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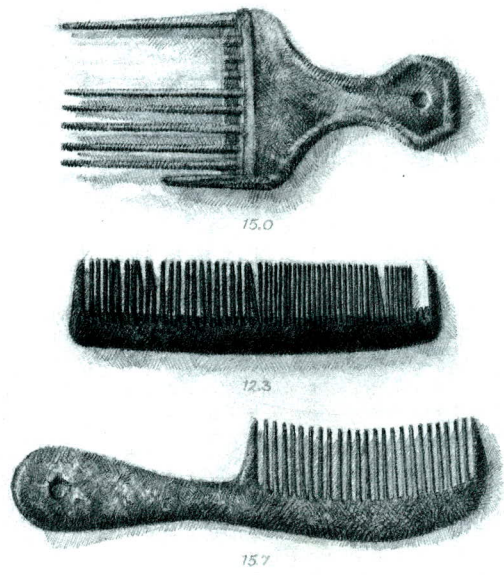
George Wedge
DeWitt Henry
Walt McDonald
Virgil Suarez
Susan
Clayton-Goldner



Grooming Devices, c 2000

Fall 1999

Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press
Lawrence, Kansas
Cottonwood 54

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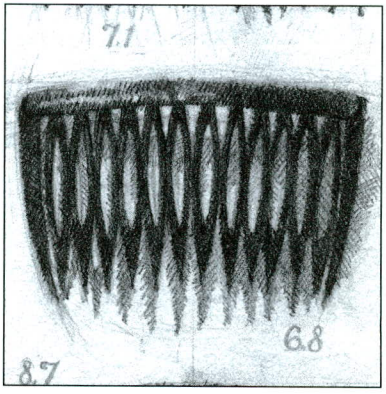

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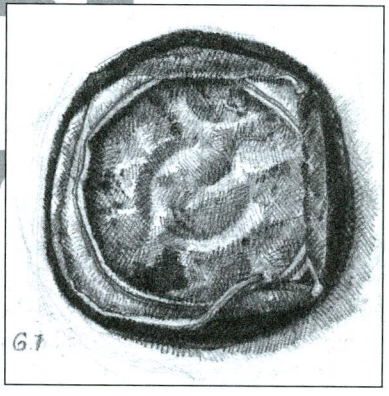


Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press
Lawrence, Kansas

Contents

Tom Lorenz

Editor's Note

This issue of *Cottonwood* is dedicated to George Wedge, whose passing last June cost the entire writers' community an invaluable friend and colleague.

A mentor and teacher of countless writers and poets, George is one of the most important figures in the history of *Cottonwood*. Serving as editor from 1985 to 1997, George gave vision and leadership to many major projects, including the award-winning Contemporary Black Writers issue, guest edited by Gerald Early, and the River City Reunion, a significant literary event which generated two issues of *Cottonwood* and featured work by such writers and artists as William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Andrei Codrescu, and Anne Waldman. During his tenure as editor of Cottonwood Press, George also published six books of fiction and poetry, including the work of Vic Contoski, Robert Day, Denise Low, and Michael Johnson. It would be difficult to overestimate the number of talented young writers whose work George nurtured and encouraged while editing *Cottonwood* and teaching at KU.

George himself was an accomplished poet whose poetry and interviews appeared in a variety of literary magazines. We are proud to feature a selection of his poetry in *Cottonwood* 54, as well as the opening chapters of his novel, *The Spooking of Sonny Bliss*, which was a finalist in the 1988 Associated Writing Programs fiction competition.

Art works in mysterious ways. The portions of George's novel which appear in this issue convey not only the main character's childhood experiences but also a wistful looking back at the innocence and promise of those times. In reading the poems and stories gathered here, I was struck by how this same meditative longing for lost times and loved ones keeps reappearing. We didn't plan for this to be a "theme issue"—but in the mysterious timing and logic of art it was as though the pieces in this issue assembled themselves to bear witness to George's life and work and to give voice to all our lost but still-remembered companions.

Emily Hoffman

Midway Gardens

What I always wanted was one of those reproductions of Frank Lloyd Wright's S. C. Johnson Wax desk, steel and wood, three oval tiers with a divided metal tray on the top tier and two file drawers attached on the right side. There's even a chair on three casters done in a matching dull burnt orange. I saw it in the pages of a magazine—*House Beautiful*, I think—and loved it. I loved it so much I wanted to move to Racine and work there just so I could sit at one of those desks all day.

We were on vacation, a grueling driving odyssey to nowhere, the first time I saw one of his buildings. I was sixteen and we had stopped in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, of all places, to spend the night. The gauzy heat of summer dusk clung close. The streets weren't busy. There wasn't really any traffic, just a few cars parallel parked and apparently forgotten along the downtown sidewalks. I was wondering where everyone was, if they'd melted or evaporated, when we turned a corner.

The Price Tower was nineteen stories high and grossly out of place. It was—I don't know how to describe it—dazzling, really, a hidden wonder of the world rising from the Oklahoma clay. Built to be a manmade tree, it appeared different from every angle, as though it was continually reinventing itself. The lowering sun pierced the parapets and louvers, making the green copper facade seem wet and gold. And there was a tree, a real tree, somehow growing out of the top balcony. We drove around it. It was like a prism, shooting beams of diluted evening sunlight off its sharp edges. I've never experienced love at first sight except for that moment, coming around the corner in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

I never liked my room growing up in Columbus, Ohio. It felt like a shoebox at night when I was in bed. I didn't like the one plain window with gingham checked curtains overlooking the clothesline and the rusted swing set with the warped slide in the backyard. The room was a perfect rectangle, without a little alcove or even a window seat. I rearranged the furniture a lot hop-

ing that would somehow make a difference, exposing heretofore unknown space and light. I'd move my desk under the window and the dresser opposite the door. It wasn't long before I exhausted all my options.

The houses he built, I read in the books from the library, didn't have rooms, at least not rooms like mine, suffocatingly plain and enclosed, all wall and no personality. I couldn't imagine such a thing. I really couldn't. I wanted to, to the point of desperation. How he tried to bring the outdoors in was liberating to me because there never seemed to be any real light in my room. And how the furniture matched the angles and the curves, and the texture of the brick and stone, everything from the dining room table to the light fixtures and carpets, all one free-flowing interior. Everything he built looked seamless, as if it all came to him in one single, unbroken, inspired thought—the broad eves, the endless stretches of clerestory windows and cantilevered balconies.

One day, in the summer, when I had nothing to do, I went rooting through my closet, pulling down boxes looking for colored pencils and my old compass from seventh-grade geometry. The pointed arm was bent, so I straightened it, found some white typing paper and a ruler, and started drawing careful overlapping circles and coloring them in, drawing lines of varying thickness and length through them. To me they looked crude and stupid. Still, I taped them to the inside of my closet door.

I kept them there until I got married and moved out of my parents' house for good.

When we met, Tim wanted to be an astronomer. I was going to be an artist. His gray eyes were always turned up to the night sky in a state of idle wondering or grave calculation as he contemplated things like apparent magnitude and luminosity. In his apartment he had a telescope set up by the window. I'd look through it and, with his hand on my shoulder, he'd tell me what I was seeing until I could find Orion and Leo and Gemini on my own. Once we loaded up quilts and lawn chairs and drove out into the country and sat huddled together until three in the morning waiting for a meteor shower. He kept me awake by telling me about nebulas and quasars and the moons of Saturn. He made it sound fantastic, like if we would just reach high enough we could have touched them all. He said that a long,

long time ago the universe was just one tight ball. It was packed so tight it couldn't stand it anymore, it had to break out so it exploded and expanded, like a rushing torrent overtaking space. And it was still expanding. I never fell asleep that night. I couldn't for days. That singular burst of freedom and the infinity of it all wouldn't leave my mind.

For our honeymoon Tim and I went to Phoenix. Neither of us had ever been there. We stayed at the Biltmore. I had read about it, seen pictures of it. I had even tried to reproduce the abstract glass cactus mural in the lobby with my colored pencils and compass.

I could have sat in the lobby all day. Walking in it felt as though there was the slow fading residue of recent excitement, like the lingering smoke of a Fourth of July fireworks display. Tim checked us in and we took a golf cart with our luggage strapped to the back to our room. By the time the bellman driving the cart had brought in our suitcases and filled our ice bucket from the machine at the end of the hall, Tim had fallen asleep on the bed. I brushed my hair, examined the little soaps and shampoos in the wicker basket near the sink, and let myself out to see if I could find my way back to the main lodge.

The hotel was one of those isolated pockets of Eden that are a side street away from Camelback, Indian School, Missouri, and all the other searing desert thoroughfares. You would never know they existed if you hadn't just been there. It was June. All the snapdragons were vibrant and hearty. The grass lawns were clean and beautiful, close-cropped like a fresh haircut. The footpaths connecting the wings to the main building were cool and shady, covered by concrete overhangs spilling over with vines. I heard a bell ding behind me and stepped aside in time to avoid a man in his hotel uniform pedaling a room-service bike, the covered tray of food in the basket beneath the handlebars.

Our room overlooked one of the grassy courtyards. When I let myself back in, Tim was still asleep. I went to the window. Down below on the lawn the uniformed staff was setting up white chairs in rows, leaving a distinct center aisle. I watched them wheel out a flatbed cart and assemble buffet tables. I turned back around. Tim slept on his back, a pillow rolled under his head and his mouth open, while I watched the wedding unfold and the ice sculpture drip quickly away.

Tim wanted to sit by the pool the next day and drink ba-

nana smoothies, but I made him drive me north to Taliesin West. I needed to see Wright's desert studio for myself. Tim wanted to ask the concierge for directions before we left but I said no, I knew the way. And I did: East on Lincoln Drive, left on Scottsdale, right on Shea, left on 114th. On the way I suggested we drive on north to Flagstaff. We could go to the observatory where they discovered Pluto, I reminded him. He didn't seem interested. He was too worried about getting back to work and meeting his sales quota. And I was going to be cleaning up spilled finger paints instead of putting oil on canvas when the honeymoon was over.

We couldn't afford the full guided tour, so I saw what I could of the steep sloping windows of the draft room. I guessed there wasn't much the guide could tell me that I didn't already know. The books were right. The sprawling camp was the perfect synthesis of desert and architectural vision with its low ceilings, redwood rafters, and rock foundations that blended into the surrounding mountains.

Tim stood behind me in the souvenir shop while I gazed longingly at the Imperial dinnerware by Tiffany & Co. I didn't buy anything, but before I left, I added my name to a catalog mailing list.

We bought our first house in Columbus. Tim picked it out. I liked it from the outside. Big shade trees, nice hedgerow, a little waist-high fence around the perimeter. It was an older house, what I'd call a bungalow. Its coat of anemic robin's-egg-blue paint gave it a forlorn, left-behind look. But it was sturdy with its subtly angled fieldstone piers holding up the porch. It had a gable roof and a stout stone chimney. Tim got a good deal on it, I think. The floor creaked in certain places, I discovered. The carpet was thin and fraying, and every room had a musty, old smell coming up from the basement and out through the vents. We didn't have much furniture except for Tim's ugly Naugahyde recliner, my dresser, a card table with folding chairs, and a queen-size bed with no headboard and a concave mattress. The telescope that had been packed away never came out of its box. I would have put it together myself but I didn't know how.

In the bank I had three hundred dollars that I was going to put toward a new couch, but the day I planned to suggest this to Tim, I reached back in the mailbox and pulled out the Frank

Lloyd Wright catalog. I ordered the Ennis House eucalyptus stained glass to hang in the window over the kitchen sink. It came in a box marked FRAGILE. I could hardly stand still as the deliveryman brought it up the sidewalk from his truck. It was wrapped in packing paper and bubbled plastic and protected by Styrofoam peanuts that went spilling out into all corners of the living room. I was still finding them three weeks later when I went to vacuum. I had paid fourteen dollars for express delivery and still thought I'd surely die of impatience. I ordered over the phone; the woman who took my call asked me to repeat myself twice I was talking so fast. I didn't sleep until it came. Tim never really noticed it. He probably assumed it was just something I picked up on sale at K-Mart. It was supposed to make the house more tolerable. All it did was accentuate its flaws.

Tim came home at three one afternoon, laconic as ever, and casually announced he'd been let go at the insurance company. The company was cutting its payroll and Tim was expendable middle management. He didn't say anything else and I didn't ask. He brushed past me, changed out of his gray suit, and went out to the back patio to smoke.

I made dinner and cleaned the dishes afterward while he went back out to smoke and brood. Done drying the last plate, I looked up from the sink at my eucalyptus window. It had begun to blend in. I had stopped smiling each time I saw it. I put down the plate and dishtowel and slowly traced the zinc cames with my forefinger. Over and back and over again. I looked out at Tim staring at his feet in the dark. Above him I could see Orion's belt flashing bright.

I went to the bedroom. In the dresser, hidden beneath my underwear and socks, was the catalog. I slipped it out. The first thing I saw was the Robie House etched crystal vase. "Large, dramatic, impressively heavy," the catalog read. I pleaded with the operator to have it delivered by the end of the week. It came and was stunning, filled with white lilies bought at the grocery store, the centerpiece of our card table.

The prices in the catalog were only guaranteed until the end of the month. A new one should have come any day but we were moving. We were moving to Iowa where Tim had found a job. I would never get the catalog before we left, so I called the

customer service number. They said they'd already sent it. I explained that we were moving and asked if they would send one to the new address. I didn't protest when they told me it would cost extra for them to send a second catalog.

We moved to Iowa and into an awful house, an unimaginative plain-fronted brick ranch, one of many on a street of identical ranches distinguishable only by the color of the front door. The back yard was overrun with weeds and thistles. A birdbath had been left behind, a large chunk of concrete broken off the base. There had been flowers but they were dead.

I exhaled and my heart slowed when the catalog came. I waited a few days, mowed the lawn, pulled the weeds, and then ordered the Garden Sprite sculpture, designed for the Chicago Midway Gardens. I set her up in the backyard, where I could look through the eucalyptus glass and see her. She had a solemn face, sad, deep-slit eyes, lowered head, and the crossed arms of an Egyptian mummy. She made the yard a little more dignified, but she made me as sad as she looked and after a while I couldn't look at her. She was much too grand to stand sentry over our grill and the picnic table that gave me splinters in my thighs every time I sat down.

I had an interview for a job as a high school art teacher. Tim had been pressing me to go to work. I had wanted time to adjust, to fix the house the way I wanted, but he said I'd had a month and that was plenty of time.

I picked out my best suit and silk blouse, opened a new package of pantyhose and managed to pull them on without snagging them. On the way out the door I stopped at the kitchen sink for a drink of water. Looking up when I turned off the faucet I saw that clouds had covered the sun. A few fat heavy raindrops clung to and wiggled down the window. My Midway Gardens sprite stood stern and unflappable, resigned to the rain descending hard upon her heavy headdress, her vacant eyes, and down her cement cheeks.

I didn't go to the interview. At a stoplight where I should have turned left I went straight, squinting to see the road out beyond the slapping wipers on the windshield. I kept driving, reaching the high arching bridge over the brown Mississippi, and went into Moline on I-80.

The rain had stopped but the sky was still metallic gray when I got to Chicago. Midway Gardens wasn't there anymore

but I went by Cottage Grove Avenue and 60th just to make sure. In its place were the University of Chicago medical center and Washington and Midway Plaisance Parks. Still, from blocks away I thought I could hear accordion music, and as I got closer I imagined men in fancy suits grouped around little round tables drinking from heavy steins of foamy beer. There were couples dancing, women smoking long cigarettes and wearing mink stoles, fringed dresses, and strands of pearls that brushed their waists. High on their pedestals were dozens of my sprites, watching it all.

The Robie House was a few blocks away, steeped in secrecy, its front door hidden from the street. I would have stopped but the afternoon tour had already begun. As I drove past, I reached for the map in the glove compartment to see how far it was to Racine.

Liz Beasley

Context

Consider things without one:
  the meaningless
roster of grandchildren rolled off

an old woman's tongue, unvisited
  towns on a map
that in the mind have no color or wind

and the roads just end, simply,
  in a field or creek bed.
I noticed today that my neighbor does nothing

but stand in the hallway with various
  postcards and packages,
locking and unlocking the same door

again and again. We know
  how important are the words
surrounding other words, how only

a larger passage can determine
  meaning. Take the word *clear*,
for instance, it is what happens

to a check, or the sky, or a conscience,
  or a throat with something stuck
in it. It is to remove, to leave a place,

to contain nothing, or be absolute.
  It is what is
unmistakable; it is me here now,

trying to clear my head.
  This is what I'm afraid of:
being here, in a new state, eight hundred

miles away from any way to
  define myself, where I write
"I don't act the same way here as I would at home"

and I'm not expected
  to behave in any
certain way, to be drunk or stubborn or witty,

and I'm given enough sky
  to disappear into.
There must be something I can lose

to a background, some kind of light
  to cast myself
in shadow that will make me

both more and less specific.
  Once I saw
a woman in a window of a bus.

When she pulled away she was resigned
  forever to my
particular version of her fate:

circling through wrong towns, never arriving.
  I hope she has proven me
wrong, is living happily among people

who will miss her when she's gone.
  But she might still be looking
at the road from the window, legs cramped and stiff.

She may have forgotten the word
  home, and it might be my fault,
not knowing the directions, the way back.

Susan Clayton-Goldner

Moon Flowers

Balanced on the willowy branch
between girl and woman,
I boxed away that moonlit night,
two cane-seated rockers on the summer porch,
and my grandmother, a giant tortoise in her hands.
"He enters this world old," she whispered to me
or to no one, her pleated thumbs vanishing
into the parchment folds of his legs,
"And perhaps it is better that way."

After my grandfather died, she wallpapered
all the mirrors in her house.
Above the bathroom sink, two small mountains
of California Poppies hung.
Each night, as I brushed my teeth,
they waved their orange and yellow heads,
uncertain as I, in their newness.
She fastened Angel Trumpets and Fairybells
inside the twin mahogany ovals on her dresser.

And atop the mirrored tiles
Grandfather had hung to expand
the dining room, she pressed
an endless field of Alpine Forget-Me-Nots,
matched and smoothed their sapphire petals
with her long brush like a baby's hair,
the hair of my dead mother,
soft as the silken blue down
of a Hummingbird's throat.

Very slowly, as the weight of age
fell upon her, whitened her eyes
like the Night Blooming Cereus,
she awakened the silent nature of my heart.
And she knew someday I'd cross over,

unpack that night and remember
her, the tortoise and the moon,
how it hung, pasted and separate,
on the black sky like a mirror,
silver, and full.

Rob Griffith

Diptych

On the Roof of the Peabody, 1942

her smooth neck
is orbited by pearls
like moons. they sweep
to an apogee of flesh
where her heartbeat
keeps time beneath

the skin. across
the table a man
sits uniformed, starched,
wet hair combed
into oily furrows.
they stare at the table,

glances intersecting above
the glass—hidden lines
of force, love invisible
as gravity. breeze carries
scent of coal, honeysuckle,
river mud, and rain.

The Parkview, 1996

She and I sit at the window,
ninth floor, looking out at the roiling
treetop ocean of Overton Park. Old glass,
thicker near the bottom from years of slow
flowing, silences the cars and tree-hiss
below. Only the muted growl

of steel carts taking pills and paper cups
room to room breaks
the quiet. She stares, blank,
at the window and the cracked
desert of paint chips on the sill.
My name slips in and out of her mind

like the tide's slow creep and retreat
over wet sand, and I must remind
her of who she is, who I am,
and what this place is not. I run
my finger along the edge of an old photograph
and tell her a story, recreating a lost life.

Vanessa Vera Eicher The Blithe House

The Blithe House stands six stories high on a corner downtown not far from the murky Missouri River. It's built of brick, and dozens of darkened windows line the facade. It clutches to the slope of a hill. In winter, the manholes on the street in front send up musty white steam that fogs the view. On either side of the Blithe House, and across the street, its three mostly empty parking lots sprawl out, enclosed by low chain fences.

I was a senior in college, and it was late March of 1992 when I walked in to interview for a hostess position. Three o'clock lay on the Blithe House like an awkward silence in the middle of a conversation. There were no customers, and all the tables were set with silver knives and forks framing empty spaces on the stiff white linen tablecloths. Somewhere a plastic scoop was driving into ice cubes, and I could hear someone shaking a dust mop, the hollow, clumsy rattle of the metal joint connecting the handle to its head. The only light in the main dining room came pale and lifeless through the white stained glass windows on either side of the revolving door.

As I descended the marble stairs of the entrance platform, I began to notice movement in the shadows to the left of the room. A bartender wearing a white shirt, a white blazer, and a black bow tie watched me with half-closed eyes. He, like all other servers at the Blithe House, had a round silver pin just bigger than a dollar coin on his left lapel with a large black number etched into the metal.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Grimes," I told Number Thirty-Three, the bartender.

He said nothing in response and moved slowly from behind the bar to a door at the back of the dining room. A few minutes later he pointed me through the doorway down a long unlit hallway. I thanked him, but he made no sound as he passed by.

Mr. Grimes interviewed me in the third dining room down from the first. He was not even five feet tall, balding, and wore glasses. His belly strangled his light brown dress shirt's buttons in their holes. He draped his dark brown polyester suit jacket

over the back of a chair, watched me sit down, and put my application face down on the table.

"You ever worked as a hostess before?"

"No, but one time I—"

"Doesn't matter. It's better that you're fresh—no need to retrain and all that."

"I do think I get along well with people," I threw in quickly.

"Just look nice—dark colors, a skirt, heels, and, you know, makeup."

"Oh, sure, I understand. I have—"

"You're a pretty girl. You'll look good up there in the Main Room." He took in my face again and glanced down at my legs.

"Um, thanks . . . thank you." I crossed my legs, looked away, and kept on smiling.

"You don't need much experience for this job. It's a piece of cake. Anyone could do it. It's just fun—that's what it is. Just fun. You'll get five dollars an hour and any tips you might make from the customers. Lotsa famous people. Spielberg once had a party here and rented the whole restaurant—all seven dining rooms. Set up a jazz band on the entrance stairs. They went all night long. Yes sir, lotta fun. You'll meet some of the most important folks in town because we've got a lotta history here. We're famous. We're tradition. We're the oldest restaurant in the city."

Mr. Grimes walked me out to the street after giving me the job, and I could tell in the sunlight that his glasses had lenses thick as old Coca-Cola bottle glass. He blinked repeatedly like a mole suddenly brought out of an underground tunnel.

"We're bumpin' tonight," Mr. Grimes would come up and tell me on nights around seven o'clock when the Main Room was full and customers were spilling over into the other six dining rooms.

Some evenings we seated a thousand to fifteen hundred people, and usually high volume came on Friday and Saturday nights. These were the only two nights I worked. I had very little spending money, so I wore the same two outfits every time: a navy blue dress jacket with a pleated white skirt on Fridays and a pleated red skirt on Saturdays. I had picked up a pair of shoes at a clearance sale, and while the waiters' rubber-soled black shoes padded along, my heels clicked like the tapping of little

hammers on a porcelain sink as I stepped on thousands and thousands of white inch-wide Italian tiles covering the floors of all the dining rooms. After seating customers, I stood in the Main Room, trying not to lean on the host desk, shifting my weight from one tight shoe to the other.

On nights like these, the Main Room shimmered with sounds, smells, colors, movement. The bartender deftly measured shots with his eyes, jerking the metal spout away from the lips of the glasses. "Hey," he'd say warmly and smile as he set down the drink, "that's what I'm here for." The enormous mirror behind the bar reflected guests holding wine glasses against the light, cracking lobster claws, and spilling laughter into the room. Diners wearing green, midnight blue, magenta, scarlet, or black clustered around squares of white like a pastiche of fluttering flowers. White figures flew silently between the clusters, greeting, flattering, serving, bowing as they covered the spaces with meats, sauces, soups, wines. Above them, murals from the turn of the century, painted in dingy brown and green with a dusty yellow for the sky, depicted the stark, rugged life of a wagon train suffering its way westward. The murals' sky met with the dark green ceiling that Willis, the handyman, painted all in one night because the owner, Mr. Lupus, didn't want to pay for much overtime. Here and there Willis' tired and careless brush strayed at the edges of the murals, and the green paint licked at the scenes like dark flames.

Willis was never apologetic about things like that, and sometimes he'd remind me, "Lupus ain't gonna fire me. No one works as cheap as me." One night Willis came up to make a phone call at the front desk in full view of the customers, the managers, and Mr. Lupus. He wore a mechanic's one-piece worksuit, and he was covered in dust and smears of dirt. Willis' pale skin was shiny with sweat that trickled into the scraggly reddish-brown hairs of his beard.

I whispered, "God Willis, what are you doing up here dressed like that?"

His expressionless eyes held mine in a blank stare; I wondered if he'd even heard me.

"I have to call my ex-wife before ten. She's got to bring my kid over for the weekend."

After he hung up the phone, instead of leaving, he leaned on the podium to say that didn't I look nice, adding that he could

sure use a drink, since he'd been working "like a nigger" for six or seven hours down in the cellar of the Blithe House with nothing but a flashlight in a four-foot-high crawl space trying to reinforce the building's foundation beams, which were rotting and splitting.

"People don't know it, but this whole goddamned place could just fall in on itself. Just like that. You should see it down there. It's a hell."

One week before I started hostessing at the Blithe House, Oprah had a show on so-called "Lipstick Lesbians." I came to find out later that during my first two weeks at the Blithe House, most of the waiters decided from my cropped hair and makeup that I fit the billing of a "Lipstick Lesbian." They stared at me and spoke to me very little, and I in turn assumed that it was logical since I was the only woman besides Dolores, the cashier, working in a business exclusively populated by men.

They slowly discovered I had a boyfriend, and I came to know their sexual histories through their stories, spats, and back-stabbings. Approximately forty of the fifty waiters at the Blithe House then were homosexual men.

I couldn't watch them leaning over their largely politically and religiously conservative clientele without considering the irony of their close physical contact, of the intimate physical proximity necessitated by the serving of food. The Blithe House's oblivious revelers—old men with their cigars and the middle-aged women with their diamond rings—had no idea that the waiters who glided from table to table were lovers or that some were slowly dying.

Mike, a red-haired waiter, was a favorite with the lady customers. I could hear them commenting on how cute he was and trying to catch his eye. Between courses, Mike would often come talk to me at the host's desk, surveying the animated Main Room.

"I just love that hag's dress. I wish it came in *my* size."

He would float away, smiling, toward one of his tables and promising me yet again that he would get me those yellow rose petals.

"You put them in your bath water, honey," he'd tell me, "and your karma will just glow, honey—just glow."

Another great favorite was black-haired and soft-spoken Paco, and clients never suspected that the glances he stole at the waiter in station five were much more sexually charged than the ones he gave to his female customers. And even Paco didn't know what everyone else on the wait staff knew for a long time as he watched his lover, Billy, in station five. Billy was having an affair with the part-timer, Jack. Later we all found out what not even Billy had known: Jack was HIV positive and secretly had been for four years.

The busboys were mostly straight and, because of the natural hierarchy more than homophobia, they hated the well-paid waiters. Many waiters spent the lion's share of their earnings on coke, but because the busboys earned less and the waiters often cheated them out of their rightful portion of waiting tips, the busboys tended to stick to pot. Frequently when I'd have to ask a busboy to clear a table or bring more settings to a party I'd just seated, I'd be close enough to see his bloodshot eyes in the dim light.

The only workers I assumed had no choice but to work sober were the assistant cooks, who cut and chopped and arranged under the unrelenting fluorescent lights of the cramped Blithe House kitchen. With the exception of the chef, most were ex-cons, some of whom had done hard time for armed robbery, rape, and even murder. Unlike the wait staff, most were boldly heterosexual, and I made my trips to the kitchen as brief as possible to avoid the hungry animal look in their eyes.

The garnish preparer told me one night over my shoulder as I got some extra silverware, "This steak ain't as big as my cock, baby."

Mr. Grimes shrugged off my concern. "Oh ya know, they just like girls."

It shouldn't have surprised me that management was so indifferent about kitchen misconduct when I knew that kitchen workers were never told to wash their hands after using the rest room, and I personally witnessed several of the women who worked in the salad section not doing it as they left the rest room. I need only have considered the fact that I'd seen Mr. Lupus himself casually toss a cracker off the floor into a cracker basket about ready to go out on a waiter's tray.

"Whose handwriting is that?" Mr. Lupus said one night, intently studying the entries in the reservation book.

"Charles wrote the names in the book tonight," I replied.

When Charles was hired as a host, Mr. Grimes told me that he would stay at the desk to greet customers while I would be the "runner," walking with and seating people at their tables. Charles was painfully thin, and his slender shoulders hunched protectively over his narrow chest. He was about nineteen, with black hair that he slicked back with talc-smelling pomade like an old man. If Charles was gay, too, I never knew it. He wrote more words in the reservation book than he ever spoke to me.

"I like that handwriting," Mr. Lupus continued. "Let's make sure he always writes the names in the book."

I watched Mr. Lupus walk away, then glanced at the old-fashioned script on the pages that no one saw but the hosts and the managers. Charles had come to work at the Blithe House, as all young men did, to make money as a waiter. The waiters' stations were organized in terms of seniority, and the waiters in the Main Room made anywhere from $80 thousand to $100 thousand a year. Charles couldn't have stepped into that category, but the dedicated part-time waiters usually made around $30 thousand. As a waiter, Charles would have only been taxed on his credit-card tips, and typically customers tipped in cash. Charles had been given the flimsy promise that "after a while" he would be bumped up to waiter. But his month-long hosting duties ended abruptly when Mr. Grimes discovered that Charles did magic.

Grimes and Lupus had Charles on a "trial basis" doing table-side magic for the customers. At five dollars an hour, he made cards appear behind ears and one yellow sponge bunny yield six little yellow sponge bunnies. It always struck me that the real magic was how customers enjoyed the intrusion of this skeletal, milk-pale young man who spoke in monotone and never smiled. Like a mortician who felt these people were too alive for his purposes, Charles' eyes held a startled expression when customers expected him to communicate with words rather than hands. Somewhere along the line, Charles must have quietly realized that Lupus had no intention of making him a waiter or of paying him a dignified wage for his skills. After two months of minimum-wage magic, Charles made himself disappear.

"Did you hear," Grimes commented, "Charles went and left us. Imagine that, and Mr. Lupus was just getting ready to give him three hundred a night for doing magic. Just goes to show you gotta be patient in this old life. It's too bad though; customers love to see tricks."

Later, someone told me that Charles had gone to a New York mime school. He'll be happier there, I thought, as I recalled how he hated being left alone at the host desk. When I'd tell him I had to step away for a few minutes, his eyes filled with terror, and even on nights that we took in over one thousand customers, he always preferred being the runner. Being at the desk often meant complex negotiations with customers that involved smiles, feigned indifference, and verbal sleight of hand. Months after my job interview, I had changed into someone who knew that what really mattered was to get along well with people who are vain and impatient.

The Main Room tables at the Blithe House were at a premium, especially the six booths along the right wall. A high mahogany partition separated the back of one booth from another, affording diners a sense of privacy and shelter. The booths were coveted furthermore because numerous politicians and celebrities had dined in them over the years. Once I overheard a woman from New York tell her companion, "The reason I wanted us to eat in that booth over there is because Harry Truman loved it so much that he flew back from Washington to sit there and make his decision about dropping The Bomb." Another favorite booth had been filmed in a Paul Newman movie, and waiters and guests alike argued over which side Newman had sat on. Fewer wanted to claim the booth Hank Williams Jr. had sat in, but the Main Room waiters liked telling that "Bocephus" had sat in the booth "right next to this one," before he went out and broke a wine bottle on the rugged brick wall of the Blithe House. A female patron and her husband had come in scared but excited, saying that a man outside with a broken bottle had told her, "I'm Hank Williams Jr., and I'm the coolest white man alive."

With legends like that, it was no wonder the booths had taken on such mesmerizing power, and while guests spoke to me, usually their eyes were hypnotically fixed over my shoulder on the booths. Even guests who had "a booth reservation" more

often than not didn't get to sit in one and spent the rest of their dinner making intense glances at the diners leaning over their candlelit tables enclosed in dark green leather and mahogany paneling.

In the afternoons Dolores took reservations for the Main Room and specifically for the booths. She didn't, however, put limits on how many people could sign up for booths. Thus, when I began writing the reservations in the book, I often found myself recording about four booth reservations at five o'clock, four at six, three at six-thirty, and twenty or more at seven o'clock. The average meal at the Blithe House took between an hour and a half and two hours at least; reserved parties from seven to eight o'clock often had no choice but to sit somewhere else or wait an hour or two for their booth.

Customers naturally expected that a reservation was a reservation in the traditional sense, and they also naturally assumed that I, the hostess, had created this ridiculous error. "Do you *know* who *I* am?" many would lean over the desk and ask me.

One afternoon I asked Dolores to please limit the reservations and space them at two-hour intervals. She made no reply. She sat inside an elevated L-shaped desk against the wall, and the green-shaded lamp she used to read by was high enough that its light hit me in the eyes. All I could see of her were her thin lips painted red and the silhouette of her black curly wig. Her eyes were in complete darkness when she said matter-of-factly, "That's too much work."

"But Dolores, all restaurants do that. That's what reservations are for. The way you're doing it now makes a lot of problems for me up front."

"Talk to Mr. Lupus," she said emotionlessly.

That night a young couple came in with a booth reservation that the husband had made three weeks previously. After two hours of waiting at the bar, his gaze consumed by the booths, he came over to me.

"It's our wedding anniversary. And I can't believe that the reservations—which I made three weeks ago—could be screwed up like this. You are completely incompetent, and I can't believe that a restaurant like the Blithe House would employ you or let something like this happen."

I didn't begrudge him his anger and explained to him the

truth about "reservations" at the Blithe House. I showed him the book, and I offered to get a manager or even the owner for him. He merely paused and took a sip of his martini.

"So next time, if I make it for five o'clock, I'll be pretty sure to get a booth?"

"Most likely."

To my complete surprise, he merely nodded his head and calmly waited another half hour for his booth. The desire to occupy and be seen in one of those Blithe House booths was so strong that being let in on their secret workings conjured pleasure that overpowered outrage at the perpetual deception that peopled them.

That same night I told Mr. Lupus about Dolores and the booth reservation problem. He held his hands behind his back and looked at me through the corner of his left eye, never turning to face me.

"I mean, well, I felt so bad—and one couple, it was their wedding anniversary, and they made the reservation weeks ago and ended up waiting two and a half hours. Maybe we could at least compensate people who have to wait in some way—"

"You mean give them *free* food?" The dark gray eye narrowed and the black eyebrow arched.

"Other restaurants do."

"People will be upset at first, but they'll take a table eventually. This is the Blithe House."

"But—but just tonight I had about half a dozen parties who were so mad that their reservation wasn't met that they left altogether—and said they wouldn't come back."

He laughed wryly, and then he turned his back on me completely:

"They'll be back."

On Sundays, my car always smelled like cigarette smoke and stale food from my work clothes. My weeks of college classes all ended with my Friday and Saturday nights at the Blithe House. From the sleepy little town where I went to school, I drove twenty minutes to the city. I often parked in a pawnshop's lot two blocks down because Mr. Lupus didn't want employees' cars in his lots. After work I always had a male coworker take me to my car. One night as I walked to my car, two of the Dumpsters in the front lot had been set on fire. Twice,

just before closing, I had customers come back in to call the police after being mugged. I remember coming to work one New Year's Eve and finding out that on Christmas Eve one of the new part-time waiters had been shot through the windshield of his car as he tried to get away from muggers who wanted his night's earnings. The bullet went clean through and shattered his collarbone. He didn't quit, but he never wore his black and whites when leaving work again.

On nights when we weren't too busy, Mr. Grimes would volunteer me to give tours of the Blithe House to customers who had tipped him. Guests were seduced by all the "bits of history" they found in the Blithe House. They loved the Italian floor tiles, the old menus framed on the wall announcing "$1 per jumbo lobster," and they particularly liked the large oil paintings that filled the dark hallway that led from the back of the Main Room to the old hotel lobby at the other end of the building. At night, spotlights shone down on the artwork, all done by a single local painter during the 1940s, depicting buffaloes grazing on the plains and grayish-brown wolves running in a pack during a snowstorm. The paintings were on loan from the painter until he died in mid-1993, and after his death, the family offered to sell the paintings to the Blithe House. Lupus told them that they could leave them there for display, but he wouldn't pay because they "weren't worth a dime." Two weeks later, a middle-aged man and woman, modestly dressed, came and carefully wrapped the paintings in frayed old blankets and stacked them into the back of a battered old station wagon. For weeks the white rectangles marking the territory where the scenes had lived for fifty years caught my eye as if they were ghosts. Finally, one long night, Willis buried them in a thin coat of bargain-price True Value brown paint.

Just about a week before the man and woman took the paintings away, I was giving a tour through the hall, and as the group hung back to look at one of the paintings, an old man in an expensive suit separated from them and told me he'd been coming to the Blithe House all his life.

"Yes, I can remember when all the waiters here were black boys. Now only old Jones is left—but I still like to come for the memories."

He was not alone in that. The majority of the Blithe House's loyal patrons were older, white, wealthy, and politically conser-

vative and had made the Blithe House part of their personal history. They tended to be "regulars" who spent hundreds of dollars on each meal and asked for the same waiter every time. They came back to the Blithe House ritualistically to assure themselves that at least one safe site from their past was still stable and protected in a world that they perceived as immoral, chaotic, dangerous, and diseased.

I remember helping an elderly woman up the steps to the door, and when we reached the top, she turned back and lovingly surveyed the Main Room. She must have been at least eighty, and when she caught her breath, she turned to me.

"You're such a nice, dear girl. It's so nice to see you working in a place like this."

Her eyes were glowing, and she placed her hand on my forearm.

"Do you know that I came here on my high school prom? I sat in the third booth right there and I ate lobster and drank wine for the first time in my whole life. It was such a beautiful place then, and to me it hasn't changed a bit."

I hardly knew what to say to such intimate sincerity, but hoped my smile and my eyes conveyed my gratitude for being invited to share in one of her dearest memories. After we said good-bye, I watched her trembling bony hands clutch her fur coat tightly around her neck as her husband led her slowly outside through the Blithe House's revolving door.

If you walk along the hallways of the mostly unrenovated upper floors of the Blithe House, often you will find gaping holes in the floor that offer an uncomfortable vista of the unrenovated floors below. The sixth floor is the most forlorn because most of its old rooms are stripped down to the support beams, twisted and exposed electrical wires and plumbing hanging in midair. Like the picked-clean bones of an animal in a desert, the rooms' skeletons sit awaiting some phoenixlike revival, or at least the dignity of a burial.

. . . In the 1980s, Mr. Lupus was forced by the city to begin renovation and preservation of the building because of its historical landmark status. Since he had bought the building with the exclusive intention of profiting from the restaurant, he felt like a man told to lavish love and money on a bought woman, and the

slow, at times totally arrested, progress of the renovations reflected this profound unwillingness.

One afternoon, Pat, the architect Mr. Lupus hired, came up to the host's desk exasperated. It was long enough before the dinner hour that no customers had arrived, and he laid a long roll of blueprints on the podium.

"I just don't understand this guy," Pat whispered, cautiously looking around the empty room. "He's got this amazing structure, and all he ever wants to know about is things like what the minimum number of fire exits are that he has to have."

I nodded sympathetically. Pat loosened his tie and his animated eyes darted up to the murals as he spoke.

"God—if this place were mine, I could make it great again. I just don't get him."

"He's an old millionaire, Pat. He's just sucking all the money out of it that he can before he dies."

Pat sighed. "I know, I know. But you'd think some compassion would kick in."

In the front hallway of the building's secondary entrance, newspaper clippings from city papers hung framed and matted, hailing Lupus as a great entrepreneur and preserver of local history.

Harold, one of the night watchmen, used to jokingly tell me, "This building's in worse shape than I am."

Harold, whose one sister was in a nursing home suffering from Alzheimer's disease, was in his seventies, going a little blind and with no other family in the world. Harold didn't need the money he made working at the Blithe House, but he used to tell me that when you're old, you've got to have some purpose in life, something to do. He came by daily to see if he could pick up any extra hours, particularly in the daytime. Unbeknownst to Harold, all other workers had been forbidden to let him work anything but the graveyard shift from eleven in the evening until seven in the morning. I knew this but never told Harold because he seemed to derive pleasure from the hope of getting more hours, and I sensed that in his loneliness, coming down each day, albeit for a futile reason, still gave him reason to leave his two-room apartment five blocks away. He'd always smile and tell me the oddities of his evening—how there was a draft for a little while, how it rained for five minutes at two-fifteen,

how the grandfather clock in the lobby seemed to stop ticking at exactly 4 A.M.

In mid-July 1993, Harold was found dead on the floor of the men's rest room in a pool of blood. He had a deep gash in his forehead and the coroner concluded that he'd bled to death. There were no sharp objects in the room, and he was several feet away from the counter edge or the rim of a toilet.

The case was closed since he had no living or mentally competent relatives, and the Blithe House did not ask for an investigation. Mr. Lupus was unconcerned.

"He was just old, and he must have slipped."

Just a few feet from the bathroom where Harold died, in the lobby, a large stained glass dome stretches up and across about fourteen feet of the ceiling. It's an interior dome, so behind the glass are artificial lights illuminating the pieces of white and green glass that pattern the dome. One evening in the early autumn after Harold died, toward the end of the year and a half that I worked at the Blithe House, a waiter named George and I stood under the dome while George smoked a cigarette. We were winding down after a long Saturday night, and just then we heard a scratching sound from above and looked up into the dome to see a small shadow making its way to the highest point.

"It's a bird," I said without thinking, and then I realized it must be just a mouse because there wasn't any blue open sky outside that dome, just five more stories of Blithe House. George and I laughed at my mistake and watched the little mouse scuttle back down the dome as if disappointed that it had led him nowhere, and I felt relieved at how innocent some things could still be.

Lucia's Father

is dying of internal hemorrhaging
after a quadruple bypass.

Here's a man, she says,
who's struggled, who's lived

hard, worked hard—three jobs
at times—welded metal under

water, slaughtered hogs in the patio.
He even married four times.

A wife per bypass, she jokes.
A man who when the time came

stole inner tubes from a Russian-
made truck, built a makeshift

raft and beat the odds of the Florida
Straits. Here's a man, she says,

dying, after all that, on a hospital bed,
lost on the bark of the foreign tongue,

lost within the whirl of exile. A man
beat, dying in the intensive care unit

of Mercy Hospital, Miami, Florida,
as quietly as any man can.

Christine Delea

The Rocks the Finns Moved

Here where orchards give way to berry farms,
a winery at every turn, annuals on each poor porch,
a year's worth of greens and fruits,
it is difficult to picture North Dakota,
where nothing is easily grown.
You cannot blame the conceit of the natives there,
boldly boasting of ancestors who tilled
until their hands bled and knees gave out,
wrapped blizzard ropes around half-starved waists
to see about the milking in winter,
believing something better could grow on
those plains where some truly went mad.
All of that digging, all of that sky.
I was a stranger there, needed friends to tell me
the names of trees, the types of birds,
what grew in those yellow fields.
Jack had lumbered in Minnesota, his Finnish
predecessors had tried to deceive
hard dirt into giving them enough food
through the years to bear on.
Not many did, but there was Jack,
ready to explain to this easterner any
pheasant or grouse, each Russian olive tree.
My Celtic mind wondered about the boulder piles
in fields, imagined Stonehenge, Easter Island,
mythic incantations to the gods and goddesses
of farming and dairies. Jack laughed.
Field waste, he said, *rocks where someone*
wanted to farm. One hundred years later,
Finnish farmers long gone from their fish
still harvest around these monuments,
ignoring the enticements of those who
have moved on to clear hills and warm winters,
making the earth yield
and watching the eternal sky for sun.

Laura Bernstein

Sounds I Hear from the Building Next Door

First it was static, even in my sleep,
a dozen radios raising a cacophony of Love
and Love, drumbeats enmeshed like the blur
inside an overheating engine.

I learned the song of the woman with her lovers,
each night a low hum through her walls
and my walls, to me alone in my wide bed,
through the cool layers of my skin.

These nights, a boy whose face
I've never seen curls his long fingers into a fist,
pulls them apart with a sound like water
while his father is a hushed shuffle somewhere below.

Everyday, that boy rebuilds
his ancient motorcycle beneath my window.
I know by heart the parts hitting the pavement:
this, the tailpipe; this tic at the edge of hearing,

a rusted screw unwinding itself. And this long
breath, the touch of his hand
along a sheet of oil spread across metal.
The boy is never there when I go out.

I never hear anyone leave.
From outside looking up, their windows are always shut,
glass lips tight against the frames.
Even the rain falls quietly.

These people don't leave me a trace
of themselves, no soot, not one hasty footprint
or frayed lace, not one love letter dropped
carelessly on the white sidewalk.

Laura Bernstein

Love Poems

To make ends meet I teach
poetry writing to the ghosts of college kids
unwilling to allow

their shattered skulls, burst hearts, the blood
lost to car crashes and disease
and despair, the chemical promise

of *just once more can't hurt*
keep them from writing one good poem.
Always on time, always pale lovely and only barely

translucent, these children dreamed up
by their mothers on the first cold autumn night.
Every week I return to discuss music and line,

the value of grief in the modern world,
while one girl takes notes with a severed hand,
another hovers above her desk

like an exhaled winter breath.
I experiment, recite *Jabberwocky*
and the theme song to *Gilligan's Island.*

I ask, *Is this a poem?* Two dozen feather-hands
are cautiously still. They are being tricked,
they sense. This is their last chance.

After class they leave single file, each pressing
into my palm a single handwritten love poem
that melts into water against my skin.

George F. Wedge

The Spooking of Sonny Bliss

I

How long ago is it since Jessie stopped in the doorway to say goodnight? In her warm, sleepy, brown eyes I sense some vague reproach, perhaps frustration—even though I am sober, I am so seldom ready for sleep when she is. She likes the warmth of my body next to hers these winter nights.

Never mind. Her eyes speak only of her sleepiness. I look for criticism and read in them willfully what I will, wanting to find reproach reflected there as surely as the expected face of Narcissus shone from that quiet pool he knelt beside, silent in adoration. A self to love (or despise) plays in the motes of light bounced back from a surface thin as mere skim ice on a winter pond.

What you get married for if you don't want cuddles?

I watch her climb to the curve of the stair, pause at the bend to glance back at me. Then, for some time, I stare at the spot where she stood. Her shy, tremulous last smile fades gradually into vacant air; my mind dims too, gradually, and becomes some vast metropolis suffering a brownout. The old portrait hanging there, some other family's Uncle Henry abandoned in that family's removal, broods darkly back at me, his ghost face silently admonitive until she turns the hall light off from above and I can stare more comfortably into the nonreflective dark.

What else is there to do? Here I am, sleepless as ever while Billie Holiday does sorrowful things on the stereo.

> The night is cold and I'm so all alone
> I long to hold someone I've never known
> Got a moon above me
> But no one to love me

Sing along with the music. "The night is cold. . ."

Day is cold too, Baby. Hurry on through the night so you can be up and doing. Up and doing what? Waiting around for

night to fall again. Nothing but waiting gets done, and that's never done either, day or night.

At the AA meeting tonight, Dave introduces himself in his standard phrase: "My name is Dave, and I'm a grateful alcoholic." The topic is gratitude, and he frowns at me when I pass.

What does he have to be so all-fired grateful about? He really thinks it's great to know what he is and what to do about his problem, to live one day at a time saying, "There but for the grace of God," and all those other slogany phrases posted around the meeting hall. But I'm sure not grateful for "the way it was, what happened, and the way it is now" as that applies to me or for having to sit transfixed as others tell their drunkalogues.

So I'm an alcoholic. Can't handle it any more. True. I can't deny it. And maybe I am getting better. So what? What has "getting better" done for me lately? Do I not still sit, night after night, in the same old dark listening to the same old tones of mournful unfulfillment? There's got to be something more before I'll be grateful.

I've heard Dave talk about how emotionally immature we are at the start, how we have to cultivate the attitude of gratitude. I'll understand better later on, he says, when I've had some growth in the program. Like a parent to a kid: "When you're as old as I am you'll understand." Patronizing. Everything they say is like that. Then, if you don't like it, your negative attitude is at fault. "Hi, folks," I yearn to say. "Meet the petulant little boy in me, the little red fox saying, 'Nyah, nyah, you can't catch me' to sleepy-eyed dogs like you."

"This was a pretty good day," some grateful body says and tells us her day, hour by hour and task by task.

Anything "pretty good" about it? Not that I heard. She had said "please" when she got up, just as they recommend, and she would say "thank you" when she laid her head down to sleep. Between these singular events seems to have occurred a blank. Anyone can read that in a face like the one she offers.

At the end, she says, "And I'm grateful I didn't have to take a drink today."

"Hallelujah," say I. To myself. With an inflection she wouldn't much like. I'm not proud of the feeling that goes with it.

Then Jay surprises me by saying it isn't enough for him to end the day being glad just because he didn't drink. He says he needs

to do something with his sobriety or it's not worth having. He asks whether anyone else feels as he does. "Yes," I say. "I do."

Everyone else sits there staring at us in stony silence, as if we are certified bughouse insects. The rest of the meeting is spent explaining to me that Jay's year of sobriety should have taught him better than to say a thing like that, especially with someone so new in the program there. I've only got three months, they say. Well, after all, I've *got* it. It bothers me that they address all this to me, that they don't say anything directly to Jay.

Well, it doesn't bother him. He comes up to me after the meeting and says he's glad somebody else feels as he does. Maybe, he suggests, we can go someplace and talk it through over coffee. That's how we seem to solve everything—talk and coffee. One addiction for another, Dave says.

When we get to the restaurant, Jay says he's sorry he brought all that discussion down on me, but he *had* to speak his mind. He's so tired of everybody's complacency. But he looks sort of rueful and goes on to say that he's exaggerating—nobody can stay sober even "one day at a time" by being complacent.

Looking out the window, not at him, the shy way I am when I get serious, I say, "That's O.K. I needed somebody to say it for me. You described just how I feel. Anybody can see I'm glad things are getting better for me. I don't need to talk about *that.* I'm simply not willing to being grateful for *not* doing something—for not drinking, that is. Especially when I'm not able to not drink without a little help from my friends. All those double negatives don't add up to something positive for me."

He nods agreement.

Looking now straight into his eyes, I go on. "Dave's my sponsor. Fourteen years he's got. He can say he's grateful he's an alcoholic if he wants to. I *can't.* I don't feel grateful for a damn thing. Oh, I suppose if I knew I were going to die tomorrow, I'd be able to say, 'O.K. Thanks for what I've had. It's been good.' At least I hope I would. But I still have a lot of living to do, as the song says, and if I'm not going to die, then there're a lot of things I'd better change."

His eyes are so intense, I look away again.

"Sure, it's wonderful I don't waste my time and myself getting drunk anymore. All that really means to me is I should get on with things that matter, things that make it worth not drink-

ing. I can't sit around saying how grateful I am just to pass up a drink or two. It's too much like it used to be, sitting around being grateful for the drink in my hand and the security of more on the shelf."

"Yeah," Jay says. "But don't get me wrong. I'm as grateful as they are for the sobriety I have. You will be, too, when you've been around a while longer."

He doesn't see me cringe at what he's said. So we have reached a stopping place of some kind and sit there, not saying anything and staring into our cups. Dark coffee. Brown as his eyes it is and somehow also reproachful.

We eventually share the frustrations of one more futile one day at a time at our respective jobs and in our respective marriages. I think about what it says about progress in a passage they always read to open the meeting, but I don't mention what I'm thinking to Jay.

"We do not claim perfection, only spiritual progress," it goes, or words to that effect. Sure thing, I say. Progress. Show me some.

Anyway, when I get home, what I've got is a bad coffee taste mixed with the taste of too many cigarettes and a wife none too grateful for a long evening with TV and dishes. That's progress?

"Think Think Think," it says on the wall down there.

Thinking overmuch is my besetting fault and someone wants me to really get into it. Somebody is always out there trying to help me get myself in trouble.

Think about something else, they say. The past is done; now is a time for doing. O.K. Doing what?

"Don't think too much," Dave says, contradicting all that other wisdom.

But I go on thinking in the same circles. Round and round. Much too much. *Too Much, Too Soon.* Movie title. Little Diana Barrymore. Little Lord Fauntleroy. Little Miss Muffet on her tuffet.

Back to Tophet. That's what. Back to the beginning.

2

The stereo arm raises itself, swings back, settles into the lead-in groove of the same old record, traces the same old intro, follows the same old rich and raspy voice again. Turn the volume down

a little, so Jess can sleep. Sotto voce. Settle back to a voice with Southern Comfort on its mind. Think of something different even if it's wrong.

The beginning. Where *is* the beginning? Surely not birth. What's that to me? Some little person in my body mewing like a blind kitten, a young cub that needs its mama bear to lick it into shape, destined like a fledgling pelican for infanticide and revival in its mother's blood. Nothing in such beginnings worth thinking about. They say it's in the genes. Goody-no-shoes.

I get no further brooding over the childish stigmata-traumata of ages five and after. "What's the matter, Sonny? Did him have a bad day?" Stuff it. Sources of resentment then are irrelevant now. Father thought like the brothers of the biblical Joseph and saw me as his chance to turn a quick profit. So what? Those pigeons roosted back home long ago, and I have been led rejoicing out of my Egypt land. So drop it.

In the beginning I was twelve years old. That's when Mother left Father and me at Granny's house. A year later she came back and took me away to live with her. Poor little grass widow and her semiorphan playing out their not-so-tragic roles, the beautiful lost centers of somebody else's fairy tale, our only hope a slight glimmer of the guaranteed happy ever after coming around the mountain for to carry us home. I am waiting still, I suppose, for that ever after, even if it seems to be here today. Never mind geography or time, money or death, marriage or paternity, when a guy's enchanted, the enchantment endures. Everything everywhere breathes anticipation of the magical change, but rain does not fall, sun does not shine, the bleak and barren land eternally as white as the snow-light moon, as stark as a tree on a dark and winter sky. Never mind. This land was made for you and me. And a pretty good day is coming soon.

"You've got to grow up sometime, Frank," they say to me at meeting after meeting, raising their drone a pitch or two in exasperation. And part of me understands, even as they blunder on and on about "facing reality" and "living in the now." Eventually, I may experience some mysterious "spiritual change." Everyone does, sometime.

For now, I can't say what they're talking about. There is no change. Drunk or sober, my world is one I carry with me. I am, I can only be who I am. Only the outer part, the facade, is Frank, the heart is Sonny. Too sad a teenaged boy for comic

strips, too undramatic for soaps, too indeterminate for drama, sleepwalking his way through dreams of what is not and was not and nevermore shall be. Out of Poe by way of the expatriate 1920s. Conceived, who knows, in the middle of some drunken night around Christmas 1926. A beginning.

Not the one I looked for.

3

To start wherever it starts is everything, I guess. If one can find a starting place. Nothing whatever starts at three o'clock in the morning. Ask old Scott Fitzgerald. "In the real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning." He knew his stuff, that man. "The real dark night of the soul." Hang in there, friend. That is where I have been hanging in, as they say, too long.

Three o'clock again, and the record player spins at seventy-eight revolutions per minute, working out on "Lover Man." Over and over. Why not? Rich, dark Holiday voice. Sometimes a record cries itself to sleep—Gene Austin—"Wondering where you can be, I hear the clock striking three, and I'm crying myself to sleep." That came from Granny's house. Most of my records are from high school days, the happy music of the hap-hap-happy days I never seem to miss.

Glenn Miller played the Glen Island Casino and people danced to the music he made there in their cozy little homes. I'd curl up by the radio, child-man in a cave built of sound, hearing somebody's Boogie-Woogie Piggie oink away for mama, myself a-wondering where Papa Bear could be with the right-angled clock hands facing right. *Wanting* to be lonely may be what it's all about, a starting place of sorts, because the music, hot or sweet, is singable, danceable, shareable, happy, and willy-nilly, there's no one to share it with.

Ancient scores to rehearse again at three, because I am afraid to sleep, to dream it, scheme it, change and rearrange it, run it as a fool movie in my head, reel on reel of it. My own damned theatre.—Don't like what I see, I tell them to shoot it again. Go out in the lobby and smoke a cigarette.—The crazy scriptings they give, I'd refuse to go back into the dream again if I could. But nothing ever works. No rescripting, reshooting, re-

casting is possible to make things come out right. Happy ever after? It's somebody else's moon up there. Not mine.

A glass of wine with din-din, or when the going's rough. Good food, good friends, good drink, good fun. The good life, the story and the glory of love. We better believe it. And now I better do without the wine, if it's still possible. Sometimes I want to fool myself with all their talk. So far, so good. Maybe.

Three A.M. I stumble up winding stairs to comfortable bed, to comforting if sleep-congested wife, who murmurs, "Thought you'd never come to bed!" Moments later, startled, "Ooh, your feet are cold."

Whispers of force, still force, quiet force, her rich warm voice speaks comfortable words, even in chagrin. Hear what comfortable words. Even at three o'clock. And there is a loving arm across me and a warmth that snuggles up into my already half-created sleep-wrapped thick cocoon, not tasting of bourbon straight tonight, my dear, nor for quite several nights, though nothing's really changed, and here I am again at three, "Olly-olly oxen free," sober or not.

Silent and secret, the screen of my mind goes blank, filling with snow as station after station says good night. I am adrift in the arms of Morpheus and Jessica. Deep and steady dark begins, stretching forever out, eternities away, a long, vague journey in pneumatic tube, straight up, then over and out across vast shadowy landscape. "Black," somebody says, "is the depth behind a star." Yes. And the height before. Tricks of perspective. So is it still, no longer speeding through real dark because there is a spot of light to make real darkness visible. Safely asleep at last.

Deep in the gentle darkness, down, down a thousand miles as from the balcony of the Paramount Theatre, deep down, is pale and paling light, like that last flicker of the house before the dark is absolute.

A pause in which filmy curtains are moving up and off . . .

BLISS'S TKO MORPHEUM
Proudly Presents
Its FEATURE ATTRACTION
Sonny Bliss
in
LAUGHING BOY BLUES

4

Always in memory or dreams, out of this distant view, the squat hotel rises between the telephone office tower and the Downtown University Club. *HOTEL HAMPTON*, a sign before it says, and in smaller print, *Transient or Weekly Rates*. Facing it are two blocks square of fenced-in park, its gate forever locked, in summer forever green, in winter mostly gray, enduring thaws. Summer and winter, drunks, locked out, dry out, propped against the iron rails. And facing them, short-sleeved in summer, bundled for wintry blasts, on the porch of the hotel, an old lady stares—at them or at the park or at the distance in between, who can say?—from the wheelchair people prop her in on better days or worse.

"Lonely and airless in my room. A body needs to get out," she says.

Is her name May Belle? May Belle Mapes? A lot of *M* in it anyway and jarring Southern syllabicity. She collects postage stamps and trades with Stubbs and me up in her third-floor room full of books and handy gadgets for crippled girls and tables with jars of pills. A dark room it is, by day or night, where we are allowed to squint through her magnifying glass at an aging copy of the one-penny black. Queen Victoria on the stamp looks a lot like her, especially under the heavy cancellation marks.

She is alone, the lonely lady on that enormous porch, dwarfed by its three-story pillars, more like amicable gnome than dwarf or troll, whimsically decorative rather than frightening. Instantly friendly if you pass the time of day, she fiddles with her wheels and tries to draw some closer to you, sneaky, like some snake transfixing you with rheumy eyes for fear you'll get away. Her smile is a toothless gash but genuine.

Must have been a magnificent structure when there was space to set it off. Yawning doors open to a hall that runs straight through but ends in a blank wall.

The owners' apartment is to the left, behind double doors they never open, blocked with a couch on the other side. Crammed behind these doors are Stubbs, my uncomfortable ally, friendly foe, his mother, nursing her divorce, her parents, nursing their decrepitudes, and Nina, a German shepherd, nurs-

ing her maimed paw and a mysterious and nameless grudge, closest in love and temperament to Stubbs himself.

Stubbs' mother and grandparents talk incessantly about the healthy life they had when they still had the farm, when the country still had a future, and the future was yours to take if you had gumption. "Gumption." That's the way they talk. The whole place is a time warp.

Our fathers, now journeying elsewhere (who knows where?), have made, these displaced farmers seem to say, a succession of logical errors: What does it profit a man to have a family but lose its roots in real estate? To them it is irrelevant that my mother's father was a city man. Her husband's father, my grandfather, sire to dear old F., had lost his land before his son became a man—foreclosed old Granddad was, by his own brother, and condemned to city life—had lost his life as well, at forty-five, renting somebody else's place too near the trolley barn, where insects carry anthrax in the night.

My mother tells the elder Stubbs a farmer's work must balance out the fun, same as with any job. But there is something true about the things they say, for Stubbs and I, indifferent to the talk, are different from one another nonetheless, in just the way their talk implies. I don't know why; it must be in the genes.

Mother says some things certainly are in the genes, and she hopes the worst ones skipped me. That story about a mosquito that carried anthrax is, according to Mother, one Granny Tina made up to hide the true facts. He was dead drunk, fell off the trolley and was run over by one of the wheels—that's as close, Mother says, as any horse's mosquito got to the event. She'll grant that the death certificate says he died of "brain fever," then ask who knows what that is. "Drunks," she says, "it seems to me, get pretty feverish from time to time. Brain fever's just some fancy words to cover up how much he drank." Well, F. showed me the death certificate, and it says quite clearly "brain fever of anthrax," in what looks like the same spidery handwriting all the way through, though the last two words *are* a bit washed out, and harder to read.

I tell her not to worry—I have every intention of avoiding at least one genetic trait by practicing lifelong teetotalism; the sauce won't have a chance with me. "Look how well," I say, "I have suppressed any inheritable country traits! Surely I can do

as well in other ways." And suppress them I certainly have, as Stubbs has not. He spots my city slickness miles away.

The lobby is to the right, great double doors opening on ghostly grandeur, leftover spaciousness, furnished lethargically with people. Listless fans depend from the ceiling, barely disturbing dense and stuffy air. Faces change from time to time; all bodies sag in chairs eternally alike, becoming part of all that's overstuffed. Pale faces and pale hands grow weirdly two-dimensional, white antimacassars lacing a moonlit room.

A table in the corner sports a radio, and here, the Saturday nights of June–July in 1941, I listen to *Your Hit Parade*, volume so low Bea Wain and Barry Wood may barely whisper the lyrics to my ear alone. Except for that, we only go to the lobby when the rent is due or to play the pinball machine, Mother and I, for I am yet too young to play such games alone. "State law," the desk clerk says one time when I try to slip a nickel in and she's not there.

The pinball is at the back, across from the registration desk. From his station there, the lean and gray-haired clerk watches us play, watches Mother, that is, as she plays or stands watching me; he watches her slyly, with what you might almost call a look of yearning, if that word were not too soft for looks so hard. He's worked the desk for years and years, but the Stubbs' have that shrewd country sense of what constitutes character and indicate in subtle ways that they don't fully trust him. For example, he's assigned a room somewhere up on the second floor, the floor otherwise reserved for transients. Part of his job, they say (but there's always another reason than the one they admit to for what they say), to keep an eye on what the guests do as well as an ear out for trouble. "We get some strange ones," the desk clerk responds, with what tries to be an affable smile, passing a handkerchief across his damp forehead. He sweats a lot, but somehow still looks cool in any situation—just like my father, exactly like old F. Except I've never seen F. wipe his brow.

Sometimes, when the desk clerk has been drinking, Grampa Stubbs is raised to mind the desk. And, old as he is, Grampa watches slyly, too, while Mother Stubbs tells him, "There's no fool like an old fool, Grampa Stubbs. Keep your eyes to home!"

She rolls her own eyes and taps her head with doubled fist, muttering, "Nobody home upstairs, I guess."

Then, after a bit, having paused significantly to keep his attention and strengthen the effect, having obviously been thinking out her next line the whole time, she says more pointedly, in the direction of Mother Bliss, "Honey, if I put the English on it like you do, the machine would ring up tilt-tilt-tilt-tilt-tilt!" Five rapid clicks of automatic tongue.

Involuntarily, as it were, Grampa Stubbs' eyes slide back into a glassy stare at Mother Bliss, and a flushed look of victory enlightens Mother Stubbs' broad country face. I stand on one foot or the other looking embarrassed, but Mother goes right on making the bumpers ring up scores.

Still, one time she answers Mother Stubbs, real sudden. Not looking at her and making the bumpers jingle as rhythmically as ever, she says quietly and sweet as the corn the Stubbs once raised, "Maybe it's all that extra weight you throw around. These machines have a fine balance, you know." And Mrs. Stubbs lets Grampa manage on his own a cheerful while.

Ascending at the front of the entry hall is a staircase so impressively steep it gives May Belle Mapes "the palpitations" when, the elevator being on the blink, stout Mrs. Stubbs and the wiry desk clerk help her to descend. Grampa precedes them with May Belle's chair, and she is more afraid he'll injure it than for herself.

"Don't let it get away!" she shrieks, taking her hand from the desk clerk's shoulder to give a little English to it.

Ajax and Hercules tremble together beneath this quaking world, and she grabs the desk clerk's hair, holding on tight until the bottom step. "Goddamn!" his mouth says, soundlessly, and other breathless words, to the back of her head, as he wheels her to the porch, none too gently over the one big step. But she seems unaware, not even to sense the dark cloud which she adorns with a silver lining, the toothless sunshine she lets loose upon the drunk-green vistas straight ahead.

At the back, narrow and careless steps descend, beneath those other, sparkling stairs. This is the approach to our apartment; steps whose head rests at the operable rear door to the Stubbs' domain. They frequently "bump into" us basement dwellers as we enter or leave, engaging us in pleasant, inquisitive conversations about all we do. "Running into you is kind of ac-

cidentally on purpose," they say. "We want you to feel like you're among friends," careful not to note, or they might, how intensely friendly they become " 'long about rent day."

The head of these steps is also across from the back entrance to the lobby, where, by the light of the pinball, the clerk peers brightly out of the dimness. "You'll find it real handy," they tell us when we are first considering living there, "that Mr. Grady, the night man, can keep an eye on things for you." Careful not to add "and an eye on who's going in and out with you."

Perhaps they say such things back then for fear we may not take the place, what with the neighborhood and the misfortunate circumstance, from their point of view, that a drunk happens to wander from park to porch as we are moving in. Certainly they are trying hard to impress us, for they say later that they had a good impression of us, thinking we were, perhaps, down on our luck for a while—"We can see what nice people you are, even in these hard times," Mother Stubbs says at one point. But little they know of what we have or had, hope or hoped; and little, it seems likely, will they ever know.

One of three basement flats becomes ours, as long as we pay them six and a half per week and maybe tip them with abasement now and then.

The first of these apartments, a single room with a Murphy bed, directly below the Stubbs', is home to a small man with brown eyes and what my mother calls a baby face. His face is gentle and has laugh lines at the corners of the eyes, but she sees gentleness as being weak and soft and helpless, the possessor of such a face as someone who's simply not her type. F., one might bear in mind, is over six feet tall and strong, his only gentle feature being his eyes.

The brown of this man's eyes is darker than any brown I've ever seen, warm as a Celtic hearth, and there are flecks of some other color, flecks that shine and seem to move in time to the laughter when he jokes. I watch them knowing his may be the only eyes I'll ever see, now that F. is gone, that laugh like this, that laugh right out loud when he smiles, for no apparent reason but his joy in being wherever he is instead of somewhere else. Mother calls them shifty eyes, but I don't agree, seeing them differently.

F.'s eyes are this laughing brown, and I shall never understand old F., or why he let us go, if I live a hundred years. Maybe

he too is shifty. Don't ask me. And why should Mother and I argue about our neighbor's eyes? Why bring it up at all, knowing she sees what I see and can help no more than I the feelings thus aroused?

This neighbor tells stories, off-color stories I am not supposed to hear, and he is very good at it, because I never hear the necessary parts, close to his telling as I try to be. When everyone laughs at the punch line, I stand there looking puzzled, so they get a second laugh—at my expense—thinking I heard it all and didn't understand. I laugh belatedly and feel my ears turn red. That is the moment when the merry flecks in his brown eyes go dancing up and down.

Stubbs, when he's there, knows what the punch line is, but he pretends to think the whole thing's dumb and won't tell me, even if I offer to do *all* his homework for him. All he tells me is "Mom says that guy should keep away from us and go back home to his own kid if what he wants so bad is to have a son." And I have heard her say it too and watched my mother sadly nod assent. But I have not a single doubt what each of these loving mothers would do to her own husband if he somehow wandered home for the sake of his son while failing to give so much as a thought or a glance to her.

My mother, too, appreciates a bawdy joke, but she will never tell me the punch line either. "If you were old enough to understand," she says, "you'd hear it too. Nothing wrong with your ears that I've ever noticed, except when I'm saying something I want you to hear!"

I think this little man, so proud of his Scotch ancestry ("Straight out of the bottle," both the mothers say)—I think he had a woman in his room one time. I think the desk clerk sweated for a space then coolly told the Stubbs' what he had seen, looking so bright and yearningly from his station. I think that's why the man moved away, leaving a long-term vacancy across the hall from us. At least, I know there was a woman there, a blonde with upswept hair, sneaking the back way out one morning as I come forth to seek the bathroom down the hall and see old lean and gray come popping out the elevator door to stand there staring after her. But I don't *know* if she has come from that apartment; she might have come from anywhere, down the steps from the lobby—even sometime earlier from the elevator, and now on a returning jaunt for all I know. Still, when

the clerk hears me behind him, he turns, and looks past me at our neighbor's door, his eyes as bright as pinball bumpers.

Mother and Stubbs and May Belle never hear a word about it from me, and if they know, they keep their counsel too.

Our place is across the hall, under the front half of the lobby, two rooms, a bedroom and a large sitting room with an alcove for kitchen sink and stove at one end. An old couple have the apartment behind us, a single large room with a fold-out couch for sleeping and a kitchen of sorts stuffed into what was once a closet.

The MacFarlands (we call them "Old Mac" and "Mrs. Mac") are long-time door-to-door salespeople "used to a better life," they say, who go to the Christian Mission Church and stand singing hymns on their weary feet. Never having met anybody busily engaged in living the better life who is ready to be caught dead at the Christian Mission Church, I think they used to be Episcopals like us, before his cuffs got frayed and they got the true religion.

They sell Columbia Desk Encyclopedias, two dollars down and a dollar a week for thirteen weeks (or even fifty cents for twenty-six weeks if a dollar is too much). Mother worked with them on a three-person crew for a couple of weeks—knowing the Macs from that job is how we found the Hampton Hotel—and she was tempted to put two dollars down for me while it still looked as if the rosy commissions they said she'd earn would actually come rolling in.

She barely earns the rent after we make the move from a one-room Murphy-bed dump on Fayette Street, and so when a better job comes through, she takes it and drops the plan of buying an encyclopedia for me—at least I hear no more of that plan. Then, even though she hasn't said a word about buying one for some two months, the Macs are shocked when she gets two dollars ahead and puts it down instead on a forty-dollar Philco radio-phonograph for me.

"Don't you care about his education?" they say. "Can you really think he'll hear anything uplifting on that thing?"

And the wife, sibylline in every inch of her spare frame, tells her, "He'll spend every cent he gets on worthless, sinful records! Doesn't he already waste every Saturday night listening to that

awful music on the radio in the lobby? How can a good woman like you chance sending her child straight to hell?"

I know Mother, and that last sentence, which brings a happy smile to my face, strains hers to the breaking point. "Oh," she says. "Well, I hope I'm bringing him up to take care of himself. If he ends up in hell, and most of us do, one way or another, he better know how to handle it."

Fingering her two dollars as we stand in front of the Philco display at the New York State Fair, August 1941, more than two weeks before my fourteenth birthday, Mother does in fact say, "Of course, if we spend the money this way, I can't buy the encyclopedia for you. This will have to be birthday and Christmas too—and maybe no pinball, no extras at all."

"I know."

"A radio with a record player, but no records—at least not right away," she says. The clerk listens patiently enough, his yellow pencil poised above the contract form.

"I know," I say. And I stare at the wood table model with an "electric eye" tuning feature that "homes in on the signal with incredible accuracy." And I touch the beautiful wood cabinet, never dreaming that in only a few weeks wood cabinets will be gone for the duration and plastic table models without phonograph and without tone, physical or aesthetic, will cost half again as much. "It's up to you," I say.

As she puts the two dollars on the counter and the clerk begins to write, she looks at me through serious, searching eyes. "I suppose they have encyclopedias at school, don't they?"

And I sigh and nod my head, afraid to speak, and use the cuff of my shirt to wipe my careless fingerprint from the glistening, true-grain, waxed and polished wood. I can't bear to look at her; the gratitude would show through, and I am somehow ashamed to be so grateful for something I know in my heart I deserve.

Yet the MacFarlands are right on one count: I shall not hear on this beautiful furniture the most uplifting, or hair-raising, of events ever to bless any radio, for we are in their apartment, sharing a Sunday breakfast, and Mr. M. is looking for their favorite revival program on their antique floor model from the better days when news from Pearl Harbor seems to stop even the eggs from frying.

Mrs. Mac, frail and dry, pinched up, generous and genteel, but stronger than talons her hands, is standing beside me as incredible words fill the air around her with faintness, and she grips my forearm on the instant, a bird on a slender branch resisting ferocious wind. I feel it through a lifetime, her hand on my arm, the sudden hard flash of another person's pain, and I feel its sting in the moments afterwards, after she moves to her husband, weeping, placing her head on his broad chest, letting him nuzzle her hair with his flamboyant nose.

The world falls round us in that time and place, me and Mother and that foolish old dog sniffing his wife, shaking and beginning to cry himself, until they both sit down, and Mother hears the eggs return to life and moves to serve them while I try to lift, incredibly heavy and sore my arm, the plates down from the shelf. A moment of sensation. Mrs. Mac jumps up and runs for the bathroom two floors above, while Old Mac lacking her support just grips the table before him, and listens to his own breathing, and sniffs at cookery aromatics as he had sniffed her hair.

And, oh, he has a nose to carry through this life, so impressive that he always comes to mind nose first, like some poor drowning puppy. The bottom curves adjoining his upper lip have pulled away, become like wings, an effect hardly ethereal, leaving raw red patches on either side. The pores, distinctly visible, are features of a nightmare dream—a dream of walking on MacFarland's nose, enormously breathing below me, little gales of wind surrounding every pore, trying to draw me in, loud little gales, like those near shellholes in a battle movie. Then to wake and hear his breathing through the wall, like a fan whose rhythm traps music in my head. "Oh," I say to noxious, noisome dark. "He's a nice man, good to me. Can't stand him anyway."

The men's bath is down the hall beyond their apartment, past the elevator. Women have to go upstairs. In the mornings, Mother uses a bottle and pours it down the sink because she can't make it upstairs fast enough. She's got a problem. And I go to the second floor myself for showers, because I fear encounters with Old Mac more than with the transients, after I meet him once, as he steps naked and hairy from the basement shower, friendly as if he were wearing a suit and tie. I simply don't feel up to dealing with that on a Saturday night after *Your Hit Parade*. Besides which, the hotel provides the soap, a stinking orange Lifebouy,

like at the city YMCA. I'd rather have the dread B.O. But, as Mother says, "Things could be worse"—sometimes the soap dish in the basement shower holds only grit-gray Lava. Another reason that I use the second floor: the tender skin around the hips.

Back when Wesley coined that phrase about how cleanliness is next to being Godly, a member of his congregation, obviously one who understood things well, replied, "Ah, yes. And next to impossible, too." He may have had prevision of how it is at the Hampton for basement denizens. Grit from the alley between the hotel and the University Club falls on my radio. I have to be careful to put the records away and close the top. It has to be dusted very carefully lest one mar the finish. In fact, everything has to be dusted every afternoon and still looks gritty when Mother gets home from work, no matter how hard I've tried to make it gleam. The china in open cupboards has to be washed before as well as after eating—like brushing teeth. All this I do after school and shopping for the day.

"For supper," Mother writes in businesslike secretary script, "Meat. Bread. Milk. Better get an orange or two—and dry cereal, if there's enough." Beside the note she leaves a dollar bill, and two on Mondays, the second one for tokens to cover the daily passage to and from my suburban school. Counting rent, that's more than thirteen of the total sixteen gone—and one more buck to keep the Philco running. Even on this tight budget, she never looks for change from the morning dollars, thinking I spend it on myself, and maybe even meaning that I should. So she is honestly surprised—a surprise that turns what had seemed to me a matter-of-fact to a puzzled feeling of pride that she is proud of me—to get back twenty dollars, pennies, nickels, and dimes saved in a jar, just in old nick of time for Christmas.

"What with the radio," she says, "we couldn't hope for much of a Christmas. But now we can have a tree—and something to go under it."

Everybody within earshot of the pinball machine that night responds to her story of the unexpected money by telling her that I am truly a good and thrifty son. Except, of course, Stubbs, whose eyes speak words I do not care to see—nor do I listen to whatever name it is he calls me later when he has the chance. Mother notices the look he gives me and says to me, downstairs, behind closed doors, to leave mean-spirited folk alone so their meanness can turn back and work on them.

It fits what is happening with Stubbs well enough, but I know what she's really thinking of. She means Granny Tina, too, and long stories I have heard too many times. So I discourage further talk by nodding, obedient, and saying I'd better trot quickly down the hall, as if I have to go real bad. One way or another, I do have to.

My little hoard of change provides a Christmas tree we set on the high, deep, gritty window ledge—to make the tree seem taller and to hide the alley view. She has had it painted silver, saying she "had to do something special with a tree so small."

Never so taken with a tree, I leave the door ajar one day when the man across the hall is home, just in case he misses Christmas, too, as well as his lonely son. He smiles at me one time, on his way out, and on his way back stops in the doorway to say it's a nice tree and he hopes we'll have a merry Christmas. He stands with his hand on the knob, and I think he may have intended to close the door, but he leaves it open and goes in and out his room more times than usual the rest of the afternoon.

When at last we take it down, late in January, well after Epiphany, the side that faced the window has turned a gritty black. I carry it down the hall and put it in the trash can bright side up because sometimes, in snowy weather, they'll miss the trash pickup several days running, and I don't think I could bear looking on the dark side day after day.

After school, as I wash the dishes, I listen to an endless serial version of *The Rains Came*, a Louis Bromfield novel about India. Then as I dust, there's a strange quiz show that keeps me company, one which consists of Arthur Godfrey asking himself a question, playing recorded music while the listener tries to come up with the answer, then giving us his answer, all low key and serious, musing, almost meditative.

He seems quite different then from the person I see on TV later; I find it difficult to compare the popular "Redhead" personality to this deep, kind, personal radio voice. My score is often perfect, but I do miss some points and believe him smarter than anyone except one teacher at my school. So I grow up awestruck fond of him, the way one is of teachers, kindly tall, dark and brown-eyed, he seems to me, like the man across the hall in everything but height.

Once fully grown, I meet his son at college, but feel too shy

to tell him such a strange truth: I loved your father when I was a boy. The son and I study *Beowulf* together, and I want to put my feeling for his father in the Anglo-Saxon word *umborwesende*, "being yet a boy." But I am always silent when I ought to speak, and now we are all alike, fathers and sons, *ellor hwearfiende*, "journeying somewhere else," the euphemistic way of saying "dead to this world"—like even the Scotsman across the hall in the mind of his lost and lonesome son.

After this network show, I switch to a local station, W-O-L-F, for the news followed by a voice, over Herman's "Woodchopper's Ball," that says, "It's five-oh-five, and time to jive." My little hour at twilight with Liltin' Martha Tilton, Charlie Barnett, Will Bradley, Goodman, Krupa, and (as the announcer always calls him) Mister Woodrow Herman, the woodchopping man himself.

Well, I too feel rather formal toward the ol' Woodchopper, not just for the joke, like the announcer, but for a record I can't believe he made that some sadist on the morning wake-up program plays. An ungodly racket, a woodshed pounding at ablution time:

> He's got the Laughing Boy Blues,
> Keeps him laughing all the time,
> Hoh-ho-ho-hoh,
> Ha-ha-ha-ha,
> He-e-e-e.

And Mother turns it way up loud to get me up, awake and going, and I wish, for just that crazy moment every day, we'd never seen the fair or bought the Philco—throwing my pants on to dash the chilly hall, slamming the door and waking old brown eyes across the hall, not-so-kind of eye in passing on the return trip—while the nose wheezes on behind umbrageous door, and the laughing boy crescendos, gasps, and dies, and all the shuddering place sighs the paralytic wasting sigh of a sleeping old lady trying to roll over, somewhere on the third floor, pills on the tables and tables themselves tipping to rhythmic and strangling laughter. And the lean man in glasses blinks off the lobby lights to wait alone for his relief.

But, five-oh-five.

As I fix the evening salad—lettuce, fruit, cottage cheese—

and start the hamburgers, cooking everything but the noodles (which I cannot learn to cook but want on my plate because I will not eat potatoes), I let the music go wherever it wants. Martha and Benny's trio offer "A Little Kiss at Twilight," perhaps, and Eberle/O'Connor answer they are "Yours, till the stars have no glory!" Or it may be Patti, Maxine, and Laverne telling some Latin lady she's "a sweetheart in a million, O-ho-ho-ho, oh roarer!" Or Harry James may call all close harmonists to order, blowing his way through "Strictly Instrumental," body-ah da! And so on, for the hour (less those first five minutes for the news) until the closing theme, when "Celery Stalks along the Highway" one more time.

I dance around to whatever melody, lettuce weeping on the floor, and I swing the pears down onto the shell of lettuce to the beat of jungle drums. I sing with it when I know the words. And wonder, sometimes, standing still at the astonished thought, why I would be the one embarrassed if someone else walked in.

As, in the fall a year earlier, my first day living at the boarding house, I wonder about the same thing when Mrs. Gruman takes us to the lake to swim. The dressing rooms, even the bathrooms, are closed, locked tight because the season's over, but she tells us boys to change in some nearby bushes. And Bull, still new to me and somehow frighteningly at ease with himself and me, says with a smirk, "You really are em-bare-assed, now, aren't you?"

And I say, "What do you mean?"

He says, "Your ass is bare. Em-bare-assed." He looks at me a moment and then adds, "It's a joke, Sonny. Just a joke."

And I can feel even that part of me begin to turn red. We can both see he has my number. "Till the end of time," a popularization of Chopin. He can punch it out on the jukebox.

Why didn't *he* feel silly, with his so-so pun? Why wasn't I the laughing boy, so we could laugh together? Start wrong, stay wrong, end wrong; that's the truth about a lot of things. We shared a dormitory room at the boarding house that year and still share a school, but we never share a word. It isn't all the embarrassment of that moment, even I could get over that—the set of our beings is just too similar beneath the differences. Stubborn. Intolerant. Not just one of us, you understand; we had to work it out together.

Which is like with me and Stubbs. He has that huge police dog with its game foot, stepped on or shot or something when she was a pup. Was it somebody drunk again? I think so, but it's out of focus in my mind. My age Stubbs is, and his dog too, nearly. She hates people who limp, as if she thinks they mimic her, and May Belle Mapes, who has to roll along, she barely tolerates—all of which may not be the dog's personality so much as Stubbs'. He gets her barking mad by limping around the room imitating her, sometimes on all fours, making her embarrassed, then races her out the door, down the hall onto the porch, straight to May Belle's chair. Old May Belle shakes so I sometimes fear what might happen were her chair not firmly anchored.

Oh how Stubbs loves to see other people color up with shame. Yet nightly, lo, he brings his fat and lazy self downstairs to stand a-rapping on our door after supper, em-bare-assed, saying, "Mom says to help me with this math?" Ending it as question, because he hopes I may say no. I do my own math early, not because I want to, because I know we'll end up in a wrestling match either way I answer. That's what he likes to do much more than math—and since it's not my funeral, I don't mind joining him.

"Want to knock everything galley west?" one of the mothers says. "Use the laundry room, if you've got to wrestle!" And if it's Mrs. Stubbs speaking, she'll add, "Sonny, I thought you were going to help him with his math, not waste his time with foolishness."

So we go down the hall to the room across from the elevator, for we have certainly "got to wrestle." He's Big Stuff at his school, what with his letter in this sport or that and a trophy or two for prowess in wrestling. At the other extreme, here's all this embarrassment with math. It's not my problem, but I can see how the exercise is good for him; he's more alert on the studies after a session, and I've gotten all tensed up myself hurrying through housework and homework to be ready to give him a hand.

Maybe he is, in fact, big stuff, all the way. Who am I, after all, to say? For maybe, being just enough older than I—it only took a month or two to be enough older—maybe he got to the war soon enough to die. Maybe I remember that now and try hard to be fair to the way it was and is and is bound to be from henceforth forevermore.

I do remember Mrs. Mac died and that Mac the nose huffed and puffed away something less than a month later. One day, too, the tables way up there tipped all the way to the floor with no one to set them right again and no one to look after canceled Queen Victoria but unfeeling lawyers who came and took it all away. And where, I wonder, are the kind, brown, lady-loving eyes after these thirty-odd years? Exit, pursued by a bear, says the cryptic bard. Exeunt, Ursa Sequente: they have all gone away from this house, old Dipper-Dapper Death nipping at their heels.

But it is morning, boy, remember? And the song has gasped and died.

An orange, sliced and sprinkled lightly with confectioner's sugar—Double-X, we call it, XX, the pattern on the box—cinnamon sugar toast, Rice Krispies—or PEP, another of Kellogg's finest—with milk, of course. Not coffee yet, can't stand the taste, and cigarettes only in the summer, when away from home. Is the pain in my chest tonight, drifting and dreaming, heartburn from coffee, or cigarettes, or merely my longing for who knows what? Never mind. Laugh, like the pain in some wild clarinet obligato! Listen to that old man's reed.

Old Mac, the nose. Mrs. Mac. The fingers of both their hands, fat or bony, stained as yellow as the leaves of fall. Great orange encyclopedias they carry from door to door on weary feet, he wheezing and leaning on that strong frail cane of a woman, until all of a sudden one day she snaps.

They are nobody I know, really, a passing shadow and a breath of air. Yet she clutches my forearm so hard it hurts, there at the start of the long nightmare of being, all of a sudden and all of a day, all unprepared, embarrassed and awake.

Morning, boy, and a sliced orange, all double-X'd with love and kisses, like a letter from Granny. Her thin brown-spotted hand shakes out two or three words per line in oversized spidery letters, some of them blurred by drops of water. But I have seen her sprinkle an epistle at the ironing board as if to press it, then say, "Oh, dear! They'll think I cried!"

Well, R.I.P., Granny, you had a long run in the big time. We

remember you as you never were for us, the way you were when Grandfather brought you home, some time before we became your darling boys. It's somehow the only picture left: Victorian lady in her high, starched collar, with her high, starched hair and high, starched face. Her blue, blue eyes, sweet and lovely as the song, have turned a kindly brown in an aging brown-tinted portrait photograph—beautiful, serene, and gone.

Oink-oink, old Booger Wooger Death. Have you come round at last to lie with me? And aren't your eyes old woolly brown lustful eyes? Forty-five I have become, and more—been married, childed, stayed innocent, pushing the first valve down, while the music goes down and round, woe-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh—and comes out where? The Lucky Strikes all went to war greener than green and came home white. Innocent. Not harmful. Ignorant as Bliss.

So, they are gone, it is gone, all gone, like the baby's glass of milk—"All gone, Baby. Does him want some more?" (him does want more, much more, but doesn't know how to ask)—and I go with it, all of a sudden one day, sitting uneasy in a morning tub. It is not as they say, "Th-th-th-that's all, folks. There isn't any more." Oh no. For a time, here in me, where I live, there is vast vacancy, no thought at all, not even a blip of some thought to come slipping across the monitor screen.

How long is this space to let? It doesn't matter. Whatever is, whatever was, is wherever I am, another version of forever; it does not go away. Yet in this oblivion itself, what is and was to be for always becomes and goes away at once; itself no longer and no more than I.

All echoes stilled, old pigwiggen me slips beneath water silently, without a squeal—and who the hell is left? My God, my God, why have I forsaken me? And who is this blanched, bleached Palinurus, breathless on an uncouth shore?

He rises, this stranger, all the same, still guileless, speaking through bright blue eyes more than he knows. And yet, though he is I, I am he, there is no going back. A common childhood clicks shut, once meant to last the century out and be/become older than Dick Clark, the All-American Popcan Stand record-holding wizard of old youth.

5

"Obscenity," I say, and instantly the picture disappears. "This film's obscene!" What business is it of theirs, I think, so to expose my moment of terror, the morning when I had to call for help?

"Invasion of privacy!"

A reel spins empty somewhere behind me. But no other sound responds to my complaint. The screen looms gray and foglike before me. All else is dark except the projectionist's little square up there in the darkness behind me, until they start the film again.

George F. Wedge Home Movie

(Shanghai c. 1933)

Your mother moves through flowers I cannot
identify, white blurs on slender stems.
The awkward movements early films impose
disguise what curving arcs of her white dress
reveal—her young and lively gracefulness.
She stops beside the image that is you,
as then you were, smiling the way she always will,
in all the photographs through all the years,
secure and happy, through good days and bad,
because the family is, because of each of you,
because her youngest stands beside her there,
laughing among those flowers I cannot identify.

George F. Wedge

A Singular Failure to Say Good-Bye

The summer I was five, your long legs walked me on
Sunday ice cream afternoons through half-pint cones.

When I was eight, you drank too much at the picnic
and wrenched your back playing at Tarzan-up-a-tree.

When I was nine, my birthday cake cooled on a sill
you sat on, staining your pants all chocolate and wax.

When I was ten, you worked in another city,
sending me postcards when it crossed your mind.

Then Mother left us at your mother's house,
saying hell would freeze over pretty soon.

She skated back when I was twelve to take me too,
and knowing how you hated fuss, I packed my bags.

At fifty-three, I don't pretend to understand,
and you in the grave so long, why it still bothers me.

George F. Wedge October

I

And so to sleep. They have untimely lent
this rosiness of cheek, this softened nasal glow,
to features that were ever angrier and more remote
as years went by; my father now has waxed

beyond recovery. People he loved,
who love, stoop to kiss this effigy,
looking at me in doubt, who have no doubt,
saying, "I never knew he had a son."

No need for programs, folks, the fact
stands written on my face. Read silently
and leave these dead in peace, at last beyond
the need for even their mute communion.

The kiss you long to witness, he alive
rejected, could not understand, for men shake hands.
He'd have another fault to find in son and fatherhood,
such as they were, and now will ever be, world without end.

II

In military rite, it all devolves upon the son,
who stands attentive while men fold the flag,
and takes it in his arms to carry on.
With tearless eyes I am, self-consciously asleep,

numb matter filling space, while other's eyes
grow dim, perceiving such a man as once he was
receive tradition with his calm, his stoic stance;
yet one is here who grew up in his other house

some other people's son unrecognized (in fact
or by convention, as you will) on whom it weighs
and trust deserves and knows the ground and will return
geraniums in springtime for the grave.

III

His brother stands beside me like a rock,
loving him more than all, perceives my ache
and steadies father, son as pulleys aid descent
to join us somehow through the dirt that falls like rain.

George F. Wedge

Three Monologues from "Doing Time"

1: Homecoming Wife

When I got home today,
there was only me to pay the babysitter.
The children were asleep.
I wanted to wake them, hug them, tell them
you are gone away a while
and will come back again before they're grown
more than a little more.

Instead, I picked up toys left lying around,
finding not a thing of yours—
you must have looked ahead, thoughtful of me,
to be as neat as that!
Made myself some coffee, shaking in salt
the way I only do for you.

Now they're awake themselves and asking me
where are you?

I just sit here, elbows on table
reading the paper like I always do,
sipping your salty coffee.
Where have we got to, you and I, so quick,
that going on seems meaningless,
your time in jail so final,
and this empty day a burden I cannot put down?

2: Victim

How can I tell him
what you did to me the day he went to prison?
No words put it right—him all alone in there, trusting me.

What made you think I wanted you at all?
We three good friends so long!
Knocking on the door for coffee and a smoke,
"Like usual," you say,
telling me how sorry you are it's happened,
hand on my shoulder and all—

And me, then, like an animal, clawing and biting,
saying, "Oh, no! Not this! Not now!"
But you don't care at all, laughing at me.
"Not now, baby? Then when?"
Pushing at me, grabbing hold of my hands,
making me hurt.

Oh, you're sorry all right.
The sorriest sight I've ever seen.
How can I tell him what you've taken away?
I know I could have managed
if you'd let me have one night all to myself
before the longing started.

3: Teenager

When I was still a kid,
I mean real little, shopping with my mom,
I stole a car she didn't know about
and stuffed it in my pocket,
fingered it all the way home, in secret,
like I knew already it was wrong.
Then, later, playing in the snow outside,
I saw Dad coming home,
and asked him could he keep a secret.
He said, "That depends," as if he understood,
and helped me talk to Mom and take it back.
And I've felt good about it ever since.

So why did he have to go and spoil everything?
What do I say whenever he gets out?
"Hi, Dad. It's good to have you home?
We missed you lots while I was growing up?"

I hope it's long enough so I'm not here!
I mean, we shared things—we were pals.
I told him things I thought he understood
and he was fooling me. So I don't know.
He can't have trusted me so much
never to say a word when he felt bad,
then go and leave us in a hole like this.

Who can I tell the things guys say at school?
Some of the teachers get so mad for doing nothing.
Debbie walks home from school another way,
and Petey's folks won't let us be best friends.

To tell the truth, if he were here right now,
The only thing I'd say is "Who needs you?"
Okay. It's rotten. That's the way I feel.

DeWitt Henry Odd

The oddest adult in my suburban Philadelphia childhood was a retired prizefighter, a man blinded in the ring, but someone who had had a serious career and earned a fortune, so that he lived with his sister and his German wolfhounds in a forty- or fifty-room mansion that we, my friends and I and other schoolchildren, passed each day walking to and from school.

For me, the walk home each afternoon was one mile, the length of Midland Avenue from Louella, past the single-floor "modern" house with picture windows on the right, past the Catholic school where tough kids hung out, past Bob Teal's house on the left (his father, Mr. Teal, was the high school music teacher and band leader, and Bob's two older sisters were cheerleaders), then the long uphill block to St. David's Avenue. Mostly I walked with Dale Wilson, who lived in the new apartments on the corner of St. David's Avenue and Lancaster Pike; we walked, careful not to step on sidewalk cracks, and talked about how babies arrived. Dale had the idea that it had something to do with "fucking," but I disagreed, horrified at the idea, and said what my mother had said, which was that when a man and woman loved each other and were together for a while, then a baby happened. We were ten. 1952. TV was still a luxury. At school we practiced air raid drills in basement hallways lined with civil defense boxes and canisters. At home, one of my favorite toys was a model of a B-52 bomber that released an atomic bomb when I pushed a button on top.

There were kids, other ages, who walked the same street, and the legend had spread that halfway up the long uphill block was the house where this retired fighter lived, who loved kids. That any afternoon if you braved the white gate between the solid bank of hedges and pine trees that sheltered the view of his home from the street; if you ventured up his strange front walk to the wooden porch; if you braved the first floor windows flanking the front door; if you rang the button bell and had the nerve to wait, as if for trick or treat—first, there would be the

dogs barking, throaty woofs muffled by the house, then, perhaps, a woman's voice:

"Quiet! Quiet! Just a minute, I'm coming."

And the sounds of her presence, a blurred face peering, the unlocking and opening of the oak front door into a paneled vestibule.

Dale had done it twice before he told me. Other kids had taken him. As we came up the hill, he urged me to try; did I want a candy bar or not? For that was the prize.

The lady who answered would be gray-haired, tall, formally dressed. She would materialize before you, questioning, as if she had no idea: "Yes?"

And you would say that you had heard that the man here liked to meet children.

And she would answer, "Yes, yes, just a minute."

Perhaps from the strange depths of the inner hall and the house's reaches and darkness, a deeper, gravelly man's voice would be calling: "Sonja. Sonja? Who is it? Who's there?"

"It's some children!" she would call. And then to you: "Just a minute. He'll want to meet you."

There would be a shuffling behind her and this man, casually dressed, a handsome man larger than any father, broad shouldered, broad faced, wearing slacks and an ascot and with neatly combed white hair, would emerge, and she would make way. You would be scared but at the same time fascinated to look: the face, the eyes, the blank, cloudy, unseeing eyes. The face handsome otherwise, like Wallace Beery's, the actor, or like Ralph Bellamy's; an educated and distinguished face. And he would be tapping with his cane and groping forward.

"Hello," he'd say. "Are these the children?" And then to you, "Hello," he'd say to space, the space where you, the unknown, waited. "What's your name? How many, two? What are your names?"

And you might find the nerve to answer, or your friend might; for no kid would ever try this alone, except for maybe Shaner, the older kid who had first brought Dale here, and from whom, perhaps, the man's rumored history had begun. Whatever first had led Shaner here, a meeting on the street, some door-to-door solicitation, Shaner had had the nerve to ask: How did you get blinded? In the ring, the man answered. Perhaps

Shaner had been inside. Were there trophies inside? Pictures on the walls? Clippings in a scrapbook? How did we know the lady to be the man's sister?

"Have you been here before?" the man would ask.

"No, never. Just some kids told us we should stop and ring the bell."

"That's right," the man says. And then: "And you? What's your name?"

"Dee," I say uncertainly, for I *am* there; but at the same time I relax, because so far this all seems rehearsed, a customary thing, and going just the way that Dale has said.

"Tell me some things you like to do," the man says. "Do you like sports?"

"Football."

"Hmmm," he says. "You an Eagles fan?"

"Sure am," I lie.

"What are your favorite subjects in school?"

I say art. Dale says math.

"Hmmm. Here's a riddle for you. Let's see: What goes up the chimney down, but can't go down the chimney up?" He turns his face expectantly from one of us to the other.

I have heard the riddle before, but never really understood the answer.

"C'mon, guess. You've heard this one."

"Santa? I don't know."

He chuckled. "An umbrella."

Dale and I look at each other.

He smiles broadly. "You're good children. I can tell," he congratulates us. "Can I feel your faces?"

I stand confused, for Dale has never mentioned this, but I can't refuse, or probably the man won't give us the candy. So I let him touch, his coarse fighter's fingers drifting delicately over my features.

A lifetime later, that blind man's gentle, rapid touch, searching my features, haunts my imagination. Dismissing any suggestion of perversion (as our parents must have dismissed it then), I have come to think that for him the touch was redemptive.

Perhaps sixty at the time, he must have fought as a young man some thirty years before, in the era if not that of Gentleman

Jim Corbett, then that of Jack Dempsey, Gene Tunney, and the Frenchman Georges Carpentier, and those very hands, as fists, had beaten men senseless, scores of men, men who had been intent, too, on battering him unconscious, all for the diversion of thousands of fans in echoing, smoky arenas, on from the 1920s into the Depression years.

I try to imagine such a man's life. Whether his wealth was partly inherited and he had come from a privileged background (and if so, what had driven him to fight, what buried rage, or what further need to prove his superiority against those who challenged it in physical, rather than in social terms). Whether he had gone to a private men's academy, like my older brothers, and started boxing in school; then had gone on to college at some place like Yale, Cornell, or Princeton, and boxed there. Had moved from school to amateur bouts, had turned professional and worked his way through ranks of street pugs and men from backgrounds that offered no means for livelihood or gain but this, men fighting for survival and advancement.

Or whether he himself had been poor. Had never been to college. Had labored and battled and suffered like the prizefighters in Hollywood films. Had from teens through his twenties battled not only opponents' fists, but also the greed of gamblers, managers, molls, and promoters. Had had the sense to save and invest his winnings. And then what fight had ended his career? Perhaps he hadn't been blinded in the ring at all. Perhaps some gangsters had blinded him.

Somehow, I imagine, his money had cost not only his eyes but also his dignity; that he felt some shame for his past. Perhaps in years of bitterness he had come to reflect on the squalor of violence. On the savageness of man.

He was a man without a wife and children. The house and grounds, in our town, must have been worth $60 or $70 thousand at the time—hardly an estate, but evidence of respectable fortune. He and his sister lived reclusively so far as we could tell. Why had they moved here, and when? Where was romance in his life? Had he lost a woman? What was his sister's story?

Perhaps they traveled regularly to Europe. He must have books in braille, but otherwise little business in his day, little to amuse him. There he sits, listening to the radio, or to the phonograph. Perhaps he listens to recorded plays. Perhaps his sister reads to him.

For myself, I am troubled by the ugliness. Not the ugliness of his sightless gaze or searching touch; not the violence he had caused and suffered; not his adult pathos and mystery, all of which he exposed to us in his need. But by my own ugliness of submitting there to the oddness so that I could get my candy bar and escape.

"You are good children," he repeats. "Here is a candy bar for each of you." He gropes back into the hall. The sister has vanished. There is some sort of basket, and he offers me my choice. A Hershey's? Or a Clark Bar? Or a Mounds? I ask for the Clark. Dale takes the Hershey's. "Wait," he says, "you're such good kids. I can tell. Let me give you each two."

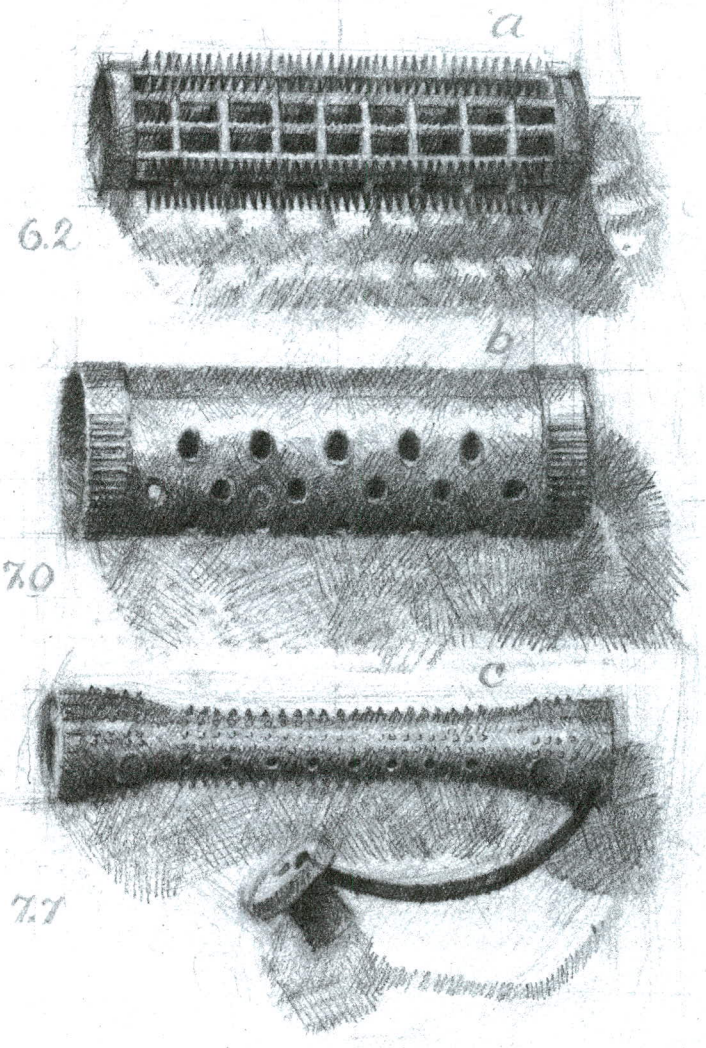
He does, both Hershey's this time.

"Now you come again. Come back again!" he says, shaking our hands. Patting our shoulders. Then releasing us with a wave and smile into nothingness.

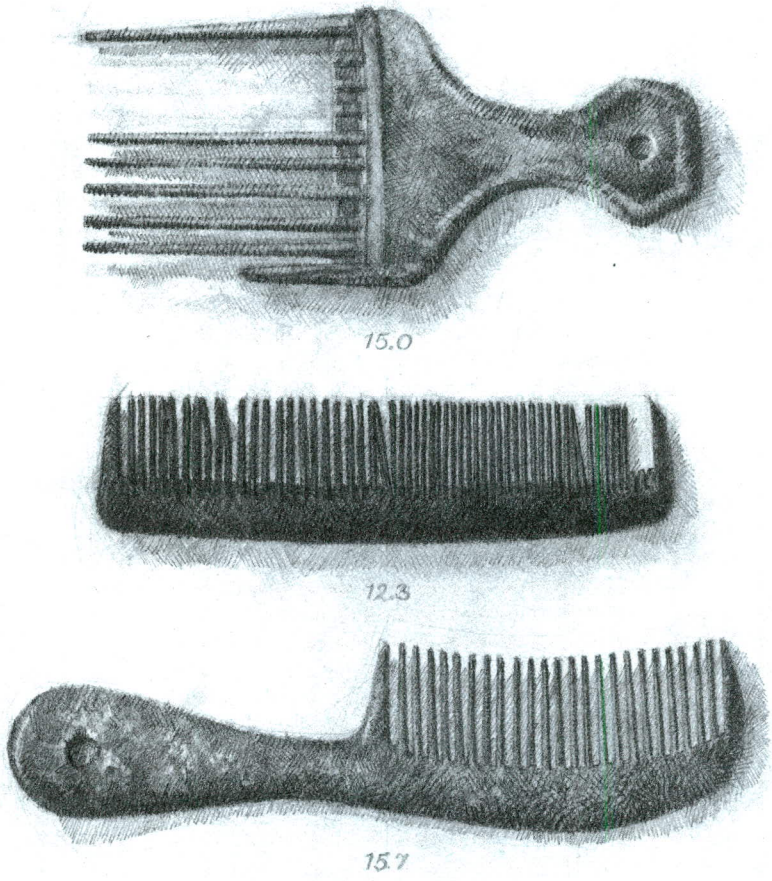
"Come again."

We never do, or at least I don't, though I do tell some other kids. And later, other times, when my mother drives me on this street from school, or on our way to or from errands and shopping, I would see him sometimes from the car. He'd be out walking, with his cane, and wearing his dark glasses, his arm in his sister's, and the two wolfhounds straining on leashes. He would be dressed dapperly, scarf, cap, overcoat.

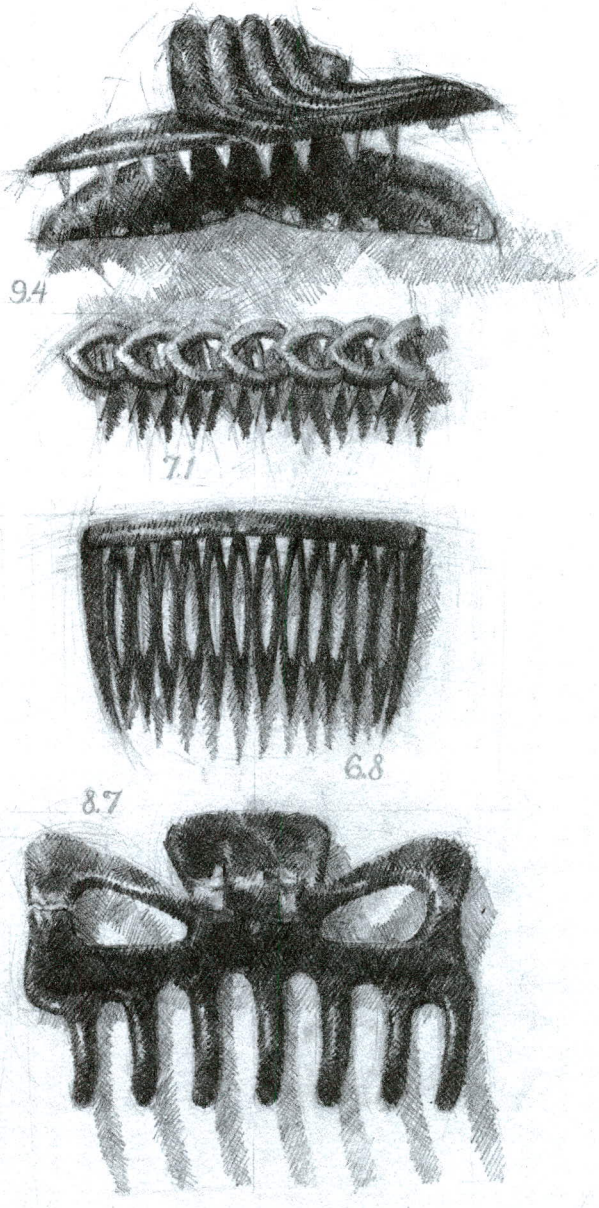
Charms, 1990~1999



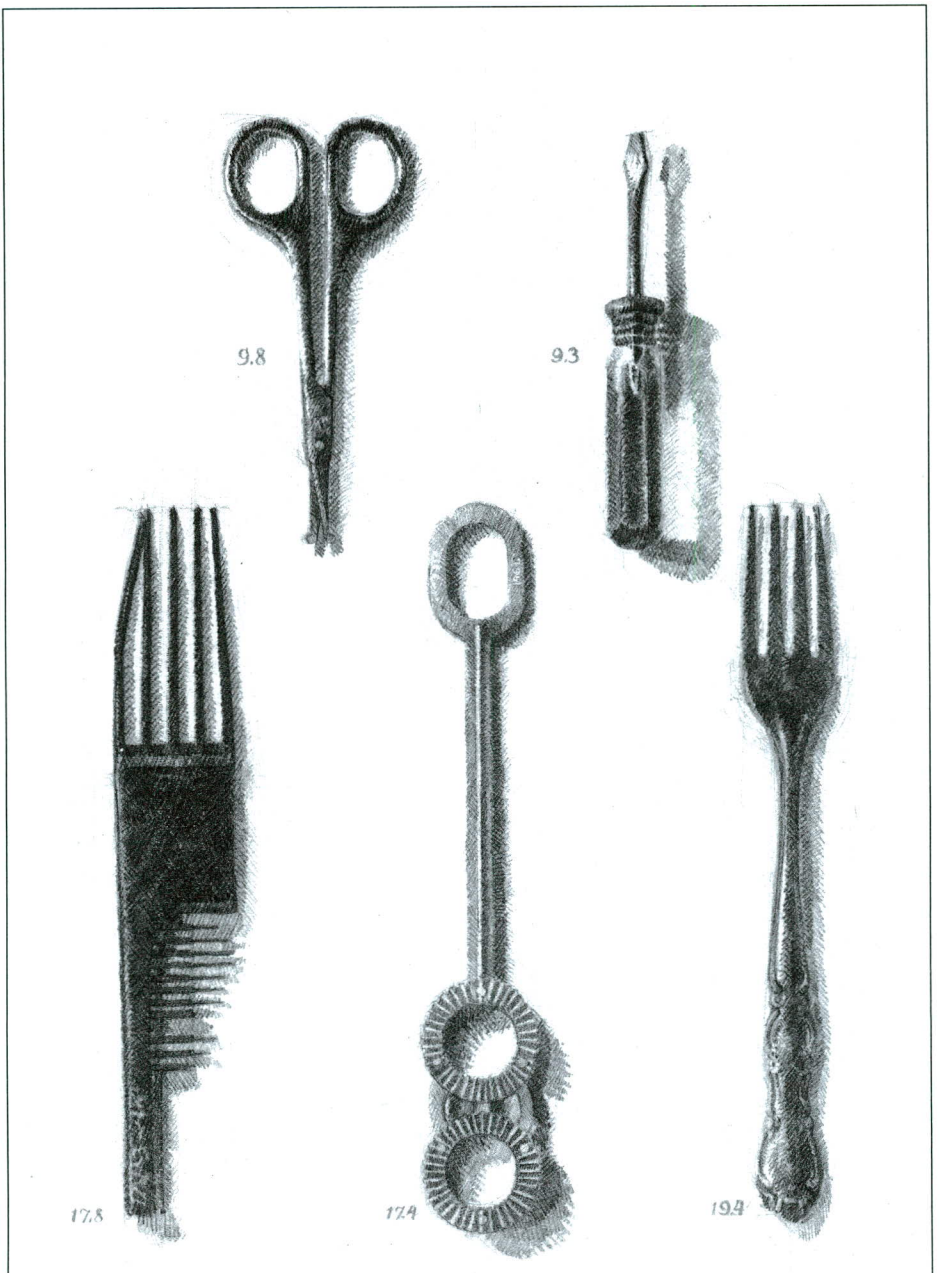
Vanity Items, L20thC



Grooming Devices, c 2000

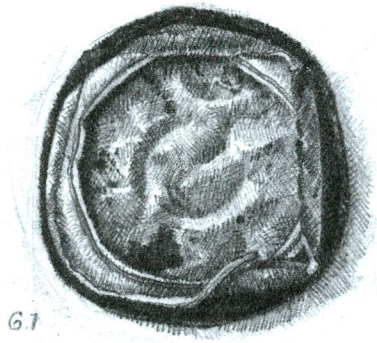


Traps & Snares, c2000



Hand Tools, c 2000

Hollowware, c 2000



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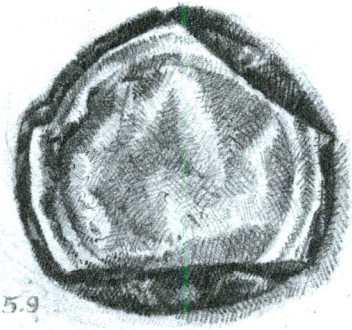

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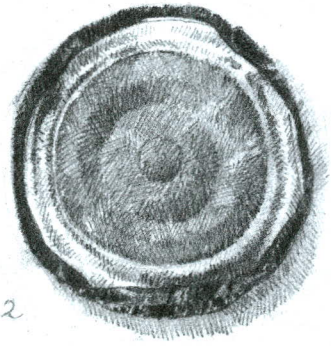

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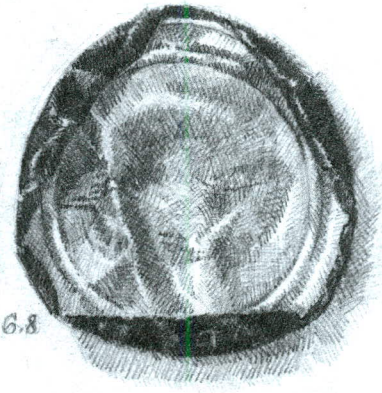

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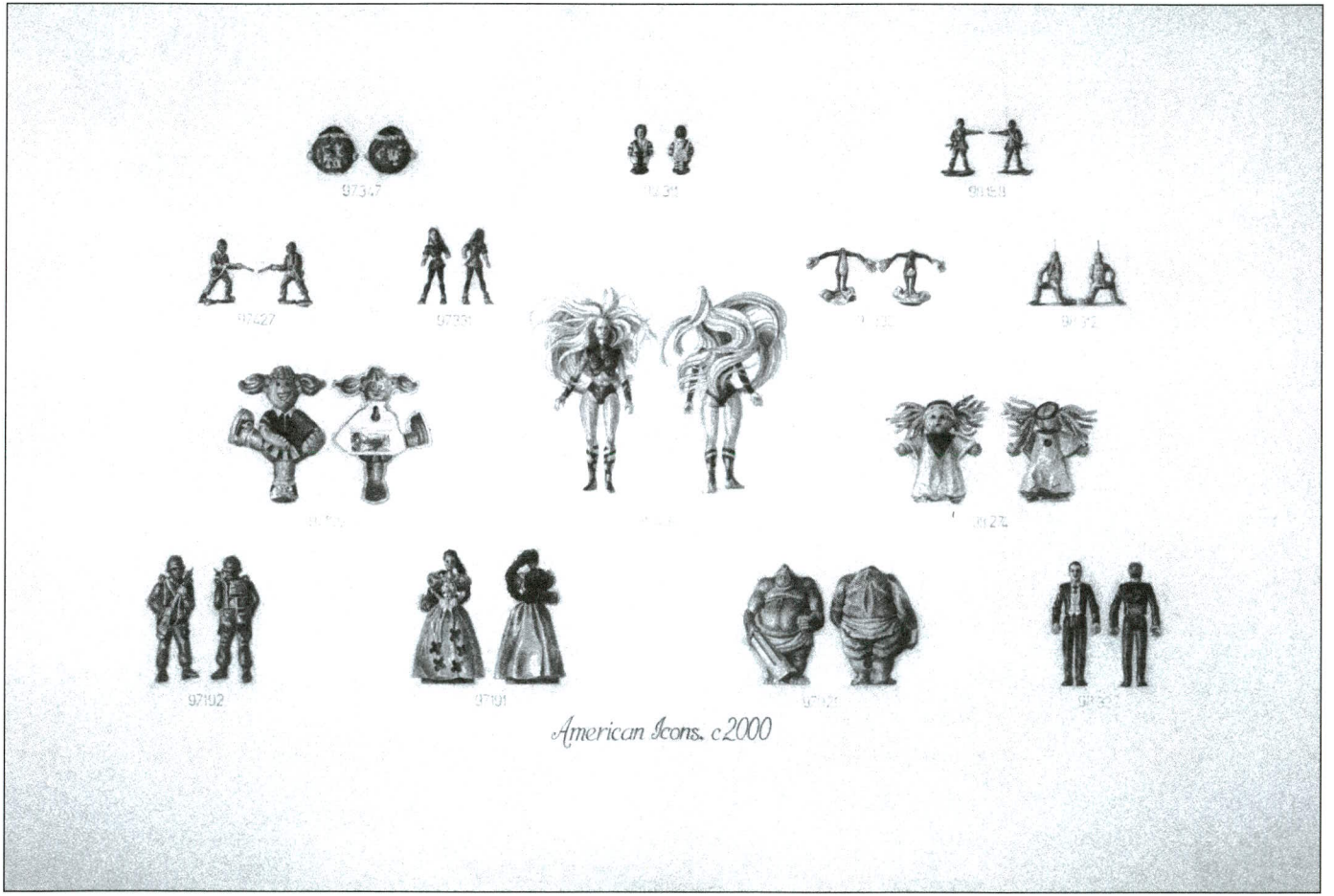
Medallions ~ large, L20th C.



American Icons. c2000

Sculpture Below the Slope

In the barren bowl of a wash the remains
of a white and black cow cure and bleach.
The herder dragged her here, the chain
bumping along when the body caught on
the stones. The rib cage holds up a drape
of stiff hide, the robe she wore for all
her years, annual calf nuzzling her warm
flank to start the milk funneling down
his dark throat: meat to meat, bone
to bone, returning in this bowl of
a wash, stark assemblage under a wide sky.

Walt McDonald

The Peace of Wild Things

What a tangible truce we manage,
forty yards downhill from bighorn rams.
They stare, then go back to grazing

a slope we stumbled up. If they know
binoculars from shotguns,
if we keep our distance downhill,

they'll stay. But if we're rude
or ignorant, if we climb too close
or above them, they'll tremble and stomp,

butting curved horns at the sky.
If we cross some Maginot line
sheep wear like hoop skirts around them,

they'll buck, escaping uphill
if they can, or charge us both head-on
or die trying, their black eyes big as fists.

Walt McDonald First View of the Enemy

We watched the old men whittling in the park,
legs wide apart, stiff knees all that saved them
from knife fights. Who ever heard such quarrels—
war stories, politics, and God. Grandpa
in overalls cocked his head and scowled,
and Uncle Carl tossed fists of shavings like confetti.

Earl and I raced a block to cigar stores and back
with coins they tossed, candy for us if we hurried.
Legs crossed on the ground, we sucked jawbreakers
and heard amazing tales of Germans they shot,
a town in Flanders where laughing, bare-legged girls
crushed purple grapes and danced. Grandpa and Carl

carved blocks of wood into piccolos
and birds, hats tugged tight to their ears,
their staring eyes. Trembling, they jabbed their knives
and shouted to make a point, autumn almost gone,
cursing and dribbling spit, while mothers watched
toddlers kicking the brittle leaves.

Karl Woelz

It Will Be Hot All Over Texas

The morning's dishes cleaned and returned to their cupboards, the yard man instructed to trim the front ground cover, and a call to the Goodwill collections office taken care of, Meredith quick-touches the four buttons of the alarm pad, pulls shut behind her the door from the utility room to the garage, and activates the electric door opener. She buckles herself into the Explorer and backs slowly out of the garage. She waits, keeping the car motionless on the driveway until the garage door slides to a stop, and then backs out onto the tree-lined street that, after a succession of subtle curves and inclines, will feed her into one of the main multilaned arteries of the city.

Traffic is fairly light, the lunch crowd having returned to their offices. She stops at the dry cleaners to drop off Gary's suits and then drives around, aimless. She considers, then dismisses, a trip to the post office. She moves the vehicle across town, heading south, then west, then north once again. A bodiless voice from the radio speaks of American jurisprudence, the fate of central Europe, a tropical depression in the Gulf.

Meredith regards the pale cloudless sky. Beyond the controlled environment of her gray metal box, she knows that it is hot, the white disk of sun above beating down, without discrimination, on everything around her.

She's already passed the shopping center with the new bookstore in it when she remembers her nephew's birthday; the books his mother has told her that he wants. She continues to the next exit, leaves the highway, then drives back to the turnaround that puts her on the frontage road to the shopping center's vast, blacktopped parking lot.

It's even hotter than she thought. She can feel her blouse sticking to the skin at the small of her back as she walks from the car to the smoked glass doors of the bookstore. Inside, it is cool, and her eyes take a few seconds to adjust to the softer light. She has been here only once before; unsure of the layout, she checks the store's directory and heads to the children's section at the rear of the building.

She finds the books with no trouble, a boxed set of novels about a group of children who stumble into magical worlds beyond the dark wooden back of their closet. She remembers reading them herself many years ago. Though the stories are fuzzy in her mind, she can recall the sense of wonder, of excitement, in having them read to her in the classroom, and then later, reading them alone, draped across the multistriped beanbag chair in her bedroom. She thinks of herself, for a moment, the ponytailed girl in plaid pinafores and Brownie uniforms; barrettes and pressed-metal lunch boxes; hopscotch and jump rope and jacks; boys in noisy, dirt-smudged groups like aliens from some other, scruffier planet. How long ago it seems, she thinks, like another century.

Meredith considers a list of errands that could be run, but none are pressing, and so, rather than returning home, she decides to stay in the bookstore. There's a café upstairs. She'll buy a magazine, she thinks, or perhaps even a book, and sit and read while she drinks a cup of coffee or a cappuccino.

Her purchases made, Meredith climbs the short flight of stairs to the café, which looks out over the main floor of the store. She buys her coffee and sits at a small table for two against the wall of the building, away from the distraction of the seats next to the railing.

She registers the presence of a man sitting at the table next to the table next to hers, but does not turn to look at him. After a few minutes, she takes a sip of her coffee, turning her head to look casually around the café, and notices that the man is staring off into space. He's quite handsome, she thinks. Dark hair, just touching the top of his collar, and fairly broad shoulders. Big ringless hands, yet fingers nicely shaped and somehow graceful. His blue and white plaid shirt obviously hasn't been ironed, but he still looks tidy. She wonders what he's thinking about, what commands his attention. She returns to her magazine.

She's bringing the thick paper cup to her lips while turning one of the glossy, perfume-scented pages of the magazine, mind focused on neither motion, when some coffee splashes onto the page in front of her. "Shit," she mutters, scooting her chair back as she looks down at her blouse. She stands, looking back to the service counter for a napkin dispenser.

"Here," a deep voice calls to her. "Miss? Here."

Even though she knows that it must be the man in the plaid

shirt, Meredith is still surprised to look down and see him holding out his hand to her, a white paper napkin emblazoned with the bookstore's logo held between two fingers.

"Did you get any on yourself?" he asks, moving his fingers up and down so that the napkin seems to be waving at her.

"No," she says. "Just the magazine, I think." She takes the napkin from his outstretched hand. "Thank you," she says, nodding her head in gratitude.

"Here," he says. "Let me get you another one." And before she can respond, the man is up and walking over to the service counter, pulling several napkins from the shiny metal container. The seat and legs of his khaki pants are slightly crumpled, and even though the pants are not snug, Meredith can see the solidness of his rear, of his legs. She imagines, for a moment, what he must look like in shorts, the power of those legs in quick motion.

"Thank you so much," Meredith says when he's returned and handed her a small stack of napkins. "You really didn't have to. Thank you."

"No big deal," he says. "Besides," he continues, pointing at a small oval stain midway down his shirt, "I did the same thing."

Meredith smiles, as does the man, who's now seated himself at the table beside her. "Do you mind?" he asks, making a vague up-and-down hand gesture at himself seated so close to her.

"No, not at all," she replies, wondering if this is the right thing to say, if she shouldn't be picking up her things and leaving. Is it bookstores or museums, or both, that are supposed to be universal pickup joints? She can't remember.

"I'm Gavin," the man says, offering her his hand.

She takes his hand firmly into her own. His palm is rough to the touch, but surprisingly warm.

"Meredith," she says. "Meredith Conner."

"Nice to meet you, Meredith. Mrs. Conner," the man replies, letting go of her hand and reaching over to retrieve his own cup of coffee.

She looks down at her hand, at the thin gold band and glittering stone on her finger. Maybe he has a thing for married women, she thinks. Or is this his way of letting me know he's not a threat? The occasional glance from a man in another car at a traffic light or in line at the dry cleaners aside, she can't re-

member the last time another man looked at her, at least not like this man is looking at her, without any trace of evaluation or calculation or conceit. He's simply looking at her, smiling.

"You're *not* married," Meredith says, her inflection caught somewhere between question and declaration.

"No," the man says, shaking his head, his lips forming the slightest of smiles while his eyes look at her as if she has missed something he thought she understood. "Not the marrying kind."

Meredith directs her attention to her coffee cup, raising it carefully to her mouth before sipping from it. They are silent for a moment, the store humming quietly around them.

"Do you come here often?" she asks, knowing that's it's stupid, like something out of a bad late-night movie, but unable to think of anything else to say.

He laughs softly. "No, it's my first time. Be gentle," he whispers conspiratorially.

With some other man, any other man, Meredith thinks, she would be appalled. But not this one. She laughs.

"I'm just visiting," he says. "I don't live here. I used to, years ago. But not anymore.

"Where do you live now?"

"I live in Denver."

"Oh, that must be very nice."

"It is, yes. A very pretty city. I've been there a couple years."

"Did your work take you there?"

"Kind of. I'm self-employed," he explains. "I do flowers."

"Flowers?" Meredith asks, trying to picture this broad-shouldered man amid baskets of roses and gladiolas, hothouse irises and tiger lilies, buckets and bundles of daffodils and tulips and Queen Anne's lace.

"For luxury hotels," he says. "In-house arrangements, special events, catering, things like that."

"I see."

"I love Texas, it's home and everything, but I needed a change of pace. A change of scenery. So I went to the mountains. Something different from all this flatness."

"I can understand that." Meredith smiles. "I'm from Virginia originally. My husband's work brought us here."

"And what does he do, your husband?"

"He's a lawyer. Commercial real estate."

"Well, no better place for it, I suppose.

They smile at one another, both reaching for their cups of cooling coffee. Again, silence falls between them.

"I'm sorry for breaking your concentration like that," Meredith says.

"Pardon me?"

"You were thinking about something," she continues, feeling foolish, now, for having let this stranger know that she'd been aware of him, had been looking at him, perhaps even studying him. "Before I spilled my coffee. You seemed lost in thought," she says, wondering how she'll be able to dig herself out of the conversational pit she seems to have fallen into. I don't know how to do this anymore, she thinks. How do I talk to this man?

"I was thinking about a friend," he tells her.

"Oh."

"A sick friend," he says, pausing for a moment. "An old friend who's not well."

Meredith watches his face, the way his eyes seem to be asking her to make a connection just beyond her reach. A sick friend, she thinks, looking into the man's light green eyes, which she sees now are slightly, just slightly, red. As if he hadn't had enough sleep. A friend who's not well, she thinks, a blush rising to her cheeks as she begins to see what the eyes are telling her. As if she can see, reflected in those light green lenses, their color dulled by red, tired veins, the image of a body, pallid and shrunken, lost in the white-sheeted expanse of a metal-framed hospital bed.

She holds the man's gaze, certain that he has understood, then looks away, feeling foolish, she hopes, for the last time this day.

"I'm sorry," she says, returning her eyes to his face, stifling the impulse to reach out and touch his arm or his leg, to make some kind of contact.

He smiles. "That's nice of you. Thank you."

"Is your friend," she says, unsure if she has been invited to step over some kind of invisible line, "is he in the hospital?"

"He was. He got out two days ago. The day after I arrived."

"Oh, well that's good, then."

"Yes, it's good to see him out of that bed," the man says, looking down into his cup. "Miraculous, really." He stops for a

moment, looks up but not at Meredith's face. "I mean, he's practically *dead* when this mutual friend, the friend who introduced us years ago, he calls to ask if maybe I could come down, that maybe now was the time, and I say yes. Of course. And by the time I get here two days later he's up and moving and the doctors are saying it's remarkable. Unbelievable. And our mutual friend says, 'It was the news that you were coming. *At that point,*' he says to me, 'at that point he started to get better.'"

He stops again, then turns to look Meredith in the face. "This is too much, I'm thinking. Too much. This kind of thing just doesn't happen—unless it's someone talking on one of those televangelist shows with the cubic zirconia chandelier and the woman in the gingham evening dress and the lavender hair. Right?"

Meredith says nothing.

"Has this ever happened to you?"

"No," she says. "Never."

"No," he says. "This kind of thing doesn't happen."

They are silent, again, and then he says, suddenly, nodding at the paper bag on Meredith's table. "What did you buy? If that's not too personal a question," he adds, lowering his voice, as if a return to his conspirator's whisper might clear the thickish air that hangs between them.

"This?" Meredith says, reaching for the bag and then pulling out the shrink-wrapped box of books. "This is for my nephew. It's his birthday."

"Oh, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*," Gavin says, smiling again. "I seem to remember reading that about a hundred years ago. Third grade? Fourth grade?"

"Me, too," Meredith says. "Sometime in the last millennium. I don't read much anymore, though."

"Me, either. There always seems to be something more pressing and grown up demanding my attention. Cocktail parties. Tax forms. Failed romances. Saving the planet from ignorance and stupidity. You know: Big Kid Stuff. Can I get you some more coffee?"

"No. Thank you. Will your friend," Meredith hesitates. "Will your friend be all right?"

"I doubt it. No."

"I'm sorry. I—"

"Has anyone ever loved you so completely, so thoroughly,

that you just didn't know what to do with it, with the knowledge of that love?"

"What?"

"I'm sorry," Gavin says, shaking his head, blushing. "That's so rude, to pry like that."

"No," Meredith says. "That's all right, don't be—"

"It's my friend. It's just—it's just that—well, why not just come right out and ask the things you want answers to?"

Meredith looks at the man beside her, still tidy though his clothes are unironed, still alert although his eyes are red, still in control despite the panic she can now see behind those light green lenses, as if she's been allowed some power of vision that makes clear to her the tumult, like a summer storm beginning to stir waves to whiteness, inside this stranger's head.

"Have you been loved like that?" Gavin asks.

"No." Meredith shakes her head, feeling a stab of betrayal, feeling the ghost-presence of her husband's familiar frame pressed against her flesh even as she says, "I don't think I ever have."

There had been a boy in college, she remembers. Blond. Stocky. Round, wire-framed glasses and jeans that were always too tight, though not entirely unflattering. He had loved her, she supposed, wildly, beyond reason. They'd probably call it stalking today. She'd talked to him in the library, exchanged pleasantries in the hall between classes; nothing more than that. And then it seemed he was everywhere she went, always visible out of the corner of her eye. Flowers with unsigned cards began to arrive at the dormitory check-in desk. And there were telephone calls, late in the evening, no voice on the other end of the line, no heavy breathing. Nothing.

Finally, there had been police one night. She can't even remember the incident now; certainly nothing memorable, nothing scarring. But she can see the boy being pulled away by the campus security guards, shoulders slumped, turning to look back at her, his face pinched neither in anger nor contempt but in sadness, a kind of despair in his eyes, as if he was being slowly drained of the only thing from which he gained sustenance. She thinks, now, about the scope of his desire, the seeming boundlessness of his feeling for her. But that's not love, she thinks. That's delusion, desperation, disconnection from reality.

And yet she feels, now, a certain sorrow, as if years after the

fact, years too late, she has a share in his loss. She realizes, then, that Gavin is speaking, has been talking all the while, and that she has no idea what he's been saying.

"And I'm taking care of him," he says. "Or what passes for it. Sitting and talking and holding his hand and getting tissues and water and whatever he needs. Helping him to the bathroom like he's some kind of old man. This kind of stuff, you know, which doesn't really feel like a lot to me. Inconsequential. Just little stuff, it seems."

"But he wouldn't be able to do those things if you weren't there," Meredith says, rejoining the conversation, staking her ground. "Not without difficulty. You're making things easier for him. You shouldn't discount that."

"You think? It's just that I feel like a candy-striper when I want to be Florence Nightingale or Marcus Welby or something. But maybe you're right."

Meredith smiles, encouraging.

"At one point," Gavin continues, "he wants to look at pictures. So he gets up and shuffles over to the hall closet and roots around for a bit and comes back with this shoebox. And we sit there on the sofa, him with the box in his lap and me with my arm around his shoulders, which feel like two hunks of bone just barely draped in skin, and we look at all these photographs from back in the days when we used to drive around the hills west of Austin getting stoned and making up our own versions of *Far Side* cartoons—'The Sloe Gin Boat to China' —stuff like that. Silliness. And then we'd drive back home and sit on the back porch drinking wine, or make love until we were too tired and hungry. Or we'd just sit there, doing nothing, perfectly content to listen to the bugs in the trees. And all I can think about as we're looking at these pictures is how depressing it must be for him to see the man he once was, like some kind of evil twin smiling back at him from a past that's too far gone. Or maybe it's just my projection. Maybe those photographs give him strength. Comfort. Maybe it's only me."

Gavin stops for moment, as if trying to decide if he should say what comes next. He looks out over the rail of the café at the lower level of the bookstore. "We were never *really* lovers," he says, glancing back at Meredith and then away again.

He looks uncomfortable, Meredith thinks, for the first time since he's begun talking. She'd like to tell him not to be, but

somehow it doesn't seem her place. To interrupt, she feels, would only make him more self-conscious.

"We had this long-distance kind of thing. And I cared for him, in my fashion, as much as any man in his mid-twenties can say that. But it never really became anything. Neither one of us pushed it. And if there were signs, I didn't see them or didn't want to see them. I stopped calling. And then we just drifted apart for a couple of years. That old story. Lost touch. And I can't say that I was all that upset about it. You move on. Life moves on for you. Listen to me," he says, blushing, shaking his head. "Like you want to hear about my ancient history."

"That's okay, really," Meredith says, even though she's not entirely sure that it is. But how can she stop now, after all she's heard? It would be some kind of betrayal.

"But then," Gavin continues, "the next day he has some kind of relapse. And I'm lucky that our mutual friend is there 'cause he calls a friend who's a doctor, a cardiologist I think, and he talks us through what's going on. Head pains and chest congestion and a little dizziness and disorientation. Our mutual friend is very calm. He's got this little at-home blood pressure cuff and the electric thermometer and something else I don't even recognize—as if he's already so thoroughly used to this that it doesn't faze him in the slightest—and I'm just trying to stay out of the way while everything's going on like this is nothing out of the ordinary, and I'm thinking '*This is normal? You get used to life like this?*'

"When it's over, and the cardiologist has told us that he should probably be back in the hospital—though we don't tell him this because he's already made it perfectly clear that he won't go back, and I can't say that I blame him, knowing now what the county hospital is like—our mutual friend goes out and brings back dinner and we help my friend eat and eventually it's just the two of us again and it's quiet and I'm sitting on the edge of the bed, stroking his forearms, which are just sticks really, telling him stories about some of the people I meet who work in the hotels, things to make him laugh—like the young woman, this desk clerk, who tells me she's made a bet with her girlfriend, another desk clerk, that she's going to sleep with me before Labor Day. 'We've got the rooms,' she says, practically leering at me. 'We've got the rooms, mijo!'

"And then—this is completely out of the blue to me—he tells

me, just tells me outright, do I realize that I'm the one? That I'm the one he let get away. The man to whom all roads lead, he's come to realize over the years, and not just since he's been sick, but for some time now, and he's so happy that I've come, that he's had the chance to tell me. Because he's not afraid of dying, he says. That's no longer a concern of any real substance. It's not that. His only fear is that he'll die without knowing that he's loved—*in the present*—by a lover. By someone who cares passionately for him and loves him as only a lover could, or should, or must. By me."

He stops. And this time Meredith does reach out, gently touching the rough cotton sleeve of his shirt.

"I guess I could be angry with our mutual friend," he says. "He knew it was coming. Knew that I'd be sandbagged. But all things considered, that doesn't seem particularly appropriate. Or productive. What's the point?"

They look at each other. After a few moments, Meredith removes her hand and Gavin continues.

"I mean, isn't this what we're all supposed to want? The fairy tale? Loved so individually and completely by another that we're their world, alpha and omega and glass slippers and kisses to wake the sleeping and magic potions and fate and all that shit we've been told our whole lives? What am I supposed to do with this—that I'm the prince riding through the forest on my white horse?"

"But maybe you *are* the prince."

"No," he says, shaking his head. "No. That's not the way I ever saw those stories. I'd look at the pictures in those books, at the beautiful women, the princesses or whatever, lying on their beds, asleep or dead or just waiting, and I knew that I was one of them. That there would be some prince to come and get me, sweep me away, offer me some kind of paradise that wasn't mine for the taking alone. It sounds stupid, I know, but that's what I've waited for. God only knows what I've missed with my eyes wide open, maybe, but to suddenly have to rethink all of that? It's not the story I know. It's not what I've prepared for."

"But it's a chance, don't you think, to see—" Meredith begins, but Gavin cuts her off.

"What do you say to that? What is there? It's like space—boundless, terrifying—this moment while you process, in the silence, what this means, the enormity of this man's love. Of what

you mean. Of the fact that for all these years, all these years leading up to this point which has completely taken you by surprise, left you breathless, that you've had no idea. None. No thought even to the *possibility* of this being the case. That you—fucked-up, inglorious you—could mean so much to another human being."

Meredith can do nothing. She can only watch, mute.

"Who now lies on a bed, seventy pounds lighter, lord only knows what's going on inside his body, wasted and yet thoroughly familiar, known to you somehow *despite* the ravages, and that's the only word for it. What do you say to this?"

"What *did* you say?"

"I can't even remember the exact words. God, I don't even know—can imagine, maybe—what my face must have looked like. I don't know. I don't. But I agreed."

"How?"

"How can I *not*? I don't know how. Emotional. Spiritual. All ways but physical. What else can there be? What could I say? How can you deny the dying? I don't know what this means."

"It's very kind, very brave of you."

"Brave? My god," Gavin says, his green eyes darkening, allowing Meredith to see, finally, the summer storm gather speed and quicken, thrashing fast into a blaring squall of panic. "What if he lives for another ten years? What have I done?"

Meredith looks over at the box of Narnian chronicles, its shrink-wrapped corner poking out of the white paper bag lying on the passenger seat beside her. School is almost out; she sees several yellow-and-black buses moving purposefully along the frontage roads as she heads north up the highway.

Gary will be home in three hours. He'll drape his charcoal suit jacket across the back of a chair at the kitchen table, set his briefcase gently on the island countertop, open the refrigerator and pull out a bottle of water before leaning over to kiss her throat, his lips a soft sting of warmth just beneath her jaw.

That boy, she wonders, all those years ago in college; is he out there still, offering his love to those who won't accept it? Is he somebody's husband? Somebody's father? She might have married him had the circumstances been different. It's an idle thought—she can't imagine what such circumstances might have been—but one which pleases her all the same. She had never

told anyone, back then, how much she enjoyed the attention, how she had treasured the boy's devotion, locking the thought of it deep within like a valuable jewel, a secret pleasure. But she admits to herself, now, that it had been thrilling. It was something all her own, and she had savored it.

Her girlfriends went out with second-string jocks and fraternity vice presidents and econ majors who confessed to literary ambitions. None of them had some boy who pined after them. His desire, no matter how inexplicable or desperate, had set her apart from those other girls. It had given her power, that rarest of gems, and she had loved it, that feeling of holding someone else so completely enthralled. So long ago, now.

The radio plays a song from her adolescence, the soft lament of an unpopular girl made wise beyond her years by grief and isolation. There is such sadness in the world, Meredith thinks as discount stores and fast-food restaurants flash past her window. Its scale is beside the point. Safety can become despair, she knows, even if tempered by tenderness. The magic castle become a prison. And if not despair, then at least regret. Regret, in fact, might be worse.

She knows she should feel sorry for the dying friend. What better use, after all, for sadness? But she cannot muster sympathy for him; instead, it is Gavin whom she pities, the would-be prince unwilling to assume the obligations of his role. What has he missed, eyes wide open? Such possibilities. She shouldn't care what happens to a stranger, a man so removed from the world she calls her own, and yet she wants him, somehow, to be happy. It seems unlikely, though, the castle in which he waits but another cell. The friend, she knows, will die, sooner rather than later; it is Gavin who will languish. Of this she is certain. We hold fast to our vision of ourselves until the very end. It is easier, she tells herself, than admitting we may have got it all wrong.

She listens absently to the smooth, deep voice of the man on the radio. There will be no break in the heat, he promises, due to a stationary trough of high pressure stalled above the state. Yes, she thinks, the weathermen are right: It will be hot all over Texas. The sun's rays, relentless and indifferent, will beat down on the rolling green hills far to the east, through the heavy, sulfurous air of the Golden Triangle, across the flat, even expanse of the Edwards Plateau, beyond, to the dusty, shadow-filled canyons of Big Bend. The sun will shine, too, on each of the

sage- and oak-lined roads that wind through the hills north and west of the capitol, and further south, as well, on every dry blade of grass and unwatered flower in the small country churchyard where Gavin's friend will one day lie buried. It will shine, hot and furious, through the branches of hoary cottonwoods that offer scant shade, down upon the weathered stone markers and the cheap, sun-dulled plastic wreaths of the faithful. Her head spins, heavy with grief and wonder, as she sees the road ahead, dizzy and wavering under the heat, as she feels, beyond the glass and metal which encloses her, the sun's rays shining dully through the universe, and dully shining, like the descent of all possibilities, their beginnings and their ends, upon all the living and the dead.

Review

Spud Songs

edited by Gloria Vando and
Robert Stewart. Helicon Nine Editions,
1999 (proceeds to benefit Hunger Relief).

Theme poem anthologies are often long on enthusiasm and short on art. In their effort to collect poems between covers on a single theme, editors may lower standards to accept polemical or commemorative fare. They may gratefully accept inferior work from Big Name Poets to lend respectability to the effort. These tendencies may be exaggerated when the book is for a cause. As a result, theme anthologies are often of uneven quality, hastily constructed and boring.

Not so with *Spud Songs*. The editors have selected good poems and placed them in a handsome perfectbound volume. There are Big Names: Richard Wilbur, Diane Wakoski, Robert Bly, Seamus Heaney, and Denise Levertov to name a few—but their contributions are not throwaways. Gloria Vando and Robert Stewart (whose own poems are among the best in the collection) have garnered works from a veritable Who's Who among contemporary vibrant American poetic voices.

Why potatoes, and why should an anthology on potatoes be so successful? The potato is the perfect choice for a hunger-relief benefit, as the lowly earth apple is the most nearly perfect food in terms of nutritional value (sans fast food grease). As a staple, it is associated both with plenty and famine, with fancy cuisine (fresh pepper, madame?) and peasant fare (van Gogh's "The Potato Eaters").

The richness of potatoes as a subject for poetry becomes obvious as you dig into the anthology. Several poems note its exotic origins high in the Andes and its kinship with the lethal hallucinogenic, nightshade. Because it cannot be eaten raw, deep personal and cultural traditions have developed around its preparation. A great famine and great migrations (one of potatoes, one of people) are in its history. It has eyes in the ground from which sprout new life. It may be the only agricultural plant whose fruit is literally cut to pieces and buried for replanting. Yet with this ready Christian symbolism, David Williams notes that the potato never appears in the Bible (the potato being a

New World plant, the writers of the Bible would have never seen one).

Early in the volume in the late William Matthews' poem, the potato is called "the Odysseus of tubers" for its history of travel across water. On its hardiness, Matthews, in "This Spud's for You," notes that invading armies' trampling and burning have little effect on it, for it is

> The Submarine of the loam,
> it bears silently its cargo of carbohydrates
> while soldiers and hunters of grouse
> and tax assessors conduct important
> business overhead.

After chronicling the potato's history, he concludes:

> . . . The plump,
> misshapen stowaway, the wily, lumpy
> little picaro, the extender of stews
> and thickener of soups, the sturdy
> reliable, ugly and invincible potato,
> who would not sing this manna among tubers?

Two poems note that the Quechuans of Peru have a thousand words for potato. Albert Goldbarth, in "Mishipasinghan, Lumchipmaduana, etc.," goes on to say,

> A thousand! For the new ones
> with a skin still as thin as a mosquito-wing, for
> troll-face ones, for those sneaky burgundy corkscrews
> like a devil's dick.

Two other poets (Daisy Rhau and Robert Stewart) advise that bare hands are best for washing potatoes. And on one page Lequita Vance Watkins says, "Potato, you thunder along/your ground base/underground in three-quarter time," while on the next page Colette Inez has potatoes singing gospels. The editors use these types of correspondences to organize the anthology. With no section dividers, the book flows smoothly from poem to poem, based on linking poems of like content. No arbitrary chronological or alphabetical arrangement jars the reader—you

can look at any two consecutive poems in the book and find connections in topic and theme. With ninety poems to shuffle through, this seamlessness is truly an impressive editorial feat.

Breaking up the poem stream are seven visual artworks, from photographs to potato prints to drawings. They are tasteful, sometimes whimsical, and lend depth and variety to the volume without distracting from the poetry. Portrait photographs of the contributors also add interest.

There are many poems which could be cited in this splendid collection. David Citino's "Famine" is a tight indictment of Irish land policies that contributed to the Irish famine. Rudolfo Anaya, better known as a novelist than a poet, schools us in the difference between the Spanish *papa* (potato) and *Papá* (father), and how even the word for potato can be used to be cruel. There are these many-layered lines in the opening stanza of Malcom Glass' "Risky":

> You know the risks when you work
> in potatoes, all those eyes, tough
> and cynical, accusing you of loftiness.

There are also Jeanette Redenius' subtly stated, "Inside ourselves, my family grows gentle as potatoes" and Stanley Plumly's descriptive line, "Each trip to the wet field turned my feet to potatoes." There are poems with potatoes as brains and potatoes as breasts. There is potato lore, such as Robley Wilson's account of a prison escape made with a potato carved in the shape of a gun and Brian Daldorph's potato remedies for sick jalopies.

Many of the poems use the potato as a vehicle for exploring family relationships. Among the best is Virginia R. Terris' poem addressed to her daughter ("Roots: To My Daughter").

> You told me you were growing potatoes
> in your small backyard in a small city
> on another coast and I wondered why
> seeing you could just go to the corner grocery
> and buy a five-pound bag. But then
> buried like the tubers themselves
> came back as in a dream the way
> Father dug up the stony ground
> on the slope behind our house

in a wilderness where deer browsed
and Mother cut the eyes of one potato
after another and together the two of them
bent above the earth. Ancient figures.
Their hands covering the eyes with earth.
Waiting for the first bud. The first frost.
For you who never knew them in your faraway place
the ritual goes on. The roots,
burgeoning in the dark,
as if planting themselves.

But I should quit quoting and urge you to buy the book to feed your own poetic hunger.

—Donald Levering

Unbroken Line: Writing in the Lineage of Poetry

Miriam Sagan. Sherman Asher Publishing.

There are books about the basics of poetry with more information than Miriam Sagan's *Unbroken Line*. Laurence Perrine's *Sound and Sense*, for example, now in its eighth edition, is more comprehensive as a text for learning how to dissect poems. *The Teachers and Writers' Handbook of Poetic Forms*, edited by Ron Padgett, is, as Miriam Sagan states, a "poetry bible" for understanding forms. Kenneth Koch offers books on poetry writing with a greater number of playful exercises than does Sagan. As good as these books are for poetry starters, Sagan's book does something others don't: It offers a holistic approach to writing poetry. For Sagan, poems are not inanimate constructs to be dissected, nor is getting poetry written always a game. While defining several forms and techniques in poetry's lineage, Sagan does not lose sight of humans behind the writing.

She accomplishes this humane approach in a readable style by peppering the instruction with autobiography and anecdote, often about poets she knows. We learn how she got started writing, some precepts of her distinguished teachers (she had the good fortune to have had as mentors Helen Vendler, John Malcom Brinnin, Robert Fitzgerald, and Philip Whalen), and how she recovered from the poetic drought that followed the untimely death of her first husband. She talks about the writing life, about carrying a small notebook with her at all times, and, more importantly, about how paying attention is the root of writing. She tosses out aphorisms to ponder, such as "the greatest gap is between NOT writing and writing, rather than between BAD writing and GOOD writing." Or, "Very short lines can have the anorexia of fashion models."

In the first chapter Sagan puts forth her thesis: "This book attempts to present the major formal aspects of poetry in an accessible manner." However, it is indicative of her rounded approach that among a discussion of such basic terms as alliteration and simile, an underlying theme of the book emerges. In the section called "Ideas in Poetry," she states:

> Much of our thinking is about dividing and classifying. This way of looking at the world can lead to profound loneliness . . . . Poetic thinking, or metaphorical thinking, is about connection. . . . There is a spiritual practice in metaphorical thinking—connecting humans to nature, the past to the present, and moving out of strict linear time.

This idea is reinforced later by statements such as "metaphor is the spiritual essence of any poem" and by her discussion of "liminality," which she defines as something existing between two worlds. Here she encourages poets to explore liminal realms, those of twilight, tidelines, cave entrances, clowns, drag queens, and corpses. In the closing paragraph of the book, Sagan underscores this theme with the statement that "dualistic thinking is one of the greatest barriers to creativity."

One strategy used in *Unbroken Line* is that the quoted examples are all from poets Sagan personally knows. These are accomplished poets, though mostly not well known outside New Mexico, where Sagan lives. But the examples are largely apt. In the appendix, Sagan states her reasons for this decision:

> "There were already more than enough books on the market that draw their poetic models from the standard academically admired poets. I wanted my models to be from working poets I knew."

By using the work of living poets whom she knows, the author takes poetry out of the museum display case of anthologies of dead masters and places it in the attainable present. Another effect of her quoting local poets is to ground the book to the place of its writing, northern New Mexico. In the section on haiku, for example, she relates a snowy-day visit to the haiku writer Elizabeth Searle Lamb, who lives along the Santa Fe *Acequia Madre* (Mother Ditch) not far from Sagan's residence. Later in the book, while discussing concrete poetry, she notes that the Santa Clara Pueblo potter and poet Nora Noranjo-Morse once told the author that she often wrote her poetry directly onto the adobe mud walls of her studio. Sagan supplements the homegrown examples with references to better known works, such as when she refers to Bob Dylan's song "Masters of War" as an example of poem as a spell casting.

In *Unbroken Line,* Sagan, who has published more than a dozen books of poetry, demonstrates a working knowledge of the major forms and techniques of poetry. She also gives sage advice on *being* a poet. She offers this mantra to any poet who struggles to write amidst the distractions of family life: "Your family is not your audience, or your enemy (as a writer)." She admonishes the reader to remember that poetry writing is not therapy, although later she offers the practical advice that the pantoum form is a good place to work out obsessional material. She relates blues to the ancient ballad form and describes how to conduct a *Renga* (Japanese group-author form) poetry party. The appendix provides a number of additional sources, from texts that complement *Unbroken Line* to Internet poetry sites. Because of this depth, *Unbroken Line* can help not only the novice but the more experienced poet to, as Sagan says, "make those connections freshly every time you sit down to write."

—Donald Levering

Review

3-Legged Dog

Donald Caswell. Anhinga Press 1999.

He begged forgiveness of the Muse
Should he fail his art and tell the truth.
"The Gazelle in the Gazebo"

Donald Caswell is not afraid of telling the truth, and he rarely fails his art in doing so. He is also a poet with a wide range of approaches and subjects, unafraid to take risks, to make direct statements or to dance about a topic. Though he primarily works with free verse, a few of the poems in this volume have a formal feel. There are tight, sharp poems and discursive ones; there is lyrical, songlike verse in other poems. All three narrative persons are used, and the mood, though generally depressed, rises at times to giddiness. As a result of this variety of style and tone and topic, *3-Legged Dog* offers the sensibility of a collected works of a poet of wide scope, rather than a unified concept book. Indeed, it is Caswell's first full-length collection, though he has authored four previous chapbooks. Judging by the lengthy list of acknowledgments, it appears to draw from several years' worth of poetry writing.

Many of the poems in this collection are about relationships gone awry—about disillusionment, regret, and guilt.

. . . we make love
or argue late into the night
about things
that do not matter
that will not matter
that cannot matter
unless we argue.
"How It Works"

There are references to broken marriages and to uneasy or even dysfunctional relationships with parents. One fine poem is about a daughter who leaves home, who is curt and cutting to her parents, and the whole poem revolves around the word "cut,' as in "cutting the cord," severing parental ties.

Themes of alcoholism and suicide move gloomily through the book. In one poem, which is in the voice of a river, the water beneath a bridge speaks to a suicide:

> . . . the blue bag of your body (is) useless
> as the good advice your family offered.
> If you love me, jump.
> "After the Fact"

Another poem is a chilling narrative about a drunken drowning on Thanksgiving day. But there is a relief from this sadness, often in the form of quirky poems about odd people. One poem is a study in people who just aren't sure of themselves—one man can't tell if it's day or night, another whether he has eaten, a third can't be sure if he has met the narrator before. Another poem is a series of vignettes of persons met at bars who tell bizarre stories. There is the "Refusing to Write a Poem" poem, in which the narrator catalogues the excuses for not writing a poem. "Drinking With Henry" narrates a scene about two duck hunters that deliberately deflates the macho hunting mystique. The men become so cold standing in their duck blind that they put their fists in their armpits. At the conclusion, they are surrounded by a slumbering herd of loose cattle "drawn by whatever warmth there is in silence."

His wide range makes it difficult to pinpoint when Caswell is at his best. The most original poems, however, often develop a fatalistic mysticism borne of loss.

> I let a lot of things go.
> I let the world go on being what it is.
> I let the sun go down without me.
> I let my fingers and all the holes in my head
> sing whenever they want to.
> When she said she was leaving, I let
> the coffee go cold. Sometimes
> I catch things just to let them go.
> "Girl in a Field of Wheat"

In a long, complicated poem, "Sketching the Cormorant," a similar tentative stance is evident:

I stand surrounded
by ripples that spread in obscure rings outward
to engulf everything
or nothing—

"Sketching the Cormorant" and a number of other poems are composed of fragmentary sections, a device often used since Eliot to mimic a splintered state of mind or existence. In *3-Legged Dog,* sometimes these pieces pull together; sometimes the sections seem arbitrarily placed. The author often gives titles to small sections of longer poems (rather than numbering or dividing with typographical symbols), which tends to distract from considering the longer poems as a whole.

In "Another River" one of these free-standing subsections is called "Ode to the Electric Light." It shows how we can fixate and become obsessed when faced with death. While in the funeral home (presumably where the speaker's mother's body lies):

I thought of the buzzing neon
outside Dorn Martin Drugs,
the rattling of insects against the front
door light—of Edison's impulse and
Einstein's absolute

and of those few honest souls
who journey to the edge and hurry back
to tell us it is to
light we go,

to light

The lyrical "Harmonica Music" links several of the book's themes. In the end, the wistful fatalism is redeemed by music. The speaker has just put someone on a train to Kansas, when he begins to play his harmonica:

. . . because love
is no more
than a ragged dog watching the moon
because everyone dies in an empty room

I'm going to keep working on this harp
till you can see the train
till it sounds like Kansas.

Donald Caswell is a poet who has paid his dues. That is to say he has obviously worked at his art to develop such breadth, and has persisted through discouragement. He deserves the exposure of this full-volume Anhinga Press publication. He also deserves an editor who would urge him to cut the failed experiment "Discouraging Words" (in spite of its prior publication), and some of the weaker passages from the more rambling poems, such as "Forty Four Quarters." Such lapses detract from an otherwise impressive poetry collection.

—Donald Levering

Contributors

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