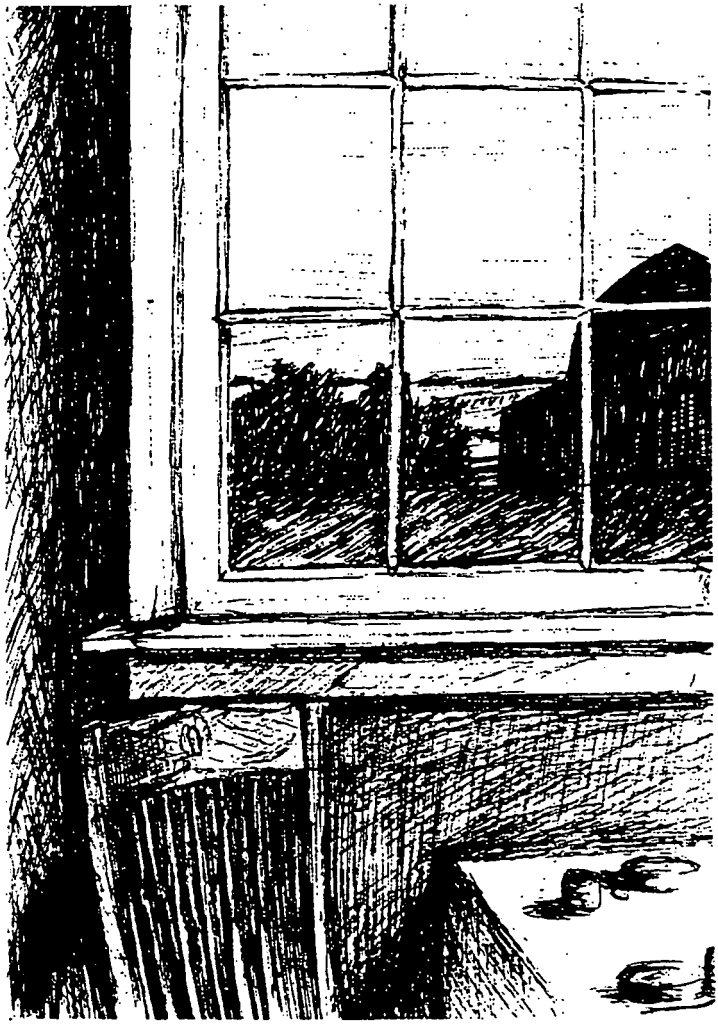
"Damn it, Shirley, you know what I wanted. I just wanted you to say you love me."

"Is that all you wanted?"

"Yes."

"Okay, if you promise to go to sleep, I'll say it. 'You love me.'"

More than an hour later, before his real fever began, Will fell asleep dreaming about the old cistern that was deep, dark, and dangerous.



Reviews

Review

Country of Air by Richard Jones. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1989. 61 pages. $8.00, paper.

No matter how akin to the real world it is, the poem remains an imagined world given rise to, through language, by the facts of the real world. The facts may be mundane in the world, but they must not remain mundane in the poem, for poetry transforms the world into meaning. If a poem speaks of things as though they don't matter, it's not the things that are lost, but the poem. The most noble function of poetry is to redeem our losses through language, to give meaning and substance to the stories of our lives, to our sense of how we live. Acknowledging that language is an artifice and so can only signify and not be the world, we must also not ignore the fact that we, as creatures of perception and reason, know the world through the language we've devised to signify it. This makes it possible for language, well-used, to alter our perception of the world and so change the world itself, or, to be more precise, create a new world wherein the things of this one are redeemed, exposed as significant. In well-made poems, we are moved to care for the length of the poem about some significant fact of the world we live in, and so we become practiced at caring, at noticing significance. Through the act of reading great poems, we can become more human.

The best poems in Richard Jones' *Country of Air* do expose the significance of common occurrences. "The Wounded One," perhaps the most articulate and moving poem in the collection, involves The Hunt. The speaker of the poem isn't involved with the violence that disrupts his world. He is working in his garden, engaged in a life-affirming activity, when he sees "geese crossing the corn fields," and hears "gunshots coming from the woods." The birds stay together as they flee, "bound to one another/by fear and love and history." Here, language begins revising the world. Suddenly these birds are our cousins, staying close to each other for the same reasons we do, and we begin the process of caring what happens to them. We see them sticking together and we are moved. Our compassion intensifies when one is wounded and drops away from the rest "who turn as one for a moment, then rise again/to cross the ridge, leaving the wounded one behind." The birds, as we might, acknowledge their loss before going on, knowing, perhaps, that grief must not consume and destroy them. Still, there is the moment when they do turn, when they could almost choose death in order to deny loss, and it is this moment, more than anything, that wins us over.

The wounded one drops into the speaker's world, and the poem is no longer safe from the threat of violence. The threat has entered the poem and the speaker is moved to take action. He follows the ragged flight of the bird to

> find her in the shallows of the marsh grass,
> head held high, water stained red, her body
> pushing itself around in circles.

It's interesting that Jones creates the wounded one as female, since it does seem women are more powerful figures of sympathy, perhaps because they are the carriers of life, of the womb, and are thus more symbolic of continuation. We are also moved to care what happens to this bird by how she holds to her dignity; even as she bleeds.

The speaker wades out into the cold water, determined to reach the wounded bird before either the hunters or their dogs. Whether he will "save her" or "bury her," it will be an act of mercy, not destruction. But she hears him coming and doesn't know of his determination and so struggles to escape. The language now takes over the poem and reader. Suddenly we are her, "alive,/and terrified," and we are compelled to struggle with her as

> She retreats into the woods,
> farther and farther away.
> She is determined to live,
> to see this life through, until it's finished.

Her dignity becomes the vehicle by which we, in reading, become more human. This determination is precisely what we need to survive humanely in the world which threatens to overwhelm the compassion of the poem, the world of violence and pain and degradation that has wounded the bird but does not, because of the power and grace of her determined struggle, succeed in what is its only purpose—destruction. This poem reminds us that poems must survive against the mindless force of destruction which seems, often, to rule the world. Poems must be on the side of construction, and work to redeem our lives and our selves, as "The Wounded One" does.

Like the workers in the cemetery in "Leaving Town After the Funeral," the best poems in *Country of Air* allow us to know our grief and to be comfortable with it as a thing we share, being human. They allow us to acknowledge it and go "back to work." And this is constructive, poems as sanctuaries against the forces that would break us and make us less human, poems allowing us to deal with the pain which seems to so often define our lives so we can go on. *Country of Air* offers us poems to remember and return to, to hold as a comfort against the pain.

George Looney

Review

All New People by Anne Lamott. San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1989. 166 pages. $16.95, cloth.

Anne Lamott's *All New People*, her fourth novel, is about memory's ability to color the past. The novel opens with the narrator, Nan, "in a state of dull torment for which the Germans probably have a word," and the narrative, as in some of Joan Didion's work, operates as a kind of therapy. The impetus for the telling of this story is the narrator's visit to a hypnotist. After Nan tells him what troubles her—"anxiety, melancholia; fears of loss, rejection, death, humiliation, suicide, madness"—the hypnotist, "sixty or so, smiling and kind, John Kenneth Galbraith in L. L. Bean clothes," asks Nan what her strengths are. She answers, more in the interest of filling the empty space left by a question than out of conviction, that she can be "sort of kind, sort of funny." In a fatherly-motherly way the hypnotist takes her answer seriously, and tells her she will need to remember it later—so will the reader.

Her first task is to recall events of her life beginning with the most recent and working toward her earliest memory. As we might expect, the events evoke in Nan feelings of guilt and inferiority; they make up a life-long chain of causes that lead up to her present state of dull torment. Then the hypnotist asks her to begin at the earliest childhood memory and as the "funny and kind" adult to "assume responsibility for the child." After we see the soothing power of this technique over a few events, Lamott spares the reader from having to accept the hypnotist session as a frame for the novel. Rather the session is more of a preface that shows us how to read the forthcoming story and tells us early on something about the teller, her ability to soften her pain with the translucent wash of a gentle and humorous memory.

The voice of this first section is the same as that of the very last; both are in the present and together enclose a middle narrative of numbered chapters told not so much by an adult as by a voice that convincingly mixes childhood innocence with the wisdom of adult retrospection. In the following passage, for example, Nan muses about the various families whose names she sees on the bundles of shirts at the laundry. The child often compares her family with others, and the retrospective adult seeks the humor in those comparisons:

> The McGees had two bundles of shirts to pick up here. They lived in an old stone house on the road that ran along the railroad tracks. They had a Newfoundland and a garden full of roses and

> tulips, daffodils in the spring. In the winter the whole family went up to Tahoe and skied. The father was very jolly and in late summer he wore lederhosen. I wanted my father to wear lederhosen, and when I asked him if he would buy some, he said, "Later, darling." I wanted him to be a jolly lederhosen kind of guy, my skinny leftist dad with his moon-white pterodactyl legs.

In the middle narrative, Nan paints a family portrait against the backdrop of a small, lower middle class community outside San Francisco when the fifties are becoming the sixties. Her mother is religious and, though white, takes her spiritual strength from a black Presbyterian congregation. Her father is a fair but financially unsuccessful writer. Both are "commies" who had become liberals when John F. Kennedy came along. As much a part of the family as her sometimes attentive brother are an alcoholic uncle and dependent aunt and the mother's close friend Natalie. Nan presents smaller stories, or episodes, in which she allows us to get to know the family of characters as they interact with one another. What motivates her selection of these episodes is not entirely clear except that they seem to flow in and out of each other, often not chronologically, as if one thing mnemonically leads to another. The effect seems to be a usurpation of calendar time in favor of something more spiritually unified. In one of his despairing moods, Nan's father says, "None of the old rules hold up these days. None of them seem to apply. Even time you know? You're too young to have studied this, but that's what Einstein proved—that clocks were a joke. They weren't measuring anything! They were chocolate bunnies!" Though it is perhaps subtle, there is something beautifully subversive in this novel.

The novel is serious but not unbearably sad or tragic. What torment the older Nan transfers to the story of her childhood is balanced by humor. In fact, the mixture of melancholy with humor is among the book's most energetic features because the contrast brings each into a higher resolution. The novel thrives on contrast, really; Nan loves to compare her family with others in spite of her mother's advice to "try not to compare our insides to other people's outsides." Before she reaches her teens, Nan's ideal is the White family—Catholic, clean, pure, wholesome. But told by the funny and kind adult, the episodes with Mady White (Nan's best friend in childhood) betray the young Nan's naiveté and suggest that she only sees an outside, a surface. While Nan's idealization of the White family results from the sorrow she feels in the face of her own family's flaws, in retrospect she gives her simple view of the Whites a funny rendition. One day Nan's mother asks her to vacuum; Mady White is around and insists on helping:

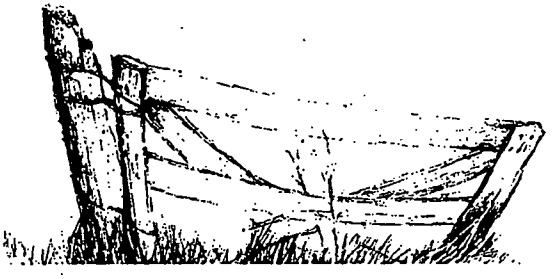
> Mady took the attachment off the nozzle and with grim efficiency began to vacuum up all the daddy longlegs that lived in our corners—that had always lived in our corners. I gasped, frozen with shame. Zzzzooop! Zzzzoooop! She went from corner to corner, sucking up all the spiders; I saw them all imprisoned in the vacuum bag, covered with dirt and dust bunnies, flailing, suffocating. I wanted to cry out, "We don't do that here!" but suddenly it seemed the right thing to do, the clean and civilized thing to do, the Catholic thing to do. And so I stood there miserable and let Mady vacuum up my family's spiders, Mady with her old-lady vinegar mouth, grim as if she were from the Health Department and we had just been busted.

In passages like this one, Lamott's enthusiasm for language and its capacity to blend perspectives of child and adult shines through.

In the novel's final section, the voice of Nan in her early thirties returns, only less tormented. She alludes sketchily to a little of what had passed since her thirteenth birthday, but she is very much out of that nostalgic tone of the middle section. In the final section, most of the humor is gone, the style is unadorned, written in mostly parallel and coordinate structures. It works not so much toward a resolution, but with a slowing rhythm as it eases Nan toward a better relationship with her past, a past which, through memory, is populated with all new people.

It's a rich book, and thoughtful. For me it also touched lightly on familiar issues brought out by some feminist essayists and theorists. By Nan's mother's fear of going into town I am reminded of Nancy Mairs's discussion of her own and Emily Dickinson's agoraphobia. Like Julia Kristeva's "Women's Time," the book's mnemonic structure calls into question patriarchal time. And in this book women are admired for their compassion and for their substantial capacity for friendship, while numerous men are often restlessly irresponsible. Those men who turn out to be decent are decent by virtue of their woman-manhood or man-womanhood. The novel's participation in this conversation, I think, suggests it is all the more important and evocative.

Dan Martin



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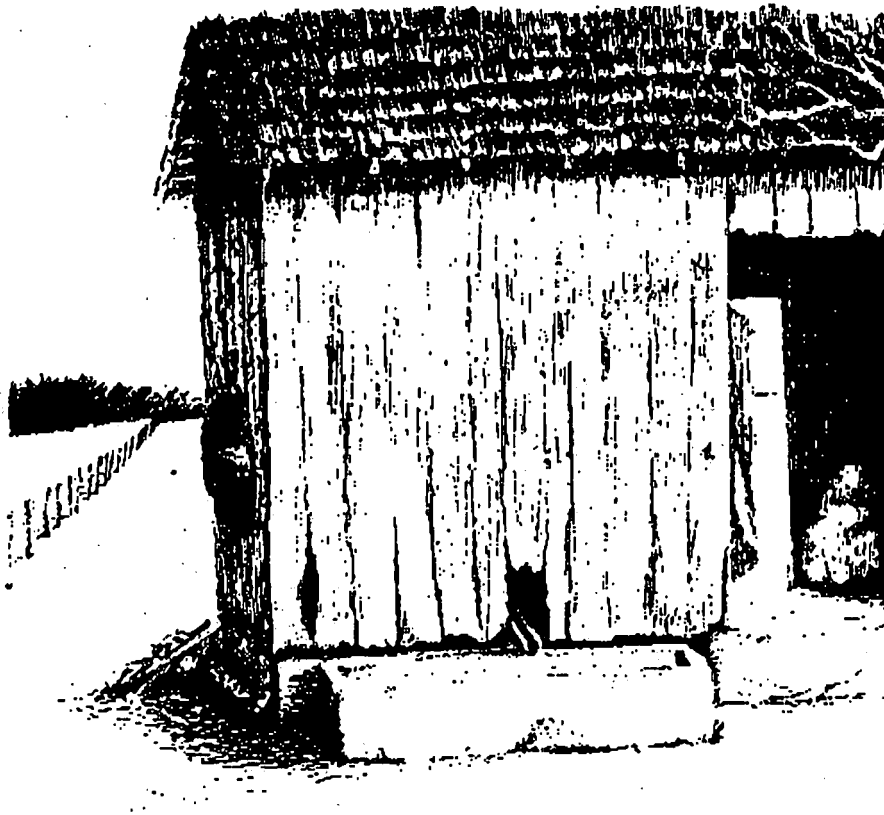

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