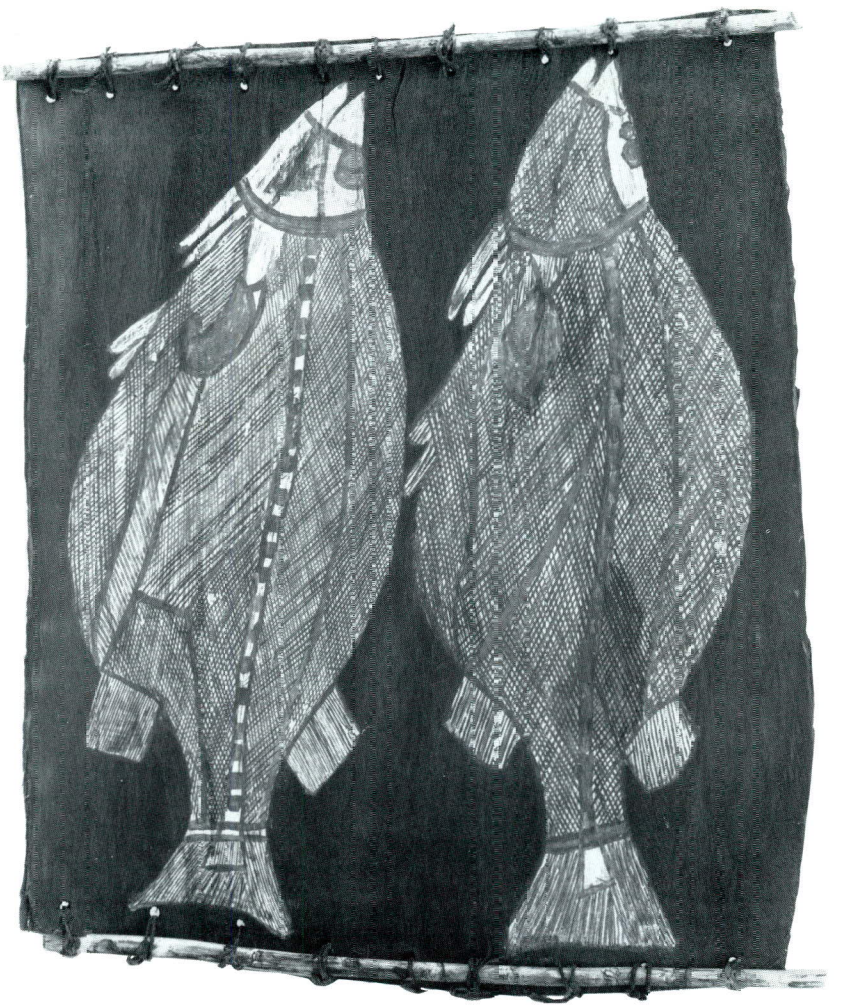
Cottonwood 44



Pearce Collection

Cottonwood 44

Ed Ruhe

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.

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

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This issue has been set in Baskerville typeface using Microsoft Word and Aldus PageMaker.

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The table of Contents for issue 43 failed to credit the cover art and internal graphics to Jean Johnston, though she was listed in the Contributor's Notes section. We apoligize to her and to our readers for the error. They are beautiful work, Jean. The only good thing about our omission is that I get tell you so in print as well as in person.

Front Cover: from the Pearce Collection

Back Cover: from the Gridley Collection

EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue features a portfolio of Australian bark paintings collected by Professor Edward L. Ruhe. Professor Ruhe, who died during the summer of 1989, was a close friend and supporter of ***Cottonwood*** from its first issue twenty-five years ago. The English Department and the University have lost a higly valued colleague. He was a very dear friend, having come to KU at the same time as I, the Fall of 1958. His interests and enthusiasms were many and deep. In the years before we had a car, he would more or less spontaneously appear at our house and load us up for a trip to the Kansas City Zoo or the Nelson Gallery. I cannot listen to a Liszt piano piece without hearing on the inner ear his zestful and vigorous performances. None of us shall ever look at aboriginal art of any kind with the illiteracy we shared before Ed taught us how to see.

The portfolio has been gathered from private collections in Lawrence. It includes two poems by Ed's colleagues, Victor Contoski and Michael Johnson, and one by a student, Shelle Rosenfeld. Ed is deeply missed by us all.

The Alice Carter awards for outstanding work published in issues 40-42 were selected by Scott Cairns, whose work appears in this and earlier issues of ***Cottonwood***. Professor Cairns is currently head of the creative writing program at The University of North Texas, Denton, Texas. For fiction Richard Neumann will receive $50 (for "Dream Wars," issue 41) and for poetry, Patricia Traxler will receive $50 (for "The Dead Teacher," issue 41). Honorable Mention awards, a year's subscription to ***Cottonwood***.: for fiction, Mary Pipher ("A Winter's Tale," issue 41); for poetry, Walter McDonald ("Fathers and Sons," issue 40). We congratulate these authors, noting that the quality of other works we published in these issues made the competition one it is truly an honor to have won.

The Almond Tree, a collection of poems by Edgar Wolfe, is a joint publication by Woodley Press of Topeka and ***Cottonwood***. Many who remember Ed as the principal teacher of creative writing at KU for decades will want to obtain this volume of his poems. Several poems collected in the new volume and a tribute, "I Look Out For Ed Wolfe" by Robert Day were featured in the Ed Wolfe Issue. *The Almond Tree* is available from *Cottonwood* Press at $8.95.

George F. Wedge

Poetry

Sandy Meek Henson
After Viewing the Body

The ash tree, its trunk
a somber lighthouse, breaks into wishbones
and a burst of capillaries at sunset.

Tall as a priest, it is full
of points, the spin
of barbed wire over the fence, lopped-

off claws of a thousand doves.
The few leaves left sit like birds
stunned on the wire.

Pads of snow climb the trunk, soft feet
without legs, white fists of clouds
that hang, a dozen fake beards

from an actor's make-up mirror.
Above the factories, those
dark bruises of smoke, stars

scatter, yellow corn for chicken scratch,
white teeth bared in the burial ground;
one red star over the tallest factory

waits like a mother over
her son pinned by the crucifix
for his finger to motion her

closer, as if this stillness
were a role he put on like the new suit.
She must believe this cold hand

is part of the act, the actor pooling his blood
in a secret glass under his ribs,
this cold a greater triumph

than the way his chest will
not rise, his eyes, nailed
by their lids, will not tremble.

When I press my fingers
into my eyes, stars sting my eyelids;
even with the sun sunk

in the hills I see my lifeline
with my fingertips, and where it fades
blue at the wrist.

Above the ash, that quivering antenna
blooming fruit the color I see it,
taking on the buds of a hundred roles

I choose today, the one
eye glows from the hill all night,
like the last

of the dozen stoplights
opening my street, the only one
stalled on red.

Sandy Meek Henson

At the Ferry Park

1
We sit on the bank of egg-shaped stones.
You are trying to draw, and I am impatient
to see the river fly from your fingers,

the weight of the bridge rushing at water.
You stretch your hand out to the river
so the iron bridge flutters on your palm.

Now, with your wedding ring you draw
the morning sun over the drowned willows
stretching into their white bodies above the surface;

with a wing of the bridge you break
the sun, its feathers sweep the river.
Frustrated with the water's flatness

you scribble rings breaking the page's surface.
A train flies over our heads
so all the rocks seem to sing,

and I don't know which to believe:
the dark coal hammering the track, the clouds
opening their wings between boxcars.

2
Fifty years later, we may circle back.
Then you might walk into the river;
shocked with the sudden

weight of your body, it will shudder around you
and around the fish rising
to the boy's hook down river.

I don't know if I will be the black chains
of the boat dragging the water, or if I will be
the river, my back trembling with the arcs

that still rise from your hands,
bridging the rocky banks, like wings
pushing out from the stones.

Robert M. Chute

Nocturnal Additions To a Passage in Thoreau's Journal: Sept. 9, 1851

The clock strikes four.
A few dogs bark. A few more
wagons start for market
faintly rattling the distance
where I hear my owl without a name
and the murmur of a slow
approaching freight train.
It is so dark
I can not find the pencil
I have dropped. The sound of the cars,
perhaps as far away as Waltham,
comes through the open window
on a rising morning wind.
One early bird sings.

Suppose I did not sleep alone.
Would she, my moon, with one
soft, cool hand, restrain
my arm and say, "Stay, Henry.
Let the day come
of its own accord.
Make the most of the night"?

Now the empty bed seems
a body abandoned after death.
I shiver by the window,
night-shirted restless ghost.

Scott Cairns

Lucifer's Epistle to the Fallen

Lucifer, Son of the Morning, Pretty Boy,
Rose Colored Satan of Your Dreams, Good as Gold,
you know, God of this World, Shadow in the Tree.

Gorgeous like you don't know! Me, Sweet Snake, jeweled
like your momma's throat, her trembling wrist. Tender
as my kiss! Angel of Darkness, Angel

of Light! Listen, you might try telling *me*
your troubles; I promise to do what I can.
Which is plenty. Understand, I can kill

anyone. And if I want, I can pick
a dead man up and make him walk. I can
make him dance. Any dance. Angels don't

get in my way; they know too much.
God! I love theater! But listen, I know
the sorry world He walks you through.

Him! Showboat with the Heavy Thumbs! Pretender
at Creation! Maker of Possibilities!
Please! I know why you keep walking—you're skittish

as sheep, and life isn't easy. Besides
the truth is bent to keep you dumb to death.
Imagine! the ignorance you're dressed in!

The way you wear it! And His Foot tickling
your neck. Don't miss my meaning; I know none
of this is your doing. The game is fixed.

Dishonest, if you ask me. So ask. God
knows how I love you! My Beauty, My Most
Serious Feelings are for you, My Heart turns

around your happiness, your ultimate
wisdom, the worlds we will share. Me, *Lucifer.*
How can such a word carry fear? *Lucifer,*

like love, like song, a lovely music lifting
to the spinning stars! And you, my cooing
pigeons, my darlings, my tender lambs, come, ask

anything, and it will be added to your
account. Nothing will be beyond us; nothing
dares touch my imagining.

John Coleman
After the Tornado
(Albion, Pennsylvania)

The hoop is already sagging from years
of net grabbing, a rung higher each summer.
Hands gray with dirt that clouds
the ball each time it spins off the driveway,
the boys loft the jump shot. They aren't playing
serious ball: arms sag sadly on defense,
and sneakers slap the concrete hard.
Soon the game is no longer points, only a dance.
One boy does a swooping lay-up and says,
"He drives. He shoots. He scores. What a move!"
The others are limp with laughter.
Arms flailing, backs on the ground, they see
the roofs wrinkled like tired skin,
the barn next door sunken, leaning westward.

Greg Field

On A Cold Evening Alone, I Turn On My Electric Blanket

I dreamed myself into the back
of my father's '55 Buick.
Under his big bass fiddle,
I curled in the floorboard pocket below
and looked up at the bulk of its curves.
Its neck rested on the seat;
projected into the air between my parents.
My brother took his turn
in the pocket behind the driver
as I took mine resting my ear
on the hum of the drive tunnel—
lullaby of metal spinning in air.
Above us on the seat, my sister,
wrapped in army surplus blankets.
The warmth of the heater
under my father's seat was dry and sharp
as the broken snow beneath us.
Delicate as the ice fog
that dissolved the world,
we were all poised on the edge of sleep.
I raised myself up till I could look down
the big fiddle's neck to its scrolled head
pointed toward Alaska.
I could feel the emptiness inside it
and I could feel the possibilities
stretched tight above its fragile lacquered skin.
I watched my mother's head lean
toward my father's shoulder
as she leaned into the night
that rushed at us outside the windshield.
He hummed a show tune
as the moon burst through
the fog like a spotlight.
The glowing dashboard fired the edges
of my mother's hair
and I felt that the warm steel shell
around us would find its way
through miles of frozen air;
would carry these instruments home.

Peter Desy

The Mind Can't

I can't imagine stars,
unbelievable violence, everything
rushing away from everything else
burning, approaching the speed
of light. Tell me again
the speed of light and I'll say
that's not speed but mathematics.
Even the eye turned in can't see
shadows playing over the mind.

Keep telling me about light years
and I'll tell you how
our lives are slow smoke
trailing and breaking in the wind:
we can't count even the light
dazzling the ice across an eaves.
Or the human head can't contain
the leaves of a single tree
at once, or the notes and noises
of a small field of animals.

Peter Desy

The Writing

Sitting on the bottom step
of the white clapboard house,
I wrote my name in the dust with a stick.
Maybe it was the declining sun, the whole day
having a peculiar slant,
my short accumulated life,
my brown shoes frayed and scuffed...
I took this turn when I was eight:
I knew I'd wear sadness
like old underwear I couldn't change,
or know it like a game I played
whose rules I never could explain.

Whenever I prayed
I saw a gloomy God, and angels
falling from heaven. That day
I examined my hands a hundred times
and saw the dirt under my fingernails.
At night I took from the chest in the attic
my white shoes and white suit from my First
Communion and fanned the gilded pages
of the stiff and glossy missal
but didn't know why they made the book holy;
it was still beautiful to me.
I set the clasp and carefully returned
those mementos to their proper place
and came down the long steps
to take my bath. My mother came in
and lathered her hands to wash my neck
and back, though I was modest, and old enough
to wash the rest of me.

Jay A. Blumenthal

King Hunt

Grandpa died on Yom Kippur eve, although rumors persisted
that he had simply gone into hiding. I never knew him.
The pictures of him show a stern Prussian face, aristocratic
except for a droopy mustache. He worked long hours all his life,
mostly in Paterson's silk mills, where he allegedly composed
strenuous chess problems in his head. But at home he was
all business, immediately turning on the radio for music
to fend off his wife, Eva. After dinner, once the children
had been dispatched, Grandpa resorted to correspondence chess,
spending what time there was before bed to disguise his vast
ambitions on the queenside. For years my father had the job
of running the moves back and forth across town. Each evening
(except Saturday, which belonged to Brahms or Buster Keaton),
he tore down the back stairs with Grandpa's wonderful scribble,
raced down Graham Avenue, and vanished behind the synagogue
on Montgomery and Folger. At 8 sharp Mr. Plotkin's answer returned.
This arrangement lasted many years, until Plotkin disappeared.
I still have Grandpa's pieces, now a shabby monarchy,
and whenever I disentangle it from the loom of memory,
I remember that Grandpa and Plotkin never met.

Dionisio D. Martinez

Variations on Omar Sharif

All my uncles on my mother's side have looked
like Omar Sharif at one time or another.
The eyes, the forehead, the mustache.
Especially my uncle with the radio dream.
One afternoon he took all the silence
in the world and caught the bus to the amateur
show in Havana. My grandmother
heard his name on the radio and caught
the next bus.

My uncle had greased his hair for the occasion.
Years would pass before they'd hear the name
Omar Sharif, before they'd read it and see
his photograph in the tabloid my mother opened
religiously to the Hollywood page each day.
Hollywood would have become a perfectly
acceptable religion by then.
Now it was just my uncle and my grandmother
and the radio. They called his name.
He held the microphone as if everything
depended on it. He held
his breath for a moment. Then he heard
the music and looked out at the small audience.
He saw his mother. The microphone
slipped from his hands. He took one slow
step backward. Then another step.

On the bus home he held the silence
like a consolation prize between his teeth.
He didn't know what to make
of his mother—her own silence,
her composed face. So he imagined his voice
on the radio and his mother crying.
He swallowed all the silence.

For a moment he could taste his own voice.

Nathan Whiting

Jones Martin

Jones Martin
bought a rifle
told me
as we waited
for eviction
in his room
in the roominghouse
to shoot at builders
on the tower
close to scare.
Is your lover gone Jones?
And Sue Jean
why won't you accept her
as she wanders
from your hallway?
Jones studies rooftops
to end a mood.
We will pitch baseball
this afternoon
I and Jones
with his power
long innings
losing score.
Men fall
watching hook swing
iron move.
Who else has Jones told
taking his soft walk
through front porch
music sessions
drug dealers
hot streets conversing
with *Jones* knowers
and *Jones* sayers
as I sit with Sue Jean asking
"doesn't Jones like me?
It's hard for a woman
to ask.
Did he understand?"
Jones knows
what she wants

as Bobby who hates hate
spreads his message
insane to crowds.
Jones shows me
his rifle.
I wait
for sounds
power and sirens
7 years.
Jones you liar!
They've torn down
the tower
for a new one.
Reporters want to call you mad.
But Jones
hits a sandwich
shoots a rivet gun
a bucket of lead
saying lay down
fascist builders.
They tremble.
Police search.
Jones is at a party.
Only I know
Jones is up there
Jones.

Simon Perchik

*

Dorian's lips in ruins
and the slow song
that never catches up —her son

not yet named, almost weightless
born with a bone already broken
and his arm left to heal.

Perhaps he will remember
how sometimes even the sea
needs more room, even that tiny hand

wanting to take hold the world
—perhaps with a name, made whole
by a sound that left some far coast

shipwrecked, to make an offer.
The doctors say but what
do they know about untested currents?

He needs to be called! to be joined
and to her cries
his unfolding heart.

Fiction

Michael Pritchett

Water Dreams

Harris sat at his kitchen table at four in the morning, drinking white coffee with his dead mother-in-law, Lula. Rita slept soundly through their talk in the next room where the TV cast a blue glow and a white rush of noise. The only other life in the small duplex slept also, dreaming water dreams in Rita's flat, hard belly.

In the kitchen, Lula spoke:

"You have underlived yourself, Harry," she told him. She sat in her chair, the same chair that had been hers, near the stove. Her hair was a hard flaxen gray pulled back in a wispy bun. She wore the same light blue terry robe and dirty pink slippers that he had seen her in every morning. Her face was generous like Rita's, but the lines in it all seemed to run downward. Harris, only 27, had hoped and believed that gravity was one thing death relieved you of. But apparently not in Lula's case.

"How do you mean that," he asked. He sat in the chair opposite, pajama bottoms only, his skinny fat belly looping over the waistband. The first night of coffee with Lula, he had shown the respect to wear his robe to cover himself. But this now was the fourth time in two weeks she had woken him by moving around in the kitchen, tending to the dishes that Rita liked to leave until the morning.

"I mean it as it is," she said. "Don't forget, Harry. I don't need the polite constraints of mortal social manner any longer. I'm dead. I say it as it lays."

"You did before," Harry said.

"Only at the last. In my early life, I never could speak my mind. It was a weakness of women at that time."

"I'm scared that I *have* underlived my life," Harris said. He looked steadily across the bamboo napkin dispenser at her, at every part of her down-straining face except her eyes. Her eyes were the only other-worldly thing about her in her present state. And it was only because when he looked into them, after a moment, the silver toaster sitting on the countertop behind her became visible.

"You should be," she nodded firmly. "A true man would never say it, of course, especially not to a woman. But you should be."

"I didn't expect this," Harris said. "We just put all the money into the yard. We're trying to build a business, for chrissakes."

"Don't swear! Don't you know you're talking into the beyond?"

Harris looked up at the cracked bubbles of paint around the glazed glass fixture.

"Just relax," Lula said. She pushed back at her hair with swollen, arthritic knuckles. "A baby will make things better. You'll stop this under living and do something serious."

"Do you realize that salvage is a one-hundred-percent profit business?"

"Tsh," Lula said, flipping a hand. "As I remember from my half-wasted life, one hundred percent of zero is still a little empty nothing."

"It wouldn't be nothing in a few years."

"In a few years, if you don't straighten up, you're going to be eating oatmeal alone in this dirty little house and bringing home chubby adolescents to sleep with you in your dirty little bed."

"You bitch," Harris said, sitting back.

"Bitch is alright," Lula said. "That one's in the Bible, I believe."

Harris shook his head and put a hand to his chin, feeling three good days of beard.

"I don't even know how this happened," he said. "Where would a baby come from now?"

"A baby is a rescuer, you fool," Lula snapped. "I should know. Rita saved Art and me from moral ruin. He was an underlived young man just like you, and tired of living with the same woman day to day. He started spending his afternoons talking with the hot pie girl at the Ozark Theatre downtown. Rumor was starting. And then Rita.

Harris blinked his bloodshot eyes uncomprehendingly.

"I got in the family way, Harry!" she said. "It turned Art around. He picked himself up and went straight into roofing."

"I'm not hanging out in any theatres," Harris said.

"This junk nonsense is just as bad."

"Rita says she believes in it."

"She has my big sweet heart," Lula sighed. "She'll be my age and maybe older before she talks her true mind."

"You're wrong there," Harris smiled, wagging a finger. "She speaks it now. She's not as much like you as you think."

"She's pregnant isn't she?" Lula asked.

"Okay, I want to know something then. If you two are so much alike, why don't you appear to her? What are you doing here with me?"

Rita leaned in the doorway, covered just to the hip in a white undershirt, one foot planted on top of the other.

"I just came out to see if you wanted breakfast," she said. She shook her flat brown curls and tried to unsquint her eyes in the light. Harris got up from his chair and walked her out of the kitchen, leaving the light on. They went to bed together and after a few minutes of listening for Lula puttering about in the kitchen, Harris fell asleep. His dreams were of huge fish, swimming past him in dark, muddy water.

Rita stopped taking the pill. This thought hit Harris as he tipped up his chin and dragged the safety razor roughly over his adam's apple. She did not miss a pill or two, he thought. She stopped cold. Pow. One moment her deep, soft insides had been a chemical purgatory for the well-meaning egg, and the next, paradise. Sweet, fertile and fragrant like a muskmelon breaking open under the weight of its own opulence. They hadn't talked about this, he realized, or at least

not like they had discussed their financial future as it related to the salvage yard. Harris had tied both their interests into the business, but hadn't given Rita a way to feel some kind of power over what was happening. The shaving cream came off his skin in neat strips, revealing this to him stroke by stroke. Tiny beads of blood expanded on his wet neck until their weight pulled them down in watery pink streaks. No money now even for new blades. He would give blood as well as money to this new turn in their lives. He blinked at his reflection, getting himself used to the new Harris.

In their bedroom, Rita lay on the bed, naked and damp and looking brand new.

"You're not sleeping," she said. "You're sitting up worrying."

"Blame it on your mother," Harris said.

"What?"

"She got me hooked on that coffee and milk. It wires me for sound."

"I'm talking about the past few weeks."

"I'm putting a stop to it today," Harris said. "I'm going to go down and see Smiley. Ask for the note back."

"Oh, Jesus, Harry."

"We'll have other chances," Harris said. "Whole other lives."

"When?"

"Trust me, baby. Everything and everyone living and dead is against it."

"I don't hear anyone but you."

"I'll do for now."

"Don't take the note. Just tell him you're worried."

"Fine."

Harris left the house before nine, going out into an October day that lacked both wind and weather. White haze overlooked the Fayette streets and gave everything a neat, even lighted movie look. Harris hated it for its timidity. He drove fast toward the river and the railroad tracks and the industrial bottoms, windows down, hoping for a reek of skunk or diesel fumes or anything at all that felt sure of itself.

The Fox Drug came up on his right and he skidded past, backed up, pulled in to the gravel lot next to a dead Chevy, done in burgundy primer and sitting on blocks. Here was the edge of decay. It reached out from the river in a broad circle and this was its starting point.

Harris was greeted by a mutt so black he was blue as he pushed through the door. Tony sat back on an upended Coke case with the paper spread in his thin hands. A Croatian; something Harris had never known as a nationality until meeting Tony. Tony nodded from in front of the steamed glass of the meat case. His Croat daughter, who didn't have Tony's foreign, drawn look, leaned on the small counter. Black hair back in a ponytail, bony arms and sunken gray eyes. A shy, quick upward jerk of her head let Harris know he was recognized. It was good

to have places like this, he thought, where people are friendly but don't care enough about you to ask about your business.

"You ought to sell that car, Tony," Harris said. "It's been there a long time."

"I called a man to have it hauled as junk and he never came by."

"He was just saying he would come by," the daughter corrected. "You never had a deal."

"I could haul it," Harris said. He came all the way in and stood close to her near the counter. He tipped his nose up a little, trying to catch her scent, expecting some kind of warm, peppery sex smell.

"I can't afford it," Tony said. He shook the paper in his hands suddenly, warding off the evil spirits of debt floating in the coffee-flavored air of the little store.

"We could trade something," Harris said. He looked without intending to at the daughter, and he could see she took it wrong in the way she moved quickly away. Harris sensed nothing in her wake, not even a stir of air. Tony noticed nothing.

"You're a decent person, Harry," he said. "That would do me a service."

He got up with the paper and went around behind the counter.

"Same as last week," he asked Harris. Harris nodded and watched as the old man disappeared along the same path that the escaping girl had taken. Harris waited and while he waited he looked around the store. Lula, sitting at the counter in her blue terry robe and her dirty slippers, caught his eye.

"I know your thoughts," she said.

"What does that mean?" Harris asked.

"You're trading your services for drugs," she whispered, glancing toward the back of the store.

"Sleeping pills. I don't sleep as you well know."

"It is just further testimony," Lula sniffed. She arranged her robe on top of her crossed legs. She was solidifying, Harris noticed, and seemed to have real weight and substance on top of the tan leather stool cover. He felt that if he wanted to he could reach out and put a solid hand on her. The thought made his mouth dry.

"Further testimony," she continued. "That your underliving may not entirely be your fault. It may be your whole age is underlived."

"That's a comfort," Harris said.

"Take this drugs business for instance," Lula said, narrowing her face with contempt. "A real man . . . my Art, for example . . . would a take a few whiskeys neat if he couldn't sleep. He knew how to drink. It was a taught thing. Now it's a lost art."

Lula paused and then smiled at her pun. "That's the truth," she said.

"Rita told me he drank."

"He did. It was one of his adjustments."

"How's that?"

"When Rita came. That was one of the manly changes he went through to adjust to our new life. Forget that foolishness about a weakness. In a good man like Art, drinking was the making of him. It rounded him out in a way."

"I hear it killed him."

"Not before he was ready," Lula snapped. "He made sure his family was alright before he succumbed." Her form wavered before him like he was seeing her across a vast, hot distance.

"Take it easy," Harris said.

"There's no humor in heaven, Harry," Lula said, smoothing and settling her spirit into the mortal world once more. "There's nothing funny about perfection."

Harry took this statement into silent consideration. The dark-skinned Croat girl came out with a small white bag and didn't look up when she handed it over the counter. With her and Lula watching him, he felt like some kind of dirty character, extorting payoffs.

"What's good to eat?" he asked her. "I haven't had breakfast and I'd like to buy something to take with me." He brought money out of his pocket to show that buying was really what he intended.

"Fried pies," the girl said. "Made this morning."

"Give me a few. Any flavor except rhubarb."

He spied Lula out of the corner of his eye as the girl wrapped up the pies. She was shaking her head with her eyes shut tight.

"Beware the hot pie girl," she said.

Harris left quickly, putting them all behind him after just a few miles of fast driving. In another minute, he was humming across the Scott Street railroad bridge, feeling the space of air and cradle of milky brown river below, touching down on land again and taking a hard left into the drive of A & A Salvage.

The A & A was Harris's idea. It made the salvage yard the first one in the yellow pages.

He parked and made his way in through the corrugated steel gate. A change seemed to work over him just by passing inside the yard. The eight-foot-high fence held in a kind of clarity and a strong, sure odor of wet rust and oil and bitter flowering thistle. Lady, the great black dane, stood chained in the back of a gutted volkswagen that sat on bare wheel rims. She strained toward him against the collar, barking. Smiley tripped out of the only bay of the cinder-block building, squinting and cupping a hand to his brow, tools in his hand.

They did not shake hands. The surroundings were too vital for empty gestures. Harris regarded Smiley's brown old face — a face as clear of trouble as that last transitional expression between earth and primum. The expression loved ones erase with dirt and flowers. Smiley's was a face with an uncertain past. Harris, of course, knew basic things. A wife dead or lost long ago. A regular V.A. check. And then other things he sensed. That Smiley had lived mainly on a coast

during his life. This by the way Smiley looked way out at times, as if he had grown used to an endless horizon and had lost his ability to perceive limits.

"You already changed the sign," Harry said.

"Why not?"

"Well, I've run up against something big," Harris caught a shot of blue out of the corner of his eye and took another hard look seeing only the powder blue fender of a Mustang leaning in the nearby weeds. He calmed himself thinking that, even in death, Lula Mae would not come into this place.

Smiley nodded, waiting.

"We're having a kid all of a sudden," Harris said. He paused for some recognition of his trouble on Smiley's face. Smiley's unclouded brow floated before him for a moment, trembled uncertainly and then erupted into laugh lines.

"That's great, Harris. Just wonderful."

"It is," Harris nodded. "I know. But it's the money. It seems dangerous right now to commit to something."

"You're worried there won't be enough money," Smiley nodded.

"Right."

"There won't be."

Harris laughed a little, weakly.

"Well, that's my point."

"There won't ever be, Harry. Never enough. Not if you rob a bank even."

"Well . . ." Harry said. He looked down at the dirt, so layered with old motor oil it gave under him like spongy tar. Small pieces of hose, panel screws and glass crystals were sealed in its surface. Fossilized. He glanced back at the weeds, expecting Lula to rise shimmering from the fender at any moment.

"I can give you the note," Smiley said. "I'm not trying to be an asshole. I'm just saying. Money doesn't save the doomed or the vice-versa."

"What about babies?"

"How do you mean babies?" Smiley asked.

"This same thing happened to my wife's mother. Prospects didn't look so good. Some things were hanging in the balance. Then whango. She comes up pregnant. She told me all about it."

Smiley shrugged.

"An act of blind cruelty in one woman can be an act of faith in another," he said.

"What about angels?" Harris asked. "Do they doom you or save you?"

"What is this talk," Smiley said seriously. "What's the matter?"

"Just give me an opinion."

"Depends on who sent them, I would think."

Harris nodded his gratitude to Smiley, knowing that he really didn't need to explain if he didn't want to. Smiley seemed to know. Harris suspected that because of his age, Smiley moved in many circles both mortal and ethereal with

the same ease that he himself moved from one room to another. Harris sometimes had glimpses of Smiley's world when he was in that place between sleeping and waking. What he saw was many levels of light and dark divided by vapor that sifted the darkness toward the upper empyrean.

Harris took a breath and looked around himself at the better world he had touched for a little while but did not own.

"I better have that note back," he said.

"I'm going to hold this open for awhile," Smiley said, producing the bank note from a pocket. "If you change your mind."

"It's probably best I don't think of it that way," Harris said. "But alright."

Harris headed the car back over the bridge the way he came. He felt the weather that had seemed absent inside the yard settle against him. His own breathing once again became a conscious effort. As he reached the far side of the bridge, he looked over to see the river but couldn't. Lula was suddenly beside him. She was looking straight ahead and her face was wet with tears. Her form was now as vaporous and unstable as it had been solid that morning in the drugstore. The tears appeared and disappeared like running droplets of mercury.

"What's the matter," he asked.

"I'm dead," she whispered.

"You knew you were dead."

"Not like this. Not dead like this kind of dead."

"What's the point in crying now?"

"I'm crying because of my doom. And yours. And Rita's."

"We're not doomed," Harris said. "I have the money back."

Lula shook her head and in doing so changed from a mist into a light that started as a faint blue and then grew until it was a deep, hot yellow that became the sunlight, emerged from the gauzy clouds and shining across the seat.

When Harris came into the house later, Rita was sitting on the couch in the front room in her navy blue dress. Her face was pink and wet from crying, and a yellow kleenex peeked out from the fist that she held to her mouth.

His first act was to go to her and put a solid hand on her, fearing that somehow it might go on through.

"I'm glad you came now," she said calmly. "I think I'm through crying."

"About what?"

"I'm bleeding. I need you to take me down to the clinic."

"Isn't that . . . normal or something?" Harris asked.

"No. It probably means I carried wrong."

Harris at last grasped what it was she was saying. It caught him low and in a way he hadn't expected. His groin tightened up with a false pain and he put his hand on her leg in part to steady himself. The pain was the first feeling and then it gave way to something else. A deep-down loneliness.

He was not sorry about losing the yard. If he hadn't taken back the note, it would feel like he had willed this, and that would have haunted him in a way that the dead never could.

But he was sorry for one thing: that he had not asked Lula if there were dreams. The moment would seem bearable if he knew that his baby would dream.

* * *

F. R. Lewis

A Family Portrait

Before he got her, Jim got the alligator, which he says gave the alligator squatter's rights, but what Brenda says is that she knew him first, which she did, which was high school, which was pretty often going steady, more often than not.

Jim was nuts about the alligator, or so he says. Just plain nuts is what Brenda says. Back when they were in high school, who Jim would say he was nuts about was Brenda, and who Brenda would say she was nuts about was Jim. From what Brenda says, though, she never got to be real crazy about the alligator. From what Jim says, she never gave the alligator a chance.

But that is getting ahead of things and the things are these: Brenda and Jim haven't been in high school for years, and they haven't been together for years, until the night they run into each other in front of the lettuce bin at Sam's Super and start to talk. What with one thing leading to the next thing, she takes him to her place and feeds her lettuce to him, along with a sirloin and an Idaho baked. He would stay the night, Jim would, except for the alligator, that the alligator is waiting for its lettuce back at his place. Not that he says alligator, just that he has to go home, and how about they get married.

When they get back from the judge's place to Jim's place — with Brenda not having been there before — the alligator is splashing around in the bathtub.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Brenda says to Jim.

"Everybody has pets," he says to her.

"No," she says.

"Not everybody," she says. "I don't. Not me."

"Yes you do," he says. "Yes you do."

#

Anyway, Jim and Brenda and the alligator pack up and move to a place that is two bedrooms and two bathrooms and lots of windows and a very long hallway where Brenda can hang her pictures. The second bedroom is everything from his place and from her place that she says doesn't fit into their place, everything but the alligator.

The second bathroom, the one with the shower, is them. The first bathroom is the alligator, which is the bathroom with the muddy-colored tub, which is a lower-to-the-ground tub than at where Jim's place was or where Brenda's place was, and easier for the alligator — who Jim says is not at the point you would say enormous — to get into and out of. In the bathroom with the alligator, Jim rigs up a timer for the sun lamp.

What Brenda says about the bathroom is, "What if I wanted a bath?" and "What if I wanted some sun?"

What Jim says he thought to say was that maybe they should move again and this time to a place where there is a bathtub for everyone, or maybe they should build a place like that, but how it came out was, "The alligator will share."

#

Their place is mostly Brenda's things, except for their things, which Brenda picks out with a decorator, in what the decorator calls shades of sand and marsh grass that he says all of them can live with, and that Brenda's pictures will look good against as soon as she changes the frames. For his place, Jim never got around to getting much in the way of things, couches and that. How Jim's place came was furnished, all but the alligator.

Where the alligator came from was the back of a magazine, one Jim's dad got for belonging. Jim's dad said that how you usually get magazine alligators is dead, even in spite of the guarantee. So Jim said what he would do is he would pay for a special delivery.

The main part of the alligator — not a whole lot, except for the eyes, which were kind of huge and in the dark they glowed — came about to the end of Jim's longest finger and then a couple of creases beyond Jim's wrist for the tail. The alligator came in a box that was made of wood and packed in all this glittery plastic stuff, strings and wads of it. Besides the alligator, there was a sheet of instructions in the box, telling where to keep the alligator and how much to feed the alligator, and, of course, there was the guarantee. Jim spent the best part of an hour at his dad's place with the alligator in his one hand and with his other hand picking glittery stuff off the tail.

The alligator cried and Jim didn't know what to do for it, so Jim's dad filled a Pyrex with water from the kitchen and mud and grass from the yard and a piece of lettuce, and the crying stopped.

What Jim says is that when he told Brenda the time was coming when she would have to help do for the alligator — offer it a turtle, exchange a few pleasantries, nothing fancy — what Brenda told Jim was, "Never. Never. Never."

#

In the garden that is behind their place, Jim and Brenda grow tomatoes and peppers and squash and beans, but mostly they grow lettuce. The only food Brenda says she takes without the lettuce is her soft-boiled egg. About eating lettuce, Jim says that he can take lettuce or he can leave lettuce, that, for him, the pleasure of lettuce is in feeding it to the alligator. The alligator takes lettuce with everything and the alligator doesn't eat eggs.

"Why does the alligator get every last leaf?" Brenda screams at Jim more than once during the growing season. "Show me where the instructions say every last leaf."

Well, he can't, and the upshot is that Brenda stops coming home for dinner altogether, and a couple of hours beyond. Jim gets real enthusiastic about feeding

the alligator. From meals they eat together, Jim and the alligator, and from meals when the alligator eats alone, the alligator gains weight, a lot of weight, which is more from frequency than from lettuce, or even from turtles.

What Jim says is that how Brenda was coming home pretty often, more often than not, was kind of puckered, her skin and all, and with a smell on her that was the smell of a soap that wasn't the soap she smelled of in the mornings when she ate her soft-boiled eggs. How Brenda smelled, her skin and that, was something like the decorator. Or so Jim says.

What Brenda says is that when the alligator walked down the hallway on their marsh grass wall-to-wall, the alligator hit the moldings, that's how wide the alligator got, and when the alligator hit the moldings, all her pictures jumped.

#

So, the alligator hits the moldings while it follows Brenda down the hallway and into the second bedroom, which is when Brenda goes hunting for a prom picture, to add it to the wall, which is when Jim is at the Elks with his dad. What happens when Brenda sees the alligator is that Brenda screams, and when Brenda screams, what the alligator does is that the alligator cries. Brenda opens the window and climbs outside to where she can open the window into the first bedroom, and from the first bedroom, she goes to the hallway from where she can shut the alligator inside the second bedroom, and those are the things that she does.

Well... the weather isn't all that warm any more, which is probably how come they both catch cold, Brenda and the alligator, how come they both start sneezing.

What Jim says is that when Brenda and the alligator stopped sneezing, they stopped sneezing at the same time, too, but the whys for them stopping were as different as reasons get.

About the alligator, Jim says that the alligator never stood a chance. Jim says for the alligator the sneezing stopped when the alligator stopped.

As for Brenda, Jim says only her sneezing went away.

What Brenda says is that Jim went away as well. What Brenda says is that Jim left their things and her and sent his things to his dad's place, all but the alligator.

What Jim says is that after he went down the long hallway and out the front door — and Brenda's pictures didn't jump, not once — what Brenda had was the alligator, what you call the remains of the alligator, the skin and all, that Brenda had the alligator to do for.

Jim never asks what she did. Brenda never says.

Rilla Askew

Hamp Humphrey

His small white frame house sat just back from the footpath that led into town. In summer we traipsed up and down that footpath a dozen times a day on milk-and-bread errands for our mothers or penny-nail errands for our fathers or the more important business of trudging up to Sanger's gas station on the highway for candy bars and pop. Always on our back-and-forth journeys we'd find Hamp Humphrey sitting in his great iron lawn chair under the elm tree in his front yard. It never mattered about the weather: on the haziest, hottest dog day in August old Hamp would still be there, fanning himself feebly with a cardboard church fan on a stick. The rasping voices of locusts in his elm tree would make the air seem to weigh more, and Hamp would slur out a greeting to us as we passed. Most of us would stop and shake hands, not only for the good reason that we'd been taught that way but also because our small fists would come away from the encounter clutching shiny nickels and dimes, placed there by the great palsied red slab of Hamp Humphrey's hands.

Some of the younger children were afraid of Hamp and would cross over to the far side of the road and walk in the drainage ditch rather than pass his house alone, but most of us understood him to be harmless, just a large uncomfortable man with quaking hands and a thick slurring tongue. Some of us had heard through the whispers in our kitchens that he'd gotten that way from falling off a house when he was a boy. Some said, no it wasn't a house, it was a horse. Some said oh yeah, you're full of baloney, I know from my daddy good and well it was a tractor; others said oil rig; still others swore he had been injured in the war. The only thing any of us understood for certain was that he'd been born normal and some unaccountable accident in life had turned him into the thing he'd become.

Hamp's body was soft and egg-shaped, his head a smooth oval criss-crossed with sparse yellow hairs. His face, in summer or winter, was a heavy, dull reddish color and his tongue lolled out thick and red between his lips when he spoke. We could not make anything of his words — just long drawn-out moaned words made of nothing but vowels — but we knew from experience to nod and say, yes sir, Mr. Hamp sir, it surely is warm today, when we stood in front of his chair waiting to shake his hand. He held his head cocked always a little to the side and folded down on his chest, and when we agreed with him about the weather he would smile and wag it sadly from side to side.

Hamp's hands were the same dull red color as his face and they, like everything else about him, were mushy and soft-looking, rounded in all the places where our fathers had callouses and knuckles and knots. They quavered and quaked when he held them at rest, and when he moved one of them to reach for our small palms, it danced a slow torturous rhythm toward us and then stood in the air, weaving delicately back and forth, until our hands caught up to it. Few of

us had ever seen Hamp Humphrey walk — he seemed always to just be there, morning or evening, out front in his big iron lawn chair, fanning himself with his worn-out church fan — but those of us who had happened by at the telling moment spoke in awed whispers of how he dragged one whole leg behind him and had to pull himself up on the porch with his wavering hands. We speculated often about how he got on alone in his house and went to the bathroom and ate dinner and all. Our dependence on our own mothers made Hamp's independence more awesome and strange.

But all of us accepted Hamp Humphrey, as we accepted Mrs. Rainer's weak-witted daughter who sat on a milk crate on the Rainer's front porch rocking back and forth all night and all day, as we accepted Pete Ketchworth's drunkenness and Stump Wilson's missing arm and the five-legged calf that got born on the Duvall place one spring. Such aberrations could not be aberrations in a town so small as ours where our parents knew all the secret histories and so understood which sorrows were a case of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the sons and which a case of direct divine retribution and which merely a result of the mysterious ways of the Lord. We were children and had been trained up strictly in the way we should go, so that we did not think to question any earthly thing it was in the will of our parents to accept.

The journey past Hamp Humphrey's house was part of growing up in our town. His life was the mystery of our childhood, secret and wonderful and strange, but the journey past his house marked things out for us in ways without words so that we knew always where we stood. We did not speak about it, never said the words openly, but it was known that when you were old enough and unafraid enough to walk directly up to his lawn chair and shake hands with him like a grownup and take your nickel away with you to spend on a candy bar at Sanger's, you were old enough to be accepted on your own terms and not just as so-and-so's little brother or sister. Likewise, there was a point when you were too old to stop by Hamp Humphrey's. Anyone who continued to go by there after all of the rest of us knew the time had passed (and no one knew how we knew and it was another thing we never spoke about) would be subject to bad persecutions because that was almost as disgraceful as going trick-or-treating after you'd gotten too big.

*

The whispers began, as most whispers began, in somebody's kitchen. We children could not find out the details of the story, only that it had to do with something Gladys Holloway said. Gladys Holloway was not one of us children but an older girl, not quiet yet a woman, who did not go to school but cleaned people's houses instead. The Holloways were not really one of the bad families and not quite one of the good families but traversed some kind of shifting no man's land in between. But people felt sorry for Gladys because her mother had died when she was little and none of the rest of the Holloways would take her. She'd been

raised all alone by her daddy and had become shy and sullen and some folks said sneaky from so many beatings and so much time spent alone. Our parents made certain to hire her if they needed someone to houseclean and paid her fair wages because that was the kind of charity our parents did — but they also made certain to be home when she came to clean and watched to make sure her sweater was no more bulky when she walked out the door than when she walked in.

But Gladys Holloway said something to somebody. Some of our mothers said, oh fiddlesticks, I don't believe a word of it, it's downright impossible, anybody could see that. (These were words our mothers would let us hear in their kitchens, though the words that Gladys Holloway said were sealed behind thin pressed-tight lips whenever we came in.) But others shook their heads and said, I don't know, I don't know. Our fathers stayed out of it at first and only cautioned their own womenfolk to not let the word of a Holloway be taken as gospel. But the whispers kept on, and Gladys Holloway never went to Hamp Humphrey's house to clean anymore.

We cared as little as our fathers for the whispers at first. They had no more to do with our lives than the rustles and murmurs and low breathy sighs we'd heard when Sissy Wilson went away very fat in the belly and came back skin and bones and crying all the time. The faint susurrous sounds belonged to the walls of our mothers' kitchens in the same way that the tree frogs outside our windows belonged to the night. Our lives went on in their small important ways and it wasn't until our mothers began taking us aside, one by one, to caution us about going by Hamp Humphrey's that we picked up our heads and paid attention to the whispers and began to try to find out what they were all about.

We gathered in the schoolyard or down by the creek to tell each other our mother's words and brag about the whispers we'd overheard and question and wonder at just what the words meant. We pretended to each other to know a great deal. The youngest ones became frankly terrified of Hamp Humphrey and cried often and would not walk by there, even on the far side of the road. But the rest of us were not so much afraid as contemptuous. Hadn't he always been a soft mushy man? Hadn't he always seemed to us like a great soft-boiled egg or something squishy and useless and red? We went by Hamp Humphrey's yard, never along the path but out in the middle of the road, and stared at him and wondered at how he could have done such a thing (and somebody said their mother had said he had Thrown Her Down, Actually Thrown Her Down, such a terrible, impossible thing, and our small bodies quaked in the night when we were alone and not so brave to think of being Thrown Down by those quavering hands). Some of the older ones catcalled at Hamp Humphrey and used words they'd heard from the walls of their kitchens or made up words of their own, but most of us just walked by and stared.

Hamp continued on in his lawn chair, every morning, every evening, and now when we came by he would lift his bobbing head from his chest and look at us, and when we paused in our journey to gaze at him, he would lift one twitching

arm and let it dance a spasmodic greeting in the air. We thought ourselves to be quite courageous, walking so near Hamp Humphrey's house, and it became a mark of great stature and bravery to step close to the path or Hamp's overgrown yard.

Still, he sat every day in his lawn chair, and our mothers began to click tongues over such a disgrace. Somebody should speak to him they said to our fathers, someone was going to have to have a talk with him, that much was clear. Our fathers, who had ducked their heads and picked their teeth and spent more time at their work since the whispers began, started talking with each other. So long resistant to the power of the whispers, they now took the sounds to the power of the spoken-out word, and their words gained strength and anger as they spoke them out loud. *Somebody* was going to have to talk to him. They talked to each other over fence posts and in barnyards, at the gas station and feed store, in the yard of the church. They delegated authority, and then took it back again or the delegate shook it off. They discussed and discussed the Hamp Humphrey situation, and we children, playing nearby, listened to the words that they said.

And so it was that on the last morning of August, our last morning of freedom before school the next day, we gathered by unspoken agreement in the roadway in front of Hamp Humphrey's house. We said to each other, very grownup and disgusted, well *somebody* is just going to have to speak to him, that's all there is to it, and we spat in the dust and shook our heads.

Hamp called to us from his lawn chair, and his words drooled out long and useless and slurring in the humid air. Somebody said, go see what he wants, and we pushed at each other and dug our toes in the roadbed, but finally, all together, as if by some signal, we crossed the roadway and waded through the weeds in his yard to stand bunched together at a safe distance in front of his chair. Hamp went on trying to talk to us, his great heavy head lifted off his chest, his pale eyes watching us and his thick tongue pushing the words without form or consonants or reason out from his lips. We listened for a long time, and watched him. His face was darkened in the shade of the elm tree. His hands were trapped like two wayward things, locked together, between his knees. After awhile his tongue went silent, and the rising/falling/rising song of the locusts wrapped all around us and weighed down the air. Hamp sat looking at us, his head bobbing wearily from the strain of keeping it lifted off his chest.

Somebody said, yes sir, Mr. Hamp, it's a hot day today sure enough, and for one flickering moment no time had passed and it was all as it had ever been. Hamp's lips pulled jerkily to one side in a smile and he wagged his sorrowful agreement.

And then somebody laughed, and we all began laughing, and Hamp's hands flew loose from their captured place between his knees. He began digging in his loose pockets for money, and we all grew silent and watchful, and when he pulled a quaking hand filled with coins free from his pocket, we put our hands

behind our backs and started walking backwards, backing away. Hamp called to us again and the words were like the lowing of a calf for its mother or the moan of a lost hound dog in the night. And so somebody laughed again, and we all started laughing, a nervous staccato peppering the air.

Hamp tried to stand up then, and we knew in an instant that he was coming for us, to reach for us with those terrible hands and Throw Us Down. Some of the younger ones screamed, and we all started running, and when we had nearly reached town, our breaths bursting in our chests, we turned and looked back. We could see the enormous soft body of Hamp Humphrey lying in the weeds beside his chair, arms and legs waving, useless and senseless, like a turned-over insect on the ground.

The next morning Skeet Johnson came around to deliver Hamp's groceries and called and called through the latched screen door. He told us how it all happened, how he finally set the sacks down on the porch and went around back to check and found Hamp laying there face-up on the concrete slab of the storm cellar in the back yard. How Hamp's back was broken but he wasn't dead yet and how he just laid there and moaned and kept trying to move his pitiful arms. How Skeet had to put his fist through the screen of the back door to call the ambulance and how they liked to never got him up on the stretcher, he was the same as dead weight. How it was Skeet's own opinion that Hamp must have got up on the rooftop some way, there couldn't be no other explanation for it, not with a broken back and all, but how you could explain both doors being locked from the inside was a mystery to him that might not never be explained.

It took Hamp Humphrey six days to die. All the long while he was dying, our fathers gathered in the churchyard or the parking lot of the hospital and shook their heads, saying, it's strange-eyed to me, that's a fact, but looks to me like somebody should have gone over there and had to talk with the man. Our mothers whispered in their kitchens, don't tell me, I knew good and well it was possible, if he could get himself up on that rooftop, he was capable of anything, there's just no telling what all he might would have done.

And we. We just never looked at each other when they talked about Hamp Humphrey. Some of us said sometimes, see, I *told* you it was a fall off a house. And somebody said one time, don't you think he could have crawled around back there from where he was laying in the front yard? and the rest of us shouted, you're crazy! that don't give you a broken back! In our minds we saw him sitting on the edge of the rooftop, his quaking soft hands moving in the moonlight and his bobbling head nodding up and down. We knew he was too soft to smash like a brittle insect or the shell of an egg, and that's why he had to lay there all night, paralyzed and dying, but unable to die.

Don Zancanella

Television Lies

I remember the summer of 1961 as the summer television came to the Arapahoe Valley. I was fourteen, and I can still picture myself riding my bicycle through the quiet streets of town toward home. It is nine o'clock in the evening, but because it is early July, the sky remains blue-gray with a line of rose tracing the mountaintops where the sun has only now disappeared. In the slowly diminishing light I pedal the last block, hands off the handlebars, guiding the wheels with subtle shifts of weight until I steer from the pavement and up our gravel drive. Though the day has been warm, the night chill is already arriving, cold breezes from the hills that can put a skim of ice on the dog's water dish even in the heart of summer. Just before I reach the porch, I leap off the bike and let it careen onto the lawn, its wheels spinning freely where it falls.

Inside, the new television set remains dark.

"It looks like we'll have to wait another day or two," my father sighs, seated forlornly on the floor before the blank screen.

"They're taking forever," I say and collapse onto the sofa, joining him in his disappointment.

He sits cross-legged and places one hand on either side of the mahogany cabinet, his nose nearly touching the glass.

"I wish you'd been here earlier. I got a picture for about five minutes, but then it faded. I called Jack McCoy to make sure it wasn't our set and he said the same thing happened to them."

"Could you tell what show it was?"

"All I could make out was what looked like a lady and a goat. It could have been a dog, but it appeared to be a goat. I just wish you'd been here."

My sister Nancy is sitting at the dining room table dressing a doll from a round oatmeal box full of clothes.

"Did you see it?" I asked.

"I was with Mom at the grocery store," she replies disgustedly. "By the time we got back it was off again."

"So you were the only lucky one," I say to my father. He just shakes his head, giving me a weary smile.

For days we had shared in his anxiousness. He was the principal of Arapahoe's only high school, but his early years as a science teacher had left him enamored of gadgets, especially the electronic kind. We had all seen TV before, in department stores in Denver and in the homes of relatives in Cheyenne, but it remained a marvel. Now, at least, the signal for two stations from Cheyenne was to be sent to our corner of Wyoming by way of a transmitter on the crest of LaPrelle Rim. Gathering impulses from 120 miles away, it would beam signals to all the antennas already sprouting on the roofs of the houses of Arapahoe. Like each of

our neighbors, we had purchased our set weeks in advance and waited eagerly for the broadcast to begin.

On such a summer evening, I would just have returned from the drive-in restaurant where I worked frying hamburgers. Once home, the first thing I did was shower to rinse away the smell of stale grease. Then, in the time left before bed, I would go out into the back yard and call across the fence to Clay Wells. Hearing my voice through open windows, he would bound from the rectangle of light at their kitchen screen door and into the cool darkness beneath the cottonwoods shading our adjoining yards.

Clay and I were friends by virtue of neighborhood geography. The same age, growing up back yard to back yard, it was inevitable that we should be often together. Yet by fourteen I had begun to sense that we were growing apart. That summer for the first time I had a job and wanted to spend more time with new friends from work. Still, I called for him nearly every evening because I knew he was waiting for me and because it was what I'd always done.

"Another day," Clay grumbles. "I can't stand it any more. I'm almost ready to kick in the picture tube."

"Somebody at work today said that the transmitter will go on the air as soon as the last parts get shipped here. In two or three weeks."

Our barrel-chested labrador appears from the shadows then and butts his head gently against my knee, wanting to be petted.

"I heard they're going to put a set in every room at school," says Clay. "All our teachers will be on TV."

"Where did you hear that?"

"Downtown."

"That's not true. My dad would have told me about any TV's in school."

Clay shrugs, palms upward, and begins to smile.

"My mom won't let me turn ours on anymore," he says. "She's afraid I'll wear out the switch."

We both laugh and groan in mock anguish. More and more we lack things to talk about, but lately we stand united in our common anticipation of television. I scratch the dog behind one black velvet ear and watch as Clay plucks a leaf from a low-hanging branch and absent-mindedly shreds it to pieces.

"Let's ride our bikes up into the canyon tomorrow," he says. "We can go fishing and get away from these TV's."

"I can't," I tell him, secretly pleased to have a legitimate excuse for avoiding a day in his company. "I have to go to work."

At the time, I had come to the smug conclusion that I was outgrowing Clay. While my interest in girls awkwardly emerged, he remained mired in b-b guns and model airplanes; while I looked forward to high school sports, Clay wished only to spend his days wandering the hills, with or without a fishing pole, with me as his companion or alone.

I felt guilty deserting him. He was an only child and fatherless as well, Mitch Wells having abandoned his family when Clay was only three. More than once my

father had reminded me that Clay's life was emptier than mine. Yet I justified my shrinking interest in his friendship by cataloging for myself his shortcomings: he was a chronic liar who felt little need to tell the truth to even his best friend, and he was unreasonably jealous of everything about me that did not include him—of my job, of my family, and of my other friends.

A little after ten, my mother would call for me and I would leave Clay in his back yard where he would sometimes remain, lying in the grass or idly tossing an old tennis ball against the fence until almost midnight. I knew because I'd watch him from my bedroom window.

Some nights, when I was almost asleep, there would be a knock at our front door. My mother's bedroom slippers would shuffle from her sewing room sounding like sandpaper on the hall floor, and I'd know that Clay's mother had come, an event that always made me hold my breath and listen hard.

"Is Clayton here?" she would ask, her voice pinched with worry.

"I'm sorry, no, Michael is already in bed," my mother answers, a little more curtly than necessary, keeping Mrs. Wells on the other side of the screen door and not inviting her in. Then my father appears at my mother's shoulder.

"Check your back yard. I think the boys were out there earlier."

"Perhaps you're right, but I don't think so. I believe they both may have *slipped out.*"

Then the door thumps shut and I hear my mother's footsteps pass once more.

Every small town has two or three residents who are roundly recognized as odd or even crazy, characters who, unlike the masses of the lost in cities, are tolerated, accepted even, into the weave of small town life. Clay's mother was one of those. Perhaps she was never given the help she needed—mental health services in towns like Arapahoe are almost non-existent even today—and yet she lived as coherently as most, holding a cashier's job at the grocery store, caring for her home, raising her son.

Lilly Wells' condition manifested itself when, from time to time, she would arrive at our door to report some impossible yet minor crime.

"I've lost my yellow sleeveless blouse," she would say, pointing one sharp finger accusingly at my mother's nose. "I don't suppose it's in your closet." Or, "I've seen your car parked in the alley at midnight. Stop your surveillance." Twice or three times she called the police, the officers going first to her house and then calling on my parents who spoke in hushed tones with them at the foot of our driveway. And I even recall a night she appeared wearing an old pair of plastic, horn-rimmed glasses.

"Are your eyes bothering you?" my father asked.

"Confidentially," she muttered, "I want the neighborhood to think I'm going blind."

Always her visits were brief and harmless and always their strangeness made me uneasy, seeming like the beginnings of nightmares as I tried to fall asleep. As

close as I was to Clay, however, I never asked him about his mother's behavior, sensing from an early age that such questions were out of bounds. Her visits were the whole of it—her piece said, she would return home and not appear on our doorstep again for weeks. In the interim, she would seem almost ominously untroubled, waving cheerfully from her garden where she spent Saturday mornings on her knees in pastel pants harvesting lettuce, or coming through the back gate with a bone for our dog.

If anyone took offense it was my mother who sometimes hissed about Lilly's "problem" and encouraged my father to look at new brick houses with double garages on the plains east of town—or at least to build a higher back fence without an adjoining gate.

One subtle but ever-present piece of evidence that Clay's mother was different lay in the fact that my parents always called her "Lilly." Never "Mrs. Wells," but "poor Lilly" or "that Lilly" or just "Lilly" while shaking their heads, even in front of Nancy and me. "The Canfields" lived next door but across the back fence were "Lilly and Clay." I liked her name because it fit—pale, ethereal, otherworldly Lilly—and thought of her that way although I always said "Mrs. Wells" when I spoke.

I sometimes fancied Clay's lies were spawned by his mother's behavior, learned or inherited even, a confused sense of reality encoded in their genes like the sandy hair and blue-gray eyes they shared. Yet it was not difficult to see that Lilly Wells' delusions were nothing like Clay's self-serving inventions. Clay lied to one-up me ("my mom is teaching me to drive"), to enrich a story ("when the Conoco station burned down the firemen found an old woman's bones in the ashes"), or for no reason at all ("I saw your dog chasing squirrels in the park"). But his mother had no car, only he had heard about the old woman's bones, and our dog never left the yard. At times I would become so frustrated that I'd demand absolute proof. Once, when I told him my family was going to California to visit relatives, he said he'd already been there. I ran to Lilly and asked if it was true. When she said no, Clay denied having ever made the claim:

"I only wish I could go," he shrugged. "I want to visit Disneyland *someday.*"

Two days after I rejected Clay's fishing invitation, he rode his bicycle up to the drive-in, fishing pole balanced across the handlebars, and waited at the picnic table under our swaybacked aluminum awning for me to appear.

"Any luck?" I asked, motioning to the canvas creel slung from his shoulder.

"They're biting like crazy," he said, "but I just kept two." He lifted the flap to reveal a pair of medium-sized trout, their milky eyes like plastic shirt buttons. "But you won't believe what happened," he added, his words accelerating with excitement. "I saw a wolf."

"Come on, a wolf?" I had seen deer, elk, even moose and bobcats in the foothills west of town, but I was certain there were no wolves.

"I was just walking along the river when it came out of the trees on the far bank. It took a drink, looked right at me, and then disappeared into the bushes. Just like that." He snapped his fingers dramatically.

"How big was it?"

"Bigger than a German shepherd. About this big," he said, holding his hand even with the table top above the ground.

"You're sure it wasn't just a dog? Or maybe even a big beaver?"

"A beaver!" He laughed wildly. "You're nuts, Mike."

Long ago I had stopped arguing with Clay when he told his dubious tales, choosing instead to tease him or simply ignore him.

"We've started getting *TV Guide,*" I said, changing the subject. "If it would come on tonight, which it won't, we could watch 'Wagon Train.'"

"Who cares about TV," he said, suddenly sullen. "I think it'll be a waste of time. I don't even want it anymore."

I did not call for him for several nights after that. One minute he was lying ("Impossible," said my father when I asked him about the wolves) and the next, unaccountably quarrelsome, scorning one of our last shared interests. Instead, I stayed at work after my shift ended, hoping one of the girls I liked would stop in or I simply went home and stayed in my room, listening to music on the radio.

"Why haven't you been seeing Clay," my father asked one evening after I hadn't been making my trips to the backyard for over a week. "I saw him out there by himself just a minute ago."

"We aren't getting along."

"You guys have been friends for too many years to stop now," he said, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Why don't you give him another chance?"

I tried to look skeptical and then walked past him out the door. It was already dark, but I could see Clay flipping a jackknife in the air and watching it stick in the ground, the silver blade reflecting little patches of porchlight or moonlight as it fell.

"Hey there, what's new?" I asked lamely.

"I'm seeing how many times in a row I can stick this knife in the dirt. My record is six."

Neither of us spoke for a moment and I watched as he threw it twice more.

"I'm sorry I haven't been around lately," I said. "I've had to work overtime. We've been short-handed."

"I thought you were inside watching TV."

"You bet," I said, "Watching a blank screen and listening to the static."

Clay stopped throwing the knife and became silent, standing back in the shadow of the tree so that I could see only his dark silhouette.

"If it was on tonight we could watch 'Rawhide' or 'Route 66,'" I said, trying to make amends.

"Our TV started working three days ago," Clay said. "I thought yours had too." Then he pulled the knife from the ground and came out of the darkness to meet me at the fence.

"That can't be. What do you mean?"

"Just one station. Channel two. My mom said she didn't think other people were getting it yet, but I didn't believe her. I've watched 'Danny Thomas' and 'Have Gun Will Travel' and a bunch of cartoons." He paused thoughtfully as though trying to recall other programs he'd seen. "Not 'Rawhide' though," he said, shaking his head. "It's on a different station. The only reason I'm out here right now is because all that's on is some news program."

I knew at once he was not lying, not this time. The story was too audacious, and still more revealing was the look on his face making it clear he thought we'd been getting the signal too. Yet I reacted as if this was just one more of his fabrications. It was the only explanation I could imagine.

"You've got to promise not to tell anybody," he said, his blue eyes opening wide. "Maybe we aren't supposed to be getting it yet."

"Who am I going to tell?" I felt a sudden contempt for him and his childish stories. "You're such a liar. Let's go inside right now and turn it on. Let's see you prove it."

"I would, but my Mom said to keep it a secret. Can't you just believe me?"

"Why should I? Go back inside with your mom and watch your TV."

"I'm not lying," he said, pleading. "Why don't you like me anymore?" Then his eyes filled with tears and he ran back toward the house. I gasped, suddenly afraid he would stumble and fall on the open knife and I would be to blame.

Back inside I found my father sitting at the kitchen table balancing a bank statement. I told him what Clay had said, hoping, I believe, that it would serve as evidence of Clay's weak character but also seeking confirmation that what he said wasn't true.

"Did Lilly tell you that?" he asked.

"Clay."

He put down his pen and sighed.

"It can't be. I mean, I suppose it's possible, but it's highly unlikely. You know how late at night you can get radio stations from far away? But the picture would be too fuzzy and wouldn't last long enough for you to sit down and actually watch a program."

"Like the lady with the goat you saw the other night."

"Exactly." He glanced at my mother who had come to stand in the kitchen doorway.

"It all sounds like Lilly talking," she said.

"Maybe I'll go over tomorrow or the next day to see how she's doing," said my father. "Maybe she's having problems again."

Later that night, I lay in bed contemplating Clay and his television set. Before long I sat up and looked out at the Wells' house. Lights still shone in their living room and so I dressed quietly and crept down the hall and through the kitchen to the back door. My mother and sister had already gone to bed, but I could hear the rustle of newsprint coming from where my father sat in his easy chair turning the pages of the evening paper. Once outside, I ran to the fence crouching like

a soldier on night maneuvers, scaled it, and then fell to my hands and knees in the cool grass, crawling until I could conceal myself in the fan of lilacs that flanked their living room windows. There, through a narrow gap in the curtains, I saw Clay and Lilly held in rapt attention by the image of a single horseman galloping across the screen. A dim lamp was on in the corner, but their faces were lit by the blue-white glow of the miraculous TV.

I had to stand on tiptoe, fingers hooked on the window sill, nose nearly touching the pane, but I wasn't afraid they would discover me, so intent was their gaze. For nearly an hour I hung there, through a gunfight and a newscast, through car commercials and cigarette commercials, and not once did they glance my way or even leave their seats. They were still watching when I stole back to bed.

Early the following morning I returned to Clay's house and knocked. I wanted to see their TV up close, to discover what accident, what mechanics, what magic made their set work while all the others in Arapahoe remained dark. I was sorry I'd called him a liar, but that seemed less important now than his working TV. Perhaps, I thought, I could learn how to bring our television to life as well.

Lilly answered the door smiling brightly. She called Clay and said, "You've been awfully busy with work this summer, haven't you? Clay certainly misses your company."

Then Clay appeared, looking sleepy, and we went outside and stood in the morning sun next to the garage.

"What do you want?" he asked, his voice sullen and his mouth turning down to a childish pout.

"I'm sorry I called you a liar," I said, wanting to get on to more interesting business. "It's just hard to believe your TV works when ours doesn't. When no one's does."

He didn't speak and wouldn't let his eyes meet mine. His hands were thrust into the back pockets of his jeans as he toed a tuft of grass with his sneaker.

"Suppose I'd told you the same thing," I said impatiently. "Would you have believed me?"

He seemed resolved to be angry until suddenly an enormous yawn overcame him and we both laughed.

"Come on, I'll show you," he said.

I followed him back inside, but we stopped in the kitchen where he pulled a chair out from the table. "Sit here," he ordered and then disappeared down the hall. I leaned forward, propping my elbows next to a half-empty cereal bowl and strained to listen until I thought I could hear the voices and music of TV but reminded myself that it could just as well be the radio. And then I heard Clay and his mother talking back and forth in anxious whispers, a hushed argument at the end of the hall.

When Clay finally reappeared, he motioned me dramatically into the living room where I found their TV on, tuned to a daytime game show. The m.c.

chattered cheerfully at his contestants, but Lilly stood by looking uneasy, her troubled expression holding me by the door.

"Channel two," she said when I had watched the screen for a few moments. "The picture is very clear."

Clay explained, "We don't know why it's happening. It's not even one of the Cheyenne stations. It's WBBM from Chicago. Maybe our antenna's just pointing in the right direction."

I stared at the picture, transfixed—not because the game show was so wonderful but because it was appearing on the single working TV in our vast valley, the only one somehow receiving signals from a thousand miles away. And yet, as I watched, I sensed Clay and Lilly watching not the television screen but me.

"What do you think?" Clay asked.

"I think it's fantastic. I can't believe it."

"There's a baseball game on tomorrow. You could come over and watch."

Then suddenly Lilly leaped in front of us and switched off the set. She looked like she did when she made one of her crazy visits to our house, her eyes roaming the room distractedly, her small hands wringing one another, scrubbing her knuckles red.

"That's enough," she snapped. "We'll wear out this instrument before a year goes by. I'm not even sure we should use ours until everyone else's works. It's a lovely day and you two should be out in the sun."

Clay uttered a word of protest, but she shushed him with a wave of her hand and herded us briskly back outside.

"Chicago," I said, still amazed, after the door slammed behind us.

Clay smiled shyly, and I could see him overflowing with pride. He had conferred a great honor upon me by allowing me inside to see their TV.

"I think it scares my mom," he said. "I had to promise her you were keeping it a secret. She's afraid everybody in town will want to come over and watch."

On my way back to work that afternoon I nearly drove my bicycle off the road as I scanned the rooftops of houses trying to see which directions their antennas were turned.

The next day my friendship with Clay Wells ended. A month before I would have found it a necessary or even satisfying event, but when it finally happened I was sorry. Sorry, I would now say, that I had lost a friend. Sorry, on that Saturday I suppose, that the end hadn't come on my terms.

I slept late that morning. The night before I had called to Clay from the fence and waited, but he never came. I could picture him then, watching whatever was on WBBM-TV, his feet resting on the coffee table, thinking himself imperious and unique. For a moment the lilacs beckoned, but it didn't seem worth the trouble now that I knew what I'd see. I went to bed, taking care to peer out the window one last time to see their living room lights still lit. As I fell asleep I wondered if it was possible to watch TV all night long.

When I awoke, the sun had already over-heated my room and father had already been to see Lilly Wells. Standing in the kitchen making toast I looked through the window above the sink and saw him just leaving their yard. I hadn't forgotten his promise to investigate, but somehow I thought he'd talk to me again first. As I stood there in my bare feet, he came in, said good morning, and poured a cup of coffee from the electric pot on the counter.

"Well, I don't think Clay's getting any more TV than we are," he said.

I let out the breath I'd been holding and sat down at the table.

"When I went over there just now, she had their set covered up with an old fringed table cloth. The top is littered with knickknacks. They're using it for an end table, believe it or not."

"She's afraid Clay is going to wear out the switch."

He pulled a chair back and sat down across from me.

"I should have talked to you before you went over," I added. "I made Clay turn it on yesterday. It looked as blank as ours."

"So he told you another stretcher," my father said, a disappointed smile crossing his face. "At least Lilly's o.k. TV is just the kind of thing she could hallucinate about."

It was the first time I can remember him speaking so bluntly about Lilly to me and I didn't know what to say.

"Why do you think...why does she...?" I stuttered. I felt myself edging toward some secret, some fragment of adult knowledge, but just then Nancy padded into the kitchen in her yellow pajamas, sleepily rubbing one eye with the heel of her hand.

"What's for breakfast," she muttered.

"They're good neighbors all the same," said my father, his intimate tone having vanished with Nancy's arrival.

While he poured her a glass of orange juice, I put on my shoes and left for Clay's house feeling triumphant for having successfully preserved our secret. We were going to watch a baseball game on television and I couldn't wait. But when I reached the porch, Clay appeared suddenly and held the door closed from inside, glaring at me furiously through the sagging screen.

"You promised not tell anybody," he said. "And then you send your dad over here to check on us."

"He didn't find anything. What difference would it have made if he had?"

I gave the door handle two sharp tugs, but he held it fast. Then Lilly came to stand behind him. She looked stricken, her eyes moist and fearful.

"Let him in," she said.

We all stood and stared at one another for a moment until Clay dropped his hands. I pulled the door slowly to me and slipped inside.

"I'm sorry," I said. "When I told my dad about your TV, I hadn't seen it yet. I thought Clay was lying."

"I didn't want Clay to tell anyone. It's as much his fault as it is yours." Then she put her hand on his shoulder and gently squeezed it, taking the sting out of her admonition.

"Dad didn't see a thing. I promise not to talk to anybody else."

"I know how I act sometimes," she said. "If people were to hear about this, they'd laugh. It would be one more story about Lilly Wells. The stories get back to us, you know."

Clay was shaking his head and, as his mother spoke, his hand flew toward her mouth as if to cover it.

"Stop it, you shouldn't be saying this to him," he said. "I've changed my mind, I want him to go home."

But Lilly just took his outstretched hand and held it to her face.

"I don't understand why we're getting channel two," she continued, "but it might be gone tomorrow. Then how would I prove it really happened? It's better if no one knows."

Within a week television did come to the rest of the Arapahoe Valley, channel seven and then channel ten, both from Cheyenne as promised. Hidden in a fold of the Rocky Mountains, the silver antennas of Arapahoe gleamed in the sunlight, almost visibly quivering at the outset as they snatched television signals from the air. The first night my father whooped and hooted and gathered us all ceremoniously before the screen. For the next two days he switched channels or adjusted the tuning knob so frequently that we saw only brief fragments of any show. Thereafter, I stayed inside evenings, fastened to the floor in front of the set. By the time the novelty wore off, school was about to begin.

On the few occasions I saw Clay, he was distant, taking care to keep his eyes from meeting mine, both of us saying so little that our already weak conversations faltered and died. When he was in their yard he would hurry back inside if he saw me step out the door. And when I finally risked asking him about channel two, he just shrugged and said it had disappeared the same day the new channels went on the air.

Only once after that summer did the subject of television come up between us again. It was on an afternoon that October just as the geography class we were both taking was about to begin. I was seated three rows away from Clay when I heard a girl next to him exclaim, "He says he got TV before the rest of us. He says he was watching it back in June." She laughed incredulously and tossed her long blonde hair, turning to see that others were listening.

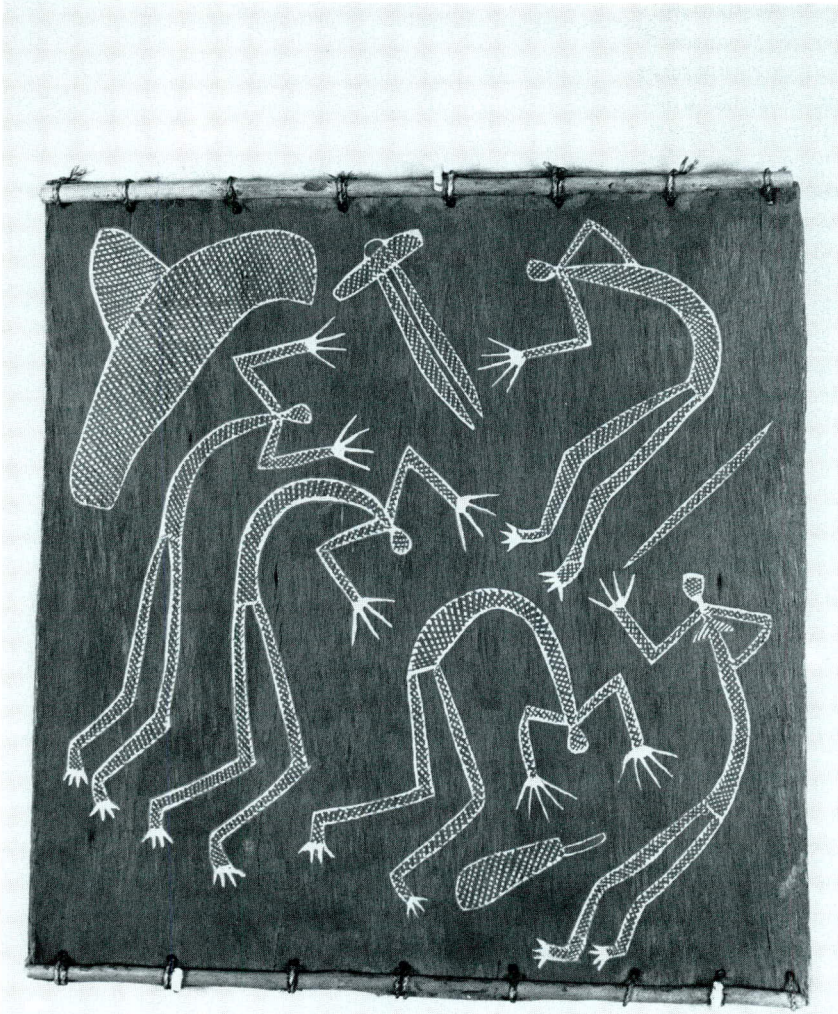
"Where'd it come from, Mars?" asked a boy in the back row. Everyone was silent for a moment, awaiting some response from Clay. Then I leaned out of my desk and across the aisle toward her.

"That's not true," I said. "I live next door to him and he got it the same day the rest of us did, the day they turned the transmitter on."

Class commenced then, and I watched Clay furiously gripping the edges of his desktop, his every muscle tensed and trembling, a fit almost, but he never mentioned the incident to me again. From that day on, we did little more than nod at one another in the halls or wave halfheartedly when we passed on the street.

My family did finally move to the development east of town, not to escape Lilly Wells, but because my father had been promoted to the superintendent's office where he made more money. And then, only months before our high school graduation, Clay and his mother moved as well, to a town in the northern part of the state, for reasons we never learned. I've since wondered if a family lacking a member as sympathetic as my father bought our house and drove them away.

Now, twenty years later, I'm surprised how often I remember them. It happens in the evening after dinner when I take a walk and see a TV on in every house. Or later, at home, when my daughter turns on our set and I worry she'll wear out the switch. When I visit my parents in Arapahoe and have occasion to drive up the canyon, I always keep my eyes peeled for wolves. And when a fellow I work with tells me in a hushed voice about "mental problems" his brother-in-law is having, I suddenly picture Lilly, standing outside beneath our porch light, tugging gently but insistently at the locked screen door as we all peer out at her from inside.



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Ed Ruhe

A Select List of Publications by Edward Ruhe

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"Pope's Hand in Thomas Birch's Account of Gay," *Review of English Studies*, April 1954, 171-174.
"The Two Samuel Johnsons," *Notes and Queries*, October 1954, 432-435.
"Johnson, Birch, and Elizabeth Carter: An Episode of 1738," *PMLA* 73 (1958), 491-500.
"A Note on James Agee," *Epoch*, 1958, 247-251.
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"Pastoral Paradigms and Displacements, with Some Proposals," in *Survivals of Pastoral*, ed. Richard F. Hardin, University of Kansas Humanistic Studies, No. 52 (1979), 103-150.
"Poetry in the Older Australian Landscape," in *Mapped But Not Known: The Australian Landscape of the Imag-ination*, ed. P. R. Eaden and F. H. Mares. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1986, 20-49.

FORTHCOMING

"The Bark Art of Tasmania," in *Art and Identity in Oceania: Arts of Ocaenia*, ed. Louise and Allan Hanson. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

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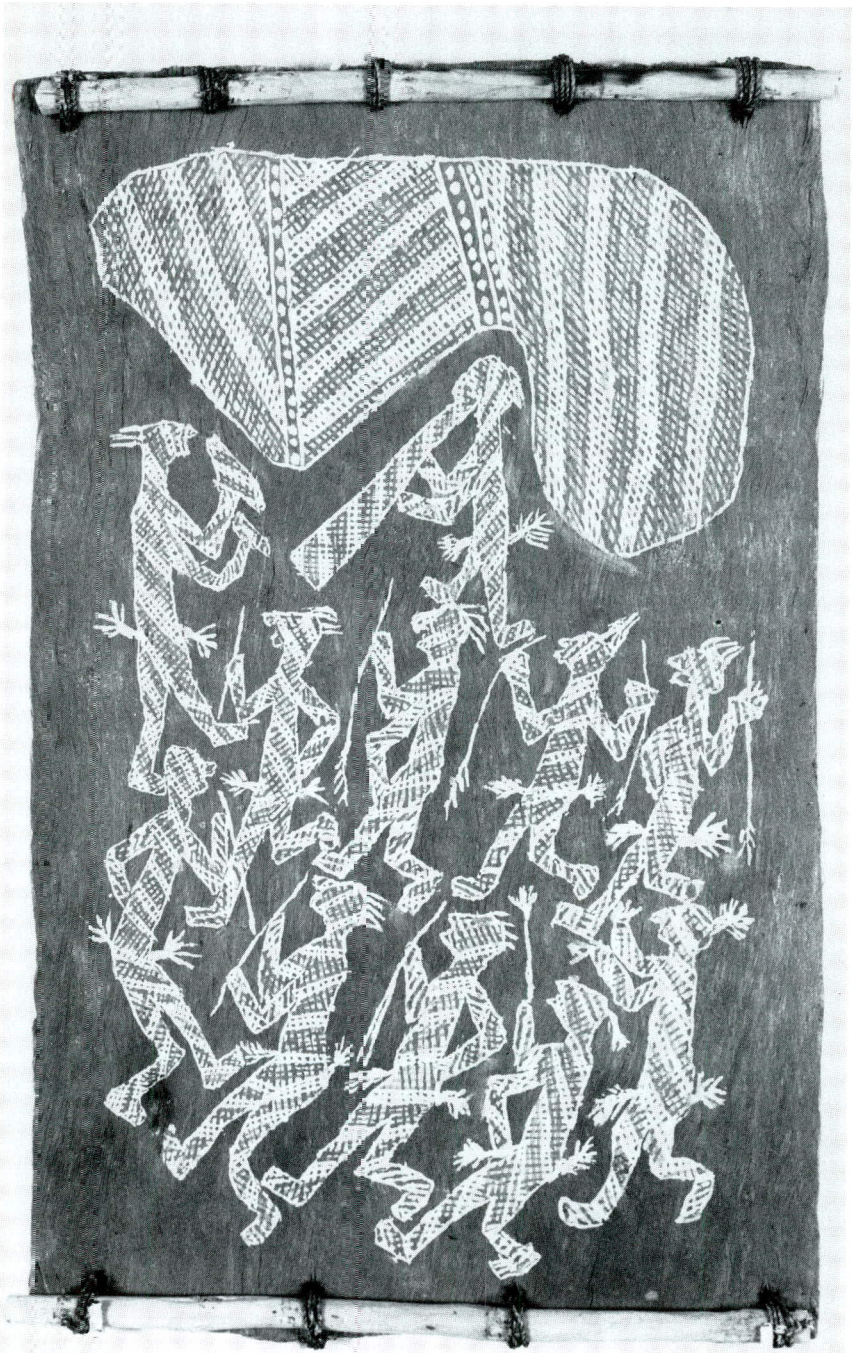

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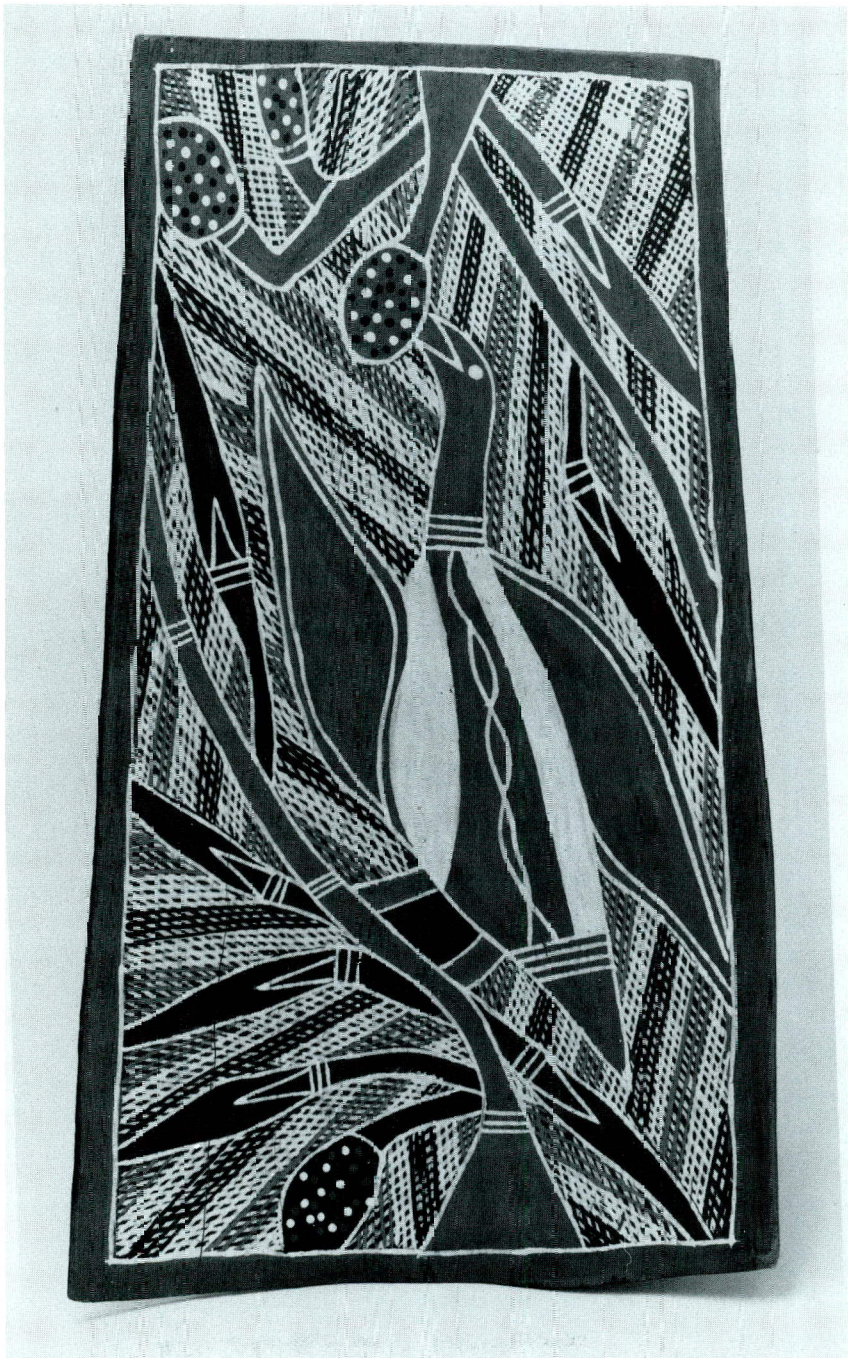


Pearce Collection.

Pearce Collection

Michael L.Johnson

My Last Visit with Ed Ruhe

We sat sipping whiskey in the late light
through your dining room. Talk ranged from new films
to aborigines, antipodes
of the broad world inside your head you shared
generously as the Cheshire-cat grin
still floating above the oxygen tube
that dangled like a necktie from your throat,
tank tucked away somewhere in bric-a-brac,
books, plants, sheet music, records, tapes, and that
whole jumbled museum of art on bark
the curiosity shop of your life.

Months before, you'd perched cross-legged on the edge
of a hospital bed, oblivious
as Buddha to the changefulness of flesh.
I worried you would fall and worry now
how little time death took to bring you down;
but all time is dreamtime, as you knew well.

Victor Contoski

A Note From a Friend

for Ed Ruhe

Your note
folded its wings and settled
over the papers on my desk
hatching its eggs

mumbling its sont
a cross between *ye-eah*
howaboutthat
and *cuckoo.*

All day it watches
over my world
like a bureaucrat
staring out the window
and dreaming of his pension.

Originally published in *Caliban.*

Shelle Rosenfeld

The Magician's Hands

for Ed Ruhe

Just before sleep a silky blackness
wraps its arms around me, steals
walls, footing, angles,
all my familiars.
I know I dream
his world

From the slow dark emerge
shadowy hands, hovering,
lost. Ten fingers curve and bridge
one dark to the next, searching
the perfect instrument, the lost
keys, playing at last
the air and soon
faint intricate notes
cover me
like kisses

***

His hands shape the air
like a magician, bringing centuries-old
words and stories to life.
He taps a book, it is a door, it is a ship
that takes us, rooted in our classroom chairs,
to other worlds and times.
Pages are maps, whispering
of journeys
of endless possibilities

We are Robinson Crusoe
creating new worlds,
making stories of our lives

***

In the dark that enfolds me
that beats through me

I see an eye, winking,
a book suspended in air
whose pages fly open and bring forth
a bouquet of red silk roses

and as the petals fall
I hear the notes,
see the shadow hands dance on the keys,
covering me with a blanket
of song

At my bedside
a sudden rustling—
pages flapping the air like doves,
beckoning—
his gift.

John Birchler

Casualties

Pat sat in his Malibu, staring at the white-curtained window on the second floor of the five-year-old Colonial. He probably should put the house on the market, get the boys away from it. From the sewing room. They'd held up pretty well so far, but you never know. He still heard a shot every time he climbed the stairs, even though he and the boys had been out when Nancy shot herself. If only he could find out where she bought the damn gun, a .38, lay blame somewhere.

But he knew that wherever he laid it, he would be wrong. Nancy was just sick. Two years of therapy hadn't done a thing to alleviate her inexplicable fits of depression, which came and went with no apparent cause. "It isn't anything you did," her note said. "Or the boys. I want you to know that." That was the entire text. Not even a signature.

He heard the screen door slam and looked up at his sons, their freckled faces. They shouldn't have to deal with something like this. He wished he could explain everything to them, but he understood so little. She'd liked her job and the house, she'd had a good childhood, and she'd seemed to love him and the boys. Figure it out.

Eddie, eight years old, redheaded like his mother, short and thin, stuck his head in the passenger window, pointed at a white bag, and groaned. "Sandwiches again?" he said.

Eleven-year-old Curt, tall, strawberry blond, with feet like a sixteen-year-old's, poked his brother in the ribs and said, "You want him to cook again, goofball?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, pal," said Pat, opening his door and leaping at Curt. He pulled the boy's face into his midsection. "Say uncle!"

"No way!" cried Curt. Pat pressed harder. "Uncle!" said Curt, voice muffled, laughing. Good. Pat hadn't heard a lot of that lately. Not even at work, where everyone still seemed to sidestep him, stop talking whenever he walked in the room. Everyone except Red.

Eddie grabbed Pat's briefcase and the sandwiches and slammed the passenger door, hard. Pat winced. He hadn't been getting on the kid very much lately. Maybe he should. How do you determine a child's ability to cope with grief?

He let go of Curt and said, "Game tonight, right?"

Curt nodded, grinning.

"You're holding something from me, aren't you?" said Pat.

Eddie said, his voice shrill, "Curt's coach called! Bobby Furley sprained his ankle skateboarding! Curt's pitching!"

"Hey, all right!" said Pat, raising his hand to deliver a high five. Curt hesitated, then held his right hand up. Their palms met in a resounding smack.

"You'll lose!" said Eddie, ducking behind his father.

Pat looked at Curt. "You might, you know," he said.

"Yeah," said Curt. "I'll ruin our perfect season."

Pat gave him a light shove. "Don't talk like that. Blame Bobby Furley. You weren't supposed to pitch this year. Anyway, it doesn't matter. Winning isn't everything." He rubbed his jaw. He hated talking like a coach. A kid's first pitching assignment, and he isn't supposed to worry about losing?

Inside, Eddie placed the sandwiches on the kitchen table. The counters were bare, and Pat opened the dishwasher and found it empty. What did they do, hire a maid while he was at work? "You guys are all right," he said. "I'll be down in ten minutes. Start eating. I'll make a salad."

Curt opened the refrigerator. "I made one," he said. He placed a large wooden bowl on the table, filled with lettuce, tomatoes, celery, peppers, cheese, broccoli, and croutons. A chef in the works.

"No onions?" said Pat.

"We finished them at lunch," said Curt. "On our hamburgers."

Pat scratched his head. The first three days after the funeral, Mrs. Shipley next door had come in to make the boys' lunches, until finally Curt insisted he could handle the task. "We have a shopping list?" Pat said.

"I started one," said Curt.

Of course. "I'll shop tomorrow night," said Pat. "You don't have a game, do you?"

"No."

Pat climbed the stairs, his pulse rate rising, gravity seeming to increase geometrically with each step. He passed the sewing room door, then stopped, drawn like a magnet to the space behind it. He touched the knob and let go quickly, then grabbed it and pushed the door open. Sunlight streamed through the window, illuminating the tan carpet. And the brown stain. Maybe he should just yank it out himself, instead of waiting for the men who would install the new one to do it. Most of the other reminders of her were out of sight now—her clothes given to the Salvation Army, the knickknacks she loved now in boxes in the attic, her books on gardening and arts and crafts donated to the library, her perfume bottles and toilet articles simply thrown out. All that was left was the wedding portrait tucked in Pat's top dresser drawer. He stepped back and pulled the door closed, feeling immense relief in the sound of wood against wood.

He showered slowly, letting the water sting away the kinks. Things could've been worse. They could've all been home when she did it. Thank God the boys never saw the body, the missing back of her head, the gore everywhere. He had taken the boys to Red Kennedy's house right after Curt's game that night, but Nancy had driven home, claiming a headache. She had seemed pretty together lately—no bouts of chronic fatigue, no sulks, no eating binges. The medication had seemed to be helping. But Pat had sensed as soon as he walked in the front door that something was wrong. It was too quiet. He'd raced up the stairs and found the door locked—just in case the boys got there first, apparently. She had closed the windows, too, probably so the neighbors wouldn't hear, and encased

the gun in a pair of pillows, or so the scattered feathers, powder-burned and covered with blood, would indicate. After the ambulance had taken her away, and the police had left, he had locked the door and kept it locked for a week, made the boys promise not to look inside after he unlocked it again. So far, to his knowledge, they hadn't looked.

By the time he'd finished his shower, he had no appetite. He dressed in cutoffs and a shirt that said "Cape Cod 1985," then trudged down the stairs. The boys had already finished their sandwiches, and he forced himself to eat half his own, then threw the rest down the disposal. He thought about the gun, still down at police headquarters, waiting for him to claim it, if he wanted. He'd already disposed of his own never-fired .45, the day after Nancy shot herself. Had she known about it? He'd never told her he had it, just hidden it in a shoebox in his closet.

He called the boys in to brush their teeth. Nancy would have been pleased.

Pat watched the Cubs loosen their arms, then take batting practice. Curt didn't have much power yet, but he stung a few line drives, even sent one ball to the base of the wall down the left field line. He was a .300 hitter, but on this team, that made him only a reserve. Which was better, having a son on a team destined to win the league championship, or envisioning next year, when the boy would be the star of a losing team? He glanced at Bobby Furley, who was moping in the dugout, in uniform but with a pair of crutches by his side. Skateboarding. Cheap thrills. Next step, all-terrain vehicles, then motorcycles and fast cars. He turned to watch Curt warming up in the bullpen. "Over my dead body," he muttered.

He looked away from the field, grimacing. Nancy used to use that line. What irony: every time one of the boys wanted to do something risky, she'd prophesy her own demise.

He climbed the bleachers and sat in the top row, resting his back against the hollow steel pipe, spreading his arms. Then, afraid that someone might interpret the posture as Messianic, he tucked them back against his sides. He saw Larry and Yvonne Pelletier and considered slipping away before she saw him, maybe watching the game from the car, but it was too late. She meant well, but she was a busybody. The morning after his father died, she came over and stayed nearly an hour, although he was obviously disoriented by grief and lack of sleep.

She led Larry up the bleachers and reached for Pat's hand. "How are you doing, Pat?" she said.

"I'm okay," he replied.

"The boys?"

"Them, too."

She shook her head. "You Meusels. That hardheaded toughness."

Too bad he couldn't have lent Nancy some of it.

Yvonne squeezed his hand. "If you ever need anything," she said, "you just let us know."

"Thanks, Yvonne," he said, knowing he never would. She was Nancy's friend, and Larry had hardly ever spoken to him or the boys.

She led Larry to another section of the stands. Shortly before game time, Red Kennedy lugged his beer belly up the bleachers and lowered himself into the space next to Pat. "How you doin', tiger?" he said.

Pat looked at his hands for a moment, then at Red. "I can't stand it, Red," he whispered. His eyes were burning, but he didn't want to start crying. Late at night, with the boys asleep, in the isolation of darkness, fine. But not here.

Red scratched his chest, a familiar gesture of indecision, and said, "Pat, I wish I could do something, but . . ." He shrugged and looked away.

"I know, Red."

Red rested his elbows on his knees, grunting. "How about bringing the boys to the pool afterward?"

Pat smiled for a moment. "You trying to mother us, Red?"

Red looked at the field. "I guess."

"Come on, Red. You look about as depressed as I feel."

Red concentrated on the infielders taking ground balls.

Pat searched for Eddie's purple shirt, spotted it near the right field fence, between two white shirts, probably John's and Ricky's. Two more stocky Kennedys. Red meant well. The Kennedys had been like family ever since Pat was transferred into town. Red had taken Pat under his wing, shown him the ropes of the office. Sometimes Red and Marie had understood Nancy better than Pat had. They were always taking the boys so that Pat and Nancy could go off for a weekend, so Nancy could screw her head on tighter.

"All right," Pat said. "I'll swing home for the suits."

Red grinned. "No need. Marie and the girls are gone for the rest of the week. We'll go in raw."

Pat blinked. Why not? The Kennedy's house stood a hundred yards from the nearest neighbors', and there was a high redwood fence around it. Pat and Nancy used to skinnydip—two years ago, at West Yarmouth, near midnight, in the frigid surf; on their honeymoon at Schroon Lake, before dawn; even in the Kennedy's pool, when they babysat for a week. Seven naked males in one pool? Call out the Vice Squad. "All right," he said. "Why not?"

Curt struck out two batters in the top of the first, but also gave up two singles, a walk, and two doubles. However, in the bottom half, the Cubs batted around, with Curt driving in a run with a single. Curt didn't give up another run, and four innings later, the coach removed him with a 15-4 lead. Pat and Red stood and applauded, Pat fighting the urge to shout. "Kid's gonna be a good one," said Red, swigging Orange Crush.

After the game the two men approached the refreshment stand. "Where's Curt?" Pat asked twelve-year-old Josh Kennedy, the hitting star of the game with a pair of home runs.

"I don't know," said Josh. "He was here a minute ago."

Pat checked the bleachers, the dugouts, even the pine trees beyond left field. Finally he knocked lightly on a rear door of the Malibu and said, "You okay?"

Curt pulled his cap over his eyes. "I wanted her to see the first game I pitched," he muttered.

Pat grabbed the door handle, then let go. "I'm sorry, son.". He looked around, wiped his eyes. "I really am." He kicked at a stone. "I'll leave you alone for a while." He walked away, saw Red and the boys approaching, and motioned them back. Red dug in his pockets and steered the boys back toward the refreshment stand.

Eddie did a cannonball, and Pat winced. The boy surfaced quickly, spouting water, laughing. "We wouldn't do this," he said, "if . . ." He looked at his brother a few feet away, then plummeted toward the bottom and came up in the shallow end.

"No more cannonballs in the nude," said Pat. "I want grandchildren."

Red leaned over and handed him a beer, his belly obscuring his genitals. "Want to order a pizza?"

Pat shook his head. "We have to go, Red."

He blew the horn twice as he backed out of the driveway. He looked at Curt beside him, touched his wet hair. "Feel better?"

"No." Curt looked at his knees. "Yeah. I guess."

"How about some ice cream?" Pat asked, low enough so Eddie, in the back seat, wouldn't hear.

"No, thanks."

Pat hesitated, then said, "Listen, I think I can get tickets for the Yankees next weekend. Toronto's coming in. Ought to be quite a series."

It took Curt a moment to reply. "Okay," he said. After a moment, he said, "Why do you still wear that, Dad?"

Pat glanced quickly at him. "Wear what?" But he knew. Why ask then? To show Curt that he wasn't thinking about Nancy all the time?

Curt pointed at his father's hands on the steering wheel. "The ring."

Pat thought for a moment. Well, why? Loyalty? To impart some specific attitude to the boys? A desperate exhibition of undying love? "I guess I haven't stopped feeling married, Curt," he said.

For a moment, Curt didn't say a thing, but finally he mumbled, "I hate her."

Pat felt the urge to brake the car and either slap the boy senseless or scoop him up in his arms and tell him how much he agreed with him. But how could he tell him <u>that</u>? Even if he felt it? Nancy was <u>sick</u>. There was nothing there to hate! The hate they felt was the result of something inside <u>them</u>, not something inside <u>her</u>! It was a way of purging guilt, or grief, or something. After a moment, he said, "I guess that's your right, son."

"Don't you hate her, Dad?"

Pat stopped for a red light. "Why do you ask me questions like that?" he said. "Yeah, I guess I do, sort of. Sometimes."

Curt rested his head against the back of the seat. Pat pressed the accelerator again, and Curt leaned forward, flicked on the radio, twisted the dial, and found the voice of Phil Rizzuto: "Holy cow, what a play by Mattingly! He dove to his right, then threw the ball to—" Curt shut him off abruptly.

"Son, she would've been proud of you," said Pat. "She loved baseball."

Curt mumbled something and turned away.

"What?" said Pat.

"Fuck her," Curt whispered.

Pat pulled the car to the curb, stared at his hands on the steering wheel, his knuckles white beneath the mercury vapor lamps. "Curt . . ." he said. But what else could he say?

"I'm sorry," Curt said, his voice cracking.

"What's the matter?" said Eddie.

"Stay here, Ed," said Pat. He opened the door and climbed out, gesturing for Curt to follow.

Father and son stood on the grass a few feet in front of the car. "I didn't mean it," said Curt.

Pat grabbed him by the shoulders. "Sure you did, Curt. I wish I could tell you how many times I've said those same words. I feel betrayed, too. I chose her to spend my whole life with. I don't know why she did it."

Curt kicked at a stick. "Did she go to heaven?"

Pat stared. This was something new. They had never been a church-going family, but many of Curt's friends attended every Sunday, like it or not. Some, like the Kennedys, were Catholics. Did the Church still preach that bit about suicide victims going to hell? "I don't know, Curt. Do you want her to be in heaven?"

Curt didn't say anything for a while, then looked up at his father and nodded. Pat led him back to the car, the boy moving as if his legs didn't want to work right. They found Eddie asleep in the back seat. So innocent. What a bunch of victims.

Pat fell asleep in front of the television, with the Yankees losing 7-0. When he woke, he saw Curt on the floor, his head propped on the backs of his hands. Phil Rizzuto shouted, "What a comeback!" The screen flashed the score: 7-7. Pat woke Curt up, and they watched the Yankees score five runs in the next inning. "Life isn't that way, is it, Curt?" said Pat when the inning ended.

Curt sat up, a frown on his face. "You mean . . . you mean we don't always get better?"

Pat nodded. "Something like that."

"That really sucks, Dad."

Nancy hated that word, had once washed Eddie's mouth out when the boy used it to describe a parental decision not to go miniature golfing. But, yeah, it sucked all right. Out loud.

Curt rose, his pajama bottoms sagging almost to his groin, and sat on the couch across the room, on an afghan that his mother had spent six months making, before he was born. Pat wondered if the boy knew that.

"Dad?" said Curt.

"What?"

"I used to want to play first base for the Yankees."

Pat laughed. "I wanted to be Mickey Mantle. I never hit better than .230, though, not even in Little League."

"I don't want to anymore," said Curt.

Pat tugged at his ear. "You're giving up, Curt." He checked himself. No lectures—not now, not yet.

Curt lay down, his head propped on a throw pillow, then rolled off the couch. "It must run in the family," he said, heading toward the stairs.

Pat started to shout but stopped himself, unsure what to do. The last thing he wanted was another quitter in the family. It didn't matter if Curt was a star or not, but it mattered that he made a full-fledged effort. He looked back at the screen, then touched the off button on the remote control.

He drank a can of Budweiser in the kitchen, then broke out a bottle of vodka. Hadn't touched liquor since the day they buried Nancy. He'd gotten himself half-blind that night, barely able to drag himself up the stairs. He'd wakened around three a.m. and staggered to the bathroom, where he'd thrown up for fifteen minutes, his belly so sore after a while that he would gladly have died. He drank slowly now, but steadily, aware of his capacity, wanting only to forget, not to torture himself. After an hour or so, he put the bottle back and weaved toward the stairs. He had to lean against the bannister and then the wall, but he made it to the bathroom, and then to bed. His big, empty bed. He fell on top of the covers and shouted into Nancy's pillow until he was hoarse.

He woke around four a.m., still drunk but not sick, and went to the bathroom. Afterwards he sat on the bed, staring at the floor, startled to discover himself growing aroused. Well, it <u>had</u> been a month by now. He groped in a drawer in the bedside table, removed a two-year-old copy of <u>Penthouse</u>, and stared at a pictorial of a couple simulating sex. He and Nancy had made love two nights before she shot herself. She had screamed, thrashed, clutched him, bitten his ear. There had been no indication then of what was to come. She had seemed ecstatic, almost newly in love.

He closed the magazine, dropped it on the floor, and lay awake, unable even to keep his eyes closed. After a while, he got up and shuffled toward the window that opened on the backyard. He stared into the darkness for a long time, then looked at his left hand in the moonlight, tugged his ring off, and flung it into the night.

It took him nearly an hour to fall back to sleep.

He slept until almost ten and woke with a mild headache, then showered, dressed, and eased down the stairs. The boys were outside, throwing a football. Pat found the vodka and drank one shot, then ate cold cereal and an English muffin. After brushing his teeth, he went to the garage, determined to sweat out the liquor, and tugged out the lawn mower.

The sweat poured off him, and he felt better with each wide, new stripe on the lawn. Eddie swept up the loose grass, and Curt pruned the hedges.

In the middle of the yard, Pat stopped and stared at the house. Monday. He would list the house Monday. Let Nancy's sister-in-law handle it. He could put away the money for the boys' college educations. Put away the bad memories.

His shirt was dark with sweat. Insect noises filled the air, rising and falling like someone sleeping, the rhythms exotic. Finally he called to the boys, "You guys thirsty?"

"I want root beer!" cried Eddie.

"Curt?" said Pat.

"Sure," Curt replied, shrugging.

Pat turned the mower over to Curt and went inside. He stood before the refrigerator, staring at the calendar held on by two magnets. July 17th. Six weeks till school. He did not look forward to September, when the boys would have to endure the sympathies of new teachers and the kids in their classes. Would they wind up feeling, as Pat had when his own parents divorced, as if they had some contagious disease? Maybe he should request a transfer, leave the city behind, as well as the house.

He poured three glasses of root beer, placed them on a plastic tray, grabbed a bag of chocolate chip cookies off the refrigerator, and suddenly recalled Nancy serving her men this way, when she wasn't depressed out of her skull. She could be so kind, so loving, but she could also sit in her sewing room, an afghan drawn up to her chin, rocking, ignoring everyone, not even answering when addressed; or look up at him in the middle of sex and push him away, her face a vision of disgust or, worse, indifference; or ignore the boys completely, leaving them in tears.

Maybe they were better off without her.

He heard something hit the house, metallic against the aluminum siding. He stood at the door and watched the boys examine something on the ground. He looked at the siding and saw a distinct dent, new. It could've been someone's head with a dent in it. Eddie held up Pat's ring, mangled now but still shiny, and said, "What is it, Dad?"

"It's nothing," said Curt. "Just a piece of junk."

Eddie turned it over in his hands. "Good thing no one was standing there."

"Yeah," said Curt.

Right, thought Pat. All he needed was another casualty of his marriage.

"You want it?" said Eddie.

"Naw," said Curt.

Eddie flung it toward the tomato garden, thirty feet away. Pat watched it fall among the vines, helpless, then glanced down at the white mark around his ring finger. The scar, as a divorcee at work had once referred to her own.

"Hey, Ed, you want to mow?" said Curt.

Eddie looked at his father. "Can I?"

"Why not?" said Pat. "You're big enough. Just be careful."

Eddie rushed the mower over the yard, leaving strips of uncut grass everywhere. After a while, Pat wiped his brow with a handkerchief and said, "Curt, I want your opinion on something."

"What?" said Curt.

"Do you think we should sell the house?"

Curt stared at him for a moment, then shrugged, turned away, picked up the hedge clippers, and resumed work.

Pat stooped for the yard broom, then remembered the refreshments and stepped back inside. When he came out, he saw Curt searching through the tomato plants. After a moment, the boy stood, his right hand a tight fist, and trotted past his father and into the house.

Pat stood motionless for a moment, then placed the tray on the picnic table beneath the maple, stepped up to the house, and fingered the dent. A little paint would do the trick. And maybe Red would come over and help him dig a hole for a backboard support, and convert the sewing room into a study.

Marian Mathews Clark

Flossie's Kid

"It's asking for trouble two men raising a kid," I told Pop when he came home with the news.

He shook the spring mud off his boots onto the paper I set out for him every day when he gets back from his walk to the mailbox. As soon as he sat in his rocker, I tugged his boots off—trying not to breathe heavy so he wouldn't remember it was him weighing three hundred that kept him from stooping over to pull them off himself. A week after Mama died he'd looked in the mirror. "All you are is a big fat man with a triple by-pass and a wrist that's always broke out in a war rash," he said. "There's no use in anything anymore."

When I heard that and knew how he was looking at life, I didn't waste a minute calling the Spic and Span Laundryman Center. "This is Warren Andrews the manager of the West Street Branch," I said. "I'm giving my notice."

"Why?" they said. "You're finally running West Street in the black."

"I know," I said, "but I have to find something nearer home where I can keep a closer eye on my Pop. He's not good." Ever since then I'd been trying to keep us in food by setting up a Rest Haven carry-out laundry service and trying to find a way to pull Pop out of the dumps. He was getting a routine back, but I couldn't find him anything to smile about to save my life. And now he was springing this new thing on me.

"It's asking for trouble, Pop, especially with a girl," I said again. "Flossie's girl at that."

"But Buddy's too," Pop said.

"How old is the kid anyway?"

"Four and a half years older than the last time Flossie dragged her around for a visit," Pop said.

"Eight, nine, I don't know," I said and picked up the muddy papers. "And how will we support her?" I asked him trying not to get that raw edge to my voice that makes him go quiet.

"Same way as now," he said. "Your laundry jobs and my pension check."

"And not a dime from Flossie, I'll bet."

"Doesn't sound like it," he said looking Flossie's letter over in case he'd missed something about money we both knew wasn't there.

I shook my head and thought of a way to set him straight in a voice where he couldn't tell it. "We're not spring chickens," I said finally and wondered if turning thirty in September would slow me down anymore than the ten pounds I'd added on since last September. "I can only do about two more sets of laundry each week at the outside and that doesn't bring in much," I told him. "Besides, what kind of a life is it for a kid out here in government housing?" I looked at him sitting there frowning, rubbing his hands over the chair arms.

"Better than where she is with that mother of hers," he said. I couldn't argue with that one. We figure Flossie runs a house not much different than a whorehouse without pay which drove my brother off to somewhere we haven't heard from in a long time and killed my mother when he disappeared. That and her ten year bout with emphysema.

"No more truck with women," I said after that. "They get you this way or that and with as little warning either way." And now Flossie was dumping this kid on us, not a woman yet but growing into one.

"I don't like the sounds of it—taking in this girl," I said raising my voice just a little and shaking my head.

Pop got up and paced in front of the heater like he does when things look shaky. His weight rocked from one leg to the other, making him look like a giant penguin with overalls, the same way I might look if I watched myself. Then he looked at Flossie's letter again and read it out loud slow and clear especially when he came to the part about Flossie having to leave Cackie somewhere for a short time while she looked for more work—looked for a man she could glom onto who had more to offer than a bulge in his pants—if you asked me. Pop slowed to a crawl when he read, "Your her only relativs. I thought it'ud be a sham not to let her stay with famly," and I knew Pop's slow-down wasn't only because he was stumbling over the words of a woman who couldn't spell her way out of kindergarten.

"All right," I said, "but mark my words, it's just asking for trouble."

A week later on a Friday the kid showed up at the bus depot. Flossie didn't have the guts to bring her by, just called ahead with a big kiss ass smile in her voice. "She'll be on the 1:40 from Wichita tomorrow," she said. "It's so sweet of you to do this. It's just until I get on my feet."

"You have to get off your back first," I wanted to say but decided to save it for later in case we needed ammo to make her take the kid back.

There was something different about the girl standing in the depot than the one I'd remembered. She had a disgusted look like she'd had to go through one thing too many and all because of Flossie. She'd put on a little weight but was built sturdy without the family fat. Only Buddy didn't have it. The mortician shook his head over Mama when he saw what he was in for and looked at Pop and me like we were the Goodyear Blimps. He would have been surprised if he'd seen Buddy's Cary Grant jaw and muscles that girls went wild over. He would have wondered if there was a family mix up somehow. But Buddy was long gone by that time.

The kid's taking her weight from Buddy was a good thing, but her hair looked like Flossie had taken drawer scissors to her, chopped her mousey brown hair off straight all around and got the bangs too short. She had brown eyes that looked big as saucers with bangs a mile above, and when she asked you something those eyes could see through anything.

She sighed like she might as well get it over with, walked up to us and shoved her hand toward Pop. "You must be who's picking me up," she said. "Mama said

to look for two fat men in Salina, a bald one in overalls and one not so bald in glasses." I stood up straight, pulled in my stomach as much as I could and shook her hand even though I thought she might have found some other way to get acquainted even if Flossie had said that. It was nice Flossie could be so rude about us, but I wondered if she'd told the kid about some of her own goings and comings and how maybe old Flossie got pregnant with Cackie to grab onto Buddy in case he was thinking about bolting. At least that's what Buddy hinted at before he *did* bolt and disappear slick as Houdini.

The kid was ten we found out driving home in old Brinker Lloyd's car we borrowed. We were quiet for the first three miles out of the depot. I could see the kid was looking at me every couple minutes like I was supposed to be doing something, but I didn't know what.

Finally she said, "Well, aren't you going to say something?"

"What do you mean?" I said.

"You know," she said. "Have a talk. Mama and I always have talks when we drive somewhere."

"I'm sure you do," I said and remembered the Christmas Flossie and Buddy stayed with us for three days. You couldn't tell where Flossie was going to light or what she would do when she got there. She could be rubbing Pop's wrist with rash ointment and the minute that was done be in the kitchen making popcorn. In one afternoon I saw her finish the border on a five hundred piece jigsaw puzzle, give Mama a permanent and keep Buddy company in the garage while he worked on the heater on Pop's Dodge. That night she cooked a duck and had fizz left over to buy a duck caller which she pulled out and honked loud right at the table when Pop made his first cut into the bird.

We were all worn to a frazzle after that visit. "I'll sleep for a week," Mama said when they pulled away. "How can Buddy stand it?"

"He's doing all right," Pop said, and I nodded. Buddy was as restless as ever, pacing the floor, glancing in the mirror, playing his guitar, looking out the window, flipping the TV off and on. But now he had Flossie to grab his eye, too. He acted happy enough.

"Well, what do you want to talk about?" the kid said.

"Can't think of anything right now," I said and sighed knowing this visit would be long no matter what.

She stared at me until I couldn't stand it. "All right," I said. "How old are you?"

"Ten," she said. "Now and yesterday, but not the day before."

"Meaning what?" I said.

"Meaning two days ago I was nine. Now I'm two digit," she said rolling her eyes.

"Two what?"

"Two digit. That's what Marshall calls me," she said as if we should know who that was. I looked at Pop sitting in the back seat tapping his fingers on the arm handle. I could see this whole thing was up to me, and I thought old Flossie had

better get herself a job or a sucker with money real fast because she was going to find herself picking the kid up at her own bus station quicker than she thought.

"Who's Marshall?" I said and wound my way around by the grade school where she would be going. I figured seeing Washington Elementary might ease her mind.

"Mama's friend," she said. "He lives with us most of the time when we don't have other company."

"My God," I said with an edge to my voice I hadn't meant to be there. No sooner does Flossie shove Buddy out one side the bed than she yanks this Marshall guy in the other, I thought, and sped up plumb forgetting to mention a thing about the school when we passed it.

We were quiet until I saw our Rest Haven Cottages sign. "Almost home," I said and looked at the kid, but she was staring out the side window. I hoped she was just looking things over and not miffed about the edge in my voice. One touchy set of feelings to watch out for under one roof is plenty. To check out what I was up against I said, "Ten years old, huh?"

She looked at me square without one hint of a hurt feeling. "Tough as nails—just like Flossie," I thought.

"What did you get for your birthday?" I asked her.

She rolled her eyes again like she couldn't believe I was so stupid. "A one way ticket here," she said. "Mama said maybe I could celebrate my birthday later."

"Where?" I said.

She shrugged. "Here, I guess."

"What?" I said. "We didn't even know it was your birthday."

"I know," she said. "That's what I told Mama. But she doesn't understand things sometimes. Or maybe she just likes to make things feel better."

"That so," I said and was glad the kid was on to old Flossie.

"Yeah," she said. "Mama said Daddy would be rolling in any day and that was four years ago. I guess she likes to think stuff like that, but I knew all along when he took his guitar, he wasn't coming back. Next to me that guitar was his favorite thing. That's what he told me once."

"He liked his guitar all right, didn't he Pop," I said hoping for some help from the rear. But there was nothing. Either he couldn't hear or he was thinking about losing Buddy and Mama.

"Maybe he'll come back if you were his favorite," I said at a loss for something better.

"Nah," she said. "He can't make money off me like he can his guitar. That's what Marshall said once when I was feeling real sad. It's not that Daddy doesn't love me, but a man's got to eat you know," she said with a voice that closed up the subject.

"That's the truth," I said and wondered if she was so smart how she thought we were going to manage with her extra mouth to feed.

The first week was too quiet. The kid got up at 6:30 each morning without a fuss, drank her orange juice, ate her toast and caught the 7:50 school bus. Flossie wrote her twice that first week and at least once every week after, I'll have to give her that. Even though Cackie read those letters two or three times apiece, misspelling and all, she didn't mope around acting homesick like some kids might have.

"Just wait," I told Pop. "She's on good behavior."

He nodded, but I could tell he was breathing easy.

"No easing up for me," I told him. "Like you always said, 'A day without wounded doesn't mean the war's over.'"

And sure enough the trouble hit in the middle of the night with our first thunderstorm of the season. A crack rattled the sky and no sooner had it died down than I felt a tug on my covers, and in crawls Cackie.

"What you doing in here?" I said. "You have your own bed on the couch."

"Whole front room's lit up with lightening bolts," she said. "There's no sleeping in there for me. And I have school tomorrow."

"Well you can't stay in here," I said.

"Why not?" she said. "Mama lets me crawl in with her and Marshall when I get scared." She was clinging onto my arm and her fingers tightened up with every crack. "You scared?" she said.

"Nothing to be scared of," I said. "It's outside."

"And we're inside—together," she said.

I was going to tell her to get back to the couch a dozen times, but it wouldn't come out no matter how many ways I thought of saying it, and I couldn't move to the couch myself with her clinging on so tight even though old Brinker Lloyd next door would shake his head so hard over this you couldn't tell it from his Parkinson's shimmy. "Moving a girl in only means one thing," he told me a week before she came. "You give her a little hug she doesn't like, off to school she goes and tells the social worker and you're in hot water. She falls and gets a bruise, she goes to the school nurse and you're in hot water. She has a spat with a neighbor kid who runs home and tells his Mama and you're in hot water. There's no way around it," he said, his head still shaking. "I'm warning you. You have a girl in the house, the heat's on."

I figured Brinker Lloyd should know. He was always in some kind of trouble about his girls, but I wasn't sure there wasn't some truth in all of what everybody said. I wasn't like him, I decided as I watched Cackie breathing easier, almost asleep even with the wind rattling the windows and the thunder still letting out an odd roar here and there. It's not that I didn't have the hornies sometimes, but there wasn't much of a chance to think about it with looking out for Pop's heart and walking three tenants' laundries across the complex every day and washing, drying, folding, washing, drying, folding, washing, drying, folding. Sometimes I had wet dreams over old Mrs. Leone's nightgowns, but when I woke up, all I could think of was washing, drying, folding her wool underwear that would have fit

Mama and her towels, the ugliest chartreuse things I ever saw. Besides, I would never touch a kid and a girl relative, to boot, in a way Brinker Lloyd was talking about.

Cackie jerked in her sleep and groaned a little. I thought of old Brinker, unhooked her fingers from my arm and rolled over as quiet as I could although when you're five ten and pushing two eighty, it's not easy. I figured with my back to her she'd still have something solid to lean against in case she got scared again, and Brinker and all those nurses and social workers wouldn't have so much to say if they found out. I tried to go to sleep but spent most of the night worrying about what would happen if they did.

The next morning after I got Cackie off to school in her culottes and a too big "Shake Your Bootie" tee shirt, not the thing for a kid if you ask me, but something Flossie picked out, I tried to talk to Pop. "It's got to be a short stay," I told him. "I don't know what to do with a girl. You need to write Flossie and tell her a couple weeks at the outside."

He was quiet a minute. "Well, okay," he said. "But she's really not so bad is she? Besides she's Buddy's girl, and she's our only kin now."

"I know, Pop. But I can't take in much more laundry and we're barely making it now," I said figuring he wouldn't understand the problem of kids climbing in beds with relatives.

"I'll get a job," he said.

"We can talk more later," I said, knowing the discussion was done. "I have to go wash for Brinker, Mrs. Leone and the Jones's."

"Jones's?" he said.

"A new one," I said and didn't add "because of the kid."

When I picked up laundry for the Jones's, it was already late afternoon. A blond woman with a baby in her arms answered the door. "Oh my," she said. "I wasn't expecting. . ."

"A man?" I smiled. "I get the whites whiter and the darks darker," I said trying to put her at ease.

"It's not that," she said. "I'm new out here. Moved in two weeks ago Tuesday with my mother when she got so sick. And it's just that . . . well there's a lot of diapers in the loads, but I rinsed them out as good as I could."

"Well," I said, as I loaded the three bags on my cart I bought from surplus hospital supply when I started this laundry thing, "I don't get much call for diapers out here, but I'll give her my best." Then I asked all the usuals—what temperatures she wanted things washed and dried on, what she didn't dry, what needed to be presoaked, if she wanted me to fold things.

"Nice to meet you," she said when I left. "Nice to see somebody under eighty."

I nodded and knew right then I would do an extra special job on her clothes.

While I was folding the last of the diapers, chewing a big bite of a Milky Way and wondering how little money she must be taking in not to use throw-aways, Cackie popped in. "School's out," she said. "What you doing?"

"Working," I said.

"What you eating?"

"Milky Way," I nodded and handed her one of the extra Snickers I'd bought for the walk home. She slid it into her pocket. "For after dinner," she said. "Mama only lets me eat candy after dinner."

I wondered when Flossie had turned into a health expert and wiped the sweat off my forehead with my handkerchief. "Hot in here, Cack," I said.

"I don't like that name," she said. "Sounds like a cough."

She watched me stack the clothes into the baskets. "I'll bet you wouldn't be so tired if you could lose some of that weight," she said. "Marshall lost forty pounds and felt better than he had since he quit driving taxi. He even got a job."

"One that'll support you and your mom?" I asked. But she was a smart one.

"For a week," she said. "It was selling little sausages in the aisles of Safeway, and they only needed him a week. Besides those sausages were so good he gained three pounds back between customers."

"Here," I said and handed her a stack of towels to put in the basket while I quickly slipped my other Snickers into my pocket. "Let's get these to the Jones's so we can go cook dinner."

"What we having?" she said.

"Spaghetti and garlic bread," I told her. "You can make a salad."

"Okay, but aren't you forgetting something," she said as I lifted the basket onto the cart. I looked around the laundromat. "Soap and clothes," I said and patted my pocket for the Snickers.

"Not that," she said, "Aren't you supposed to ask me how school went today?"

I wiped my forehead again. "If you want to tell me, tell me. I can't think of everything."

"Mama or Marshall always asked me," she said.

"I'm not them." I pushed the cart overflowing with four baskets up the hill. "Help me push," I said puffing a little.

"Okay. I'm pretty strong. Move your hands over," she said and gripped the cart handle.

When we knocked at Jones's, the lady with the baby opened the door and smiled at first until she saw the clothes were folded. "I...I meant for you not to fold them," she said. "I don't think I can pay that extra amount."

"I know," I said. "It's a bonus for the first loads."

She looked relieved. "Oh thank you. I do have a brownie apiece for you that just came out of the oven. Mother likes chocolate, so sometimes I make her a treat," she said and handed an extra big one to me.

"Who's this?" she said to Cackie just before we left.

"My niece," I said and the lady patted her head.

On the way home, Cackie kept glancing at me but stayed quiet a few minutes. I was chewing the rich fudge brownie, relishing its taste, but it's hard to get the full joy of chocolate when someone's staring at you with "You should wait until after dinner" sliding through her mind.

Then I saw a sly grin spread over her face I hadn't seen on her before. "Cora's got the hots for you," she said.

"Who?" I said, swallowing the last taste of chocolate in a gulp.

"Who," she said and gave me a disgusted look. "The brownie lady, silly. I saw her name on a letter."

"For heaven's sakes," I said. "She does not."

"It's written all over her like graffiti on an underpass," she said.

I turned my head away while I worked on holding back a grin. "Where you hear that?" I said.

"Mama," she said.

We walked toward the cottage with me pushing the cart and her walking ahead doing a skip once in a while and keeping that smile on her face.

"Well," I said to get her mind off my dating life. "How was school today?"

"Thought you didn't want to ask."

"I can't remember everything all the time," I said.

"That means you'll ask me everyday?"

"I don't know," I said and waited. Finally I said again, "Well how was it?"

"School? It's always the same. I hate math and like reading and spelling and some kids are pains and some aren't. And guess what? That raunchy Bobby Raynors barfed green beans and beets right by my table at lunch today," she said. Then she skipped home ahead of me and disappeared into our cottage. When I got there, she opened the door and shook her head. "You're so pokey," she said. "It's about time."

The next day the Jones lady phoned and asked if I'd like to bring my niece by for another brownie. Pop took the call while I was sweating over the washing, drying and folding and remembered to tell me over dinner.

"I told you Cora had the hots for you," Cackie said before Pop's words were cold.

He looked startled and gave me a "where'd that come from" glance. I hoped he'd finally see it wasn't all roses and lilies keeping a girl. Cackie must have caught Pop's look, too. She said real quick, "Gramps, you should have seen it. That lady is on Uncle Warren's trail."

"She gave us *both* brownies," I told her. "She's trying to get in good with us so we'll charge her less for the laundry."

"She's not the type for that," she said. "You can tell by her eyes it's not cheap laundry she's after.

"What eyes?" I said.

"People's eyes," she said. "You look at their eyes to know what's going on. That lady's eyes said, 'I like you Mister.'"

"Where do you come up with these crazy things?" I said and looked at Pop for help. But he was on her side now, nodding and even on the edge of a grin.

"Mama told me," she said, "and she knows about eyes. Mama says a man's eyes tell you what he wants before he opens his mouth."

"That's after he's opened his pants in Flossie's case," I wanted to say but took another bite of potatoes instead. Pop was smiling for the first time in months, and even though the kid was spouting off crazy stuff, I didn't want to break his smiling streak.

"Well, you're reading the eyes wrong this time," I said. "All those eyes see is a big fat laundryman. Now eat," I said.

But this kid wouldn't take the hint. "I talked to the nurse today," she said. I thought of Brinker and of Pop seeing my picture in the paper for doing bad things to kids. I laid my fork down and frowned at Cackie.

"I'm not sick," she said. "And if you'd remembered to ask me about school like you're supposed to, you'd have found out sooner."

"About what?" I said.

"The diet she gave me."

"Diet for what?" I said and felt my heart slow down from its race.

"For you two," she said. "You're never going to catch someone unless you lose some of that weight."

"I don't want to catch anyone," I said.

"Everybody wants somebody," she said.

"Well no one wants me," I said.

She shook her head. "It's not that no one wants you, but that you think they don't. It's called a bad self image," she said.

"What class you learning this stuff in?" I said wondering how many weeks before school was out.

"Not classes," she said disgusted. "Mama told me. Mama always says, 'Before you can get people to like you, you have to like yourself.' Mama said that's why Daddy left."

I looked at Pop whose forehead was full of frown grooves. His eyes looked ready to water up like they did for months after Mama died. Cackie must have seen it too. "I think Mama was lying about Daddy," she said. "He left because he needed to bring music to the world. That's what he said once. 'I need to cheer the world up with my songs,' so I guess that's what he's doing."

Pop was still frowning, but I could tell by the way he stared at Cackie that the idea of Buddy bringing music to the world was a brand new one for him.

"Let's have it quiet for a few minutes and stop all this chatter," I said. "Pop and I like eating in peace."

"But when are we going to start?"

"Right now," I said.

She looked at my plate. "Then you'll have to put back some of those mashed potatoes."

"What?" I said.

"The diet," she said. "You said we were starting now, and those potatoes are heaped up like Vesuvius before it blew. Those things are stuffed full of starch. And starch is what makes you fat."

I looked at Pop again for help. But he was looking somewhere between surprised and pleased. "Do I have to go on this diet, too," he said and didn't even notice me glaring.

"You have somebody hot after you?" she said.

He shook his head. "Not that I know of."

"Don't know then," she said. "It'll just depends on your self image. Mama said. . ."

But before I had to hear another "Mama said," I excused myself from the table, picked up my plate and sat myself in the living room in front of the TV.

In a few minutes she was sitting by my elbow watching me. "What about Cora?" she said.

"I'm calling to tell her I'm not coming over for brownies. Then you don't have to worry about my diet." And I went to the phone to show her I meant business.

It wasn't so easy as I'd thought, talking on the phone face to face when I heard the Jones lady's voice.

"This is Warren Andrews," I said. "Pop said you'd called." The kid was mouthing "Cora" at me in the mirror and had that sly grin spreading across her face.

"Yes," the Jones lady said. "I just called to see if you and your niece wanted to stop by for coffee sometime. I get tired talking to my mother. She's got Alzheimer's, you know, and can't remember what I say long enough to answer. And that baby—well, the only time I get much out of him is when he's hungry or needs his diapers changed." She laughed kind of nervous.

I was quiet a minute wondering how to say "no" in front of the kid and "yes" to the lady at the same time.

"If you can't leave your niece or father, I understand," she said.

"Oh that's not it," I said and watched the kid mouth "What's not it?" in the mirror.

I thought how different this call was from my usual ones with someone complaining about the wash—people like Mrs. Leone who shouted in the receiver thinking I was deaf as she was. "Warren Andrews?" she would yell.

"Yes, Mrs. Leone," I would say.

"This is Lydia Leone."

"Yes, Mrs. Leone," I would say again.

"Well, I'll tell you, that pink blouse you washed today has wrinkles in it that weren't there before you washed it."

"That's because it's cotton, Mrs. Leone, and you always iron it."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Okay, Warren, if you say so, but I can't remember where I put my iron?" she would shout.

As I tried to think what to tell the Jones lady I thought how it was a real shame when you finally got a call from someone who doesn't want to complain or shout at you, some kid keeps you from enjoying it.

I was just ready to tell her maybe I could stop by sometime and to ignore the kid staring at me in the mirror when it hit me what she was seeing. A big fat man holding a receiver almost hidden by a double chin. My nose was straight and Mama always told me I had nice eyes, but now they looked puffy and tired. My arms and legs were solid enough, but I had the family stomach that barrelled out.

"I'm awful busy," I said. "Thanks anyway for the invite."

"That's okay," she said, but there was disappointment in her voice. "You know your schedule better than I do."

"What'd you say that for?" the kid said when I hung up.

"Don't push me," I said. "I'm real tired."

"Okay," she said, but threw disgusted looks at me for the rest of the night.

While I was going over the laundry line-up for the next day, I thought of the Jones lady going out of her way phoning me like that. We could have had a nice talk, I figured, without worrying about getting into anything more. I thought of the way she'd held her baby—close to her—and her brown hair hanging limp around her face with a button nose and tired eyes. I thought of how tired her eyes might have looked when I said "no."

As soon as the kid was in bed I called the lady and asked her if I could do her laundry Thursday morning instead of afternoon. But this time while I talked to her I kept my back to the mirror.

As luck would have it, on Thursday Cackie stayed home from school with a cold. "If you're too sick to go to school, you're too sick to go to the laundromat," I said when she asked to come with me, but as usual Pop was on her side. "It's stuffy in here," he said. "The air will do her good."

While she pulled off her Wonder Woman pajamas that she had wanted and Pop said we should buy even though I thought the Garfield ones would be better, I sneaked in and called the Jones lady to tell her I'd like to change the laundry time back to the afternoon. I figured maybe Cackie would be tired enough to go home then and I could still have coffee with the Jones woman, asking about her mother's Alzheimer's and telling her how it was—running The West Street Spic and Span.

When Cackie had dressed in the overalls she'd wanted to buy to "look like Gramps's," we headed for the laundromat. We spent the morning together, washing, drying, folding. Things went faster with her helping, and I saw how two people doing this fulltime could make it into quite a business even at minimum wage.

Playing animal, mineral, vegetable Cackie learned at school took my mind off things like folding Mrs. Leone's chartreuse towels or Brinker's underwear for the hundredth time except when she asked me, "Uncle Warren, how old are you and

why aren't you married yet?" "That has nothing to do with figuring out the animal I'm thinking of," I told her.

By the time I'd treated her to a Big Mac for lunch and was ready to go to the Jones's, Cackie wasn't worn out but steamed up more than ever. I could see trying to find an excuse for taking her home was a waste of time.

When we got to the Jones's house, the Jones lady came to the door, but she didn't have the smile for us she had before. "Mother's slipping," she said as she handed me the first basket. "I have to buy more expensive medicine for her, so I think this is the last time I can pay for you to do the laundry." She looked worried. "I haven't decided how to carry the baby and laundry a quarter mile or what I'll do about leaving Mama alone," she said, "but I'll think of something."

I felt a kind of disappointment I was surprised at, seeing as how this solved the thing about Cackie pushing me into dieting and her being a matchmaker. I tried to keep my face as cheerful as possible, as I could see her watching me as we headed for the laundromat.

"Cora needs some man to help her out, that's for sure."

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"Cora Jones," she said. "How's she going to do her laundry?"

"Maybe she'll have to call her husband."

"What husband?"

"She has a baby," I said.

Cackie kicked a rock off the sidewalk. "Nope," she said. "Her old man's bolted like a deer."

I stared at her.

"If he was going to be around, now's the time with that baby," she said.

I shrugged. "No use talking about it," I said. "If she can't afford us for laundry, she can't afford us. That's all there is to it."

"You can visit her even if you don't do her laundry," she said.

I was puffing a little by now. She looked at me.

"Mama said you don't have to have excuses to visit somebody if you like them."

I wanted to say, "I bet Flossie's never made an excuse in her life," but I just took a tighter grip on the cart and pushed it up the long hill. I tried to concentrate on watching for squirrels and guessing how many cars I would see on the way, but I couldn't make myself care much. I was surprised that disappointed feeling hung on for most of the day no matter how I tried to shake it.

"Our trouble with the kid isn't over yet," I told Pop that night when she hardly said a word. "Something big's brewing."

"She's probably just tired," Pop said.

But I knew better when a kid you can't shut up for two months won't make a peep.

And sure enough she was coming down hard with some flu bug. In the middle of the night she came dragging into my room. I'd given up worrying about the

school nurse or the social worker. If they hadn't come poking around shaking their fingers at me or instructing me on uncling the first week or two when I didn't know what I was doing, I figured they wouldn't come now when I was starting to get the hang of it.

"I don't feel good, Uncle Warren," Cackie said, looking all sweaty and limp like a normal sick kid instead of a diet lecturer or a matchmaker.

When she crawled in bed, there was nothing to do but crawl out to get a thermometer and a cool washrag Mama always put on my forehead when I was sick. I could see I was in charge of this whole sickness when I heard Pop snoring on my way to the bathroom. I thought of the sleep I wouldn't be getting with a sick kid and of the ten loads of laundry ahead of me on Friday and of my sore feet and of Flossie no doubt thrashing around in a bed at this very moment with Marshall or Martin or Melvin or somebody other than Buddy. And my blood boiled. But I sat right by that bed all night, dozing between groans like with Mama and kept wondering how I could get Pop to see we couldn't keep this up.

The next day Pop watched Cackie. As soon as I stepped into the cottage from the laundry rounds, Pop said he thought she was getting worse. "Her temperature's a hundred three," he said. "Should we call the doctor?"

"And take her there in a taxi? It's expensive, Pop," I said.

"What about Brinker's car?" he said.

"Broke down," I said. "Bad cylinder."

He sat in his rocker, and I brought him his heart pill. "We can't keep this up much longer", I told him.

"Maybe not. Maybe not," he said with the life gone out of his voice.

I watched him rub his hand over the chair arm and saw his eyes starting to fill up.

"She'll be okay, Pop," I said. "Kids have high fevers, you know, and if it gets too bad, we'll call a taxi." He quit rubbing the chair, and I left to check on the kid.

After Pop went to bed that night she hit her lowest. At nine o'clock her temperature climbed above a hundred four, and I was trying to put chicken broth and tea and orange juice down her every half hour.

"Uh uh," she said after each sip of anything. Tears started oozing out a little drip when I mentioned I could call her Mama.

"She won't be home. It's Friday," she said and the tears gushed. "They go every weekend to sell jewelry at fairs and art shows."

"What jewelry?"

"Jewelry Mama and Marshall make." She looked at me with the crying at its peak now, with her chin quivering and eyes and nose red. "If Daddy hadn't run off, Mama wouldn't be making jewelry and going off selling it," she blubbered with an anger in all the crying that made me feel guilty somehow.

I wiped her face off with the washrag but couldn't get those tears to quit coming. "You'll get your fever up worse with all this crying," I said.

"Don't care," she said. "A daddy that loves you doesn't run off somewhere."

For once I was glad Pop wasn't helping me or he'd got his ears burnt over Buddy.

"You said he had to go off to make music," I said.

"I was lying," she said.

"Now Cackie, your Daddy wouldn't have left you unless he couldn't stay for some good reason," I said knowing Flossie would be reason enough for anybody.

"Mama cried all the time afterwards. I told her he said he had to go off and sing his songs to get her to feel better." She had the washrag wiping off her own eyes the tears were still seeping out of but not in an angry way now.

"If he told you that was the reason, I'm sure it was," I said.

"I heard him tell Mama he was leaving with Clarissa Webster," she said.

"No," I said. "His guitar. . ."

"He just told me that to cover things over," she said. Her voice was real soft now like she was tired of crying and thinking about Buddy and of being sick. Just before she dropped off to sleep she said, "Mama still thinks he'll come back."

"I bet he will," I said.

She shook her head very slightly. "You never saw Clarissa Webster," she said.

I watched her sleep for about an hour. It was the fever talking about Buddy I told myself. Besides what does a kid know about why grown-ups do things. Just the same I knew I wouldn't mention that story to Pop.

I didn't have to talk to Pop again about the kid going back as it turned out. The Monday after the flu weekend, Pop came back from the mailbox looking glum. He handed me a note from Flossie. "We've moved to where Marshall has a job as a casheer in Safway. I'll com to pick Cackie up on Saterday morning," the note said.

"Shouldn't be surprised," Pop said and sat down heavy into his rocker. "That woman's always yanked people every which way."

"Well, Pop," I said. "Maybe she won't show up."

"She'll show up all right," he said. "As if driving Buddy off wasn't hard enough on everybody."

"Yup," I said and wondered where Buddy really was.

When I showed Flossie's letter to Cackie, she read it real slow and sighed big afterwards. "Mama's spelling," she said. "She's always forgetting which vowel goes where. But it's good Marshall finally got him a job even if she spells it wrong." She looked at me. "Who's going to help you with the laundry? And who'll watch out for your diet?" Then she looked at Pop. "And who's going to rub ointment on Gramps's wrist for the rash?"

"We'll make out," I said taking Pop's heart medicine out of the bottle.

"Wish we could all live together," Cackie said and crawled up on Pop's lap.

"Wish we could, too," he said, and I nodded but knew with a house full of Flossie and Marshall *and* the kid, Pop and I would be done in inside a week.

When Flossie drove up on Saturday in a used '74 Pinto, I'd just finished closing the kid's suitcase stuffed full of things she didn't have when she came.

Flossie picked the kid up and twirled her around when she saw her and kissed her twenty times if she kissed her once. And it was hard for the kid to act like a grown-up—flying through the air and being hugged on so much.

"And how are you two wildmen?" she said to Pop and me after she finally set the kid down. I looked at Pop and smiled to think of him wild, but Pop wasn't up for any laughing. He hardly raised his arms to hug Flossie back when she thanked him for keeping the kid. I couldn't help but get a flash of Buddy and Clarissa Webster laughing and boozing someplace and gave her a pretty good squeeze. Then she hauled out a thousand piece jigsaw puzzle and pointed to the picture on the box of two gorillas in the zoo throwing something at the crowds. "Couldn't resist these pooper scoopers," she said. "Thought you'd have fun putting it together." Pop took the puzzle but shook his head.

I hugged the kid good-bye and smiled at her. "Laundry business won't be the same," I said and thought about the Snickers and Milky Way I could eat right out in the open.

It was like she saw right through my mind. "Remember your diet," she said. Her voice sounded on the edge of crying but she held tighter to the Superwoman T-shirt Flossie had brought her, the right size this time, I'll give her that.

"It's been so comforting knowing Cackie was with family these last few weeks," Flossie said when she climbed into the car. "Thank you so much."

"With family," Pop said after she pulled away. "She includes herself in with us like she was an Andrews herself."

"Well," I said leading him into the cottage. "The kid's an Andrews, and Flossie's her mother."

"If you can call a woman like that a mother," Pop said and wouldn't quit staring out the window until he went to bed.

For the next week after the kid left, I made my rounds as usual, to Mrs. Leone's, Brinker Lloyd's and a new person's to take the Jones woman's place. The laundromat seemed real quiet and I couldn't help but look for the kid to burst in any minute jabbering about my diet or asking questions about my love life or making me guess if she was thinking of a carrot or a rock or a platypus. I hadn't had much of an appetite for anything, even Snickers, and I couldn't remember a time except when Mama died I couldn't put away a full meal.

On the way home every evening, I passed Cora Jones's cottage, but there wasn't a reason to stop. "You don't need an excuse to visit somebody if you like them," the kid would say, but I kept pushing the cart up the hill knowing Pop would need the company. I hadn't been able to cheer him up at all since the kid left, and I was getting real worried he would fall back to the glums as bad as when Mama died.

The next Monday, my longest laundry day, Cora Jones came in just when I was finishing up. She had a bag of clothes in one arm and the baby in the other. He was starting to raise a fuss and wouldn't hold still while she tried to put the clothes in the machine.

"Need some help," I said when she was struggling to open a box of soap.

"I hate to bother you," she said. "But if you could hold Gerald just while I get the soap in the washers, I would sure appreciate it."

"Be glad to," I said, sat in the only chair and bounced him on my knee.

"Where's your niece?" Cora Jones said while she dumped Cheer over the wash, a good detergent I've found out especially if you add a little Borateem for whiteness.

"Went back to her mother. A week ago. How's your mother?" I said not wanting to talk about the kid much.

"Worse," she said. "I'm afraid to leave her alone for more than a few minutes. Can't ever tell what she'll do. I'm worried I won't be able to keep her much longer."

I could hear the kid's words in my head, "That Cora Jones needs some help," and even though I could feel my face getting hot and my mouth drying up some I decided it wouldn't hurt me to say something neighborly. "If you ever need anything, give me a call," I said.

"Thanks a lot," she said and smiled, and it seemed like her face was flushing up a little. I folded the last of Mrs. Leone's underwear while my mouth got back to normal, and Cora Jones rocked the baby who was almost asleep.

"You're later than usual," Pop said when I walked in, and his voice still had that sadness in it. He pushed himself up from the kitchen table where he'd been finding pieces to the second gorrilla's throwing arm and sat in his rocker. "No mail from Cackie again today," he said. "She'll never write."

He still had on his outdoor shoes. "It's only been a week since she left, Pop. She's getting settled. Remember she's moved to a new place," I said and tugged at his right boot. "Besides you might have to write her first. You know how she always wanted us to ask her about school."

He shook his head. "I'm afraid we wouldn't hear from her even if I did," he said. "I'll bet Flossie won't let her write."

"Oh Pop," I said and pulled off his left boot. "Knowing Flossie, we'll get a call who knows when saying the kid'll be on the next bus. And there she'll be standing in the depot with those bangs so short they don't do any good and she'll be saying she's looking for two fat men."

Pop had to smile a little just remembering. "But this time she'll see only one fat man with you dropping off some pounds," he said. "And she'll look at you and say, 'Well it's about time.'"

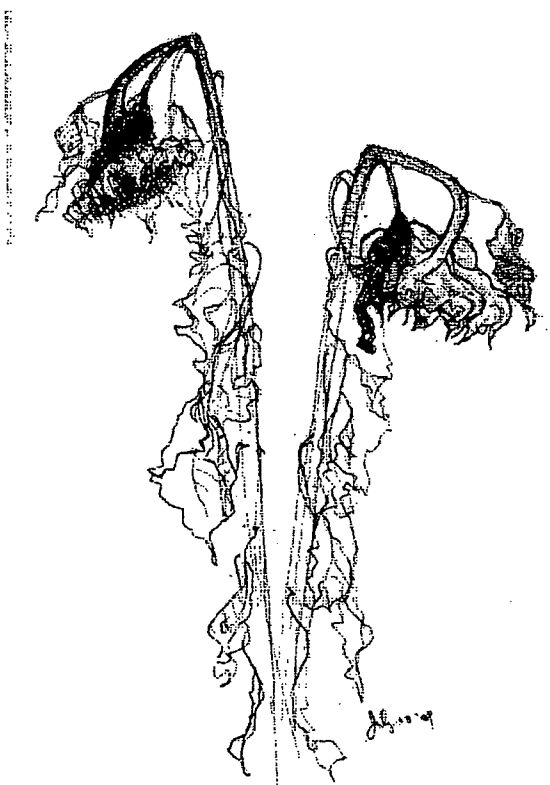
"Maybe," I said, "Or knowing Flossie's kid she'll say, 'Losing weight, huh. I knew you had the hots for that Cora Jones all along.'"

Pop looked a little startled then shook his head. "What a mouth. Only Flossie's girl could have a mouth like that."

"I warned you about her, Pop," I said. "Flossie's kid'll always be giving somebody trouble."

"You think so?" he said with a grin spreading out wide over his face.

"Yup," I said and rubbed some salve on his wrist. "Until the graffiti falls off the underpasses."



Reviews

Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog by Paul Monette. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1988. 65 pages. $13.95, cloth.

Poets for Life: Seventy-six Poets Respond to AIDS edited by Michael Klein. New York, NY: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1989. 244 pages. $18.95, cloth.

A few years ago a friend called to tell me that Paul Monette's eloquent collection of poetry, *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog*, contained some of the most powerful and amazing poems about death. Within a week of buying this book I found myself also picking up the phone to recite passages over long distances. The eighteen elegies, drawing on the poetic elegy style of Rainer Maria Rilke, tell the story of how the poet/speaker was transformed as his lover (Roger Horwitz) slowly died of AIDS. The telling of this love story also becomes an appeal to the power of love and poetry as immortalizing elements. As Monette writes at the end of the final elegy, "Brother of the Mount of Olives,"

> pray that my friend and I be still together
> just like this at the Mount of Olives blessed
> by the last of an ancient race who loved
> youth and laughter and beautiful things so much
> they couldn't stop singing and we were the song

By writing such lines he makes his prayer come true: in poetry we hear the song of his life with Rog sung with such passion that we cannot help but to join in the singing. Each poem mixes, without diminishing any of the intensity, all the harsh, sentimental, wicked, humorous, silly and loving moments of Monette's life during Horwitz' slow death from AIDS. And the poems that come out of Monette's confrontation with death demand that readers enter not only his personal experience but a new experience of language.

The poems demand complete surrender from the reader into a world of inescapable grief and into a language that must reinvent itself to adequately capture the horror of AIDS in a society that still, largely, has not come to terms with the fallout of pain from the disease. Monette finds a style that both allows complete accessibility into the heart of each poem, but also forces a face-to-face confrontation with the pain that lies in each of those hearts. Using no stanza breaks and little punctuation, Monette swirls together, at a tornado-pace, the various levels of reality (his own, Rog's, the public's, friends') to capture the richness and the losses. He draws out origins of civilization, personal experiences, Bette Davis, Star Wars, Thoreau and the Twilight Zone among other surprises

from this grab bag of realities. The multitude of cultural references coupled with the universality of loss force the reader to stare in the eyes of dying. As Monette writes of the elegies in his introduction, "I don't mean them to be impregnable, though I admit I want them to allow no escape, like a hospital room, or indeed a mortal illness."

Monette insures no escape by concentrating on the most specific of details that bring Rog's life to us while illustrating a more universal kind of pain, the pain of a mortal illness. In "The Losing Side," he writes of meeting, at the cemetery, a fellow mourner, Eve, who has come to put a windmill on the grave of her two-year-old son, Brian. After she gives the speaker/poet her extra windmill for Rog's grave, he explains

> . . . there is nothing so nothing
> it can't blow up in my face which is why I
> stay in a locked house or wander out here
> where pain's at least constant Eve and I swap
> wars peacefully we've got nothing to lose
> no more and she makes me see in her hard fight
> not to think Brian could be walking now
> that somehow we got to be men together
> we *gat* that far even if now I have to let
> the wind blow through me whistling here and there
> aching to find the boy who used to play me

While these poems force us to face up to the devastation of AIDS on the most intimate level possible, they also serve as great gifts for exploring how we speak of any death, and consequently, how we can view and come to terms with the death that pervades all our lives. In "Gardenias," for example, Monette explores the roots of pain that travel through him and through all of us who have ever suffered great losses that knock out the foundations from our lives:

> pain is not a flower pain is a root
> and its work is underground where the moldering
> proceeds the bones of all our joy winded
> and rained and nothing grows a whole life's love

The pain of such a loss, then, is not diminished by time; instead the loss grows inward over time, mixing its strands with all other aspects of life.

Monette dives into the deep waters of resentment that accompanies such a loss (especially in "Manifesto," an attack on New Age healers of AIDS), but he concentrates more on the love between two men, the "whole life's love" crammed into their twelve years together, and how this love sustains him even while Rog's

loss tears him apart. In "The Worrying," he says, "WHO WILL EVER LOVE ME that was / the heaven at the back of time but we had it / here now . . ."

The poems serve as far more than a record of love and loss. In "The House on Kings Road," he explains,

> *Writing may be either the record of a deed*
> *or a deed* Thoreau says okay just this once may
> this be a deed lawyerproof filed at the hall
> of records that two men ceased to be single
> here in a house free of liens and the rule
> of sorry kings and sometimes would look up
> from a book from peeling an apple their bright
> astonished eyes would meet and nearly falter
> gladness is like looking at the sun how can
> Death untwine them or the room in the room
> where they have one name of my love tell me

Writing these elegies certainly recorded the deed of Monette's love for Horwitz, but the writing also was a deed of love for the generation of gay men who die and witness death. Monette explains his purpose of giving a voice to his people in his introduction:

> The story that endlessly eludes the decorum
> of the press is the death of a generation of
> gay men. What is written here is only one
> man's passion and one man's cry, a warrior
> burying a warrior. May it fuel the fire
> of those on the front lines who mean to
> prevail, and of their friends who stand in the
> fire with them. We will not be bowed down or
> erased by this. I learned too well what it
> means to be a people, learned in the
> joy of my best friend what all the meaningless
> pain and horror cannot take away—that all there is
> is love. Pity us not.

This deed of love also brought out 76 poets', including Monette's, finest poetry for the anthology, *Poets for Life*. The poetic elegy continues to find new meaning as Carol Muske explains in her introductory essay, "Rewriting the Elegy":

> The elegiac form, like a graveside path,
> has been worn smooth in places by the years,
> but the language of these poems is direct

> and unsparing in detail; it refuses literary
> phrasing or the phrasing of the eulogy. Part
> of what fuels the unconventional response is
> the incongruousness of dying themselves. The
> young and strong are disappearing, people
> at the height of their careers and talents.
> Children are dying. It is a monumental task
> to find words for any elegy. To describe the
> loss of so many who should have lived into
> the next century strains all our notions of
> composition.

This anthology, well-edited by Michael Klein, finds new ways of achieving this monumental task by presenting an outstanding collection that touches on angle after angle of these hard losses. The poems delve into the incredible loss of words and deeds to explain and alleviate this pain. Deborah Digges, in "Faith-Falling," explains an encounter with a friend dying of AIDS.

> I have a friend who taught me this week the work-a-day
>
> of his disease, how not to sentimentalize his happiness—
> in the morning radiation treatments, then lunch in the
> foot-hills,
>
> where we spoke of the poem just out of reach, the one
> failed mostly, the one believe.
> It's falling we do best, it's how we navigate the silence.

This helplessness is reinforced in many poems, particularly Thom Gunn's "The Missing," when he writes "Now as I watch the progress of the plague / The friends surrounding me fall sick, grow thin / And drop away . . ."

But while the poems don't diminish the infinite losses of a fatal disease without a cure, they concentrate more on how AIDS teaches survivors to love and let go. Maureen Seaton, in "White Balloon," writes,

> Linda, it's the letting go
> that terrifies: the night air
> alive with rising ghosts
>
> the cries of strong men
> grieving in each other's arms
> the ease with which we love.

The dying may teach the surviving to love and let go, but nowhere is there a meaning for all this suffering, and most of the poems instead concentrate on the intimate experiences of watching someone die without reason, on the rage and sorrow and confusion. And the experiences cover the losses of brothers, daughters, lovers, and acquaintances as well as the famous and the unknown. What we learn from this collection might best be summed up in Phillis Levin's poem, "What the Intern Saw":

> He shuts his eyes
> And in his sleep he sees a gleaming bar,
> The shore of pain.
> It isn't far.
> People live there.

Poets for Life is an account of the people who live on the shore of pain, those dying and those witnessing. It opens up the life of those who live along its rockiest edges and lets the tide of rage and grief overcome its banks. In this collection we discover, more than ever, that this river of death is not a tributary that only affects a select population; it's the mainstream and cannot be ignored or forgotten.

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

Empathy and Action in the AIDS Crisis

Someone Was Here: Profiles in the AIDS Epidemic by George Whitmore. New York: New American Library, 1988. 211 pages. $17.95, cloth.

AIDS and Its Metaphors by Susan Sontag. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989. 95 pages, $14.95, cloth.

Reports from the holocaust: the making of an AIDS activist by Larry Kramer. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989. 284 pages, $18.95 cloth.

The Walking Wounded by Beverly Barbo. Linsborg, KS: Carlson's Press, 1987. 245 pages, $6.95, paper.

Recently a high school friend of mine died from AIDS. After several years of being out there and in the news, AIDS had finally entered my world, killing an old friend. Before his death, I had thought myself sensitive to the problem of

AIDS, but, of course, death changes things. Books may change things too. Books on AIDS seem to apprehend a division between people who care about AIDS and people who don't, and so writers direct their persuasive energy toward making the uncaring care.

When we care, we respond in various ways. We think seriously, feel deeply, and we act. Each of these authors seems to concentrate on one type of response, with the exception of George Whitmore, whose book balances thought, emotion, and, implicitly, action. Larry Kramer approaches his task aggressively, challenging both his political opponents and his political allies who have yet to act. More subtle than Kramer yet still considering the larger picture, Susan Sontag asks us to pay attention to our language because the way we talk about AIDS and the way we conceptualize AIDS influences the way we try to deal with the illness. For Sontag, our speech and thought reflect how we care. Beverly Barbo tells the story of her son's death from AIDS and her own conversion from a citizen of a homophobic world into a person who accepts homosexuality. Coming from Linsborg, Kansas, she offers a work keenly relevant to the Midwest. And George Whitmore, believing that those who see the horror of AIDS cannot help but empathize, presents detailed profiles of AIDS patients and the people who help them.

"Plainly," says Whitmore, "some of my reasons for wanting to write about AIDS were altruistic, others selfish. AIDS was decimating the community around me; there was a need to bear witness." *Someone Was Here* is self-conscious enough not to be self-serving. In the prologue Whitmore, launching imaginatively from a picture, tells the story of the keeper of a charnel house, a man whose job is to display the bones. Whitmore says, "Someone has to arrange and rearrange the display. Someone has to take the box [of relics] down off the shelf to show you. This is that man." Make no mistake about it, George Whitmore is also that man. Form the start the reader knows this book will "show" AIDS.

The book presents three profiles in the AIDS epidemic, told in the third person and marked by careful detail. And while Whitmore deals in the particular, he selects representative stories. The first profile focuses on a gay couple, the second on a poor Mexican-American family, and the third on intravenous drug users. Gays, minorities, and drug addicts are currently the groups most at risk. This attention to the specific with an awareness of larger implications consistently comes across in this book. In the first of three profiles Whitmore follows a man he calls Jim, who has just tested positive for HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), the virus that causes AIDS. Gay Men's Health Crisis (the largest AIDS support group in New York City) sends Ed to counsel Jim through the difficulties related to the virus. The difficulties generally come in three stages: the trauma of testing positive for HIV; AIDS related complex, that is, illnesses that come and linger longer than they should; and "full blown" AIDS. Jim's journey toward death, Whitmore assures us, is one followed out many times over. At first, Jim like

others thinks he can beat the virus. "AIDS," Whitmore writes, "is as much about denial as it is about death."

Whitmore does not shy away from making statements. His narratives seem to call for more encompassing statements, more complete contexts. At times he will place a political comment in an informal footnote, or he will blend medical statistics with the narrative line, or, with no apology, he may break off the narrative cleanly, leave some white space, and then look into politics or psychology. At the end of the first profile he shifts out of the narrative in order to explain what research reveals about what Jim and his lover go through: "Not surprisingly, researchers are documenting grief, anger—especially at what is perceived as the inadequate response of government—depression, but most markedly a widespread and unabated anxiety in reaction to AIDS." The research and the statistics, of which there are many, serve to multiply the suffering of the people in the stories, making us aware that each story is a variation on a theme of great magnitude.

Like the first, the second profile deals with a single AIDS patient, but Mike, the Mexican-American of the second profile, already lives a desperate life before he tests positive. This profile shows an uglier and more miserable suffering than the first. The hero is Mike's undaunted mother, a poor woman who takes care of her estranged son when he will finally accept her help. Both the second and third profiles describe in detail the physical havoc of full-blown AIDS. It is hard reading, yet never senseless or overdone in its description, Somehow Whitmore writes as though he is showing just enough to make us understand, showing us only a small portion of the blood and excrement and pain that he has seen. And the last profile, which I found most compelling, describes various hospital workers and patients at Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx. In this inner-city hospital, "The corridors are crawling with a surging mass of people." Help never comes right away in a place that seems more like a bus depot than a hospital:

> Perpetually, people are waiting. A long line runs around the corner and down the hall from the cashiers' windows. A long line snakes around roped stanchions in front of the pharmacy windows. In the outpatient waiting rooms people sit in rows of chairs. . . . In the halls and the waiting rooms, there are puddles of cola and coffee on the floor. Everywhere, there is an air of resignation and imminent alarm.
>
> The corridors are full of noise. Everyone is talking. Lite F.M., piped in through ceiling speakers, is playing. Somewhere an elevator alarm bell rings unceasingly—its

> message goes unheeded as the elevator moves from floor to floor. Someone is shouting into the receiver of a pay phone. Vending machine levers rebound with a clatter. The doors to the emergency room bang open.

Whitmore can paint a scene in the hospital like this one, or he can bring alive character. The medical care workers he introduces to us are both saintly and weary of the emotional tug of their work. Most of the AIDS patients are intravenous drug users. Lincoln Hospital shows in sordid detail that mostly the disenfranchised die of AIDS.

While writers make the point that the AIDS virus does not discriminate according to race, sexual preference, or economic status, they agree that those affected by AIDS more or less constitute a new group of outsiders. This situation is abetted by the fact that so far the virus has spread, in the United States, mostly among gays, intravenous drug users, and racial minorities. "Indeed to get AIDS," says Susan Sontag in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, "is precisely to be revealed, in the majority of cases so far, as a member of a certain `risk group,' a community of pariahs." Sontag says that the way we talk and think about AIDS contributes to the ostracizing of AIDS patients. She points out, for example, that military metaphors, which equate the disease with an invading enemy, "contribute to the stigmatizing of certain illnesses and, by extension, of those who are ill." Referring to AIDS as a plague that "visits" a community reinforces the "otherness" of the disease and the ill. As if language's impact on the general attitude were not enough, the terminology of AIDS, says Sontag, also influences the way doctors and researchers approach medical solutions. For example, perceiving AIDS as a disease of three stages emphasizes the hypothesis that all who contract HIV will die from it. This hypothesis, she argues convincingly, is far from proven.

We certainly hold some unfair attitudes about AIDS, and the parallels Sontag draws between language and attitudes are suggestive. I tend to be swayed by suggestive arguments like hers, but I do not want to delude myself about their logical strength. Sontag's book has the feel of scientific rigor without possessing it, and that is deceptive. It is easy to attach all sorts of significance to the many entailments of a metaphor, but after a point, interpretation becomes highly speculative. Nevertheless, she makes us think both about what we say and about who we fail to concern ourselves with. What attitudes hide in the conjecture that AIDS spread from Africa to Haiti and then to the United States? Does this reinforce "racist stereotypes" or "anti-African prejudices"? She gives us much to ponder.

The politics of AIDS, which Whitmore alludes to and Sontag theorizes about, is easily overlooked. In the news, we hear about the spread of the disease, its magnitude stressed by escalating numbers, but less often do we get detailed accounts of the political goings on. Larry Kramer is all political. He sees the crisis

in terms of power and influence. Although his audience includes any straight people who will listen, he speaks most pointedly to the gay community. According to Kramer, because gays have not fought fiercely for the political power necessary to bring massive funding and cooperation into the fight against AIDS, the disease spreads.

In Part One of *Reports from the holocaust* (small "h"), he yells at the reader in a desperate attempt to raise consciousness. Here Kramer reprints various articles, open letters, and speeches he has written throughout his activism, and then retrospectively comments on each, giving us two Larry Kramers in effect. The younger, hot-headed Kramer writes with a prose that is coarse, edgy, obstinate. At one point he blasts out a litany of dislikes, beginning eleven paragraphs out of thirteen with "I am sick of . . ." He is sick of, among others, "closeted gays" who will not fight and sick of those in the community who tell him "to stop creating panic." The older Kramer, wiser but still fiery, says people thought he was crazy when early on he warned of the possible epidemic. In the beginning, few doctors and friends of the first AIDS victims simply began to notice a pattern of illness among gay men. Kramer called on gay men to "be cautious" until they found out what caused these rare cancers and pneumonias. People did not like what he had to say because, according to Kramer, gays feared that too much talk against "promiscuity" could reverse the progress they had made toward greater sexual freedom. The suggestion that others might find him crazy runs throughout Kramer's book, and his ranting style reinforces the reader's suspicion. He was known to accost public figures in front of crowds. His book conjures up the image of a Biblical prophet crying out to his people, who ridicule him as a mad man.

The reckless tone and the discontinuity of the reprinted sections make Part One uneven, yet it delivers at least these three worthwhile things: In a sense of the utter fear and confusion during the early part of the AIDS crisis; a survey of the epidemic's progress and the fight against it; and a sense of Kramer's growth as a writer during the ten years these pieces span.

The holocaust comparison, so boldly proclaimed in his title, emerges several times in Part One. In Part Two Kramer undertakes to explain and defend his analogy, which, he admits "straight Jews, and other heterosexuals [will] find . . . repugnant." To equate AIDS with the Holocaust is to indulge in hyperbole, but I suspect that Kramer believes some exaggeration acceptable in the effort to stir people to action. He seeks both the intellectual interest in the analogy and the emotional response to the word. Intellectually his comparison provokes some thought; emotionally it stirs a few, but mostly it angers whose who fight to keep the lesson of the Holocaust poignant and alive. To his credit Kramer draws some interesting parallels. He says that because AIDS affects mainly homosexual males, intravenous drug users, and racial minorities, the "monumental indifference on the part of the straight world" smacks of a "final solution," a convenient way to eliminate the undesirables on the fringe. Whitmore, Sontag, and Kramer all point to the fact that mainly the marginal suffer from AIDS. Whether the well and

powerful people look on with secret satisfaction rather than with horror or compassion is hard to say, but Kramer's often-repeated question certainly makes one wonder: what if this disease had instead struck as many straight white males? Or children? The first child to get AIDS caused quite a media stir.

Kramer's most controversial parallel to the Holocaust, begins with the conviction that Jews are also to blame for the Holocaust because for two thousand years they refused to be politically active. In the same way, he argues, gays through their own inaction have allowed indifference to prevail in the AIDS crisis. Blaming victims is dangerous to the degree that it exonerates the perpetrators. Cautionless, he goes after closeted gays who have been afraid to get involved. "It is now a truism," he says, "that every gay man who stays in the closet is helping to kill the rest of his fellow gay men." From his particular position as a gay activist, the call to come out of the closet is both biased and unrealistic. He derives his professional energy and existence from being gay, but there are many closeted gays who could lose status, power, and indeed their very livelihood by coming out. The door opens into a hostile world. Kramer admits in a recent interview in *Time* that gays "are always going to have enemies no matter what."

Beverly Barbo's *The Walking Wounded* addresses in greater detail this problem of the homosexual's difficulty in a heterosexual world, a world she calls homophobic. Barbo's story is of her family's coming to terms first with her son's homosexuality and then, years later, with her son's death from AIDS. Rather than stir people to join the political battle against the disease, she wants to draw her reader into a sympathetic understanding of homosexuality and AIDS. She describes the difficulty her own son Tim experienced in high school because he was gay. From an early age Tim had trouble making friends. Barbo attributes this to Tim's inability to participate in sports because of poor eyesight and to Tim's homosexuality. She may attribute more to Tim's being gay than is warranted, but how can anyone know? Barbo is a fundamentalist Christian, and we see her faith come into conflict with her love for her son. It seems there is never a question in her mind about which had to change. She adjusts her Christian view to accommodate homosexuality. She comes to understand and wishes us to understand that being gay is not a choice but a given.

One real value of Barbo's book is its sincerity and its treatment of the conflict between homosexuality and Christian fundamentalism. This is not to say the book resolves it; the conflict is one of the book's flaws as well. Explicitly the book describes a single conversion, but for all her acceptance and love, her language may still carry the residue of a fundamentalist bias. Speaking of her husband's struggle to accept their son's homosexuality, she says, "It was as if God said to him, 'You would accept your child under any other circumstances, why not this one? If he were crippled in any other way, you would still love him, why not now?'" The word "crippled" is suggestive in the way Sontag's study of metaphors is suggestive. Her heart has changed but her language has not. Plainly, the conflict does not resolve easily when there is this discrepancy between what she

professes and the language of profession. I cannot help but think of Kramer's disdain for Christian fundamentalists who saw AIDS as divine justice. Barbo, of course, does not think of AIDS as retribution, but something lingers. In recounting her conversations with her son's gay friends she makes a point of letting us know in several instances that this man or that man said he would never "choose" to be gay, as if this statement is an important confession. The contraries are in Kramer as well. He points to the irony that his hero in the fight against AIDS is former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, who is a Christian fundamentalist. Koop spoke openly against the Reagan administration's complacency, and Kramer refers to Koop as "a man of high honor."

Complacency is the other problem caused by Christianity, according to Kramer. He says the Christian emphasis on the other world allows people to accept passively what is happening to them here on earth. Barbo finds her faith to be a comfort and a way to make sense of the pain around her. In the second half of her book, she is helping her son as he dies of AIDS. She and Tim frequently attribute happenings to God's will even while she actively battles to get medicine and nursing care for her son. The tone is indeed one of acceptance, and watching her son die of AIDS takes on the character of a trial, the suffering she must bear with the help of God. Her book works from a more humble design than the other three. It is simply a personal account of a woman from Lindsborg, Kansas, and it addresses concerns important to the Midwest, where conservative Christianity, one way or another, impinges upon everyone. So while the book is not as stylistically sophisticated as these others, it is relevant as well as deeply sincere.

In Whitmore, Christianity inspires and carries many of the health-care workers at Lincoln Hospital. It is a selfless force motivating people to help the most forgotten among us. The AIDS quilts that travel the country encourage us not to forget. These books do the same. Sontag wants us to remember that our words have power and that they reveal our deepest convictions. Pay attention she says. Kramer would have us remember the dead and the dying so that we might help the living through brash political action. Memory is fuel for his rage. We need Kramer and his fire, and we need people like Barbo to tell their stories. Every once in a while we will get someone who can give us both. Whitmore, with the best written book of these four and the most balanced, delivers compassion and urgency. As keeper of the bone house, he understands memory, its need for the tangible, its ability to hold onto story. Four books and four ways to understand AIDS. The books are as much about attitudes and perceptions as they are about the disease. The unanimous message is that more people must begin to care.

Daniel Martin

Contributors' Notes

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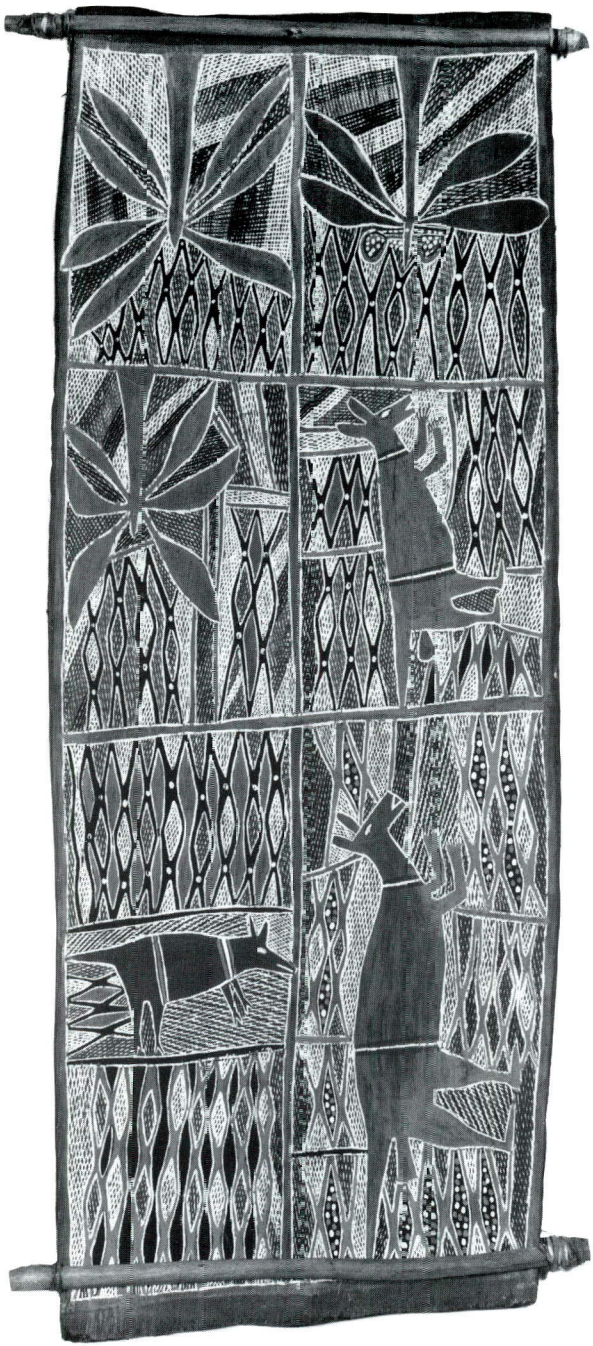

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