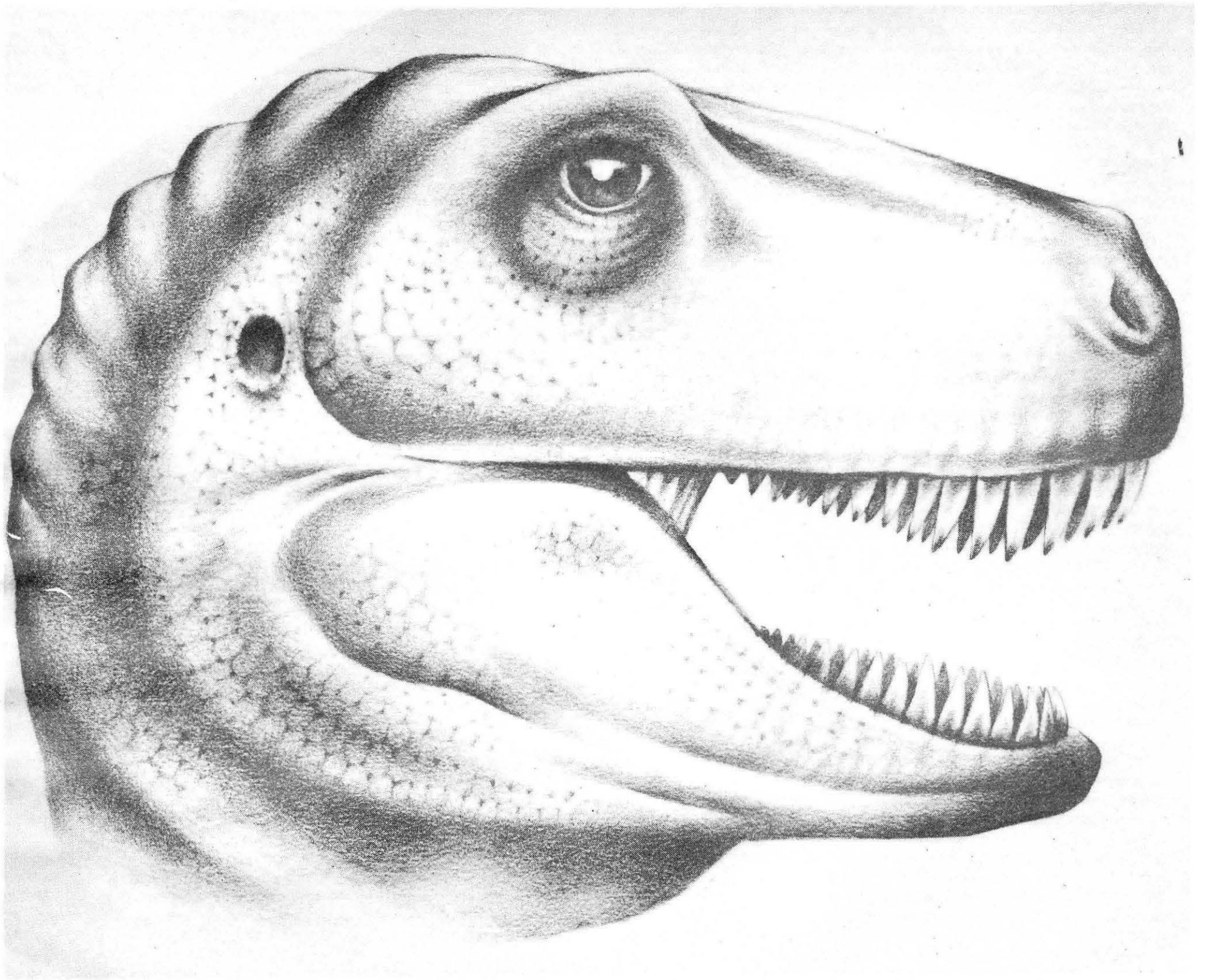


KENNEBEC:



Tyrannosaurus

*Yesterday was hell.
We climbed trees.
You came near, nearer.
Up close, your loose skin,
hanging heavy as history,
smelled like reptile.
You licked us from limbs
like sprouts from a stalk.
You got Adam and Abel.
Cain you missed.*

**James Fehlhaber
Bucksport**

A PORTFOLIO OF MAINE WRITING

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Leaving

Finally it begins to sink into Linnea's head that Bert could just possibly be shackled up with someone in Augusta. But, then, what can she do about it? Or, should she do anything about it at all?

She knows she should leave him. That is the most logical course, except for the baby that's due next month and their daughter Alice. Always a baby saving him, she thinks, staring out into the damp, Maine, November afternoon and seeing the dying fields and gaunt, leafless woods. She watches a truckload of blaze-orange-capped hunters roll down the dirt road past her house. Wasting your time today boys, she laughs to herself, all that's posted now, every last bit of it, do your killing elsewhere.

She does not wait to sneer at their return, but walks over to the only other window in the house, one that peers out on the dormant summer garden and their own hills and woods stretching north and beyond. Ah, Bert, she shakes her head, I was truly going to leave you seven years ago, but you got me pregnant then, too! Is that your method? Is that the icing on the cake?

Linnea is not sure; she cannot be absolutely sure. Yet, the pieces fit so well; it is almost perfect. She is not even sure whether there is one woman or two or three. He has been seen any number of times by a variety of people such as her neighbor down the road who is really not a friend but just a neighbor and has periodic business in Augusta. They usually talk casually when Linnea waits on the corner during the spring and fall for the school bus to drop off Alice in the afternoon. The neighbor is often out in her yard then, and they chat easily about gardens and the weather. This past fall she mentioned that she ran into Bert every once in a while in Augusta — having lunch in a place called Guido's and also down in Hallowell and Gardiner, both times in restaurants, names of which meant nothing to Linnea.

Although fairly certain that her neighbor assumes Bert does business at these places, Linnea knows better. He just graduated from law school and works for the state writing regulations. His salary is not much, but considering it's the first job he's ever had and he's 35, well, really it's not too bad. They need every penny, particularly with the new baby and the new siding he was supposed to put on the house during the summer but never got around to doing, saying it was too expensive, and maybe those dinners and lunches are why.

None of Linnea's close friends go to Augusta or anywhere for that matter. Acquaintances are whom she gets these bits from, and then it's more from the tone of their voice than what they actually say. Like the postmaster this summer. He is the town gossip, and the post office is the town gossip center; hang around there or the general store and sooner or later you'll know most everything that's going on locally. Linnea rarely has occasion to go there, but she had a package to mail then.

"Glad to hear Bert's liking his job," the postmaster said as he pulled apart stamps and stuck them to her package.

"Oh, yes," she smiled, knowing that the postmaster and most of the locals that he hung around with hated Bert.

"I ran into him the other day down in Augusta. Says he enjoys it. He's looking good," he continued, a little too dryly.

"Yes, yes, Jack, he likes it very much," and as she left the post office, she knew Jack had stopped short of saying something else, mainly because he knew it was none of his business. Oh, he loves to gossip, all of these New Englanders do, but they always sort of keep it to themselves, file it away for future use.

Linnea's friends do hear things from other people who get around. But Janice is the only one who has come right out and said that he's been seen at these nice places with women and one in particular. And Linnea has tried to dismiss it all to working colleagues, maybe business lunches after all? But she knows that is far-fetched. He makes no decisions and only does what he's told. That is, unless he got a promotion this past year. Perhaps that could explain the extra money for him to spend. Then there are his later hours. Just during the last six months. He says it's a heavier workload and will get heavier because of the legislative session. Besides, he wants to impress his boss.

Linnea believes he is lying, but, then, again she doesn't because she doesn't want to. She has not dared question him about all of this. She does not want him to run off into the woods fuming for several days like he did seven years ago. This time he might take Alice with him. Linnea wonders if she had not been pregnant that time would she still be here today? But why is she here anyway? How come? Why isn't she back in Michigan or Connecticut or even in Portland where they'd lived when Bert was in law school. Why is she living in this run-down cabin in the middle of Maine with someone who ignores her most of the time? Then, why does he stay, why doesn't he move to the city since he seems to be taken with it? Why does neither of them have the courage to say something?

Probably, she thinks, walking back and forth between the two windows in their small living room, because they both want the past back so badly. Seventeen years ago when they left Michigan, oh God, is it really that long ago and is this all they have to show for so much time together. Their homestead — that's what this was — their homestead. Everyone was getting a homestead and living off the land. And this land in Maine was so cheap. Things were fun then. They

had some money; his parents were generous. That's how they bought the horses, and, then, he did his blacksmith work. But Linnea cannot remember what they did all that time except stay away from people until they forgot how to act in public. Just look at this house. She can't get him to do anything. They could have used the carpenter who'd transformed their neighbor's house up on the corner, the one who always sees Bert in Augusta. Bert even went so far as to have him give an estimate. But then he, Bert, got all pig-headed because the guy told him the way he'd been hanging some new sheetrock was all wrong. Said he'd do it himself. And, of course, nothing's been done. That was when Linnea got a job as a waitress at one of those expensive, new, "country inn" type restaurants in the hills south of Brooks. She'd never had a job before. They trained her and the tips were pretty good. But four months later she was pregnant.

Linnea goes into the bathroom and looks at herself in the medicine cabinet mirror. She has been doing a lot of this lately, just staring at her face, pulling her nose, screwing up her mouth, combing and recombining her hair and wondering how she really appears to other people. She usually concludes that she's not so bad, not that bad anyway. No one stares at her when she goes into Bangor to shop or at the restaurant before she had to quit. She supposes that could be good or bad. She is awfully tall and broad-shouldered, but not fat, except now, of course. She's neat and clean. Perhaps, if she did something to her thick, raven-colored hair, permed it up instead of simply cropping it short? But that would take money. Still, it would be for him. To get him to like her again. Her mother would help; the money, that is.

After allowing the mirror to confirm that she's not contracting leprosy, Linnea goes into the kitchen to plan supper but thinks about her mother instead. Bert is happy to accept Mrs. Cronin's money, as long as it is for the house or Alice, but never Linnea. She knows if she wants, she can always run away to Connecticut. That is the ultimate solution. And maybe that's what she should do. Linnea's father had died while she was in high school. After she and Bert had married and settled in Maine, her mother remarried a wealthy, retired businessman and moved to Connecticut. Only six hours away. She knows, has told herself many times that it is the only answer; if, indeed, that is the answer she wants.

It looks like supper will be either beans and franks or tuna casserole. Doesn't matter. He complains about everything she's fixed lately. Oh, well, so what, and she heads back into the living room and sits in the old rocking chair to wait for Alice to come home from school and to consider seriously going to Connecticut, like this weekend.

Maybe if most of their friends hadn't left things would have been different. But almost all of them couldn't stand the winters and discovered the land didn't provide as good or as easy a living as they'd thought. That's when Bert decided to go to law school. He'd received an undergraduate degree at UMO, but figured that wasn't enough and maybe it was time to stop taking money from his folks. Besides, he didn't have anyone to hang around with anymore, no one to smoke pot with. The locals didn't like him, especially after he'd had that run-in with the warden and threatened to shoot anyone who came near their property. She'd never been able to understand why he did things like that. Law school did seem to have calmed him down.

Bert had complained a lot about having to go to Portland for law school, but the city had been fun for her. He'd been in school most of the day, so she'd taken Alice and gone into all the shops, walked in the parks and down by the waterfront. She'd been surprised at how much she'd enjoyed the city hustle, all those people together at once. But then he'd decided that it wasn't good for her and Alice and had rented a farm out near Gorham. He never lets her do anything, doesn't want her to know anybody.

Love never enters Linnea's mind anymore; the word, that is, much less the feeling. Except for Alice. And Bert spoils her. Perhaps, she is jealous of his affection for his daughter. But that would make it even better if she left him. Up and gone, tonight. She has the good car; he took the truck to work. She could call her mother; there should be enough gas for the trip; she'd be there by ten.

Linnea begins to feel better than she has in weeks. She is planning, doing something. She goes into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. It would be nice not to cook this evening; even a pizza from the general store would be better or a grange hall supper if you can stand four or five different kinds of beans plus boiled franks. Bert loves beans and franks, so she has them once a week. They're all right, but she longs for the day when she might never have to eat them again. There is a chicken in the freezer, but it's too late for that now. He gets mad if supper isn't ready when he walks in the door.

The tea kettle begins to whistle and Linnea makes a small pot of comfrey tea. The herb grows wild halfway up the hill out back, and she finds its steaming flavor very soothing, almost reassuring. She carries a full mug over to the living room window with her and watches for Alice to come down the road from the school bus stop. The drizzle has turned into steady rain, and as Linnea watches the water pool and course down the dirt road, she wonders if the school bus is late, or is it just her imagination. She darts into the bedroom for a look at the alarm clock by the bed. It's 4:10. How odd, and she pauses in the doorway, mug

in hand; the bus is always on time; well, usually. She returns to the now darkening window, oblivious to the scant light in the room save for the glow from the fire in the wood stove. Maybe she went home with Sam and Jim; but, no, she would have had to pass by there. Besides, that wasn't like her.

By 4:30 Linnea, still standing by the window, clutching her now empty tea mug, challenges herself to call someone. The school, the school district office, the post office, a neighbor. But she seems frozen to her spot by the window. Then finally — finally her phone rings. She places her tea mug on the window sill and moves calmly toward the ringing.

"Hello."

"Linnea?" asks a familiar and anxious voice that she cannot place immediately. "This is Sally, over at the school district office. There's been an accident; the bus."

There's a pause on the line as if the caller is waiting for Linnea to go hysterical or allowing herself time to summon the courage to tell the tale.

But Linnea waits; her mind is blank with terror, her mouth dry and unworkable.

"Linnea, Linnea. Alice is all right. Her arm is broken, and there are cuts on her face, but she's all right. All the children are alive, some hurt worse than others. The driver was killed. Just up here on that hill past the general store. A logging truck. The roads are starting to slick up; no one's real sure what happened, not yet."

Linnea still has said nothing. She knows the bus driver. She is trying to imagine him dead. She really hadn't thought Alice would be dead. For that could never be. Alice is golden, and the one good thing that is truly Linnea's.

"Linnea?" comes the voice over the phone. "Are you all right? I've got to go and make other calls now. They're going to keep most of the kids at the hospital in Waterville a while for observation, overnight if necessary."

"Will they let me see her?" Linnea finally speaks.

"Of course, go now."

"What about Bert?"

"What about him? Leave him a note, for Christ's sake, Linnea. I've got to go. Bye."

Then, as if she is a mechanical woman, and someone has just wound up her spring, Linnea scratches a note to Bert and sticks it on the tea kettle's spout in the kitchen. She pulls on her boots, throws on her coat, shoves a blaze-orange watch cap on her head and, for a moment stands in the living room shifting from one foot to another.

Suddenly, she runs into the bedroom and yanks open a dresser drawer where she knows Bert keeps wood money hidden in a sock. She stuffs it in her pocket, makes sure she has her driver's license, and then just in case, just supposing she might not get home tonight or the next or even the next, she jams several changes of clothes, both hers and Alice's, into an old beach satchel and charges out the front door without locking it behind her.

C. Walker Mattson

Troy

former writer, editor and
photographer in D.C.

Making Bread

*Clipping wings on the milkroom window
moths madden the light
break my night retreat
out here in a cold baker's hut.*

*A jungle mantra to mix into meditation.
Why not just flour and warm milk
to make this bread rise?
It is midnight and I keep kneading.*

Lisa beth Hammer

Bar Harbor

studies at COA

A Domestic Scene

... a woman reflects on her long marriage to a husband who is deaf

*Moonlight climbs above our headboard
to the wall, filtered through the lace
your mother gave. I lift my hands
in the speech we call our whisper.
The words flutter like black doves
across the faded patterns of swans and reeds.*

*Someone asked me, "How do you talk to him
in the dark?" I wanted to say
your hands are like drunken geese
that learned to dance, and slowly,
slowly got tired and settled
their way to words instead.
But for that we need the moon.*

*But for that I need to tell the truth
and never do even when I try.
I speak so quickly in the dark.*

*For your thick hands, with whom
my doves lie down these years upon
your thigh, have swallowed
everything I say. It's all right.*

*After twenty years, the shape of my heart
with you, what to shop for, and
where to go in August
are nearly the same shape.*

*It's as if each thought is held a moment
and then placed into the air.*

*It's all right even when, in the kitchen,
I must put down my cup and walk-
around in front of you and still remember
the list of things I need to ask
and swallow those for which I have no signs.*

*Here in our darkness, my hands
are so free they don't know anything.
They just live. It's strange,
as I roll across your chest
and press your hands apart, to think,
"You talk too much!"*

David Adams
So. Euclid, Ohio
is a technical writer

Serial: episode #4

This is the fourth episode in an on-going series over the last few years.

Summary: Ted Wharton, 42, a high school English teacher, has had an affair with a senior student. Soon she goes off to college. Ted is relieved. However, when he refuses to answer her love letters, she confronts him in front of school officials with compromising photographs and motel receipts. Ted is fired. His wife takes their children, Brad and Kim, and moves in with her parents. Ted is afraid they may never return. However...

The Positive Mental Attitude Path to Success

from *Growing Pains*, a novel

When he got back home, June's car was in the driveway.

Kim was at the kitchen table, eating cookies and drinking milk. She looked at him with nervous eyes. He wanted to hug and squeeze her, but checked himself and said coolly, "Hi. Did you have a good time at Grandmom's?"

Before she could answer, June came in looking exhausted. "Hello, Ted."

"June... I'm really glad you're back."

She sighed. "The kids and I had a talk. We agreed to try to make the best of a bad situation."

With gratitude so great he could have kissed her feet he said, "We'll work it out. I'm sure we will."

She looked at him. The space between them seemed to crystallize. "My father had found you a job," she said.

Kim got up from the table; went into the family room. Ted said, "He did? What kind of a job?"

"There's an agency in Sellerstown called Helping Hands. It's for families in crisis. They need an assistant director. You'd do publicity, write brochures and press releases, interview people to determine their income levels, that kind of stuff."

Ted held out his helpless hands, palms up, thinking: families in crisis! "But June, I don't know anything about that kind of work."

She sniffed. "You can *talk*, can't you? And you teach *kids* to write, so one would assume *you* can write."

"But a social service agency... I've never had anything to do with a social service agency. I'm not even sure I *like* them."

"This is hardly the time to be choosy, Ted."

"But we'd have to move. I don't *want* to move."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh Ted, for Christ's sake, be realistic. I guess you didn't see the paint that's splattered all over our door."

"Every neighborhood has its assholes. Those feelings will fade."

"Right. In how many years? Think of Brad and Kim. Do you realize how embarrassed—?"

"I know, I know."

"Do you also know you'll never get another job around here?"

"Not in teaching, I guess."

"Not in *anything*, Ted."

She was probably right. But he would be *damned* if he'd take her father's job. He would not be indebted to him for anything — ever! He told June he'd think about Helping Hands, but had a few other leads — which of course was a baldfaced lie, but he did have a plan.

He'd apply to every junior college in the country. College — that's where he should have been teaching all along. A brief fling with a student? In a college setting that was nothing at all.

In his silent study, head fuzzy, he worked on his resume. He tapped the blotter with his pen and stared at the cemetery. The sky — a scalloped gray — pressed into his brain. Jesus, what could he say? — except, English and psychology teacher, Walt Whitman High School, Somerside, New Jersey. Part-time automobile dent inspector? Not very impressive — and neither were part-time supermarket clerk and part-time bartender, other jobs he had held in past lean (always lean) summers. Seventeen years at the same damn job! It looked awful! People didn't expect that these days. They thought if you didn't jump around there was something wrong with you: you lacked initiative, were nuts, incompetent!

He changed "dent inspector" to "automotive assessor," changed "supermarket clerk" to "retail sales." What else, what else? Was that it?

*

He put two hundred resumes in the mail — and kept searching the COURIER-NEWS, the Philadelphia papers, the NEW YORK TIMES.

The social agency jobs — developmental psychologist, psychiatric social worker, etc. — required credentials he didn't possess. In the

course of three weeks he found a grand total of two English teaching positions — one at a school for the deaf in upstate New York (sign language required), the other for a debate coach-English teacher in Newark. He called about the latter job the day the ad appeared. It was already filled.

As he read the ads, he suddenly realized that time had passed him by. While he was serenely expounding on Poe, Thoreau and Frost in his classroom capsule, the world had turned upside down. "Data capture shift manager." What the devil was *that*? Did people actually go to college to study such things these days? "Fluid dynamicist" — another mystery. "Flavorist" sounded a bit more understandable, but where were the jobs for *him*? Not "flavorist" but "wine-taster" — that sort of thing. (How did one ever *get* a job like that, anyway?) "Export traffic specialist." Huh? "Does your fluency in English and German match your expertise in export traffic?" His fluency in *German* did. Seventeen years ago schools had been begging for teachers, and now he couldn't *give* his skills away.

He signed up with a placement agency. They were not optimistic. English teacher at the top of the scale? The man at the desk gave a shrug of thick shoulders, a shake of bald head. Feeling ill, Ted stopped into the ground floor bar (the placement agency's *real* business?) and ordered a double scotch.

Jesus, he was totally expendable! All the courses he'd taken (that Master's plus plus), all the kids he had taught, all he'd learned and had done meant nothing! He drank. There had to be *something* he could do — besides ringing up groceries or mixing drinks or checking cars for dents. He thought of his work as yearbook advisor. Editor? The magazine or newspaper field, some area like that?

There *was* another possibility, one he didn't like to contemplate; but during the rush hour drive across the dark Walt Whitman Bridge (the murky river fused to the graybrown sky), he decided to give it a shot. All he *really* wanted to do was teach, and he knew that now: he already missed it like mad. He'd never missed it those busy summers, had actually dreaded Labor Day, but now with all this time on his hands oh *god* did it appeal! He'd get back to it soon, he swore he would, but right now he needed a job, any job — some temporary thing to tide him over until—

*

"Hello, is this Joe Bishop?"

"This is Joe Bishop, who's this?"

"Joe, this is Ted Wharton."

A pause at the other end of the line. A *long* pause, then: "Ted! What's up, your Electrakween giving you trouble?"

"No, Joe, it's not that, it's... well, I'm looking for work."

"For work?"

"I was thinking about that offer you made when you sold us our vacuum. You know — the salesman job."

A long, *long* pause. "Well, that was a while ago."

The hum of the line. "You mean there aren't any openings?"

Joe's voice took on a confidential tone. "Ted, look, let's face it. After your troubles at Whitman... Selling door-to-door around here after that... no way."

Ted wet his lips. "Well Jesus, Joe, I'm not a goddam *rapist*. I mean what do you think will happen?"

"It's not what I think will *happen*, Ted, it's your *image*. A male is always a negative image in this line of work. He can often overcome it with effort, but in your case... it's just not possible."

"Joe, listen. I'll take another neighborhood. —Some place where they've never heard of Whitman High."

Another pause. "Sorry, Ted, but we can't take the chance. Electrakween *has* to protect its image."

Ted gritted his teeth. "Hey Joe, let's not be hypocritical. Did you show me a magazine in the mensroom at school?"

"I fail to see—"
 "Did you say — referring to the centerfold — 'What a chunk of tail?'"
 "Ted, that's irrelevant."
 "I don't think so."
 "Well it is. You've got a negative reputation, a negative image, and—"
 "Stop it with all this image shit!"
 A silence. Ted's breath was hot in the phone. Joe said, "Ted, I know that you're having it rough and I'd like to help, but I can't. Not in this way I can't. In another way, though, perhaps I can. There's a book I'd like you to read. It's called THE POSITIVE MENTAL ATTITUDE PATH TO SUCCESS by Napoleon Murphey."
 Heat rose in Ted's head. He said, "Joe, I'll tell you what. You can take your positive mental attitude and shove it up your ass, then set your Electrakween on four ball suck and suck it out again. I don't need an *attitude*, I need a *job*!"
 The silence, hum, the click.
 Ted banged the receiver into its cradle, shaking with rage. Son of a bitch, not even a goddamn vacuum salesman! Not even that!

* * *

On the day he received his ninety-fourth rejection — from Peyote Junior College in California — June announced she was leaving. Her father had found her a job in Sellerstown.

The house like a tomb, Ted went to bed early that night and dreamed:

He was taking a shower. The enclosure was filled with steam and he couldn't see, but a certain fantastic blind perception told him that wires were coming out of the shower head. These wires, he suddenly realized, were attached by means of small clamps to his penis and scrotum.

Through the steam, far off, he could hear June's voice — or was it June's? He strained to hear. The voice, so distant, wet and small — was giving him a command. What was that gray breath saying? Press the button on the cord — the cord that he held in his hand. He felt the slippery plastic bulb, rubbed its nub with his thumb. The demands (was it one voice or two? Did he hear Joy now?) grew louder, shrill. The shower hissed tropical, gasping clouds; he couldn't breathe. His body, he was shocked to see, oozed beads of blood. "Press it! Press it! Press it!" screamed the overlapping echoes, and shattered with fear, he did. A fierce jolt of power tore through him, the world was fire, he sizzled and snapped—

And woke in the dark in a drenching sweat to see lightning flash outside.

Christopher Fahy
 Thomaston
*from his study window
 admires the prison's pink glow*

One Body, All Bodies

*If we would listen to the body
 and nothing else
 we might never break from silence.
 We might learn no skin is
 exclusively our own,
 that the clean and unclean
 drink of the same sky,
 that breath never ends
 and is just beginning.*

*For the thing about the body
 is this:
 tracing it forward and back
 to the origins
 we get lost,
 finding ourselves
 unable to distinguish
 between molecule
 and sun,
 mouth and womb,
 blood and sea.*

Mark Melnicove
 So. Harpswell
runs The DogEar Press

Once: A Collaboration

In the mid 1920s, Andre Breton and other surrealists living in Paris practiced a method of group composition in which, until the end, each participant saw only the word or phrase written immediately before his own. They called it le cadavre exquis, the exquisite corpse, after a phrase that appeared in their initial attempt. Sometimes, as in this example produced in Sylvester Pollet's creative writing workshop, the results can be extraordinary.

No words have been changed. The "author's name" is simply a listing of the participants' first initials.

Once I thought about the world as a child might, and years later these thoughts revealed the simple truth that poetry evolves from everyday experiences — changed in some ways, but still the same. We changed as we grew old, but if I'm along with you the best is yet to be, because we live for the future, and you make every day better and brighter than the one before. Today is only a drop in the bucket of forever — forever is too far away to imagine — yet I dream about what I will be doing in 10 years, and I see a dirty mop and the world crumbled around their feet.

Klcbrj Jpljs
 Orono
is a writing class

Assault

*I was attacked last night slinking
 down my road in the moonless illumination
 of fresh snow by I don't know what—
 a pack of mongrels from the junkyard gone over the brink...?
 a shuddering porcupine with one red eye...?
 three queenly coyotes sick of shrews...?
 a sneaking chilly sting, or so it seemed,
 or did I step into my own shadow
 struggling like a spider coughed
 off a bridge?*

*I was attacked last night skidding
 homeward in a wet November snowstorm after the newest damn
 car I ever owned couldn't make Rocky's Hill. Down, down the dark
 crept up my neck and slipped in—
 a long-lost sliver.*

*Inside me shook like a dripping spaniel
 and tightly circled before settling.*

*I was attacked last night plowing through a surprise
 party naked trouble jumping-out-of-the-cake snowsquall fishtailing
 on brass orchids while coming at me an old Nova
 swerved through my heart-skip
 and missed me by a spurt of adrenaline.*

*"Live in doubt!" I flung to the fool, glancing at the ditch
 I wouldn't hurt that night. In the mirror
 flashes of headlights, the heavy metal crunch of an old
 Nova kissing a thick pole.*

(It takes only one pole to turn out a light.)

*Oozing fat wet flakes draped
 my newest-ever steed and me like my dentist's x-ray blanket—
 I leaned my head against the brace-cups and opened wide.
 They're all right, I told the mirror,
 as the tiny whistle
 pierced.*

On Rocky's Hill I burned and burned

Terrell Hunter
 Orono
*is a student and editorial assistant
 for the National Poetry Foundation*



Photo by Michael Howland

Graduation

*A senior sees his words and face pressed
on the pages of his yearbook.
He stands at the door.
Teachers have gone home.
He turns as if he could return
to being bright and young.*

*James Dean leaps just in time
before his car careens off the cliff.
He never dies. He makes of desire
and the sun what he finds in his reach.
He rages in his heart
and leaps out of doomed cars
watching the best part of himself
disintegrate in the gorge.*

*There is no return. Only the art
of leaping out just in time.*

**Bruce Spang
Readfield**

*educates adolescents
about substance abuse*

Diver Dan

This isn't a love story because she wasn't that pretty, and I'm not granite-jawed or steely-eyed or that kind of thing. She didn't have one of those faces where you look at her, and you're talking, and you're thinking "if I can just keep this conversation going." And you get excited because you've been funny, and she's leaning over a little, glancing at you while she's laughing — not that kind of face. I don't remember any strong feelings about her, until she was wearing something and the way she turned to look over at something else — I remember that. And, if I think back, I can see her again lying back on my bed after everybody else had left, saying "Don't you think it's time you got on the bed, too?"

But this is also about leaving home for college, expecting it to be better, and finding out it was different, but not any better. When I left home for college I was thinking about adventure, maybe even danger. The way I was thinking, I should have run away to sea, or hopped a train headed West. But somewhere along the line I had bought the idea that college was a big adventure. But for me it was just a way for my parents to treat me like I still wasn't old enough to feed myself or come in out of the rain.

I wanted to get into some kind of predicament — something life-threatening — and then not be saved by my parents. My parents were saving me all the time; mostly from the things that frightened them.

I got there in the afternoon, still dressed the way my parents liked to see me — banlon shirt and pressed slacks — but I was feeling very patient. They'd have to leave me now. This was college. They weren't allowed to stay. My roommate had been there first and done a few things. Nothing obvious, but it looked like his room. It was like we were both dogs and he'd already run around the room, peeing on all the best bushes. My mother had found the dorm counselor, someone in purple corduroy cut-offs. I could see her setting up the scene so it would be a funny story to tell the bridge group — "crazy kids... Ivy league!... his parents pay all that tuition and these pants!..." It was all right though. That day I was balanced. Her time was short.

My father was heavily involved in calling my attention to every feature of the room. "Look, son. Here's the light switch." Like I would have studied in the dark for four years, and then gone blind if he hadn't showed me. So I'm standing in the middle of the room. I can hear my mother explaining all about me to the hall counselor — "He's forgetful sometimes, but we love him" — I flash them both the smile she expects to see, and then go over to my father who wants to show me how to lock my windows. I don't know what I was thinking. I was spinning in perfect balance like some kind of top. Inside everything was moving, outside was just a smooth whirr. Anything nudged me, I was across the room, still turning.

Later they were gone, some kind of goodbye probably, but nothing I can find in my mental scrapbook. They were going to continue to Cape Cod, to the same place where we went as a family for the last ten years; then they would stop back and see me on the way home. Every year, for ten years, my brother and I listened to them tell the story of how they would drop me off at college (my brother, three years older than me, would already be in college) and then continue on to the Cape for their first vacation alone since they had us. Now it was time for the trip. I got the feeling they were going because they couldn't not go. By now, not going would force them to consider why the story was so important to them all those years. They had to do what they always said they would do. It was like some kind of penance for telling stories to make us feel guilty. Of course my parents talked about what they were going to do so much that frequently they talked themselves out of doing anything at all. When we did wind up doing something, I had this feeling like it had already been done, and we had to act like we were doing it now, or else something bad would happen.

My roommate showed up later, after my parents were gone. He had a suave attitude about how we were going to be friends and special partners, like we both had these different special qualities, and together we could make what we wanted happen. I wanted to believe him, so it was a few weeks before I realized that what he really meant was that *he* had special qualities, and my special quality was to notice them, and ask him those questions that would let him say the things that made him feel good. When I think back on what I might have said to him, all that comes to mind are phrases like "Really?" or "Hey, that's great." But I was that way with everyone I met that first week or so, just flashing messages like a baseball scoreboard.

The first day I just remember leaving the room and coming back a lot. It was the first time I had a key to where I was living, and no one there to ask where I was going or when I was coming back. So I was just this trolley bus motoring through campus, waiting for something to flag me down, but meanwhile looking like I had any number of places to go. In the early evening I went to the dorm meeting. My roommate made a point that we should go together, and I was just grateful for twenty minutes when I wouldn't be alone among large groups of guardedly friendly people. We stood in the back, like we'd heard it all before, and were just circling back to see what other people thought. I liked the pose: look interesting rather than interested. Of course a lot of people had mastered this pose and it made for a strange atmosphere. Sometimes I'd walk around the grassy quadrangles and everyone was posing, like it was a yard sale and they were all for sale. This attitude kept me from seeing how I really looked: skinny

kid with mussy hair and crooked glasses, both hands in my pants pockets all the time, like it was cold outside and I was waiting for a bus. My wardrobe was the pits. All bought by my mother. All polyester, so if there were a fire in the dorm room my clothes would melt. My mother made buying clothes a big love ritual. "Here, what about these pants?" Simple question, but it always felt like my soul was in the balance. And now I was in college, still being dressed like I was a Barbie doll.

The counselors all did their patter. We had two. One was friendly and organized, always glad to see you. Anyone could guess he had life where he wanted it. I felt lucky to talk to him because he seemed to know what he wanted and he seemed to have decided what must be done to get it. But this self-assured quality also made me nervous when I was around him. I was afraid he would turn around one day and say "what are you doing here?" and I would blurt out I had no idea, and then I'd be sent home. I envied him. He knew what all his needs were and he had people stationed in different places who knew how to attend to them. Nothing in my environment seemed suited to my needs. I felt like Diver Dan — that character on a show I watched as a kid. The show started with just a shot of the waves rolling into the beach. At the time, it looked a lot like the beach where I was being taught how to swim. And then there would be Diver Dan, in his big metal globe helmet, with sort of a sewer grate across where his face was, so you couldn't see his face at all. He'd stomp around the ocean floor, bubbles boiling around his helmet. He had this big rubber air hose that apparently connected to the surface of the water where there was a boat. Show after show there were bad fish who lured him into dangerous caves, or killer clams who grabbed his legs. Everyone tried to fuck with his air hose. The fish were stuffed, I think. They were sort of dangled near Diver Dan while they talked out their plans to do him in. The leader was a long thin fish named Barry Barracuda, who smoked a cigarette. His henchman was a hammerhead shark. They were always trying to get Diver Dan in pretty obvious ways, like "Hey, Dan, why don't you put your foot in this giant clam? See what happens." The scariest part was when Dan realized he was in trouble. Then he'd do this slow motion lurch — this way and that — bubbles everywhere. They always used to end the show when he was in deep shit — or maybe not — but I can't remember how he ever got out of anything — just this death lurch — and maybe a shot of the people on board the boat saying "Pull him up — he's in trouble." They were always idiots and understood nothing about the problem. The other thing they said a lot was "he's only got a few minutes of air left." And I was walking among all these people at college like everything was underwater and I had to worry about my air hose all the time. But the worst part was that there was no one on board my boat. If I screwed up I would die a slow bubbly death, and no one would notice, except maybe the evil fish that lured me into a trap.

The other counselor had blond hair and a full blond beard. His name was Skip, which was a bit much. The place was too much like summer camp already. He was more open, more in need of friends, I guess, and later I got in the habit of just dropping into his room. I would put on one of his records, usually *The White Album* (I liked "The Birthday Song"; I liked the ferocity of the song which implied that if you *didn't* have a happy birthday, you would be killed). Then I would talk about things I had seen that day. I had a nasty, irreverent sort of humor which I always employed when the subjects of my humor were no longer around. To Skip, however, I implied that I was as tough at the time as I was in the retelling. Responses that had only echoed in my head were repeated to him as if they had been spoken aloud, and his appreciation gave me great comfort. I told him I was a Golden Gloves boxer in high school. In this way I lived my life like it was a seven second broadcast delay; I never stood directly behind my words. To me, that was like hugging a tree during an electrical storm. But we became good friends, I guess, and he's an important part of this thing with the girl that I'm going to tell you about.

At the end of my first day at college, my roommate Jack invited people back to our room for some pizza and Amaretto. I sipped the stuff, Almond liqueur, and it gave me this scary portentous feeling: now I could taste all these funny drinks, even have a Manhattan if I wanted one. It made me think vaguely about my future — big drinks in plush restaurants with dark somber oil paintings on the wall — of course that wasn't what I wanted at all. Afterwards I went over to the bookstore, which was open until midnight the first week. I went over the section where they have all the things with the college insignias and mascots and all that. I just liked to browse through — shot glasses, cushions, mugs, toothbrushes, toilet seats, mirrors, all kinds of clothing — part of me was very scornful and part of me wanted to buy all that shit because I wanted to belong somewhere. I tried to imagine being an alumnus, say twenty years down the line; while my friends guffawed and tittered out in my living room, I would prepare drinks with my college shot glass and everyone would have a good laugh about my toilet seat. Finally I just bought a car decal. My parents had seen them (they beat it over to the bookstore, too), and had hinted around about how nice they were. For some reason it was my place to buy them. I bought a small one that just said "Brown University." It had a little bear, wearing a sailor's cap, leaning against the "B". I don't know if I thought that was me, or what.

I headed back to my room wondering what to do next. I wanted to meet one

more person, or maybe I should write some letters. I had this idea that writing letters would be a big, enriching thing in my life, and I was able to keep that feeling as long as I didn't actually write any. Once I put down the date and "dear somebody," I felt stupid and uninteresting. I opened the door of my room and only my desk lamp was on. I sensed there were people in the room, but with the place so dim, I didn't even want to look.

"Hello, Lawrence," Jack said.

"Hey," I said, sounding cool and off-hand, no idea what was going on. I kept my back to them, there had to be someone with him, and I started going through all the catalogues and coupons on my desk like it was something I really had to do, and it couldn't wait.

"Have you met Elizabeth?" he said.

I figured that was my cue. Elizabeth looked confused and ruffled. The amaretto bottle was about empty.

"Oh, sure. Hi Elizabeth." I made my voice deep and understanding, like I was young once and had done like her, and I had come out of it all right. Really it was my father's voice, echoing out of me. Think about it. Whenever you're startled, that's when you realize that your parents live inside your head. Elizabeth was looking at me like I had slapped her out of a deep sleep. Jack looked slick, a little pleased with himself. I guessed this was his way of conquering a new place. Jack steered her outside, and I could hear this low hum of conversation. In the weeks that followed, she came down to the room a lot, but after awhile Jack stopped being there. He had hooked up with a senior who had an off-campus apartment. Later that semester she joined the feminist group on campus. I've met a lot of girls who think all men are users, they usually have good reasons, but I've also noticed that the only men they seem to view seriously are those slick movers who manipulate them with suave flattery. That was my theory, anyway, for why they never seemed at all interested in me.

Anyway, I was trapped in my room since they were whispering in the hallway, so I decided to put up the posters I had brought from home. I had a calendar of athletic pictures that my mother had got from her sister who worked in a travel agency. Actually she had gotten the calendar a couple of years ago, and my mother kept it under the couch in the living room. My mother made it clear that my aunt had not intended them for me, that my mother had to insist it be given to me. Like most of my mother's stories, this one implied that she was the only one looking out for me and I wasn't very grateful. My mother always felt that people were slighting her, overlooking her, and it seemed important to her that I feel the same way. My dad had also brought home a poster from American Airlines where he worked. It was a poster for Aruba, or somewhere; it had some dripping wet babe in a white bikini, walking out of clear blue water. She had a cool, direct gaze, and a smile just on one corner of her mouth that said "I'm thinking whatever you're thinking." My father and I never talked about sex, and I was a bit surprised when he gave me the poster. My mother didn't say anything, which was even more surprising. Every time she found a *Playboy* in my room, she made me get out a Stop N' Shop grocery bag and tear the magazine into little pieces before I threw it out. But I guess she decided this was some father/son boy-goes-to-college thing. Sometimes I wonder who wrote the script for their lives. My father had gone to night school for his college degree, and my mother had gone to nursing school right out of high school. So what they knew of college came from television and the "Campus Comedy" section of *Reader's Digest*. Of course I didn't know anything, either, and all my letters to them were designed to confirm their sense of the college experience.

Meanwhile, I didn't think college was funny or cute. I wasn't finding it enriching, rewarding or that sort of thing. I went to class, got A's, that sort of thing, but I was lonely and bored.

Around then I met a girl. I mean actually talked to one. The girls all lived two floors above us, but I couldn't imagine going up there without a good reason, so I met a girl who was down chatting with the guy next door to me. They had gone to the same high school. I could see right away she didn't like this guy. He was showing her his complete set of the Harvard Classics which he had stolen, one book at a time, from their high school library. Steve liked to come off as a hill-billy. Actually he was from some suburb in Virginia, but he acted like he was the son of a coalminer. Most of the time he was in overalls and a flannel shirt. He also had this huge stereo system and about 5000 tapes, and boxes of records. He was very into acquiring things, more things than he could possibly use. He hadn't read any of the Harvard Classics, and he rarely listened to music.

Now he was moving around the room. He was big, and he liked to move around a lot. He talked in a tone of voice that was permanently ironic; yet he had no sense of irony. So no matter what he was saying, you got the feeling he wasn't telling you all he knew; but of course he was. Beth, the girl, was sort of scrunched up in a chair watching him. One leg dangled over the arm rest, her attempt to look relaxed. Her arms were folded across her chest, hugging a new Springsteen album, "Born to Run." Just watching her I got this flash of what she was doing here, looking like she wanted to be somewhere else. That happens to me all the time. I see someone, and their posture, or the set of their mouth, and I got this flash of what they're up to, where they've been, what they want at the moment, and whether or not they're sufficiently loved. There's nothing psychic about it; maybe I'm even wrong a lot of the time. But it's not fun — it can be a sad lonely thing. Most of the time people keep hidden what they know other

people would not enjoy seeing. The secret itself is not as horrifying to us as the idea of watching someone else discover it. Anyway, lonely trapped people really set me off, and this film strip of their life starts clicking in my head. Like me, she'd probably spent the last week trying to breathe some life into her room. All her favorite books were put on a prominent shelf, maybe one or two she didn't really understand and hadn't finished reading, like *Ulysses* or *Paradise Lost*, but she had read the introductions and planned to read the rest, and she would tell people that if they asked about them, so it was not a pretentious thing to do. Her blanket from home went on the bed — some sort of up-beat stuffed animal: Snoopy or a Kaliban Cat. Beth's calendar might be Sierra Club, not because she was a hiker, but because she felt unique and alienated. All those Ansel Adams spooky-clear mystic rock formations — the visual equivalent of a coyote's howl. Those black and white windows into the grandeur of solitude lent dignity to silence and boredom. After the room was set, the next impulse would be to buy something with the money given by some uncle or other. I had bought *Exile on Main Street*. I didn't have any albums at home, nor a stereo. My father had built a Heathkit stereo which was in the livingroom. I stole the *Hot Rocks* album from a place where I did lawn work, and when my parents went out I would put on "Sympathy for the Devil" as loud as it would go, and sing along.

But for Beth, it had been *Born to Run*. And now she was headed back to her room to listen to it alone. But before she could do that, she was going to make herself talk to someone. Steve was the easiest. Now I was there, and I could sense that she was going to hang on a few more minutes before she considered her penance complete. Even as she was sitting there, looking for a chance to go, she was running Springsteen lyrics through her head, like some kind of chant that would keep her safe. In a little while she would be alone with the song and that would completely free her strangely certain sense that at some point she would become something powerful, admirable. She might flare, torch-bright, up into the air, some hot dangerous night, powerful feelings and thoughts snapping through her like voltage through a high power line. Then all her potential would be actual, all who doubted her would be knocked lifeless, all whom she loved would discover they loved her in return: a brilliant flame of pure being, constant and visible to all. I knew her scenario because it was a lot like mine, and that of all the people around me, like college was the incubator and we would astonish the world when we hatched. Tramps like us.

But she was noticing me, at least a little. Steve was telling us about his reel and Dolby sound reduction. Somehow I eased the conversation towards Springsteen — automobiles, hot roads, t-shirts damp with sweat, couples in backseats opening and closing around each other like a fist clenching and unclenching. Steve switched his topic to anti-static functions, but he knew he'd taken the wrong turn somewhere and wasn't even really in the room.

Of course I had never heard a Springsteen album. My Dad's big thing was 101 Strings. This was some orchestra that took popular show tunes, or whatever, and made them all sound the same. Muzak, really. After my parents installed a radio intercom system in the house, they just stayed tuned to WEZN all day. It was on every minute of the day, with creepy announcers telling you, in their valium voices, that you were listening to beautiful music. I would listen to it for awhile, and then I'd want to go do something crude in a public place — spit on the floor in a restaurant — anything to counteract the feeling that my brain was being turned into a baggie. Stuff like that — muzak and Ronald McDonald and Mr. Rogers — sometimes it gives me the feeling that everyone else in the world has already had a lobotomy and now they're looking for me.

Later that evening, Beth came walking down the hall with a box of Ritz crackers. My door was open, so she offered me some. I don't know how I got started, but I used all of her "let's get acquainted" questions to spin an elaborate yarn about my background. I grew up in a Connecticut suburb, but that's not what I told her.

"Where did you grow up?"

"New York City."

"Really? What part?"

"Not a well known part, I mean, not Fifth Avenue, or anything. Sort of a poor area."

I was inventing this story. Why? I wanted to seem pathetic and valiant. Someone who had triumphed over tremendous odds.

"I know where Grand Central Station is. Did you live near there?"

"Closer to 125th Street," I said meaningfully. She didn't get it. "Near Harlem," I said, trying to sound like I didn't mean anything by it. I liked the tension of acting reluctant to tell my heroic story. Also, it gave me time to make it up as I went along.

"How did you know about Brown?"

"I didn't really, I was in some trouble, and I heard about it through this program." While I was laying all this down, I had only the dimmest idea of what I expected it to get me. Mostly I wanted her to take me to her bed for a languorous episode of love followed by lying close together beneath crisp sheets, sipping hot tea, the sun casting a shaft of light on the bed, and the sounds of voices outside, students noisy and excited, but not as contented as we.

Instead she told me that she didn't get along with her roommate, and that she had a boyfriend named Steve back in Virginia, who had promised to come up next weekend. I must have felt guilty, because I was all solicitous about Steve,

like I had a hunch we would be good friends.

I guess this is what we needed to hear because she became a loyal companion. If I were late getting back to dinner she would wait for me. She would write notes, offer to loan me albums, bring me ice cream. Her solicitude was meant to keep my demands to a minimum. And it felt to me like I was central to her life, and I did not analyze possible contradictions to this feeling, such as the fact that we had never touched each other, even in the most casual way.

We went along like that for several weeks. Then one night four or five of us sat around Skip's room drinking sloe gin. It was a drink he liked and that he wanted his friends to try. I was telling some funny story, my gaze sweeping the room to gauge its effect, and I saw that Skip and Beth were sitting on the bed holding hands. I finished my story, not missing a beat, but I felt that something inside me was peeling itself away from my ribs and congealing into a hard ball. I had reconciled myself to Steven, her Virginia boyfriend, as some sort of evil emperor in a faraway land. Some force that might just consume itself and leave me the boy-prince of vast lands I had never dared to explore. Instead, sitting in a stuffy dormitory, drinking some purple shit, I was banished without a shot being fired.

The next day Skip caught me in the hall and asked if I minded what was going on. He said he just took her hand and she let him. He was very intense about the question — counselor to counselee — like if I was sick about this he'd be happy to write me a note to the infirmary. I told him I didn't mind. Was I sure? Sure I was sure. We were just friends. What did you both do after I left? He said not everything. Just a lot of kissing and dry humping. I asked him about dry humping and he said it was like going all the way, but both people leave their pants on. I thought about how civilization had really brought us a long way. Then they both dropped out of my sight. Skip's door was shut, day and night. I did other stuff, I guess. Schoolwork, that sort of thing. Mostly I made out like Diver Dan — keeping a sharp eye on my air hose, trying to make sense of everything through all the bubbles. Somewhere in there I called my parents. I wanted to retreat, but that's not why I called. I called to remind myself that I had nowhere to go. It was my first call home from college, so it had all the trappings of a television sit-com:

"So, you remembered you had a mother!"

As usual she was half-joking and half in pain. "Of course I remembered!" Talking to them always seemed to force me to be jovial and hearty. Their conversation was so alive with innuendos and comments constructed as verbal land mines. The sense of danger was enormous, and I could only proceed by sounding enormous myself.

"Honey, it's Lawrence!" I heard her yell to my father. Her tone for this seemed genuinely excited and touched, but usually when she spoke directly to me the voice was flat and guarded. I only remember the openings of our conversations, and of course the endings, which were always the same: "Don't forget." This was shorthand for "don't forget I love you." My parents seemed to think all my feelings for them might very easily be left behind, like a pair of gloves on a bus.

One night Beth knocked on my open door, just like old times. She had in her hand a copy of *Catcher in the Rye*. I had told her before it was my favorite novel, but she had not read it. Now she had bought it and read it — peace offering, penance, I don't know. I should have shut the door in her face. That might have done me some good. Even now I have a clear image of standing up and slamming the door shut. That image is more clear than what I did, which was to act delighted. People who put themselves in vulnerable positions around me, bare themselves so to speak, can really cut me off from what I should do. I was so sorry for her, so nervous her feelings would be hurt, that I played like a world-weary father confessor, well able to expiate her sins.

She couldn't believe it, she told me. She had almost told Steve about Skip. She was that serious. But he hadn't ever acted like he wanted to be very committed. He had almost ruined everything. Skip had already told me he didn't know what was going on with her. They took long walks and then had long make-out sessions. They would kiss and rub. There would be salivary sounds, but no talk, except when he tried to unsnap her jeans, and she would say loudly, "No!" I guess the whole thing didn't make sense to either of them, for different reasons, so they just stopped. I was more scared of her than I was before, and we picked up where we left off — dinner, movies, no contact.

At the time, I didn't think of myself as lonely. Sometimes I would still be up when it was quite late at night. The hallways of the dormitory were always brightly lit, so you wouldn't feel like you were creeping around at night if you chose to walk around. I'd get a candy bar out of the machine in the lobby, just because it felt good to get something to eat in the middle of the night when everyone was asleep. Then I would walk the hallways on different floors and read all the notes on the memo boards. Almost everyone had a memo board. Some were in the shape of a light bulb, others were a spring landscape that invited you to write your message on a mountain pond. In the still, dawn hours, the messages were so energetically written that they seemed to shout: "Sally — band practice at two!" They made the coming daytime seem like an exhausting dream. The love messages were cryptic:

"Hey, potatohead! How did you like them spuds?"

"Yo! Bopee! Lay off the sheep and let me come blow your horn!"

"If I'm a french fry, why don't you be my ketchup?"

It gave me an image, distressing and exciting, of students tirelessly experimenting with each other's bodies. And then there was intellectual graffiti. I made up a few and scribbled them:

God is dead.

—Nietzsche

You're in big trouble.

—God

During the day Beth and I fell in with each other again, never fighting, like a couple too old to think anything that important.

But this isn't the girl I first started telling about. About that time, there was a short article in the *Brown Daily Herald* about a female student who was raped at a fraternity house. The details floating around were that she had done consecutive shots of whiskey, cheered on by whomever, and after she was incoherent, three students had her in succession. Another story was that she dared them to do it. She was found in the lounge the next morning — sick to her stomach, that sort of thing. It seemed like rape to me, whether she gave them permission at some point or not. The idea of placing her in the lounge afterwards made me feel a little queasy. But I was also fascinated with the story, and I didn't want to know why.

After that, Skip came around to talk. We had taken to dropping in on each other just like before. After a while he mentioned that he knew this girl — the one who had been raped. She lived on the fourth floor. They had talked about it and now she would come by from time to time to say hello. But it was more than that. He had told her about himself — that he was a virgin — Beth's unsnapped jeans had kept him intact — Louise, this girl, had started hinting lately that some night she was going to bring her contact lens case to his room. I didn't get it. Was he shocked that her vision had been corrected? But it was a pretty clear code if you knew that you couldn't wear contacts to bed at night; you had to soak them in some fluid. Skip had read her a passage from his journal, before he knew her, about how he saw the incident. She took him to his bed, more like a favor than anything else.

We went over how it wasn't really a bad thing. He was a counselor and she was a freshman, but she didn't live on his floor. She had coaxed him into it. He had written that passage before he even knew who she was, and she had wanted him to read it.

She had visited on the floor a lot, and I knew her just to say hello. There was no big meeting. I can't remember when we met, like I said. I don't know why we started talking. I think Skip told her about me, that I was articulate and a thinker, that sort of thing. I don't know if that sums me up. I also ran on the cross country team, but I could tell this didn't intrigue her at all. She had met athletes before. From the start she treated that side of me like a mistake I was making. I remember her tapping my running shoes, while I was wearing them, and then tapping me on the forehead. "How do you reconcile these two?" she asked. At the time the question seemed profound, and I had no answer. The question invited me to feel mysterious and therefore desirable. She was inventing a scenario within which she would be willing to make love with me. I did not mention being a virgin because that was too physical a word. It was an eager, sweaty-palmed word that did not accord with the abstract, intellectual world wherein I dwelled, as far as I could make out. So I implied that I was experienced, even jaded. I see myself leaning back in my desk chair, one foot in an open drawer, my hands behind my head, trying to seem fathomless in order to entice her to dig deeper and help me invent what she needed to find.

She, for her part, began to hint at a tragic side to her nature — one that only a great mind could understand. She was the Ancient Mariner and I was the wedding guest, fated to hear her story and be forever changed by it. One day, after we spoke for awhile, she showed me where she had cut herself on the wrist with a disposable razor. She had not really been serious. She did not feel it was a suicide attempt, nor did I. Now I see that she was trying to make her mystery worthy of the genius she thought she saw in me.

I told Skip of our growing intimacy. He had stopped sleeping with her after only a couple of nights. They had decided they were best suited to each other as friends. I didn't have any sense that he dumped her. It was more like the play was over and he had to exit left and she had to exit right. He sprung on me the fact that I had to go talk to the Dean of Somebody or other, because he had conveyed the information about the disposable razor to them. It didn't occur to me to not go, although now I'd refuse. I went to see this fellow, in some office within an office. Walking in there I felt like a small child and I realized that's what the administration thought, too, in spite of all the "right to be you" rhetoric that the term "liberal arts education" tends to spawn in college catalogues and brochures. Course catalogue descriptions still float in my head, meaningless as advertisement jingles: "We will attempt / endeavor / consider the soul of a man in relation / in conjunction with / for / despite / in order to / so that / we will / may / might."

The Dean gave me what he called "the details of Louise's case." He used her name a lot, like he was delivering a legal brief. By her request, the college did not press charges or involve the police. The three offenders were brought into the office to see her, as she had also requested this. They were on some sort of secret probation and were sorry about the whole thing. She had also requested as much anonymity as possible so that she could remain at Brown and continue her studies. It was very cut and dried, and despite the hyper-intimacy that was

between Louise and me, I did not have this picture of her at all. Continue her studies? We never talked about classes. The interview with the Dean was more of a briefing session. He informed me how they viewed the situation and I listened.

Things went on this way. Beth dropped by occasionally, but I was increasingly indifferent to her. My sudden lapse of energy resulted in tired exchanges about campus events. I no longer felt any hopeful intensity and just felt untuned in her presence. But with Louise I felt alert. The fact that the same feeling was so neatly transposed from one woman to another should have warned me that I was running some film in my mind and women were the blank screen. Of course with Louise, she was sort of directing the film, editing it as we went along, shaping it into narrative form so that it seemed right and inevitable.

One night a lot of people were drifting in and out of my room. It might have been a hall party. Louise had just come back from Boston where she had seen David Bowie in concert. She seemed on a more energetic plane. Maybe she was just stoned. She floated around the party telling everyone what Bowie wore, what he sang. I teased her about her passion for him: "I'll bet if he were here right now, you'd be too shy to speak." "That's what you think," she said. The group started thinning out a bit, and I had this sense that she was thinking about spending the night. I chattered on, making it easy for her to remain behind. When we were alone it seemed very important to me to keep talking. I sat in my desk chair and she lay down on the bed. We chatted some more. Finally she patted the bed and said "Don't you think it's time you got on the bed, too?" I said no. I said I didn't think it was a good idea. There were things . . . certain things that she didn't know, reasons I couldn't go into with her, or anyone. So we got interested in my dark past. What was wrong? Oh, just something that happened. And while I talked, I tried to think what it might be. Maybe I was actually her brother, or I had been castrated in a freak accident in kindergarten. Then I settled on the idea that I had been accused of rape in the past, that I was on probation of some kind, and getting on the bed with her was bound to violate it. After a bit she asked me if I had raped someone. No, that's not it, I said. It was like a bizarre game show. Well, could she just lie on the bed with me for a little while? Her roommate was away for the weekend and she didn't feel like sleeping alone. Was she just being clever? I thought so then, now I'm sure she was telling the simple truth, although she thought she was being clever too.

I got on the bed and just lay beside her, and she was quiet. For a long time I felt good about the situation. I could hear myself telling Skip in the morning how I had comforted her, no more, despite her clear offer. How I, unlike the other boys, unlike him, had given her new insight into men, new respect for their sensibilities.

Then I got more and more aware of her lying there. I felt that if she moved even a little I would jump as if something had brushed against me when I was in the dark. She had not said anything for an hour, but I sensed she was awake. A little bit after that, I began to absently pat her shoulder. I willed my hand to move across her chest. All the while a voice asked me "What do you think you're doing? What do you mean by this?" Still she was absolutely silent, as though she were the proctor in some exam who knew the answer, but the whole point was for me to discover it unaided. I grasped the zipper tab at the nape of her neck between thumb and index finger. She shifted, almost imperceptibly, so that the dress material was slack around the zipper, so that it could be pulled down without making any noise. Her breathing was very careful, very measured, like soldiers in those war movies just before they break from cover. Slowly everything became more frantic and hard-edged. We did not speak a word, as if we were lovers in each other's dream, and knew that any sound would cause us to awaken. Everything seemed blind and thirsty; each of us feeling for somewhere to be, somewhere to nestle and hide. My delight was in her sharp intake of breath, her fingers tightening.

I figured that was the beginning of something. We'd be good for each other. Early in the morning she said she had to get back to her room. When I saw her again, later in the afternoon, she was in the lounge with a bunch of other people. She gave me a careful greeting, and just like that I saw that the night before had been sealed off, a secret. She would not come down to the room even to talk. There was no longer any point.

Later I told Skip something about that evening, how she had patted the bed, what she had said. And then I told him how we talked about it for a while, I explained why I would not sleep with her, and then I sent her back up to her room. He congratulated me, and was very warm in his praise, for doing what he felt he should have done.

That night I went to bed quite late, but before I did I walked around the dorm reading memo boards. Of course when I got to hers I wanted to write something, but the more I tried to think of something to write, the more I realized that I really didn't want to write anything. The episode was over, my air hose intact. I kept on down the hall, walking the bottom of some unheard of ocean, everyone around me drowning.

Garry M. Leonard
Waterville
teaches English at Colby

**Before you love,
learn to run through snow
leaving no footprint.**

Turkish Proverb

*What could love be wanting here
in Maine, midwinter?
Ludicrous, the whole idea—
this is no time for love,
we wear too many layers
and even, after effort,
getting to our skins,
we find them gray and pasty.*

*And yet a friend comes to announce
he has been struck with love
for, it gradually emerges,
another friend, and both of them
married of course, to other friends
and their kids, naturally, friends too.*

*You want to shout at them
"It's not even March!"
You want to shake them,
show them the four-foot drifts,
the dwindling woodpiles,
the ice dams on the roof,
the squash in the back room going soft.*

*Like a dream car made of glass
rust can't reach them—
impervious to roadsalt
or the hot salt wash of tears
they're months ahead of us
somewhere in summer,
rolling in flowers.*

*There's nothing you can tell them, though you know
at moments Maine will set them back—
force them, for discretion in fresh snow,
to learn to ski in one another's track.*

Sylvester Pollet
E. Holden

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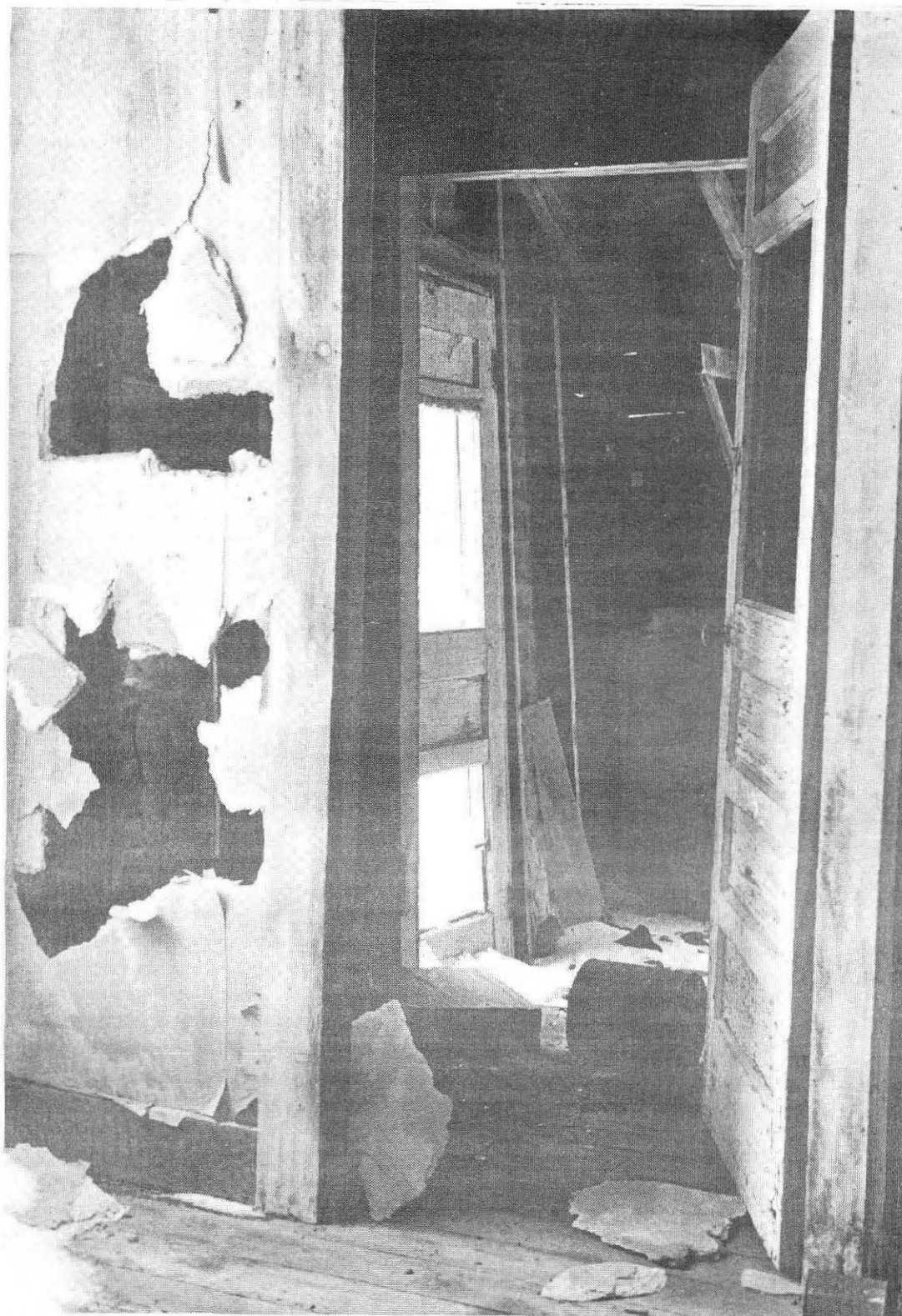


Photo by Michael Howland

Another World

"Hey Bernadette, get me another beer, willya?"

Bernadette sighed heavily, rolled her yellowed eyeballs heaven-ward, and headed for the kitchen. She'd probably miss the exciting part of "Another World." But no matter. What happened when Lance discovered that he was not the father of Delia's child would be small stuff compared to what would happen here if Ralph didn't get his goddam beer the minute he asked for it.

Ralph patted her ass as she walked by.

"Christ," he thought, "what a keister."

He could remember when she had such a cute, tight little rear that he could get hard just thinking about it. No more. Twenty years, twenty pounds. All in the rear it looked like.

"Get the lead out, Bernadette. I'm thirsty."

"Keep your shirt on, Ralph. I'm moving as fast as I can."

She was pleased at her own boldness. She walked back into the living room. The theme music from "Another World" leaked from the TV. Oh, well. She could always call Wanda and find out what happened. Wanda never missed an episode. Wanda didn't have a fat slob drunken bum husband hanging around the house all day driving her nuts. She proffered the sweating can to Ralph.

"Aintcha gonna pop it? God, Bernadette, you get lazier by the minute. You got nothin' better to do than lay around watchin' soaps and getting fat. OPEN THE CAN!"

She opened the can, willing her hands to be steady. She was scared. She was always scared when he yelled like that. She never knew which way it would go. Sometimes he just made noise. Some times he hurt her. If she could tough it out she'd be better off. He was like a hound dog — he could smell fear on her.

He took the can from her roughly, spilling some beer on the couch. She ran to the kitchen and returned with a cold wet rag. She started to cry a little as she scrubbed at the spreading stain.

"Bernadette, baby, I'm sorry I ruined the couch. Sweetie, honey, it'll be o.k."

She didn't speak. How could he know that she was crying with relief? She was grateful that he had not slapped her with his free hand when he'd taken the beer.

"Really, baby, don't cry, o.k.?"

Christ, she really made a federal project out of everything!

She struggled to control her voice, to get the tone just right. Tone was very important. Her mother had always said so.

"Oh, Ralph." Smiling tremulously, "Of course I'm not mad. You know I'm always a little over-emotional right before I get my period."

He knew alright. Christ, did he know! She was like a crazy woman sometimes! He was a good guy, an understanding husband, and he tried to be patient, but sometimes, man, she was too much. Sometimes she needed a few slaps to keep her straight. He heard her back in the kitchen, heard the sounds of pots and the refrigerator door opening and closing.

"Ralph."

She stood framed in the doorway. God, he hated that polyester crap that she always wore. Did she really think that stretch pants made her look slimmer? And those print over blouses. Ugh!

"Yeah. What?"

"What would you like for supper, chili or meatballs and spaghetti?"

"Make it chili. And a salad. You got any of that homemade bread left?"

"About half a loaf."

"Good."

She was a good cook. You had to give her that much. Too good maybe. That's how come she'd picked up all that lard around the rear. He drained the can.

"Hey, Bernadette, another brew. And pop it this time, huh? Bring me some chips or somethin', too. I'm starvin'."

He headed down the hallway towards the john. She watched him and thought bitterly.

"Unzip your fly for you? Hold your dick while you pee?"

She wished she were brave enough to say it out loud. Someday. Someday.

He lumbered into the kitchen and sat down on the red plastic covered chair.

"Go relax in the living room, honey. I'll bring your beer and chips."

"Nah, I'll sit here and keep you company."

She smiled brightly and turned to the refrigerator. Shit, she thought, shit, shit, shit. She would give a lot to have a minute to herself.

She served the beer, being careful to open it, and then she filled a bowl with corn chips. She placed a paper napkin next to the beer and went back to the stove to prepare the chili. Her hands trembled slightly. She could feel him watching her.

Ralph tipped the chair back and put his feet on the table. The bottoms of his white socks were stained yellow-brown from his work boots. He unbuckled his wide leather belt and opened the button on the waistband of his dungarees. He let out a loud, satisfying belch. Ahh! That was better. Bernadette turned and made a little face.

"Something wrong, Miss Prim? You got a problem?"

She smiled — too quickly, too brightly.

"No, Ralph, no! Just checking to see if you're ready for another beer."

He picked his beer up, drained it, and suddenly stood and hurled the can at her. It hit her right breast hard enough to make her wince.

"Yeah, you could say I'm ready."

She crossed her hands in front of her in an unwitting imitation of the Madonna. Her heart was pounding, and she felt as if her insides were about to escape from between her legs. Again, the fight for control. DON'T LOOK SCARED. Who was she kidding? He knew, he knew.

He smiled, revealing mossy yellow teeth. She shuddered. God, how he disgusted her.

"Yeah, Bernadette, sure."

He sat down. She began to breathe more easily.

"Another brew would go down good. And hurry up with the friggin chili, willya? I'm hungry."

Let the games begin! She brought the beer. Steady now. Smile. Be sweet. Be docile. Kiss ass. Refill the bowl with chips. She watched carefully, wary now. It all depended on her. If she could just keep him from getting mad again, just keep him happy. He reached up, brushed his thumb lightly across her nipple. He ran his tongue over his lips. His eyes were glassy. His breathing was heavy and uneven.

"Did I hurt you, honey? I didn't mean to hit you. Want me to kiss and make it better?"

Back and forth, back and forth, ever so lightly. She stood frozen. He was in control and he knew it. So did she. She wanted to vomit. She laughed, a metallic, coy little laugh.

"Oh, Ralph, you devil."

She smiled flirtatiously, slapped lightly at his hand and backed up.

"Let me get back to work here or you'll never get supper."

"O.k., o.k. Get me another beer."

He leered.

"But don't forget what I want for dessert."

"Don't worry," she thought, "you won't let me forget."

She'd gained another small victory. Maybe she could turn it into a reprieve.

She stirred the sizzling ground beef. Methodically she chopped the peppers and onions fine and added them to the mix. She looked in the refrigerator for garlic and couldn't find any. Panic welled up like bile in her throat. Ralph loved garlic in his chili. Oh God, what would she do if there was none? She spotted the garlic under the lettuce in the crisper. Her relief was so great that she felt faint for a moment.

She minced the garlic, added it to the beef and stirred again. She glanced at Ralph. Would he mellow out or get nasty again? She had to be careful. Do things right. Get him just drunk enough but not too drunk. She used to try to get him to pass out so that he wouldn't be interested in sex. She'd stopped that because he'd get her when he came to. Hard. Fast. Painful.

She'd get a beating before he fucked her. Standard operating procedure. It was the violence, the smell of her fear that aroused him. She'd had her triumphs though. Small but significant. She did not have orgasms.

She smiled at the thought of how angry that made old Ralph. He saw himself as incredibly sexy and macho, a real bedroom athlete. What a joke! He was repulsive. A filthy, smelly, animal. He could beat her, humiliate her, use her as a receptacle. But he couldn't make her come. It was the only thing she had left, the only area of her life she could control. When he was done with her and had passed out, she would masturbate fiercely to orgasm, fantasizing about having

sex with other men while Ralph watched, shackled and helpless. In her dreams she was young and supple. She had no layers of fat around the hips, no sag of gravity in the breasts. The men were handsome, virile, wild about her. They did not beat her. She did not masturbate for sexual release; she masturbated for revenge.

She preheated the oven to 300 degrees. The bread would be better warm. She took the salad things from the refrigerator and grabbed another beer for Ralph. Better to anticipate him at this point. She flashed another bright smile.

"Here you go, honey. Supper's almost ready."

He took the beer, drained half of it immediately, and placed the can on the gray formica table. He watched her put the salad together. Suddenly he felt sad, regretful. He loved her. Swear to God he did. He remembered the young Bernadette. Slim, lovely, sweet, so sweet. Long auburn hair. Freckles. A body he loved to love.

He took another pull on the can. Some beer trickled out the side of his mouth and down his chin. He leaned his chin absently into his shoulder to wipe it clean. He could smell his own sweat; strong, acrid. He reached up and rubbed his chin. Two days worth of stubble. His tee shirt stretched over what he had to admit was a beer belly. Sometimes he was a little sick of himself. Couldn't find a job, couldn't turn his wife on, couldn't control his rage. He didn't mean to hit her. He hated it but he couldn't stop it. It made him feel strong, powerful, on top of things. The young Bernadette walked through his mind again. He sighed. He began to feel angry again. Was he turning into some kind of wimp or faggot? Forget that! Look at her. Fat. Flabby. Graying hair. Sagging breasts. Gross. She deserved whatever he gave her and more. She was lucky to have him. Who the hell else could she get with that face and body?

"Bernadette. A beer."

He wasn't going to turn into some nostalgic jerk. His wife knew her place, not like some of these goddam women's libbers. Nothing worse than an uppity woman.

Bernadette gave him his beer. He'd let her slide for now. Let her worry a bit. Keep her on her toes. It added to the fun of the game.

She wiped the tabletop with a blue cotton dishrag. She set the table with her new plates, the ones she'd collected at the supermarket. She could feel his eyes on her but years of practice stood her in good stead. She went about her business with reasonable calm. Outwardly, at least. Her mind raced. Would tonight be bad? How tanked would he get? Would he screw her or just beat her? She felt tired, old. No dreams left for her. No hopes. No choices. She was bitterly, unbearably sad. How had she come to this? Getting beat up was bad but the sexual violence was worse; demeaning, shameful, depersonalizing. Usually there was no either/or. Sex was the natural consequence of violence.

She rubbed the smooth wood of the salad bowl with a clove of garlic, then tossed the salad with olive oil and vinegar. She felt proud and satisfied about the way she could put a meal together. She grated monterey jack cheese into a bowl and placed it on the table along with the chili and salad. She took a jar filled with daisies from the window sill and placed it on the table. It gave her a happy little feeling inside. Lance and Delia always had flowers on the table. Candles, too. She decided to pretend that they were a normal couple sitting down to Friday night supper. She'd pretend that he was the old Ralph, the one she never got a glimpse of anymore. He was so handsome in his Crackerjack uniform. The Navy was to have been a career; a dishonorable discharge for beating up another sailor in a drunken rage had ended that dream. He was slim and muscular and so good in bed. And she'd been flattered by his jealousy, his possessiveness. He loved her so much that he wanted her all to himself. He didn't even want her to have girlfriends. One by one they had all drifted away, all except good old Wanda. He told her that he would be everything to her and she was thrilled. Above all, he was her ticket to freedom, an escape from a home of alcoholism and violence. She was seventeen, he was nineteen. She couldn't remember feeling young ever after the first year of their marriage.

"Take those fuckin' weeds off the table! Who the hell you tryin' to impress!"

She removed the daisies quickly.

"I thought they'd brighten things up."

"Well you thought wrong."

Another bright little smile from her. A triumphant look from him. That's better. Keep her on edge. Stay in control. Let her flutter around. It wouldn't do any good. She was his. He owned her. It was like sticking a pin through a bug and watching it squirm.

She took the bread from the oven and began to slice it. The aroma was good. Not so good as fresh baked, but good. She loved the smell and the texture and the color. The butter melted as she spread it.

Baking bread was the only creative thing she did. She did no crafts or needlework. She had borne and nursed no children. He had seen to that, she thought bitterly, in one of their little sessions. The memory came shrieking into her consciousness. Sweat broke out on her upper lip, between her breasts, on the back of her neck. Her knees felt shaky.

"You're my wife," he had said. "I own you. You're worth no more to me than a piece of meat hanging on a hook."

Cont'd. next page

And then he'd done the unspeakable thing. No babies for her. Never. Never. Never. She stifled an urge to scream and forced her mind away from it. She turned to face him, smile back in place. She took another beer from the fridge.

"May I have one, Ralph?"

He considered for a minute. One would probably be o.k. He liked her sober. He liked to know that she was feeling the full impact of his fist and of his sex.

"Sure, go ahead. But hurry up. I wanna eat."

She sat down with the beers. She'd have liked hers in a glass but was afraid to get one. He'd get mad. Say she was putting on airs. Say she thought she was too good for him. Funny, she didn't think she was good enough for anyone, even him.

They ate in silence, she grateful for the peace but wary, watchful. She waited. He had her off balance tonight. He almost always complained about the meal or some part of it. It upset her equilibrium, threw her off balance for him to eat without comment. She felt like a wounded mouse when the cat plays with it. It came to her all at once that Ralph was closing in for the kill! He'd been toying with her for nearly twenty years. It was almost over. She was sure of it. The thought made her happy. It would be over. She could rest in peace. Was there peace? Was there life after death? There was no life before death, she was sure of that.

Why hadn't she left him? Where would she have gone? What would she have done? Who would want her now, a fat, homely, barren woman?

And it hadn't been all bad. When they were newlyweds and he'd been in the Navy, he hadn't beat her so often. Anyway, she'd thought things would change, that it would stop. After a while she'd decided, she knew, that it was her fault. She'd tried to change, be a better wife. She kept the house cleaner, cooked tastier meals, tried to be more passionate in the bedroom. She'd failed. It was inevitable. Ralph told her she was stupid, ugly, incompetent. A slut besides. In time she knew it was true.

"Are you finished, Ralph, I'll take your plate."

She reached towards his plate. Her hand stopped in mid-air. A feeling of dread pounded in her chest. He was quite drunk now and his eyes had a demented gleam.

"Don't bother Bernadette, don't strain yourself."

He stood and sent the dishes crashing to the floor with one quick movement of his arm.

"Now get me a beer." Softly spoken. "And then — CLEAN IT UP!"

She was shaking. She began to go through her ritual prayers. Please let him stop. Please don't let me be hurt again. Please don't let him cut me.

She prayed to no one; she prayed to everyone. She prayed on the outside chance that there might be someone out there who would hear her.

She got the beer, opened it and handed it to him. When the beatings had first begun she had tried reasoning with him, pleading with him, asking questions.

"Is something wrong, Ralph? Did I do something? Why are you angry with me? Please, Ralph, talk to me."

"You know what you did, bitch! Don't get cute with me!"

She'd stopped talking when she realized that it only made things worse, only drove him to greater fury.

"CLEAN UP THAT MESS, I SAID. YOU PIG! YOU FILTHY SLUT! CLEAN IT UP!"

She went to the closet to get the broom. She'd learned not to bend over to pick up the debris. She'd been kicked face first into it too many times. She began to sweep. In her head she chanted her prayers again. This time she added some promises: I'll be good, I'll find a church and start going regularly. I'll give up watching the soaps. The dregs of her beer drained from her can, an amber puddle on the tan linoleum.

"Oh, Bernadette. I'm *sooo* sorry. I didn't know you hadn't finished your beer. Here, have the rest of mine."

He walked towards her smiling. He lifted the can of beer and poured it slowly over her head. She stood perfectly still, eyes closed. She began to cry. The beer spotted her blouse like giant teardrops. She trembled all over, her teeth chattered. She was sick with fear.

"Get me another beer and stop your stupid whining."

He sat down, tilting his chair, head resting against the wall at an angle as if to get a better view. His face was flushed, slick with sweat and excitement.

"Take your blouse and slacks off, Bernadette. They're all wet. I wouldn't want you to get a chill."

"Ralph, please. . . ." She began to cry harder.

"Take them off, Bernadette." It was worse when he used that soft, oily voice.

She unbuttoned her blouse. She was sobbing now, shaking. She slid her pants off, then her blouse. She rolled them into a ball and held them in front of her as if for protection. She stood waiting, waiting for him to tell her what to do.

"Well, well, well. Ain't you ugly? Well, ain't you?"

"Yes, Ralph." Barely audible.

"What'd you say, Bernadette? Speak up. I can't hear you."

"Yes, Ralph." Louder this time.

"That's better. Turn around slowly. Let me see just how ugly you are."

She turned around, eyes downcast. Ashamed. Ashamed.

"Take your bra off, Bernadette. Let's see how far them big tits sag. Do they make it to your belly button yet?"

"Ralph, please." Her head ached from sobbing, she could not stop the tremors in her body.

"Please, Ralph, please."

"Please what, Bernadette? What are you asking me please for? Please do it to me? Please give it to me hard? Don't worry, baby, you'll get it. It's just not time yet."

He stood up.

"Come here."

She stood mute.

"COME HERE!"

She walked towards him. He reached forward, placed two fingers under the band of her bra and ripped it from her. She kept her eyes downcast as he encircled her, speaking once again the unspeakable things in his slick, oily voice. She stood frozen. He began to touch her, he began to hurt her. She screamed. He doubled his fist and smashed it into the soft expanse of her belly. She sprawled into the broken crockery, turned to her side and instinctively pulled her knees to her chest. He began to kick at her back, already bleeding from the broken dishes. He kicked at her sides, her legs, her head. As he delivered the kicks he chanted:

"Whore."

"Bitch."

"Slut."

And more. And worse. Over and over until his chanting was drowned out by her screams. He stopped. Foreplay was over.

"Oh, baby. Just tell me the truth. Tell me who you're doing it with? I promise to forgive you. Just tell me, tell me."

She could not speak or scream. She could not even cry anymore. She fought to stay conscious, afraid of what he might do to her if she passed out. Ralph was crying now, lifting her from the floor, carrying her to the bedroom. Her pain was exquisite, breathtaking, beyond expression, beyond screaming.

"I'm sorry honey. You know I love you. Swear to God I do."

He laid her on the bed, chanting again, crooning:

"Daddy loves his baby girl. Daddy doesn't like to hurt baby but baby has to be a good girl for Daddy."

She felt her gorge rising and fought it back down. He'd be furious if she vomited. She didn't want him to kill her. She had other plans.

He slipped her underpants off, and began to undress. Let it be fast, she prayed, let it be fast. She looked at him, a fat white slug in the moonlight. In a moment he was on her, chanting, pumping, chanting his obscene litany. Then it was over. She lay still until he slept. She did not touch herself tonight. She was in too much pain. Lying there, she knew the truth again. Ralph's truth. He was right, always had been. She was stupid, disgusting, a filthy whore. She was bad alright. So bad that not even God could love her.

He did not know how much time had elapsed when she was able to rise painfully from the bed. She pulled on a robe to cover her shame, her body. She hobbled to the kitchen holding the wall for support. It took a very long time to travel that nine feet. She poured herself a drink from the bottle of vodka she kept hidden in the closet with the cleaning supplies. Once when their car had broken down and Ralph couldn't take her food shopping, she'd gone with Wanda. What fun it had been, almost like a vacation. On the way home she'd asked Wanda to stop at the liquor store. Said she wanted a little something in the house for "special occasions". Well, her special occasion had arrived.

She tossed it back, choked a little at the burning sensation in her throat and poured another. Ah, screw this, she thought, and took a drink from the mouth of the bottle. The pain was beyond words. She deserved it, though. yes sir. Ask Ralph. Half a bottle began to take the edge off.

She opened the junk drawer and picked past the bits of string, the rubber bands, the twist ties and other assorted crap until she found the small bottle. She sighed in relief. She'd been afraid that Ralph might find it. She took another drink. She emptied the pills onto the blue formica counter. A veritable rainbow, she thought. Forty-six pills. Uppers, downers, and everything in between. She'd been saving for a long time, begging pills from Wanda, one at a time, "for her nerves". Wanda's doctor prescribed these things like they were M&M's, for God's sake. And Wanda was a junkie. She just didn't know it.

One by one, she popped the pills into her mouth and washed them down with vodka. She was *SO* weak and she wasn't used to drinking so much. She'd have to be careful not to pass out before she'd completed her task. She had to swallow *ALL* her little friends. She started to take three, four pills at a time. At last she was done. She felt happy.

She staggered to the couch and lay face up. She closed her eyes and let herself drift. She smiled, and wondered what Lance would do when he found out that he wasn't the father of Delia's baby.

Ride a White Horse

The doctor stood calmly leaning over the patient. "Try to relax. You must get some sleep. I'll give you something for that right now."

"Oh, God, no!" screamed the patient trying to rise from the bed. "Please . . . I don't want to sleep. You know what will happen if I fall asleep."

The doctor frowned. "You know you can die from lack of sleep. The lack of REM sleep can be very dangerous."

"I'd rather die," said the patient. "I don't want to see the white horse again."

"Perhaps, when you see the white horse again you could get on its back. Wouldn't that change the picture? Wouldn't that make you feel better?" soothed the doctor.

"The horse is too big. I've tried to get on. Then there is laughing. All that horrible laughter that grows louder and louder. I can't stand the laughing." The patient began to weep.

"You must control yourself," said the doctor not unkindly, "Dreams are our own creation. You can control them if you try. I'm ordering sedation. This has gone on too long." The doctor turned and opened the gray door. A nurse entered quietly.

There was muffled talk between the doctor and the nurse. The nurse slipped out into the hallway with her orders. The doctor pulled a chair to the patient's bedside and waited.

"Why don't you wear a white coat?" asked the patient.

"Certain colors are soothing," said the doctor.

"White. White is not soothing. Yes, you're right. A white coat would be a reminder. You get inside a coat, but you have to get on top of the horse. There's the difference," mumbled the patient.

"You must think of something else now. Something pleasant. It's not good for you to keep going over your failures."

"A prince. I saw a prince. Did I tell you about the prince? When I got up close he didn't have a face. He held out the reins from the gaping mouth of the white horse. I could see all the horse's teeth and they fell out at my feet." The patient was talking to the ceiling now.

"Look at me when you talk," said the doctor lightly, "I told you before that dreams cannot hurt you. You must gain control before you fall asleep."

"I can't!" the patient said staring hard at the doctor.

"You can if you will," the doctor reaffirmed.

"When I was a child they taught me . . ."

"You must forget your childhood teachings now. That's why you are here." The doctor noted on a yellow pad to resume the shock treatments the following morning. The patient must forget, to recover. And the doctor's reputation was at stake. This patient was taking far too long. Resisting too much. What power of destruction those ancient fairy tales had. With great relief the doctor remembered that this was the last patient with the "white horse syndrome," and took the syringe from the nurse's tray.

"Stop! I tell you I can't go to sleep. Get away." A slight scuffling noise. The nurse held the patient firmly by the shoulders while the doctor administered the injection. The nurse left with the tray and the doctor sat down to wait again.

"You're killing me, you know that," said the patient with half-closed eyes. "You want me to die."

"That's ridiculous. I want you to live," said the doctor.

"No. You've killed the prince. His face is gone. But the horse! My God, the horse still lives. It won't let go. It always rises again from a pile of teeth and bone. It will rise upon your head. Mark my word, doctor, you aren't safe either."

"It's only a dream, my dear. Try to relax so the medication can help you. Think of realistic things. Do not drift. Stay on course. I'm here to help you."

"I'll fight it. I'll fight you . . ." But the patient was losing consciousness now and couldn't fight. Down. Down and down to the green

meadow, the blue sky, the violet mountains that exist in the minds of youths. The white horse steps high. Front and center beside the stream. The breeze is cool. The doctor jots "goosebumps" and the time on the yellow pad.

It seemed like hours to the doctor but mere moments to the patient. The patient was sweating and moaning. The doctor kept writing on the yellow pad. The words were coming more clearly so the doctor rang for the nurse to bring a recorder.

The tape ran silently into the night. The doctor's shadow was falling across the patient and seemed to change shape as the patient tossed under the pastel flowered sheet. The doctor repeated, "You are in control. Make the horse leave. You have the power to make the horse disappear."

"No," mumbled the patient, "I must get on."

"No. Do not get on the horse. I know now that harm will come to you if you get on the horse. Go away from the horse."

The doctor had to save this patient. The others had died. There would be a board hearing, loss of practice, and shame if the last patient died. The others. The others had finally mounted the white stallion . . . and died.

"The laughing is so loud. I can't stand it!" screamed the patient. "The women. The women are laughing. More and more women in the trees."

"Don't look. Don't listen. Get away from there. Your mind has the power to bring you to the real world. Come to me in the real world. Now!"

The patient lay very still. The sweating had stopped and the sheet moved only slightly and irregularly.

"Nurse! Stat!" the doctor croaked. But it was too late.

The nurse finally covered the man with the pastel flowered sheet. The last one, she thought, thank God. The doctor was in the hall talking to the physician who signed the death certificate. It was too quiet for a mental hospital at midnight. It was too quiet for any hospital. It was unreal. A sound began in the air ducts. No one noticed. They had their own real worries to contend with.

The desk nurse noticed the noise first. She'd heard it before and paid it no mind. Things only troubled you when you thought on them, paid them mind, constructed a reality in your mind. She was young. She'd been taught to know better. The drumming increased its volume. The nurse opened a chart and kept on working in the dim light. The doctor was sipping coffee in the lounge alone. She fought off the stories in her mind. The ones the man had told her in his dreams. Princes, white horses, and maidens. Unreal. Foolishness.

The doctor went to the front desk to sign out. The nurse was somewhere checking on a patient. The drumming beat in the doctor's ears. The drumming of hoof beats coming closer.

They called it suicide. They said the pressure got to her. They said the strain of losing another patient was too much. They said she couldn't handle reality. They said a career woman was just asking for it trying to combine everything. Trying to have it all.

They said all these things as the doctor lay flat on a gurney in the hall. The nurse covered her face with the pastel flowered sheet and wondered to herself how the doctor had inflicted such wounds. But the reality was, she had. The nurse went back to her station hardly noticing the receding drumming of the hoof beats that would never come to her. She sat down to transcribe the tapes. It would surely take her 'til midnight to finish. Wrapped in the reality of her work she never noticed the tiny mouse in a red jacket run under her desk. The mouse who waits for midnight to become a white horse.

Linda J. Bartlett
Warren
is a columnist for the
Rockland newspaper

American in Bombay

*I rise at five to watch the truck come
to clear bodies from the street
before store fronts, lying like rolled rugs.
The driver races the engine,
some wake up, turn over,
and the barefoot boy kicks at others
to tell if they are asleep or dead.
A blond boy is turned like a log.
I met this westerner yesterday
when he begged me for money
and saw him the day before
picking up melon rinds.
His hair had not been cut in years.
His unmoving eyes stared but did not see,
milky eyes vanishing in oceans of red.
I bought rice biriyani he did not want
and would not eat.
He had not spoken to a white man
he knew in years.*

*Nothing was left in Weston
or Hartford, just scars from Scarsdale,
where ideas were thin as air he breathed,
so he shipped himself out
to find out how far cargo can go
when no one cares.
He dropped into India a decade ago
with no shots, a nylon backpack
with Velcro flaps with a label "Down East"
and a pouch of traveller's checks on his chest.
His head was empty except for yearning
but the world was wide with his wonder.
He came for the ideas of India
which soon felt thin as air too.
Reincarnation seemed a horror
because he could not bear to think of living again.
Karma meant he deserved the life he had,
a vicious thought. He could not discover
Dharma's duties, nor any way at all.
So, he spent the checks on ganga, or poppies,*

*then swapped his backpack with Velcro flaps for more.
Then he sold his jeans and belt
and began on bathtub gin and Bombay bhang,
breathing in at last an air his mind could feel.
One night he came out of a coma,
his boots gone, his eyesight almost,
and he began to wear rags
and sleep on a grain bag,
his head emptier than ever
and no wonder left anywhere.*

*He put down at the place
where people do whatever they want
because no one cares.
And after everything he wanted to do was done
and he had gone all the way to the end
and found no end
his terror got worse.
He sank and sank in his hole
that seemed to have no bottom,
believing and hoping there was one,
until he found the depth he sank for
and the hole went away,
Scarsdale and Hartford and Weston went away,
even India itself went away
and last night in Bombay a bottom really appeared.*

*The worker rolls him over with his foot.
I watch as he lifts him into the truck,
hair dripping, and the driver drives
to the long trench in the country
where the worker's foot will roll him off
among melon rinds into air in the hole
where there is a bottom
filling up.*

**Terry Plunkett
Hallowell**
teaches at UMA

At The Top Of The Mountain

*Trees scraping rain
off the sky*

I standing below

outside the matter

Amplexus

*When I can
touch
nothing*

*I am not alone
for it is that empty space
that is familiar to all that is.*

**Pat Murphy
Portland**
operates OUT-OF-PRINT Bookstore

Second Divorce

*Once more
around the
block*

*to
the
bloodbank.*

*In Umbria
a swallow has a chance
to be the most important thing
in the land.
The oil is the clearest
and the basil the sweetest
you will ever taste.
Young men still learn to play the lute.
Blood is the color of the red wine.
To the olive growers
each sunrise is the Creation.
The old women know dreams
and yell them
through the winding cobbled streets.
A man named Tommaso brushes his thick hair
in the reflecting eye of a lizard.
The priests can sometimes
say the secret silences that lie
in the folded hills
and full hearts of the people.
Square chapel towers glow
in the smooth light of sunset
that seeps up through the soil.
When you first stir in the morning
to a warm touch
you wonder
if it is the skin of your love
or the breeze.*

Lyle Dennett
Rockport
builds houses and writes



Photo by Michael Howland

The Codfish Relay Race

Seems to me every town in America ought to hold a codfish relay race the way it's done each year in Milbridge, Maine. My bet is *The New England Journal of Medicine* would report out improved mental health.

Consider. We Americans are grippers and we've perfected the act. Gripping goes along with competition and free speech, wanting to do it quicker (or slower), in a bigger way (or smaller), different, my way. Think the library closes too early? Complain to the librarian. Want a speed limit sign posted? Complain to the road commissioner. Think we're too far out or in Nicaragua? Hector our congressman, visit his local office (if he's not around, sit in and wait). Or if our rich neighbor buys yet a third car and new redwood lawn furniture, complain that his cars eat gas and he doesn't need new lawn furniture; he's never in the yard anyway — too busy working. Admit it, we're grippers who can pump up our blood pressure and reshape our mouths into a permanent sneer over a ref's bad call.

But imagine, for a moment, a gripe-free neighborhood, town, a gripe-free America. The waitress embraces the coffee-drinking-pincher. We ask for a pothole repair and shall receive it. Our successful neighbor takes US for a ride in his luxurious new car and shares a beer at his fine redwood table. (The congressman still isn't in his office, but life's not perfect.) All of this can be ours, if we do as the Milbridgians do — run a codfish relay race once a year. Here's what happens.

In a neighborhood park, or on the square or common, rope off a rectangle about thirty yards by ten. Roll a sixty-gallon drum into a corner. Borrow the new pump truck from the fire department and set it up halfway down field, the hose aimed at the course. Persuade a local fishery to donate four cod. Have to use cod because they're American. (Did you know that once a gold codfish hung in the Boston statehouse?) Also, a gutted cod, about fifteen pounds, is an ugly, bug-eyed, grey-green, soft and slippery double-armful. Just perfect for this race.

Round up four-person teams of grippers. They're easy to find. Tease the waitresses and the cheapskates; challenge the foremen and assembly-liners; call down the Knights of Columbus and the B'nai B'rith. Likely, more than needed will volunteer. Then plan the race for about 4:30 on a summer Saturday, but don't start until 5:15 or so. Gives the gathering neighbors something to gripe about.

When the kids are nagging and the oldtimers' handkerchiefs are soaked with sweat, send the librarian onto the field dragging a wagonload of gallon-size Mazola oil bottles (any brand will do). Watch as one by one she empties the oil into the sixty-gallon drum then returns with another wagonload — this time, four warming cod. Into the drum they go. Finally, pile the official codfish relay racing gear at each end of the course: firemen's rain slickers, firemen's boots, firemen's hats and firemen's gloves. One size — extra large — fits all. Now call the contestants.

When the first three teams enter the field and take their places, two runners at each end, the mayor, beneath stovepipe hat and behind a bullhorn, signals the start. Into the boots, hat, gloves, and slicker (must be buttoned last) the contestants fumble. Now they stumble to the drum, haul out an oil-slick cod and, cradling it the way they would their dearest child, run the thirty yards to their partners. Halfway down the field they're blasted by the fire hose. Hats may fly, knees buckle, but a real combatant never drops the cod (or he's out). Into the waiting arms of the second relay man the floppy cod is heaved while the first undresses, then grabs the cod until the second is dressed and ready to run back down the field, cod in arms. Four trips. The fastest time wins.

Undignified you say? No argument there. The drenched racers smell like the back end of some ludicrous sea creature. And the spectators, after screaming thirty minutes for members of their own species who dressed in rubber and ran through a fire hose spray, clutching a slicked-down cod, are red-faced, hoarse, and spent.

But listen. No griping. No kids whining. No petty jealousies. Lots of laughs. Lots of good-natured kidding. Gripes drift away like milkweed seeds on the gentle afternoon breeze. No thought of the world beyond the racing field. Even the racers feel a peculiar euphoria born of uncertainty since the losers seem to be winners and the winners, losers. After all, who wants to be remembered all winter as the winner of the annual codfish derby?

Seems to me every town in America ought to run a codfish relay race. Why, it's something like holding a funny-mirror up to ourselves, and that's always been good for a gripe-freeing laugh.

Joe Sterberg
St. Charles, Ill.
teaches in a community college

Clara: A Triptych



Drawing by Nick Snow

Left Panel: Alicia

Clara's not crazy. I could be crazy. Henry, my husband, he's crazy. The whole damn board of selectmen who did this to her are crazy. But my friend, Clara? Clara is old. Clara has dressed in long black dresses since her husband George died years ago. Clara stays to herself and talks funny sometime. I'm used to that. . . I only hear her realness now. The rest? She's offended some people and. . . well, who knows for sure whether anybody ever talked to the dead?

Do I sound upset? How would you feel if the best friend you ever had in this world was uprooted and sent away. Uh huh. A bunch of grown men acting, they said, as the responsible officers of the town cashed in a lien on the proBerty of an old lady who has lived in this town for fifty years. They're pushing her out of the house that's been her home for the last forty. Worse. They're going to force her to live in one of the wormiest, God-forsaken, state-licensed nursing homes this side of Augusta.

But why pick on Clara and not one of the other regulars listed under "taxes in arrears" in the annual Blue Book? I can figure some of the reasons for that and also how it was I was the only person who spoke up for her. First, let me tell you about this friend of mine.

Clara has been more family to me than my own folks, closer than my own mother. Hardly a week's gone by since I discovered her house up on the hill that I haven't been in her kitchen for a cookie or, later on, for a cup of teabag tea and good talk. We've talked about everything under the sun, no holds barred. Clara reads and she got me to reading. . . books about just about everything. And. . . it was from Clara I learned a lot of things about myself, things I could never ask that dear sweet mother of mine about. But, hell, mother was impossible to talk to even before daddy died and she came under the Pastor's wing.

I know, people must have told you how mean she was, scaring young people off her land and things like that. She never turned me away from her gate. When my father died (his boat drifted up on Burnt Island Ledge with him in it) who do you think thought to come over to the school and get me, hug me, walk me out of doors and break the news to me before some principal or teacher called me into the office? Clara. That big black dress was safe harbor to me all the time I was growing up. When my Henry got so wild in one of his jealous fits that I thought, for once, he might make good one of his threats to kill me. . . Clara was there to calm me down. . . make me feel safe. As you can see, Henry didn't kill me. Clara judged him rightly for a wimp. . . and a liar.

Sometimes it was little hurdles she helped me over. I remember complaining to her that my folks didn't hand me some money I asked for. An allowance. And I was really mad. Outraged. Clara just listened. She didn't set me up against the wall and lecture me with "maybe your parents needed that money. . ." or "you could go out and mow lawns and earn some money, couldn't you." Nothing like that. Her eyes opened up a little bit wider than usual in that strong brown face. . . and they just sucked me into her mind, a mind that had made its peace with poverty. . . among other sorrows. And pretty soon I felt like a fool. . . crying about a petty money grievance.

Oh, she can be judgmental. There are times when even I think she's gone over board. . . particularly when she makes out all young people as dangerous drunks. The kids who drove her daughter, Matilda, off the road were drunk at the time. And she did push the law until those guys had everything and maybe extra coming for the mistakes they made on

Center Panel: Henry

I guess I'd have to be deaf not to have heard a few rumblings about the Board's action in disposing of Clara's hovel. As Second Selectman, not much goes on around here in the nature of whining and complaining that I don't hear about it. They mean me to hear about it eventually, don't they? That house of Clara's, if you can use the expression, wasn't fit to live in. I went up there myself with the assessor last time he made his rounds and no, she didn't come at us with her stick. Could feel her peering at us out the window, though. Would you believe, that thing she calls a septic system was flowing down over the slope like a little Niagara. She must have just flushed as we drove up but, I tell you, the sight of that stuff bubbling up and the smell of it was more than I could stand. She's had no complaints only because her husband George bought about 1500 feet of road frontage when they settled up there. Road frontage didn't mean anything back then. You might have bought some of it for a woodlot. Cheap as dirt. Not like now where you see road frontage advertised the same way we advertise shore frontage.

Anyway, it's her own land it was running on. Or was. Now, we all know that that land, so close to the village and all, has got to be developed someday, and that kind of open sewer wouldn't be allowed to go on. The house isn't worth anything but that piece of ground has some potential. That's what last year's revised assessments was all about.

Listen, even if the taxes had been paid for the last couple of years, something would have had to be done. As I reported to the board, the sewer system she had operating put in by her husband thirty-five years ago was about as sanitary as if you had her empty her chamberpots out the window. True. . . there are people in this town who have no better a setup than she has. In fact, a backhouse would do better assuming it got shoveled out and dumped properly now and then.

Well, this system of hers was never dumped. It just spread her gurry into the veins of water coursing down the hill and into the village wells. You may think I'm stretching things a bit, but its entirely possible we could have had a serious health problem in this town. Grandfather clause? Sure. Up to a certain extent that might apply in her case. She wasn't on shore property which would sure as hell have had her fighting the State. You know yourself who would of won that one. No. Being where she was, we probably couldn't have done anything about her on that score even if the whole village. . . kids, babies, expectant mothers and all was eating and drinking hepatitis and other diseases out of her sewer whether we liked it or not.

Of course, the courts being what they are today, we most likely couldn't have done anything. But the taxes was sometfing else. You know that the town can hold liens on back taxes just so long because after awhile the State comes poking in. . . about the same time they look in and tell us to get our assessments up to snuff. I'm telling you now, having those liens outstanding and those taxes unpaid had put all of us in a delicate position. It called attention to our traditional ways of handling what should be and, if I can help it, will be our own damn business.

Well, do you want the State on our backs and peering into every question and assessment? OK, then. Let the old lady sit up there on her old sewer system and her taxes-in-arrears liens and see how it begins to affect you. You've seen your taxes go up already. Well, don't blame your Board. . . we're doing the best we can. . . and that includes keeping the State out of your town's business. The nose of the camel, you know. You gotta keep the nose of the camel out of the tent.

Right Panel: Clara

Alicia will be here in half an hour and I'm all ready to go. I've said my goodbye to the house. No use laboring on that. Alicia can sell what furniture there is, the beds, a few bureaus, this old rocker. I said she could use what money she got for the lot to put toward Nicky's upkeep. She's going to take care of the cat for me, and a nice can of catfood every now and then should help him accommodate himself to a new house and Alicia's dogs. But, he'll get used to the new order of things. . . the same as I will.

The sun's out. No point in standing inside when I can be outside. Or sitting in the doorway anyway. George and I used to like sitting here when the house was new. . . and smelling of fresh cut wood. As fresh and new as the forest it was. Oh, George, you old dreamer, you'll hate to see what's going to happen to our garden spot. It'll be garages and gas stations and party stores before too long. Alicia told me the planning board is going to zone this road and the land adjoining "commercial".

Well, I held on as long as I could. I could have sold the land piece by piece to pay the taxes. I had plenty of offers. But you know that at the rate the assessors were raising my taxes I would have ended up the same way. The only difference is I would have had to watch them cover our old playground with asphalt hot-topping. We had such fun back then, the three of us. You, Matilda and me. No money. But every day was holiday while you were around.

We thought it was just an ulcer. . . and I guess maybe it was at the beginning. Everyone in your family had one, you said. Went with the dreaming and the unwillingness to do things the ordinary way is how I see it. No, you weren't much of a provider. "Something will turn up" you used to say. . . just like Mr. Micawber in David Copperfield. But you were a handsomer man than any man I ever saw in a Dickens illustration. Don't let that go to your head.

Well, here it is. Our land and our house. When I leave it today it will still be intact. Just the three of us will be gone. And we won't be far away, just up the hill. The plot I bought with your veteran's burial money will hold four. So there's room for guests. . . and maybe the cat. Anyway, we'll be together and if this place gets totally spoiled we can start off and begin somewhere new. That'll be fun. A new project. Just the sort of thing you like best. . . solving a new problem. Something that hasn't been done before by anybody. Nothing you can send away and get plans for to put together in your home workshop. A real puzzler. I'm game.

I still have some things to do before we can be off. Alicia said she would stop for a minute at the cemetery so I can have a word in private with our daughter. Matilda doesn't understand how I can take all this ripping and tearing so lightly. She's young and still got a lot to learn and, I should keep in mind, this is the only place she's ever known. She says she can't imagine moving on to a totally new environment. I said, "Well, you negotiated a pretty big changeover, dying as you did." "I had no choice in the matter." "But you handled it. That's my point. I haven't got much choice in this matter. But I'll handle it. And you'll see, my darling, if the time comes when the three of us decide to move on. . . we'll handle it. Don't you lose sleep over it."

And I won't lose sleep over it either. That sun is hot and nice. A clear northwest wind, kit flying weather. That was one hell of a kite you made for Matilda on her thirteenth birthday. I was sure you would never get that thing off the ground. And then, when you did I was afraid you might let go and it would take the child away with it. That's when I decided to grab ahold myself. God, I can still feel that thing tug. And

one wild, partying night. She won no friends doing that. Now those kids are married, settled down, and have kids of their own to worry about.

Damn. I'll miss her. I'll miss the smell of her woodstove, her cat and the cracked linoleum floor which was never clean. A little dirt never seemed to matter much. I'll miss the smell of her. It wasn't much of a place I suppose. . . tiny. A lot of old timers built places for themselves that weren't big enough for a dog to live in. A large dog that is. Snug, though, and a place you can heat with a handful of newspaper and a little kindling has something going for it in our climate. Of course, Clara being huge, over six feet, made it seem even smaller. Big Clara in her rocker and me perched in the one unbroken chair filled that place up.

So what in hell does the town intend to do with her place once she's out? Burn it down most likely. . . sons a bitches. It wasn't the house they were after.

Henry, that's Second Selectman Henry, my husband, had more to do with this transaction than he lets on. He never liked Clara, which is putting the case mildly. More to the point, he never appreciated the time I spent with her. Thought she was a bad influence and, as far as he was concerned, he was probably right. Clara knew I had no real love for him. . . a high school romance is all it ever was. The cheerleader and the basketball team manager. Clara told me way back at the beginning I was a fool to marry so young. Told me I had to keep myself for myself and not rush into becoming another lobster fisherman's wife with nothing to talk about but babies. Meantime, the men cluster out in the kitchen drinking beer, smoking cigarettes, and no talk about anything but the weather, who's fishing how much gear, and who's cutting off who.

Well, I saw to it we never had kids, anyway. I wasn't going to put an anchor around my neck just because I made one mistake. And why do I stay married to him? Have you looked around at the available males over thirty? Makes me sick just thinking about getting more than a one nighter out of any one of them. Clara's happy to sleep in bed alone. She has since George passed away. I really wish I could do it her way.

So, there were people who didn't take to Clara the way I did and there's got to be more than one of them who didn't like me any better for hanging around her place. I do know it was right after Henry and I had that knock down, dragout argument about Clara and the devil that the town took the action it did.

I might as well tell you myself, you'll hear it from someone. When I was a kid, I'd come to visit Clara and maybe some mornings old Becky McGrath, God bless her, who lived even further up the hill, would be sitting in the kitchen. And they'd be talking about somebody saying what to who and somebody else saying something else to Becky or to Clara and after a while it got through to me that some of these talkers were dead and buried. . . had been in the cemetery on top of the hill for a long time, in fact. I'd read the inscriptions on their stones. One afternoon, Clara started telling Becky about the things she had said that morning to Matilda, her daughter, was killed in a car accident years before, remember when it happened. She had been thrown out of the car and bled to death. Nobody knew to put on a tourniquet and, as I told you before, there was not one of them sober enough to know what was going on anyway. Well, never mind that. I knew Matilda was dead and here was Clara talking about her as though they had just been visiting an hour ago.

Weird? Well, our village had many a ghost story to tell. You could say I grew up with them as a special kind of bedtime story. My father saw a ghost one night. She was a nice looking, old-fashioned lady and she was bending over my crib. Looked up at him and smiled her approval. That's what he told me, anyway. Then there was the story about Gram Grey's wicked third mate of a husband getting cut up and thrown overboard off the Horn. At the very hour he was killed, his umbrella lurched out into the room where Gram was sitting and fell down in the middle of the floor.

All I mean to say is, it wasn't that unusual, that kind of talk. If you took it in mind to pack every man, woman and child in this village who believed in ghosts off to the funny farm you'd be left with just two institutions of long standing: the village atheist and the village idiot. No, by god, I can't speak for the idiot.

It might be Clara was into that sort of thing more and deeper than most of the villagers. But you know, the things she and Matilda talked about were no different than the things she and I talked about. It wasn't spooky. Just good solid thoughtful kind of talk. . . mostly about life and things going on. Matilda wasn't a complainer. . . so there wasn't even a trace of what you'd call graveyard clay in her talk.

Then, a few weeks ago, Clara sprung on me the wildest story ever. It made a big impression on me and now I'll probably have cause to remember it as long as I live. I had gone to call on her and no sooner had I opened the screen door when Clara said, "Alicia, I am scared!" And she looked scared. I didn't know how to handle that. . . coming from the strongest human being in the world. So I commenced chattering about something else. . . "was tea ready?" and so forth. She wasn't about to be distracted by that sort of noise. She took a strong grip on my wrist and said "Alicia, I figured anybody would find this hard to take, even you. The fact is. . . I think I've been touched by the devil's hand."

Then it all poured out. . . how she'd been out for a walk up by the cemetery the night before. . . right about sunset. And for no reason she can figure yet, she had

wandered off the road down into the puckerbrush on the side of the road opposite the graveyard. . . had followed some old deer path down amongst a stand of birches. She was peering into the shadows where the spruces take over further down the slope, and she saw something move. At that very moment, the hair rose on her head and she felt something like a hand stroking the back of her neck, gently. Up and down. She was paralyzed. Couldn't move and swears she might be there still except that Helen Walmsely, driving by, picked her up in her headlights and stopped to see what was going on. Clara figured that's what broke the spell. She rode home with Helen but didn't say a word about what had happened. She waited all the rest of that night and the next morning 'til I come by to tell somebody.

Well, we chewed that one over for about an hour with me being the unbeliever up to the point that I saw that Clara was getting angrier with me by the minute. As I said, I grew up with a lot of this kind of talk. . . but as a believer? Not me, not really. Still, this experience had shaken her to the very foundations and no way was I going to get away with passing it off lightly. Then, it occurred to me that the best and maybe only thing I could do for my old friend was get her back up there, with me along for morale, of course, so we could dispel this nightmare. We all learned as kids, that if you fell from a mast, the first thing you had to do is climb back up. I guess that's what I had in mind. But she took some coaxing.

Finally, she did agree and we arranged to meet up by the cemetery that very night. We met. It was cold and it was frosty. We waited for what I figured was a fair length of time. Then I blew the whistle. Time's up. Nothing here. Let's go. Clara had wandered off by herself during the last of it. . . but pretty soon I had her back on the road and headed home. As far as I was concerned, that put an end to the devil business.

But that was not the end of it, not by a long shot. Next morning when I got up and came downstairs I saw Henry was laying for me. . . on what score I didn't know. I recognized the symptoms: the yellow, bloodless jaw and the precise diction, his holding his knees together and not letting his breath all the way out.

"You're up, finally. What time did you get in?"

What was he getting at? Clara and I had stopped off at her place for some talk and some warming up after our vigil on the hill. After all, I had to satisfy myself that I'd gotten my friend calmed down. So? I'd be goddamned if I was going to sit there and be questioned like a naughty school girl. . . so I just dawdled. Drank my coffee, savoring it. . . and, all the while, I could see him getting steamier. The next moment, he was complaining that I had left no dinner for him when he got home from the lobstermen's meeting and no note saying where I was. Well, I had left some dinner in the toaster-oven; he just hadn't looked very hard. And if he thought that now, after all these years, I was going to account to him all my comings and goings, he should have known better.

Well, I got tired of his bleating and told him, "I went for a walk with Clara." And then, just to rile him a little more, "we went to meet somebody." I knew that would cut it. . . and it did. It didn't matter that Clara was with me the whole time. When that fool has an attack of jealousy sickness, nothing answers. It was then I must have added that we went to meet the devil. I was going to hear about that a lot. . . and regret it. Even my dear old mother took it on herself to tell me I should maybe stay away from Clara, that there was evil up on the hill! No, I shouldn't have said it. But the sight of that pissabed white face staring at me wide eyed and hateful just opened me up so I wanted to spit.

Before that breakfast spat was done, Henry threw at me the fact that Fred Otis had arrived late at the lobstermen's meeting and couldn't resist telling him about seeing me up in the birch grove with somebody, he couldn't tell who. I can't figure how come Fred hadn't recognized Clara. He must have gone by when she had wandered further down the slope into the spruces. But now it was clear to me why he was laying for me that morning. Henry can not abide being made to look the fool in front of other people. Always drives him right crazy.

We ended our brawl in the usual way with him making me out a whore and me laughing at him and taunting him with divorce talk. I generally manage to conclude that with the reminder that he won't be able to fish my family's Burnt Island privilege where he knows even a lousy fisherman like him can make a decent living. . . and so on. After a certain amount of that he gets his strangled look, becomes speechless and stalks out.

Well, the next thing I know, Clara's on her way out. Just like that. No house. No beloved land. Welfare income is all she has now, and there are no houses to rent around here even if she could afford it. An important part of my life is drifting away from me and I can't figure any way to stop it. Clara says it's all right. I shouldn't worry, she'll be taken care of and would I please take care of the cat.

If Henry thinks that's the end of it he'd better think again. I'll see him in hell every day of his miserable life from here on out. As for the rest of the dutifully elected officers of this town, well, I'll get them too every chance I get. I know those bastards a lot better than their blessed wives do. . . and you'll see. I have ways.

She'd been taken aback. "Why sure, what's it to you?"

"Well, I think it's time for you to color it again 'cause in this light I can see your dark roots showing."

She remembers her embarrassment. And her anger. And after that he'd had the gall to try to attack her in the back seat of the car. She'd turned him down and off real fast. The funny thing is that he still grates on her nerves. He might be a fine person, but whenever she sees him, he's the nerd who made all the wrong moves.

An older woman leaves the doctor's office. White legs and shoes, a fake fur coat, frosted brown hair crowning a round face. "Can't be her."

The woman unlocks the door of a red station wagon nearby, the back loaded with miscellaneous ball gear. "Must have sons." She gets in, puts her head back against the headrest and closes her eyes. "A long day." The engine hacks; she drives away, the left side a little lower than the right.

Neither woman nor car fit the image she has of the nurse. Her eyes examine the cars in the lot. There are still a dozen or so. Near the laundromat — are there apartments upstairs? Near the doctor's. And what's in the building next door?

A dozen cars, half of them junks, a few small economy cars, two older sports cars and a Turbo SAAB. Which would be the nurse's? Either the SAAB or the MG. With him in the SAAB, she'd have turned all the dials to comfort. In the MG, she'd stretch around to let down the convertible top. Her mini-skirt and his eyes high on her thighs.

She sniffs, searching for the new car smell. He likes this car. They picked it out together. It was the best deal in their price range. Practical, with a touch of class, they'd joked. He'd asked for the sunroof and the sound system. The dealer insisted air conditioning was an investment. And she chose the color. Metallic gray. Subtle. Not flashy sports car yellow nor sleek SAAB black. Muted. Like Monet's water. He likes this car.

She lingers a moment in the car, her space. She knows that she must leave, gets out of the car, checks the lot once more and locks the door. That pale green door awaits her. The one from which the fake fur nurse and the old lady emerged, the one her husband entered an hour and a half ago. Her feet feel heavy. Like walking on fine beach sand, ankle-deep. She trudges forward. She wonders what she looks like to an observer. She hopes her husband will appear. "Her husband" not the nurse's lover.

The pale green office door. Solid steel, standard chrome knob. She turns the handle and pulls back the door. Soft music. Antiseptic smell. A small empty waiting room in shades of orange and brown with blonde furniture. An empty reception window. She moves her leaden feet toward that window. Beyond the two vacant desks and file cabinets, a door partially open. She hears a woman's low laugh, a flattered woman's laugh. A male voice murmurs a reply. Is that him?

She tries to peek around that door fifteen feet away. She wills it open. No luck.

She taps her fingers on the check writer's ledge in front of the window. She strains to hear the words.

The voices move toward her. She stops tapping. She casually leans an elbow on the ledge and admires a bright autumn abstract on the wall above the waiting room chairs. Not as serene as Monet.

The door swings wide. A man and woman enter. His arm on the back of her neck. They notice her. Their smiles vanish. His hand drops. The nurse approaches the window. "I'm sorry, but we're closed."

The man in a white lab coat retreats through the open door.

"I'm Mrs. Parker. I've come to pick up my husband."

"Oh, Mrs. Parker. The doctor just went in to see him. He should only be a few more minutes."

"Thanks. Is it okay for me to wait here?"

"Of course." The nurse turns away.

"Nurse?" She has to ask.

"Yes?" The nurse's head turns back.

"Have you worked here long?" Her eyes feel glued to that pretty face.

The young woman blushes. She shakes her hair away from her face. "No, ma'am. This is only my third week."

The knot in her throat that had grown tight enough to choke her releases. "I didn't think I'd seen you before." Pause. "I won't keep you." She crosses to the first chair.

Minutes pass. The waiting room door opens. He's in front of her, one hand unconsciously at his belt checking his fly. "Hi, hon, sorry to keep you waiting. The doc had an emergency call this morning that screwed up his whole day. What time is it anyway?" He leans over and kisses her left cheek. Old Spice on his skin.

She smiles and lifts her watch for him to see. "It's okay. Let's go eat. I'm starved."

"Sounds good to me." He takes her hand and helps her up and out. He opens her car door. She watches his eyes take in her legs. He gets in.

The doctor and nurse leave the office together. He pats her shoulder and helps her into her MG, then he heads on over to his SAAB. She follows him out the driveway.

"Is Dr. Lambert married?" She already senses the answer

"Oh, sure. His wife is the painter, Gabrielle Lambert. Their son goes to Harvard Medical School."

"I thought so." She hesitates. "Did you get the test results?"

He grins. "They're swimming fast and there's plenty of the little buggers."

She gives him a quick hug. He starts the engine, then the radio. Michael Jackson. She reaches over and shuts it off.

"Let's stop at home so we can dress for dinner. What do you say?"

He gives her a quizzical look.

"I feel like wearing my gray high heels and my best stockings." She looks straight ahead.

He glances at her and smiles. "Home it is." They drive off in the direction opposite the doctor's.

She sits back and breathes in the new car smell. Shalimar. Old Spice. No smoke. No greasy burgers or fries.

Lisa Grundstrom-Whitney

Virginia Beach, VA

recently moved from Maine

A Man Remembers His Wife

(from a novel in progress)

The room disappeared. Did it matter where he was? He loved her. He took one look at her face and he loved her all over again like the way it was the first time, for the last time. It was the last time he would look at her face, though he hadn't known this was the way it would be. He had thought he would not get the chance to be seeing her now; he hadn't the courage to make it happen on his own and now in her presence, or in the presence of her physical presence, he saw again her beauty and felt the love and the loss as they bound up tight in his throat. The longing was no longer a burning, but a dry powder on the blackboard of his soul that no amount of water or alcohol could erase.

It was true that he drank, but she flirted. Which one was the chicken before the horse? The cart before the eggs? Oh, he was all scrambled up as he'd been for a long time now, but for a moment the reasons were clearer than they had been in years. Yes, she was beautiful and he loved her beauty, but it was not that that would stay with him. It was the wit, the sharp wit of one who was a survivor, loved the thrill of the chase, and walked the fine lines that separate humor from armour. Oh Christ, how cold she could be then and how cold she was now.

His feet had brought him here, his feet and three of her siblings. They were standing next to her casket, huddled together, the outcasts from out of state who had chosen to leave and/or were thrown out of town — the ugly ducklings who wanted more or less than what was expected of them. The death of their mother was the final wedge in the split of that family tree weakened by jealousy.

It had been going on for years and it was going on now, the three of them huddled together near their sister's casket as he stood in his long black shoes near the body of his Jeannie, the beautiful, the comedian, the flirt. His wife.

It was his shoes that brought him here in this room full of her relatives and the wide-eyed and tear swollen faces of his own five motherless children. His shoes had walked him here as they had carried him out onto the dance floor the first night he had held her in his arms, as they had walked him into so many meetings, so many bars, so far away from the kids who stood there needing him. His shoes had carried him beyond being needed; he could not, would not retrace those steps, re-face those family ties that strapped him for money and took his dancing shoes away.

When his feet hit the icy pavement outside Colombe's Funeral Parlor, he shrugged his shoulders, walked in the path that presented itself to his dress-shoed feet, and did not try to hide his face from the sharp April wind.

Ann Arbor

Beloit, Wisc.

teaches in the public schools

Henry, cont'd

old fashioned enough to think a man has a right to know where his wife has gone off to... especially at night. Fred told me she was up there in the bushes at sunset... and then, in the morning, she gave me a cock-and-bull story about being up there with Clara to meet somebody. The devil, she said it was and that Clara had already met him before. The devil!

Well, I don't know how you'd take something like that. As for me, I figured either my wife had really lost it or Clara was into some very strange doings up there on the hill. I can't say I ever believed in the devil... but what in hell was she leading my wife into? Alicia was always going to her friend Clara for advice. What kind of advice was she getting up there behind the locked gates? Locked gates. What was to hide? I'll tell you that she got from Clara all her notions about that big outside world. I think our ways are better. If not, why in hell do we keep getting these immigrants from Connecticut and New Jersey?

Well, I did hear from the church elders, and so did the rest of the Board. Was Clara a witch, did we think? Of course, they wanted to hear what I had to say, having been the one who had been on the receiving end, had a wife who was under the influence of this woman.

Well, I didn't tell them much. I didn't know very much... not that I could prove in court, anyway. The rest of the Board said afterwards they thought I was showing great restraint. I could only speculate about this devil stuff in particular, having no actual proof. One should have some good solid proof before going around making serious accusations. I did admit that I thought the village would be a healthier place without the influence of the old woman spreading like a dark shadow down over the hill and into the houses below.

So, you can accuse me of working to get Clara removed from her house and out from our midst. If it makes you happy, go to it. I know my wife does. But it's not true. I just presented the facts as I knew them and let the rest of the Board and the officers of the town make up their own minds. In fact, because I'd made no bones about my disliking Clara, when it came to a vote, I abstained. That is, there is no record I ever voted to have Clara's house taken from her and I dare you to prove otherwise.

There was one other action in which I took part and I make no apologies for that. My suggestion that Clara's house be donated to the Volunteer Fire Department for practice drills was very popular. Funny, that's probably the one thing this town will remember me for.

Clara, cont'd.

cemetery... never mind the things she said that other morning when I told her about the first experience... led me to think I would be dealing with a scoffer. And much as I appreciate the attention she gives me and the things she's doing for me, I just haven't the time or the patience to set her straight.

In the end, Alicia probably thought that taking me up there had cleared my head... and indeed, it had, but not the way she thought. She's a toughie and means well. I'll leave it at that. I do wonder sometime how long the two of them, Henry and Alicia can go on the way they do. Forever, no doubt, and with no help from me. Game players. And, though I find myself feeling sorry for little Henry sometimes, I guess they're pretty evenly matched, her energy, his cunning.

George, you were never a game player. Everything you did was for keeps. So, think... I hear Alicia's car coming up the road... so we've just got a second. What will we have left behind? Maybe, maybe the shadows here will be just a little deeper? The blacks a little blacker?

Nicholas Snow
Spruce Head

is a painter

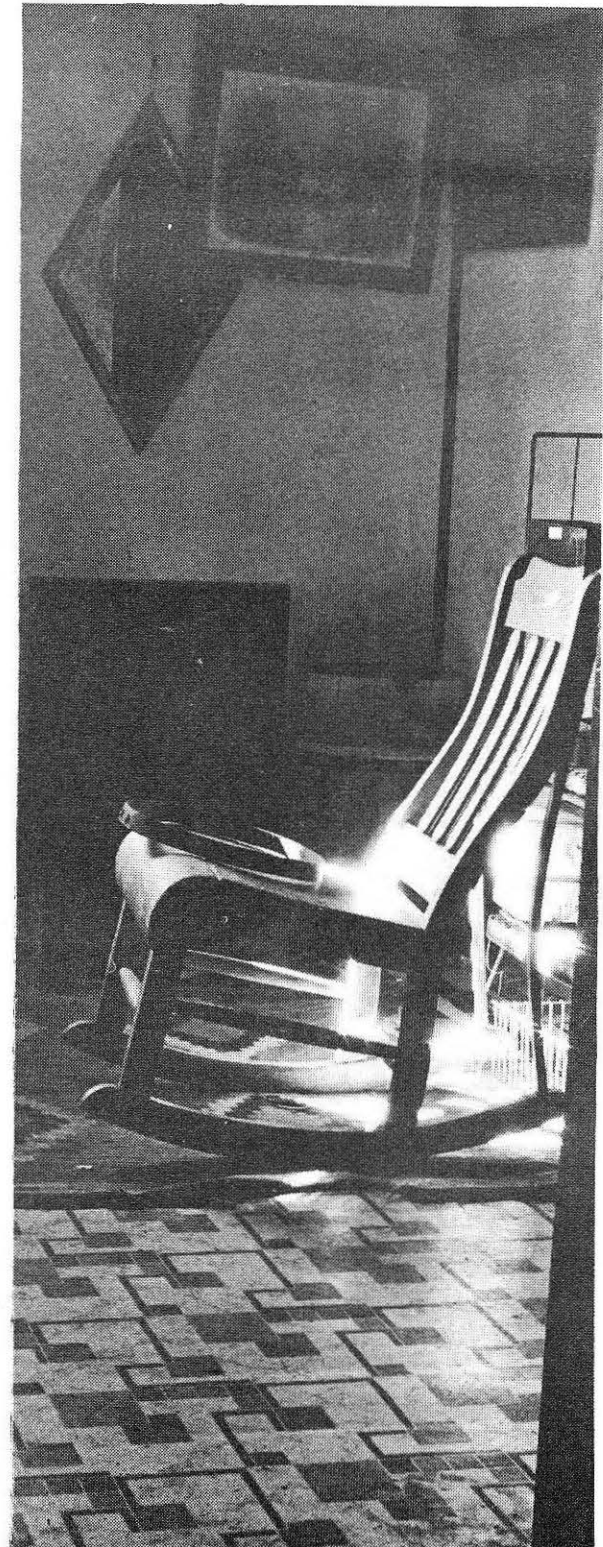


Photo by Michael Howland

A Final Scene

Midnight caller hears buzz-unanswered
buzz-unanswered buzz-unanswered, leaves
at last for an uncertain future. The phone
swings on its black cord.

The call comes too late. Ringing
echoes through the hollow house, each ring
building on the last to fill empty rooms
where all have died or fled into the night.

The roadside phone booth, alone beneath
a tame, pinkish moon, marks time. The phone
on its cord, the pendulum, slows, stops.

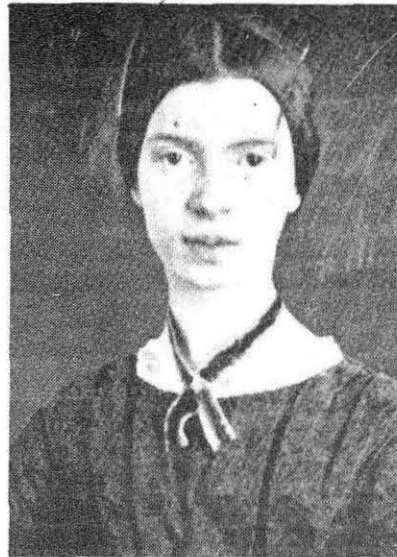
In the cold house the bell shrieks
in circles through hallways, stairwells,
spills out gaping windows, sprawls
in weedy gardens, crawls down the hill.

A passing vagrant checks the slot for coins,
hangs the phone up, wearily walks on.
Credits roll across the dawn.

Robert Chute
Poland-Spring
teaches Biology at Bates

Ourself Behind Ourself

for Emily Dickinson, on the Centenary of her death, 1830-1886



Only known photo of Emily Dickinson

ON
EMILY DICKINSON

"An eccentric, dreamy, half-educated recluse in an out-of-the-way New England village — or anywhere else — cannot with impunity set at defiance the laws of gravitation and grammar. . . Oblivion lingers in the immediate neighborhood."

Thomas Bailey Aldrich,
Atlantic Monthly 1892

When I was growing up, there were always two women in my life: myself and the self behind myself. There was the girl with a face, whom I hardly knew; this one I presented to the world like a paperdoll — she wore clothes and a body I didn't recognize. The other one thought and had feelings and she kept to herself, standing off a little to one side and speaking to no one. This second self was a wallflower, plain and unpretentious.

There were also two other women who informed my life: very real, uncommon women. Already dead; but at the same time hauntingly alive. They were part of everything I thought and did. Mary Baker Eddy and Emily Dickinson, both New Englanders, straight-laced, both in a sense out-of-the-body, spiritual transcendentalists, vulnerable to strange fits of depression, and visionary. One, the image of the *mother* — the founder of the Christian Science religion and the Mother Church in Boston; the other, the image of the *spinster* — a red-haired woman with hazel eyes and a contralto voice writing in a white-curtained, high-ceilinged room about volcanoes, deserts, eternity, suicide, physical passion, rape, power, madness, separation, the daemon, and the grave.

Mary Baker Eddy spent my whole childhood and adolescence with me, trying to convince me that I had no physical body, could experience no pain, sickness, or disease. Dickinson, however, reminded me that there was great pain, grief, unrelenting sadness, and that they must all be experienced. The one with the smaller mind tried to avoid the body altogether, and the one with the greater sensibility tried to remain a girl — kept that persona all her life in order to define the world and the personal anguish of a speaker whose gender is the determining factor in her existence. Mary Baker Eddy tried to forget that she was female, to disregard sex as unfortunate; Emily Dickinson was self-consciously female in poetic voice, and more boldly so than is often recognized. She was hopelessly ignorant of the male American literary tradition, most of which was right there in her own backyard, but she did read avariciously the female authors of the day.

Her contemporary, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, meant the most to Dickinson, in her confident use of female experience and female accessories — the clothes, the discernments, the domestic chores of a woman. Dickinson was coming directly out of a female tradition and she took it a step further, compressing metaphorical linkings between girlish intimacies and spiritual abstractions. I believe that every serious woman poet writing in America today must eventually come to terms with and encounter her progenitor in Emily Dickinson. She has

allowed us to enter the chambers of self in which

Ourself behind ourself, concealed—
should startle most—

This split between a publicly acceptable persona and a part of yourself that you perceive as the essential, creative, and powerful self is an extremely difficult and painful way to live. The difficulty and danger is in possibly not being able to accept that immense energy and harnessing it into an outlet that is also acceptable to those you love and the greater society as well.

Many contemporary women poets have carried on the tradition of writing through the persona in order to be able to say what they may have been unable to write about otherwise. For myself, I chose to write through the persona of Calamity Jane — a tough, energetic, strong-willed woman of the frontier West — in order to gain the strength to write out of my own inner voice, also Western.

We think also of H.D.'s Helen in Egypt, Adrenne Rich's laudatory but exasperated salute to Marie Curie who died from the power she discovered and released in radium, and more recently of Carole Oles' work about Maria Mitchell, the astronomer.

Until we can understand the assumptions beneath which we have been smothered we cannot know ourselves as women, much less as poets. We are just beginning to be able to express an unmistakably female voice in our work. We have a great deal to learn from Dickinson, whose poems were self-confirming and had begun to explore states of psychic extremity. Unlike the "dreamy, half-educated recluse in an out-of-the-way New England village" relegated to oblivion by Thomas Bailey Aldrich in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1892, Dickinson herself had the courage to enter, through language, states of mind and feeling which men and woman have long denied or veiled with silence. She opened up new possibilities in poetry, both for men and women.

Dickinson represents a significant character in her poems — the whole work builds to an experience of restricted space and augmented emotional intensity bursting at the seams.

Writing about Dickinson in her seminal work of creative scholarship (*My Emily Dickinson*, Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 1985), Susan Howe tells us that the powerful essence of her poetry is the vital distinction between concealment and revelation. Her brilliant technique of masking and unveiling is the poet's device for releasing creative energy and at the same time protecting herself against the power of that energy.

Dickinson recognized the unstable condition of power, whether it be the power of love, of time, or of nature. In her fiercely insightful poem about the necessity of power for the powerful, "My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun," Dickinson is both the owner of the gun and also the one "carried away" by the power of the weapon. Dwelling in possibility, which Dickinson learned early on to do in life and in her work, she deciphers the idea of herself in code, in the emblematic Gun, and she moves through the poem as on the edge of a real frontier, becoming the source of her own creative power. In the end, like all those who create, Dickinson has "but the power to kill,/ Without — the power to die—".

Kathleen Lignell
Orono
is a writer/editor at UMO

Thoughts While Waiting on Death Row

I went to bed early because it had been a long day and both my body and my head were weary, but the minute my head hit the pillow I found myself wide awake, sleep the furthest thing from my mind.

What was on my mind was Ted Bundy. Theodore Robert Bundy, prisoner on death row, scheduled to be executed in Florida's Old Sparky at 7 a.m. July 3. I kept wondering how he must feel, this self-assured, arrogant, amoral man with the handsome face and crooked smile; what must it be like for him now, at 10:30 p.m. Tuesday, July 1, 1986, contemplating the prospect of his quick but excruciatingly painful death looming just 32½ hours ahead.

What is it like to know *precisely* when you will die, that you *must* die, that there is no hope of reprieve, and barely a hope of postponement?

Foolish questions. I may not know what Ted Bundy is thinking at this moment, but I share his feelings of denial and terror for I, too, am under sentence of death.

I have been sentenced not by my peers but by my body, the very thing that allows me life. When the doctor first said the word "malignant" my head-in-the-sand mechanism kicked in. "They'll fix it," I assured myself. Even after my skin had burned and peeled from radiation treatments, after great, huge handfuls of hair had fallen from my scalp and my stomach developed a permanent intolerance for nourishment of any kind, I continued to indulge my Ostrich Syndrome. It was only when the doctors told me, "it's in your bones — in your arms and in your legs and in your spine, there's nothing we can do except try to keep you as comfortable as possible, and when it gets to the end the pain will get so bad that nothing we can give you will even buffer it," that I gritted my teeth and told myself, "O.K., kiddo, reality time."

I realized I was near hysteria when I almost suggested that perhaps I should go out and start stocking up on Bufferin.

Don't get me wrong; I'm no coward. Life has thrown me plenty of hard knocks and I have endeavored to meet them with shoulders squared and jaw clenched and upper lip proverbially stiff. But it's one thing to go through a divorce and lose your sainted mother and smash up a brand new Mercedes. It's something altogether different to contemplate your imminent extinction.

I am thirty-five years old (five years younger than Ted Bundy) and I do not want to die. I have done some admittedly rotten things in my time, but nothing remotely approaching Bundy's long list of sins.

He has no decisions to make. He knows when (pending a stay). And why. And how. ("Now, you just come on in here, Ted, and sit yourself down. I'll just strap you in, there, nice and snug. Comfy?") His pain will be brief. He need not concern himself with "arrangements;" he has only to do what he is told.

I listen to dozens of people tell me what to do (and they all tell me something different) and must make sure I do exactly the opposite of what they say. My prescriptions are to rest, conserve my energy,

be on time for my treatments, take my pills, get my affairs in order.

I went to Hawaii for two weeks. On Oahu, I indulged in as many one-night stands as my body would allow. I swam. I tried out a surfboard. I learned to do a rather pathetic hula. On Maui, I climbed Haleakala. I went to the Big Island and watched Kilauea intermittently spew lava tongues and artfully dodged the spatters. I used every Traveler's Check I had and put the rest on American Express.

I did not take my pills. I saved them. Except for the still occasional days and nights when the pain gets out of control and I am forced to take one or two or three, I have saved them all. Pain pills, sleeping pills, leftover pills from a prescription for that and a prescription for this, boxes and boxes and boxes of over-the-counter pills, every size and shape and color and perhaps, if I'm lucky, a bottle or two of cyanide-laced Excedrin. Ghastly combinations of drugs, guaranteed to be cumulatively lethal; I know, I've looked it all up, everything you need to find out is right on the shelves at B. Dalton, thanks to the Hemlock Society.

Some people chicken out when it gets down to the nitty gritty of taking so many pills all at once, but I won't; I've been practicing, courtesy of the folks at the GNC store (they think I'm a real health freak). Every day, once or twice or three times, I take Preventron (at least six a day), B-1, B-6, B-12, Lecithin (lots of those, they're huge and hard to swallow), Selenium (toughen up the old immune system), L-Lysine (could have picked up Hawaiian Herpes), Beta-Carotene (don't want to get cancer — snicker, snicker), kelp (in case the government isn't telling the truth about Chernobyl fallout), fish oil, Vitamin E (keep those fires burning!), L-Tryptophan (pleasant dreams), bran fiber (see beta-carotene, above), bee pollen (it can't hurt), Vitamin C (don't want a bad cold), and BONE MEAL TABLETS (hyuk, hyuk). I pop 'em all down just like nothing, been doing it so long it's automatic. I figure I won't even notice when I decide it's time to gulp down all my stash. If worse comes to worse and I barf it all up, I've got enough saved up so I can try again. And if *that* doesn't work, I'll just have to bop over to the corner drugstore and buy a box of razor blades.

All this conniving because society legislates my morality, telling me I must live, live, no matter how much I hurt, how much dignity I lose, how many unpayable bills I run up, how much of a vegetable I become. It is both unthinkable and illegal for me to choose when and how I prefer to die.

Yet it is both legal and moral for society to choose when and how Ted Bundy is to die, whether he wants to or not. The process is called justice.

I don't know what they call the decisions they presume to make for me, but they will not prevail. I will lie, and sneak, and con, and break whatever laws I must to ensure that the nature of my last days will be of my own choosing.

11:45 p.m. I still wonder what Bundy is thinking right now. I know what I am thinking.

Ted Bundy is one lucky son of a bitch.

Janet Beaulieu
Bangor
is a free-lance writer

Seven Palimpsests

Palimpsests are parchments from which writing has been erased to make way for new text. Here some traces of time remain, and the parchments include surfaces other than paper.

(1) skylarking
you still hear
your old navy chief growling
at yourself & some other green seamen
to stop your sk'larking & turn to —
himself half skipping the first syllable,
always preceded by a well-plucked adjective,
& bellowing the second.
struck anew by the lack of wisdom to it
your eyes spark with a blue more electric
than stars.

(2) the last aspect
i recall of my cousin molly at eighty
is her skeptical yankee nose thumbing
up out of her coffin at life
as if distrustful as ever of doctors
(& finally with reason),
of men, although they were burying her,
& most especially of those
who would have had her as wife.

(3) her brother john
had left the little hill farm
bitter as early turnips, too,
& getting no beef
had abandoned my grandfather's brother solon-the-butcher
to live down in town with my grandfather
who had not much more himself than
a handsome moustache & a shy sort of love.
well, john became a baker after
taking as a second wife a small dumpling
of a baking lady. they are now apparitions
on the wooden walkway to the water district,
figures faint as dust motes doling out
gingerbread men & sugarstarred cookies
to children standing outside their summer kitchen
& dying inside all the time from sugar diabetes,
justifying molly's sprained nose.

(4) starcrossed,
the island cat
saturated with time
measures winter more softly
than snow shadows:
small boulders, tan grasses clumped on white
she grows with the sunset
into regal purple, paled blues
& gold in the twilight.
camouflaged in the back field,
only she knows who she is.



Photo: Jacki Bragg

(5) the big man
with the plastic ear is permitted to carry
his white parrot into ames
& i see my childhood friend charlie step out
through the look-momma-that-man-has-a-parrot-that-sits-on-his-
shoulder-&-talks & we are stepping down into
old mr. peterson's cellar full of finches
& listening to butch the cockateel who could whistle
behind a screen of giggles & front porch wisteria at ladies passing
before being eaten by charlie's pet cat.
charlie killed the cat but turned out to be a doctor.
as the white parrot stated archly, "pretty boy, pretty boy."

(6) every time
that the pigeons from the beehive house land on our rooftop
i remember your story about your uncle frank
(a frequent & uninvited guest to your childhood)
trying to persuade you to climb out on the porch roof
to catch some lunch on the move.
"them squab are mighty good eating, boy."
one clatter of cat-startled wings is enough.

(7) hannah,
when we watched the young eagles scream down from the catskills
on our way to your show in new york
i knew we'd find their presence in your paintings
though no birds or people are visible in your landscapes:
the trees move — no, dance really, with life.

grete goodwin
Thomaston
is trying to find a match, and a
campfire and a few good ghosts

Introduction

Assafa slides his butt along the ground, keeping an eye out for large stones or droppings in the gravel. He drags two rootlike appendages of shrunken bone and skin where legs should be. At least he is mobile. His arms, shoulders, hands carry him. In the dry season his white jacket, one of two he owns, catches its share of the dust raised by donkeys and cows on their way to market or back. It is washed every night. The rainy seasons, when they come, are another matter: the mud is thick, clothes dry slowly, his jacket is often damp and yellowed. But the small rains have ended and there are months to go before the big ones begin. He does not worry ahead of time. No need to store up trouble: each day brings its share. And if it doesn't, so much the better. Assafa slides his butt along the ground, one eye out for large stones or turds in the gravel, the other for a friendly face, reason to pause. Assafa is not a beggar, although among the beggar population of Addis Ababa there are many with his peculiar deformity. Some say it is the result of venereal disease and malnutrition; others say it is bad luck or God's will. It's all the same to Assafa: he has always walked on his hands.

If a person sitting on the ground comes up to your waist, how tall would he be standing? Simon had been toying with the question for two weeks, since he had started walking to school, declining a ride with his mother and sister. Each morning he passed Assafa.

He had never given much thought to height until he grew taller than his mother and, in a very short time, taller than his father as well. His father showed no concern about it. He seemed to think Simon was doing what sons did. But Simon was not accustomed to the adult status his height conferred on him. He was only fifteen, in the fifth form at the English School. He had always been an articulate child, glib with comments on any subject that presented itself. Parents, teachers, his younger sister Wilma let him talk. But within months he had grown from 5'6" to 6'2" and all of a sudden these same people began listening to him, turning his opinions over in their minds, weighing them, matching them up with this or that other idea, questioning him as if he had some sort of insight, or should. He didn't. He had always launched opinions like trial balloons: some caught the wind, some fizzled. Nobody kept count. They had begun keeping count. "Sh-it," Simon muttered to himself and kicked a stone in his path. Damn stone rolled off at an angle and stopped in the path of this guy coming towards him, swinging himself along on his hands.

Oh God, thought Simon as he watched the stone roll away from his foot and stop in front of the one creature in all the motley traffic on the Dessie Road that morning who could not step over it. "I'm sorry," he said, and, bending over to pick up the stone, came eye to eye with Assafa.

The face that met Simon's was a revelation: confident, amused, the last thing on earth Simon expected from this fellow who scooted along the ground like a wormy dog scraping its bottom. They'd discussed it at the dinner table a few nights back, "Have you seen him?" Wilma asked, "He always looks like he's going somewhere. I wonder where he's going."

"Poor soul," Jenny, the mother, sighed, "How can you look at him? I wonder if there's any treatment available for that sort of thing. Maybe if we got him out of Ethiopia... Mayo Clinic... physical therapy..."

"Cut it out, Jenny!" That was David, husband and father, speaking. "You can't go around saving the world. You're not a Rockefeller... they can't even do it."

"But it's so painful to see people like that. How can you sit around and talk about it and not want to help?"

Simon had said nothing during the whole exchange. But equanimity, even humor, was the last thing he expected to see in Assafa's face. He let go of the stone, squatted down, and stared at him in silence. Assafa stared back at the pale childish face of this foreigner who, most days, walked past him as if on stilts. It was, as a matter of record, the first time that either of them had looked directly into the face of a stranger, the sort of face that most people, steering a safely charted course through life, are careful to avoid. It took a bit of time, a few seconds in real life, before they remembered the formalities, "Good day, praise God, etc.," as they say in Amharic. But before he stood up, Simon put out his hand and said, "My name is Simon," and Assafa let go of one of the blocks he used as shoes for his hands, took Simon's hand and said, "I am Assafa."

Then Simon went on to school. He watched his feet as he walked, fascinated by how, at every step, they touched the ground. Assafa moved in his own direction, at his own pace.

Wendy Kindred
Fl. Kent
teaches art at UMFK

Sonnet: Crude

*if we under absolute untrammelled
by what or which or trick or treated sky
under just a metaphor unscrambled
of fiddle strung for sun's bow blue and high*

*over needles that pines to live bleed down
over chewed up and spit out for beach sand rocks
over trails of weren't and roads of were to towns
of might be and could be and will be walk*

*if we write silly acorn books too real
to read too long for depth too deep for length
on topics like cobwebs and how they feel
when some big fool decides to test their strength*

*then we will know then we can conclude
that love like all else is best when it's crude*

Peter Miller
Vienna
likes Chuck Berry's poetry

The Jibaro

Ed. Note: In Puerto Rico a HE-bar-oh is a kind of medicine man, herb-gatherer, shaman.

He was living in the cave when she moved in. From the window of her bedroom, as she unpacked in the soupy air of the second floor apartment, she watched him waddle out. He squeezed from an opening half-hidden in jungle grass, a place where water oozed and gathered. At first she thought he was one of the goats she had seen stripping the bougainvillea near the driveway. But when he straightened, and the kinky hair floated past the bald spot on his head, she saw it was a man.

She frisked the sportswear for the Nikon. Had she laid it in the lingerie? She kneed the big pullman across the floor and grabbed at the keys in her pocket. The old man hopped from the wall bordering the driveway and walked into the street. She took the journal from her purse, opened it on the windowsill and wrote, "Frail. A good breeze could take him away. His clothes hung from his frail body in grimy folds." Two thin dogs bolted from the cave, circled him twice, and took their places at his heels. She slapped open the book again and dated the page. When he was almost out of sight, when she could barely see the coiled hair bounce on his back, she pulled the drawstring shorts with the tomato stain from her suitcase and sat on the bed.

The dresser was scarred. Spadaccini Movers had degenerate help. She pressed a finger into the long, snaky gouge. Incompetent and hairy men who went to their jobs fully loaded. She knew this by the way they had laughed at the slightest thing she said. And they had removed their shirts. The muscles of their arms had popped and shivered under the weight of her couch. When they finally left and she prowled the rooms, she could still smell them there among the boxes.

Annie kicked off her pumps and swabbed her face with the knotted roll of pantyhose. Then she tossed it in a drawer and went out on the veranda.

The veranda had a quartered view of the bay through thick iron bars that twisted a few times before sinking into a low concrete wall. Torn mosquito netting drooped from the bars and was sucked outside with the ebbing breeze. Across the street a lemon-colored house set in the center of a fenced garden containing two banana trees and a well-tended pineapple plot. Philadelphia Jon had lived here. With his wet eyes and his gourd collection. They'd corresponded fitfully in the two years since their small affair. She had ended it the morning she pinned a specific but non-judgmental list of grievances to the sleeve of his pajama before going off to work. She continued to send him an expensive card every year on his birthday.

Annie turned and with expert eyes shook down the clues. A pickle jar filled with black sand beside a bleached conch. Two scorched geraniums rocking in saucers on the ledge. He had been unaccountably happy here.

When Jon wrote that he was leaving, she had applied immediately for his job. She was thirty now and hungry for new experience. When she dropped the news to her friends at lunch, they had all admired her questing spirit. But as soon as she stepped off the plane and took in the rotting vegetable smell of the place, she had wanted to go home.

"You have nice taste," Carlos said. He probed a black curl on the top of his head with a finger and sat on the couch. "I'm sure you will like our beautiful island."

Jon had not mentioned that Carlos was a gentleman. Big and brown, Carlos spoke a studied English. Sweat broke on his brow and rained past the bones of his cheeks as he talked.

"You can smoke pot," he winked. "But stay off the roof."

Carlos lived in one of the ground floor apartments with his wife Nilda and their 26 year old son, Hector. For twenty years they had worked in the States, putting away what they could in the Banco Popular for the house that would be a source of income for their retirement. Carlos had four apartments rented now and was finishing up a fifth.

Annie asked about the old man.

"He's an old Jibaro — a hillbilly. Mentally, he's a child," Carlos said. "Harmless. His mother used to own all this land. When she finally sold, she put it in the contract that her poor son should always have a place here. He chooses to live in the cave." Carlos shrugged, fingered an ear. "And he won't leave," he said. "Even though his legs are stiff and, I swear to Christ, fur grows under his fingernails. I think we got to get him out of there."

Carlos was proud of the neighborhood. Rising above the slums of the city, its fruit-colored homes with their Moorish curves were a haven for the middle-class. The neighborhood was sprayed against the mosquitoes that brought fever and was patrolled regularly by the local police.

Carlos smiled warmly at the drawstring shorts. "Don't go out on the street like that," he said.

The group of engineers that Annie worked with were all from the States. A tight little group, they called themselves. A good little group. They were surprised that she hadn't taken a home on the air force base. One man who told her about a vacancy on base seemed offended when she refused it. When she told him that she preferred to live among the people, he nodded solemnly at her. "Great," he said.

There were no screens on the windows. Outside things just came in. At first she had kept the windows tightly shuttered, but when she began to sit up in bed

with her breath clotted in her throat like something solid, she began to open them again. She opened them one at a time over the span of several weeks until they were all wide open. On the night she unlatched the glass doors of the veranda, she dropped her legs over the edge and counted the lights on the bay.

And things came in. Bugs like bullets shot past her head and spun, confused, on the floor. Salsa music came in, becoming the pulse to which she moved. The smell of yellow rice and beans thick with cilantro. The garbled voice of the man who sold chicken from a loudspeaker on his truck. The moon-faced cat who climbed through the bars and lurked behind the couch. Spasms of tune from the cars that took the bend below the window.

She got up earlier each day until the time that she sat in the chair by the window was the precise time that the old man emerged from the cave. Spectral in the morning fog, he snaked from the cave in a slow unwind, wrenching each limb in its turn until he was straight and the bones of his shoulders pricked the thin cotton of his shirt. He would tug at his belt, rock his puckered hat from side to side until it squeezed his brow, and buzz intimately at the dogs who had gathered. And the mange-crusty dogs would bow their heads and follow like broken children.

Nobody knew how the old man spent his days. Carlos thought he went into the hills to gather the ingredients for an ancient philter said to awaken a dangerously non-specific lust. Just last week he saw two men leave the cave fondling small packages bound in banana leaves. Once Annie saw the old man laughing with the men who played dominoes outside the rum shack, cradling his rum in a tiny paper cup. From inside the shack, someone threw scraps to his dogs.

* * *

Annie met Raven at the Black Eagle where she went to have an imported steak. He sat himself at her table without introduction and began *Carnival of Venice* on a plastic recorder. She wanted to leave. But she had her steak and people were grinning, so she stabbed at the Pina Colada and didn't look up until he finished.

"Hey, chiquita. Raven." He held out a hand.

"Hi," she said. She lifted the straw and sucked at the other end.

"Well. What do you think?" His gaze moved down the front of her blouse and found the steak. She felt suddenly exposed.

"Nice," she said. "What do you want?"

"Hey, relax. I'm just being friendly."

Raven called over the waitress and ordered a beer. He then began the unedited story of his life up to now, an outpouring so generous and rich that Annie could only pick out a word here and there to ponder. Like "surfing." Or "Terre Haute." A large cockroach darted beneath the chair of a woman at the next table. It grabbed a crumb and dragged it under a bush. Annie pushed her steak across the table to Raven, who only paused long enough in his narrative to slip a large chunk past his epiglottis.

When Annie agreed to give Raven a ride home, she hadn't realized it would be twenty miles out of her way. For the last ten miles she turned up the volume of the radio to the sobs of an evangelist who spoke a florid Spanish. When they arrived at the beach house, they sat in the car until the program ended.

Raven pulled the elastic from his bleached hair.

"I didn't know you spoke Spanish."

"I don't," said Annie. "I like his style."

After some discussion, Annie agreed to see Raven again at the end of the week.

* * *

"Oh that Scorpio moon."

The recluse astrologer who lived downstairs slapped her big feet on the glass table.

"I'm not leaving you alone with my husband." She half-smiled at Annie.

They sat on her patio. Fenced with black iron and screened by the hibiscus hedge, they drank dark rum from coffee mugs and watched couples parade beneath the streetlight.

"This is a Libran country." The astrologer motioned to a woman in a ruffled skirt and elaborate makeup. "They love a fine facade."

A man was at the gate. Two dogs wedged their muzzles between the bars of the door and growled. The man from the cave. The astrologer bolted to her feet, spoke roughly to him in Spanish. Rum gilded the glass of the table, leaked down the leg into a crack in the floor. Annie moved to where he stood. She ran a hand over the sketchy fuzz of his face before she could stop herself. She followed his eyes over the vinyl bamboo on the wall, past the hanging beads of the doorway, and deep into the apartment. An Asian face. Something about the high plain of the cheek, the angle of the eye. Indian blood.

"Look at those eyes," Annie said. "If I could solve those eyes. He's wise, you know. He wants to tell me something."

"All you're gonna see in those eyes is your own reflection," the astrologer said. She pulled Annie away from the door. "Look at him. He's a fool."

The old man smiled at one of the astrologer's children who had run into the porch at the sudden change in her mother's voice. He stuck a fist between the

bars and dropped something on the floor. The child ran for it. Her mother caught a fold of her dress and jerked her back. The little girl screamed and crumpled to the floor.

Annie hunkered down beside it. "He's carved a bird."

"It's a crucifix," said the astrologer. She scooped up the limp child.

Annie looked up but the old man was gone.

The astrologer kicked the carving through the bars of the door and took the child inside.

* * *

Annie sat at the window with a cup of thick, boiled coffee. The sediment settled in a new, bitter layer with each swallow. She'd missed him. She glanced over at Raven who was wrapped completely in the damp sheet. He yawned and squinted at her.

"What are you doing up already? Come back to bed." He rolled to the other end of the mattress and peeled off the sheet. Annie looked back into the mist. "I've got things to do."

A pillow caught her in the back of the head. Anger congealed into words that crowded for expression. With one voracious act of will she said, "Go home."

Raven studied himself from the pile of pillows where he propped his head. He clutched a t-shirt to his waist and heaved himself upright. At the door he stepped intuitively over the line of ants whose route took them through the middle of the room to the opposite wall where they filed singly into the light socket below the window.

The mahogany door banged in its frame. Paint sifted gracefully from the ceiling. A small lizard bobbed in the corner. In the driveway, Carlos and Hector unloaded building tools. They climbed the wall and in unison sliced the jungle growth outside the cave until it was low and spikey. By the time Annie returned that afternoon, they were tacking a crimped metal roof to a rough shack which stood 20 feet from the cave.

She was awakened the next morning by a scream which rose from the earth and filtered through the foundation of the house, a scratchy vibrato at the suspended part of her brain.

Dogs barked in abandoned staccato. Men shouted in Spanish. Annie stumbled to the window. Just inside the cave, three men wrestled. Annie groped beneath the bed for the Nikon. Had she stashed it in the closet? She pushed open the window and saw the old man stiffen, dig his heels in the clay. Carlos and Hector dropped him then and grabbed for his ankles. They pulled him from the cave like a startled fetus, red-faced, fists punching the air. In three minutes they had him bound to the trunk of a skinny breadfruit tree. After twenty minutes the howls became low, nasal moans that lowered into silence.

Later, when Annie backed her car down the driveway, he was asleep, his head hanging. Seven yellow dogs perked up their ears and watched until she was out of sight.

When she returned that evening, the old man was sitting on the ground beside a heaping platter of Nilda's lard-slick banana fritters. Carlos poured sugar cane water from a large plastic jug and the old man washed down a mouthful. He rose and urinated steadily into an abandoned termite mound before limping into the shack.

* * *

Christmas came. Poinsettias reddened in front yards. Bands of carolers roamed the streets demanding rum and pork rind at inappropriate hours. The old man's dogs turned mean. Neighborhood people, unable to pass the driveway on their way to market, were forced to hurl stones in a steady barrage before they could run past. When they were safely on the other side, they'd stop briefly to curse Carlos and his descendants for generations to come.

There were more dogs. Every evening when Annie pulled into the driveway, more dogs blocked her way, shaking in their rage. A dog with a shredded ear climbed onto the hood of her car and pushed his nose into the windshield. From a twisted fang he drooled gluey saliva on her wiper blade. She shifted from drive to reverse and back again, over and over, until the car rocked violently and began to hop. The dog flattened himself against the hood and hooked his claws into the vents. Annie wheeled out of the driveway and headed for Route 2. The dog's breath formed a small circle of fog on the glass. She avoided his eyes and merged with traffic. The glass was clouding rapidly now. A bead swelled and ran down the windshield. Annie squinted through its clear wake. She pushed on the brakes at what she guessed was a red light, and the dog slid cleanly off. It dodged a melon truck in the left lane and sprinted into a field of sugar cane. When Annie snapped on the wipers, the blade on the driver's side made a gummy arc across the glass.

* * *

"He's got too many damn dogs." Nilda was a small woman with arms like a wrestler. Whenever Annie saw those biceps she felt driven to account for their breadth. Nilda, drop and give me 20. Or, Nilda on a Nautilus.

"People are complaining," Nilda said. "You don't know what kind of diseases they bring. That Jibaro is going too far."

They sat at the livingroom bar, stared morosely at each other in the big, silver-veined mirror.

"Maybe someone could talk to him about it," Annie said. "Maybe Carlos could

point that out."

"Yeah," Nilda sniffed. "Talking to him is like talking to the moon. Anyway, I don't trust him." Her eyes narrowed. She leaned into Annie. "I know for a fact he's got powers."

"Powers?" Annie watched the red vein throb in the corner of her eye.

"You know, *El mal del ojo*. The evil eye." She lifted her right arm and rattled a silver bracelet strung with a single jet black bead.

Hector came into the room with a record album under his arm.

"Leave the old guy alone."

He sat on the stool beside Annie and slid Thelonius Monk beneath her right breast.

"You can't get this down here," he said. Hector had a low and petulant voice that wound down each sentence with a soul-wrenching sigh. "I'm going back to the States this summer, did I tell you? I've got to get out of here." He reached over and drummed on Annie's neck with icy fingers.

When Annie got back to her apartment, she undressed immediately and dropped into bed. But she couldn't sleep. The sheets clung and burned her flesh wherever they touched. The light from the street leaked beneath her lids. She found complex logic in the dog noise outside her window.

Her work was beginning to suffer. Annie was not surprised that she was called in to see her supervisor or that her co-workers talked about her in tight little groups. There were too many dogs. They cried and copulated all night long and it was impossible to sleep.

But the dulling of her senses only sharpened her intuition. She picked up signs everywhere. She saw pattern in trivial events. He was trying to tell her something necessary to her being. She would be alert.

She stared at the screen. At her terminal, commands glowed. They asked her to forget their programmed roles and use them instead as sacred nouns in a dialogue of cosmic significance. She typed as fast as she could their urgent, inner dictation. Despite the general sluggishness of her synapses, she never forgot to shoot her work far into the bowels of her private account at the end of the working day.

She slept on the roof most nights now. After Carlos finished his patio beer and went inside, Hector would unlock the door to the roof with his father's key. But she would forbid him to follow.

"You ruin it for me, Hector," she would say. "You ruin the roof for me with your relentlessly serious expression. And your choice of clutter."

Hector liked to carry a portable TV with him to the roof to catch the dubbed version of Merv Griffin at eight. He brought copies of last year's People magazine, family size bags of nacho-flavored Taco chips, and a six-pack and a half of Rico Cola.

Only when the breeze blew the wrong way and the dogs whined like devils in their rut would she ask him to come up and rub her back. And when she was half-asleep, he would unhitch his chinos and slide into place behind her. Unassuming, even in the greed of passion, the pitch of his lovemaking was so profoundly soothing that Annie would sink at once into grateful sleep.

* * *

On the night Annie heard a drone in her ears that even her Don Barrolito Three-Star could not erase, she picked a lime from the tree that held her clothesline and went with her bottle to the roof. Ducking the web of antennae wire, she leaned past the edge. Below, the dogs boiled and rolled like a swollen river, chasing and mounting, spilling beyond the driveway and into the street. A bat circled above her head, dipped and disappeared. The old man poked his head from the shack and piped at the dogs. Then he raised his chin and delicately sniffed the air. A dog spotted her and let out a howl that lifted him off his forelegs and sent him sprawling against the ribs of a tailless rival. The old man saw her. He snapped his arms over his head and began to move. He moved slowly at first, hopping lightly from foot to foot, then shifting, finally stomping to each side. He crouched and sprang, spinning perfectly in mid-air and landing on the ball of one foot. With a burst of speed he sailed off the wall, spreading his legs into an accomplished split before losing himself in the knot of dogs. He surfaced and plunged in again, landing on several, rolling along the ridges of their spines and hooting.

Annie watched until she too was up, tripping along the ledge, balancing the bottle in one hand, the lime in the other.

"Hey," she screamed. "Hey, old man, look at me. *Que pasa*, old man. Hey, catch me Jibaro. I'm gonna jump into your arms."

Giddy, she pitched the lime at him. It landed soundlessly in the street. A dog rooted it back into the air. Shallow laughter caught and clumped in her throat. She coughed it up and gulped for air. A string of thin hiccups popped in her mouth. When she looked down again the old man was standing still among the dogs whose ears were cupped at the street. Carlos stood at the far curb, shaking a baseball bat. He spoke and the old man cringed, hobbled into his shack, and closed the door. The dogs broke like a wave around Carlos. They brayed a single, rumbling note that rolled up the side of the building and curled around her like a mushroom cloud.

Carlos looked up at Annie wobbling on the ledge, chenile robe flying at the moon.

"You," he shouted above the orbiting hack. "Get the hell off the roof. You're

crazy too."

The next evening a dog lay in the center of the driveway and when she honked it didn't move. So she drove over it. That night Carlos dragged the dog into the street. He doused it with gasoline and set it on fire. Its oily smoke seeped into the apartment, even after she shuttered all the windows and fastened the curtains in four places with clothespins. Two more dogs burned the next day, five the next, until on one night nine dogs blazed in a soaring pyre that brought people to the streets with their suppers. Someone in the crowd played guitar. A man sold coconut ice in cups on the curb. Annie began to trip over things.

* * *

"Carlos is poisoning them." Raven stretched an even breath into his nose. It swelled his abdomen and lifted the muscles of his chest. Then he puckered his lips and pushed it out. "What would you do?"

"I know he's poisoning them," Annie said. "Do you think I don't know that?"

"Something had to be done," said Raven. "You have to fight for your life to get in or out of here."

Raven had come out of his meditation but was still sitting, legs entwined, on the rug. Out of his shirt pocket he pulled a small bottle containing a single white rock. He jiggled it at her, grinning.

"Look what I've got. Enough for two. Let's get your mind off your little obsession."

Annie dumped a basket of towels on the couch.

"Not now."

"You sure? It won't last."

Raven went into the bedroom. Annie heard chink chink chink. She waited for the slushy inhalation.

"Look," Raven said. He rounded the corner into the living room. "Why don't you get out of here for awhile." He crushed several ants beneath the heel of his sandal and scattered many more. "We can hang out at Crashboat for awhile." He sniffed loudly.

Annie carried the towels to the bathroom. Raven leaped ahead and opened the door.

"Donna told me about some coffee land for sale 10 miles outside Mayaguez." He raked his fingers through his beard and patted the ends. "Let's check it out. She thinks the guy will come down on his price, no problem. The place is loaded with orchids. We can raise them with the coffee. Here, let me do that." He elbowed Annie aside and began to remove her dirty laundry from the hamper, probing each item thoroughly before stuffing it into the machine.

Annie went into the kitchen and took a bottle of water from the refrigerator. She opened the lower cabinet door and breathed its generous, fishy smell. The previous tenant had been a young man with an appetite for shrimp who had regularly washed the black veins and pinched heads into the drain where they caught and mixed with warm beer and the juices of fruit. There they festered and frothed until the water backed up to soak the wood of the countertop and then the shelf below where the cleanser was kept. The wood of the cabinets had grown spongy from the network of termite tunnels which ran like arteries through the frame. Now the wood and the odor of ripe shrimp were inextricably one.

Annie sat on the floor and pressed her legs against the tile. From the bathroom, the washing machine buzzed warmly. Raven bounded out with a large comb wedged into the hair above his right ear. He pulled open the drawer beside the sink and removed a pair of poultry shears.

"Here," he said. He waved them at Annie. "Get this goddam hair off my neck."

Raven dropped to his knees behind Annie and set the shears on her lap. He tucked his hands beneath her blouse. "Want your back rubbed Annie Bananie?" With two lively fingers he snapped off her bra. "We've got to get you out of here, kid."

That night Annie dreamed that the dogs rose, winged, from their ashes. Healed of all affliction now, fur bloomed around their faces, downy and clean. They flew back and forth outside her window, peered in at her with knowing eyes. On some hidden signal they all turned and treaded the air for the bay. Men and woman in medieval dress followed beneath the streetlight. Behind them a line of fantastic creatures slid on oily walrus bodies or tottered on zebra legs. Annie crouched at the floor and folded her head in the gauzy curtain. But whenever one of them was directly below the streetlight, it would call to her and she would be forced to look back.

* * *

The cottages at Crashboat beach were built on stilts and leaned at the sea. Raven's friends surfed the beaches, played volleyball when the waves flattened. They worked part time as diving teachers or techs for the phone company or crafters of shell-embedded tables hung from the ceiling in macrame. Mostly they sold the marijuana that was brought in on boats from Colombia. Annie became friendly with a woman who lived alone with her seven children and walked the shore daily, swollen again, in a stretched bikini. Her children painted their faces and stole from the men who sold fried tuna steaks on the beach. When Annie tried to explain the old man and their psychic connection, she became angry. She warned Annie that unless she cut all ties to this man her soul would be in extreme danger. Then she changed the subject.

Mostly Annie slept. In the little room she shared with Raven she slept day and

night. When Raven tried to wake her for work she would squeeze her pillow and say she was ill. She continued to sleep until she was uncertain of the day.

"You've probably lost your job," Raven said after the second week. "Don't you even want to find out?"

Raven was becoming impatient, growing distant. He could not appreciate the depth of her exhaustion. Annie stayed on for a week and three days after Raven moved into another cottage with a woman who rubbed Spanish olive oil on her skin. Then she took her car and went home.

The first thing she noticed was that all the dogs were gone. The next was that her TV was missing and so was all the cash she kept in the third dresser drawer inside the box of unscented panty shields.

* * *

Nilda found her in the tub the following morning.

"Are you gonna lay in there all day?"

She dropped the cover to the toilet bowl and sat down. Nilda's three-year-old granddaughter came in and removed her sandals. Annie noticed a string of tiny white beads tied to her right ankle. One bead was black. She stepped into the tub with Annie.

"It's too bad what happened, but you got to get on with your life. Why don't you go home and stay with your folks until you get on your feet again?" Nilda looked hard at Annie who held a papery hand over her eyes. The child stomped around in the space between her legs.

"Pull yourself together," Nilda said. "Have a little faith in yourself."

From her purse she took a red vinyl book with the word "Datebook" in black letters across the front. She opened the book and turned a page.

"I got organized since I bought one of these. I get a lot done now. I have a six-month plan and a five-year plan. You could use one of these too."

She looked at Annie again. "Why the hell don't you say something?"

Annie blinked up at her.

"Turn off that light, would you?" Annie said. She looked sideways at the child over the fingers of her right hand. The little girl sat at the edge, whacked at the water with her feet. It churned and foamed around Annie's face.

Nilda rose and grabbed the child by the waist. The water that clung to her legs sprayed the room as she bucked against Nilda.

"Carlos wants to rent this place," Nilda said. "He wants you out."

She stooped for the sandals and left.

Annie considered Nilda's advice. She tried to get up but the heaviness in her legs held her to the water. So she stayed in the tub for the rest of the day and into that night. It was only because of the old man that she got up. It was because he rolled up her spine and broke in her mind and she could not stop the breaking. Because when she thought of him, he was already dead and the flies hopped from his mouth and ran into the corners of his eyes. Or he rocked on his knees crying mutely, and the yellow clay took his big tears where they fell. For him she got up. With fingers spread on the edge of the tub she kneeled, then quivering, stood. In the big mirror on the door she saw a lifeless, puckered body. Except for the hair which dripped from her crotch and her head. Dark patches of animal life against the bloodless skin.

She stepped out of the tub and dried herself. She still felt chill and damp. She dried herself all over again until she was pink and the old skin flaked above the new. She pried open the top of a container of baby powder with a small metal file and emptied it over her shoulders and across her breasts, buffing it into the rounds of her flesh. With the powder that clung to her hands she kneaded her face. But when she looked into the mirror over the sink she saw only blazing, dark-shadowed eyes. So she took a corner of the wet towel and scrubbed until the pores swelled. With rouge dipped from a tiny jar she drew circles on the bones of her cheeks. Then she wrapped herself in the chenille robe, combed back her hair, and went downstairs to find Carlos.

Carlos was nodding over a copy of *El Mundo* when she knocked. When he saw her face in the yellow porchlight he nearly shut his door. Something in the expression of her eyes or in the red and white of her face compelled him to change his mind.

"I'm worried about the old man," Annie said. "Is he OK?"

Carlos looked down at her shriveled feet.

"I don't know where he is. I haven't seen him."

"He could be sick," Annie said. "He could be dying or he could be dead. You killed his dogs."

Carlos looked at her sadly. He dropped a hand on her shoulder.

"He's ok. What are you so worried about him for? You got your own problems."

Annie swept the big hand from her shoulder and stepped backwards.

"Are you going to check on him?"

"Check on him yourself," Carlos said. "If you're so worried, check on him yourself." He glanced at the clock over the table. "It's after midnight for christ-sake."

Annie went into the parlor and lay on the couch. Then she got up and went behind the bar.

Carlos took a flashlight out of a drawer. He cursed her with Spanish words that directly insulted her character and that of her mother's. He left the apartment. Annie chased after him on the balls of her feet.

In the moonlight, the shack had a humble grace. Undermined by termites and

split by insistent vines, it held barely to an upright position. Carlos hopped the wall and went inside. Almost immediately he was out again, hurrying up the driveway. Annie climbed the wall. She pushed open the door and leaned in. At first she saw only looming darkness, then she saw the vines. Thick jungle vines grew up between the knots of a hammock slung from the walls. Over-sized leaves dripped water and crowded the shack. The vines turned at the crack in the ridge and crawled back down, lifting the shack from its bricks. Annie watched it rock lightly in the breeze.

* * *

For the next six days Annie drove the tortuous hill town roads watching for the old man. She asked about him at the rum shacks, described him in troubled Spanish to the children who ran with the chickens in the road. In Utuado she ran out of gas. An entire family pushed her five miles to the nearest station where they ate pigeon peas and rice and waited for the owner to return from his cousin's wedding.

Nilda called her mother collect.

* * *

Annie sold her car to a disc jockey at WKAQ. She gave the herbal teas to the astrologer downstairs, and made arrangements for the transportation of her furniture. She sent out a resume. She waxed her legs. In a steaming rain, Nilda drove her to the airport. She kissed Annie's ear just before she boarded the small plane for San Juan. Annie patted Nilda's powerful arm and whimpered.

Two weeks after Annie was settled in her parents' house she got the letter from Nilda.

"When Carlos was tearing down the shack," Nilda wrote, "a funny thing happened. A roll of film uncurled itself from the leaf of a philodendron and dropped at his feet. So I went and had it developed. Nothing came out, just this one picture. Damn Jibaro got your camera, didn't he?"

Annie picked up the snapshot. She recognized the apartment house, its long expanse of stucco on the driveway side. Framed in a window on the second floor was a face, white as the surrounding wall. It was her face, Annie realized, her own tight little face staring back at the cave.

Jane Russo
No. Whitefield

The Kindling Queen

The kindling queen does not ask the big professor. He almost always says no, and besides in the three years she's carried box after box of scrap wood from there, she only saw him once. So she talks to Bobby Darin instead because as far as she can see he runs the place. "Sure you can have it," he says with a smile, delighted to see her again. "No one picks it up anymore," he tells her grimly, and sometimes he even has to throw it out — sending a great shock through the kindling queen. It is all right now, she thinks. At last she is at the kindling again.

The kindling queen is low on boxes. Once she had the poor boy stack them tall by the produce, and wheeled out without them. And one window short now that the tailgate won't budge. She can only load them in by the side door and fill the boxes so high. If she really wants the nice, thin, oversized ones she'll have to make two trips. On the lunch hour or at the end of the day, she can only afford one.

She used to wear gloves. There were a few nails but the wood was tossed so light you could always spot them. She used to wear big gloves and try not to dust her fine pants which were ordinary enough but better than the ones she wore on weekends. She'd come in with a fine trace of sawdust or a few smudges, smiling. She loved to pick up kindling.

A few times they saw her in the barrels out back where the duck man renovated the duck pens. There were old nails and dust and dried duck do, and a few traces of feathers floating lazily as she rummaged through the old wood. She knew the smell and was not afraid of it, having cleaned her own chicken pens countless times. She was always so pleased to finish the job, giving her birds a clean, dry place. Thinking one day she'd hose the house down. One hot steamy day she'd take a hose to that house and then she'd be happy.

Most of the scraps she gets from the shop don't need to be split. But she does more work than most would. Most people wouldn't think twice about a scrap that big. They'd howl to see the sticks she

takes to an ax. But she doesn't mind. She'd rather make a blazing fire than a steaming mess on those stiff frozen mornings.

Sometimes she feels kind of cheap rummaging through the wood-box like some ancient lady picking clothes from the back door trash. So she keeps her head down and moves swiftly, keeping the noise to a sigh. She leaves the plywood which scatters in awkward blocks throughout the scrap box. On the radio she heard not to burn it because of the glue. She could almost feel the invisible gas going out the stove door and into her house. So she leaves them behind and hopes they don't notice the vegetables she left on her plate. She hopes nobody bothers to notice the kindling queen and the plywood plugging up the deep box.

Looking back, she never had it this good. It took years to find it: the perfect kindling. Along the way, there were others: slabs at the sawmill, take a year to split. Dry oak, too big to burn so quickly, smoldering from the start. Scraps from her own workbench, never catching up with demand. Or old boards with nails, a hundred rusty nails she doesn't have time to pull.

Then there's the kindling she saved for years because it was too pretty to burn. Always meaning to make something. Or the branches knocked down by the worst storms. Trick kindling, she called it. Where you get 10 boxes in no time and watch it burn like paper. So in the middle of winter you're out there breaking boughs from frozen trees, cursing. Kind of like a match at your rear end when you're low on kindling.

But this kindling here is the best. So when the time comes for her to collect it, a wave of anxiety breaks over her: you can't keep a good secret too long. You wouldn't think there'd be much difference from one kind to the next. But then there aren't too many kindling queens out there broadcasting it. When you find "Grade A" kindling, you kind of keep it to yourself.

Dianne Ballon
Orono
works in visual arts

Silver Blue

I would rock them gently home: Duane, Paul, B.J., Jack. They were all around 30, except Jack, who was a few years older. He played the piano in shabby bars across the north country, and drank wine highballs like they were nothing at all. He was huge, always happy, never said anything unkind. I remember the night he showed at my door with two intoxicated women; my sudden companion and I discussed Dylan Thomas for an hour or so while Jack and his sweetheart embraced on the other side of a thin wall. I was embarrassed and eighteen.

I heard about his death as I was shooting pool in his favorite bar: he took his life during some sort of police chase: no one could tell the particulars. The last time I saw Jack he told me he had cut down to one bottle of wine a day and I told him how pleased I was, but I never knew until then that he had a real problem.

Duane. His favorite saying was "there you go." He used it all the time, no matter what the occasion. Most people say "thank you" or "I understand" or "that's wonderful" now and then. But not Duane; he was a man of few words, and they were usually pretty generic. I remember him on one of his more loquacious nights, teaching me quickly how to pay off a Chicago cop. Leave the bill on the seat, he kept saying, don't hand it over — just leave the bill on the seat. I was nervous but I did so and it worked fine. Life was simple then.

When Duane hanged himself one March morning I was crushed. I sat by the shore of Lake Michigan for the longest time, and the waves seemed to say, over and over, there you go.

Paul's favorite saying was: "It's not the fall that hurts, it's the sudden stop." He was a gigolo of sorts; he lived mouth to mouth. All the women adored him, and they supported him in gracious little ways. He taught me how to play chess, when attempts by brighter teachers had failed. It became an obsession with us. I won the first 201 games (exactly that number), then we stopped keeping track. We hitchhiked the South together, for a while, and tonight I remember a terrible argument we had outside a topless place in New Orleans, but I don't recall the subject of our grief. The last time I saw him he was using heroin. We talked about it.

One thing about Paul worth mentioning is that he despised famous people — the wealthy, the much photographed, the jewelled women and fancy blow-dried men of success. When Paul killed himself, by intentionally stepping in front of a car on the interstate, his body was hurtled 60 feet into the air. I don't now how they measure that

sort of thing. But it was a slow night and some reporter dug his case out of the morgue and put his picture on the front page of the Detroit Free Press: The Death of a Nobody.

Paul had been on his way to see me when he apparently had that change of spirit. We were to spend the winter in Mexico. I would be finishing my first novel and, since he was an artist without an art, he would merely be healing, and practicing what he knew best, perhaps now and then bringing insane women to the door, like Jack did. But Paul's sudden stop changed my life, and I never got to write in the Mexican sun.

B.J. was my brother. He was tremendously brave, totally generous though not always kind, but kind enough during my childhood nightmares, and that was all that really counted back then, and even now. I knew him for 26 years, and I introduced him to both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. In turn, he taught me about sorrow. On the night before he killed himself, I read to him the following passage from a novel by Lawrence Durrell, something I nevertheless would have liked to have spoken also to Jack and Duane and Paul:

It's a terrible thing to feel that one has come to the end of one's life experience — that there is nothing fundamentally new to look forward to: one must expect more and more combinations of the same sort of thing — the thing which has proved one a sort of failure. So then you start on the declining path, living a kind of posthumous life, your blood cool, your pulse steady. And yet it is just the fruitful point at which some big new understanding might jump out on you from behind the bushes and devour you like a lion.

My brother shook his head slowly, carefully I think, although to this day I don't imagine he really heard my words. As he turned to leave, I played for him a John David Souther song I'd recently discovered:

Silver blue . . .
said goodbye to no one.
Thought it through,
and left me standing in the road.

Frank Johnson
Tenants Harbor
*writes in the woods
on a tidal cove*

On Penobscot Bay

*If the widow commit incontinency, she forfeits her estate.
If she comes into court riding backwards upon a black ram
and uttering a rhymed plea, she may regain her inheritance.
(paraphrased)
The Newgate Calendar*

Sleek hulled sloop
Circe's you said
Closehauled, heeling
Pumping Sou'east across the bay

On the granite brow of Spruce Island
Above the bucking hull
You sit crosslegged, shake loose your hair
Then carefully cast the delicate bones
Forsee: bump and stench
The agony of tensed thighs and brittle knees
The whelming need to urinate
As, teeth chattering, you ride backwards the black ram
Up from Stone Harbor to reclaim my few books, letters
A faded blue flannel shirt, the map, and the two amphorae.

Just two white lumps
"Jug, jug," you said and held them against your breasts
And the sun far out on the water catches copper
As I repeat the translated cave scratchings
"Long ships of Phoenicia
Cargo lots landing quay."

We lie drying on the granite
Cigarettes in puckered fingers
Talk of Columbus-come-lately, Popham, Weymouth
Of men, women drowned before Calvary.
The bay pulsates, water lapping, lapping
Salt for your psoriasis.
The sun teeters on the hills
Ringing the West Bay
And twenty yards offshore, watching
A harbor seal rides the waves.

Roland Burns
Fort Kent
teaches at UMFK

Fifty Year Anniversary

Kennebec: Cradle of Americans / Robert Peter Tristram Coffin

(Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., New York, 1937. Available in libraries.)

Coffin's is a book to curl up with, a book for anyone who enjoys language, the tall tale, the playful Maine imagination rather than gospel truth. This Maine classic should not be allowed to gather dust. One of twenty-four volumes of literary history about the Rivers of America, this 1937 folk saga is fifty years old. It is for the general reader, not the historian. In it, "people are supreme and events secondary." The novelists and poets commissioned to write the series were told to catch America in "the rhythm of moving water." Coffin (1892-1955), perhaps the best-known Maine poet of the previous generation, does just that. His river flows in the rhythm of his words. Born in Brunswick, and for years a professor at Bowdoin, he revels in the real river and his imagined one.

He begins with pre-history, native Americans, and quickly introduces the red clay and oystershell people. The latter left the largest monuments to human hunger in the world, he says; the mounds of shells found along the river are temples to the God Gastronomy, our oldest deity. Soon he is writing about the Abenakis, the Dawn people and their god Katahdin, and how in a "century of agony and fire" two ideas of land control clashed so that "hate flashed up and down the Kennebec valley like summer lightning." After the last Indian War the natives "bowed from sight as the pines that had brushed the stars bowed for the sawmills that ate the forest from the Kennebec's bank," he warns us that "the greatest error of history is the impression it constantly leaves of one race's completely supplanting another... as though our Maine ancestors could have lived next-door to the Abenakis for two centuries and still have remained European. It is like expecting a book to lie open in Maine's sunlight and not change color." Coffin concludes that "there is a lot of American psychology you can explain only by the fact that we went Indian for a while."

Regarding European settlement, he speculates about the first person to "sail into the lower end of a rainbow, or into a river like crushed diamonds." St. Brendan the navigator? a Viking warrior? or a simple fisherman? The last, probably. Coffin takes high ground; it was "God and not Columbus who opened the door to a new world." Coffin tells of David Ingram, America's most famous walker, who in 1558 was marooned on the Gulf of Mexico and walked his way to the Penobscot where he met French fishermen whom he told about the riches of a town called Norembega (Old Town). His story inspired Europeans to explore our coast. Weymouth, for example, came looking for riches but found something better, "something close to paradise — Maine in full bloom." The French temporarily settled Mount Desert; Fernando Gorges, "proprietor of Maine" for the English, found "winters as hard as diamonds, but the people tough and stayers." Later, during the six battles for the continent between the French and English in which Indians were pawns, the "habit" of trying to capture Quebec was formed — Benedict Arnold and all of that followed. Coffin relates the legend of Jacataqua, the Indian queen who fell in love with one of Arnold's marchers — Aaron Burr.

Coffin's prose is playful. After the revolution, "America stood up as a nation and something tremendous happened to the Kennebec. It started rising and kept on rising until its waters covered the Atlantic, poured down the Horn, out across the Pacific, and met themselves coming around Good Hope." To Coffin, Maine's wooden ships, built by farmers, were "seasonal symphonies. The keel was laid when the grass showed its first green around it. Their planking was finished when the golden-rod blossomed. And they usually went into the river to meet the rising of the harvest moon." However, with the Civil War, wooden ships and the Kennebec in general declined.

"The pulp era" polluted the river; the acids of August and Gardiner mills ate at the water. Fish disappeared, as did birds which hunted them. Thousands left the valley; houses emptied and decayed. It was 1937. Coffin dedicated his book to his son Robert, and as such to all young Mainers of the time. "Greed fouled the Kennebec," he tells them; he pleads for its renewal, and for kids to stay home and take pride in their patrimony. Today, more seem to stay home, as did Robert who teaches at USM. The river is clean enough to surprise Coffin. Salmon swim it to spawn. People swim in it for... for what? Coffin might say "... to meet the rising of the harvest moon." Around here, we have a new word for our clean river, and an official Day and a bizarre boat race to celebrate it: "Whatever," we say. "Whatever Day." I can just see the poet floating down his river amid the hundreds of others, saying it: "Whatever... Whatever." And he smiles.

Clara Schroder
Hallowell
studies history at USM



Photo: Jacki Bragg

Excerpt...

Kennebec Weather

"On the 18. of Januarie they had in seven houres space thunder, lightning, raine, frost, snow, all in abundance, the last continuing."

This is, so far as I know, the earliest weather report in the Kennebec valley. It was for the year 1608, and the place was the Popham Plantation. It reads mighty natural. It could be for the year 1937 just as well. The weather has not changed.

The Indians weren't the only things that tempered the steel of the Kennebec men. The weather did too. Purchas's description is that of a good average day, the run-of-the-mill weather you can expect in seven Maine hours.

The weather vane always put on the top of the tallest pine tree is a necessary adjunct of a Kennebec farm. This is not for looks. It is to tell a man if there will be rain or hail, a thunderstorm or a fog, by the time he has the horses hitched. A farmer who begins his haying with that arrow pointing the wrong way may have to finish up his haying three farms away. A Maine farmer had always better take his winter coat along with him. A July scorcher winds up with three blankets and a comforter on the bed at night. Many Kennebec men wear their long ones right through the summer. Woolen socks never go out of season with the lobstering men.

A Kennebec breeze can grow into a man-sized gale quicker than any other breeze going. It can get strong enough to lean on in an hour's time, and it can rattle the teeth in your head and make your eyeballs jingle. No wonder the Kennebec people took to sail early, with all that power flying around loose. The winds get into people's minds; they get through the clapboards of the stoutest houses; they get into people's sleep. My father once had a farmhouse that he had to keep tied down with chains over the roof, and he had to change the chains when the wind veered. That's the kind of wind we raise in Maine. The spruces grow close together so that all hands of them can lean on each other and still be there in the morning. The Kennebec men

and women have learned to fit their lives into the winds. Maybe their not having much to say comes from the fact that they don't have a chance to say it, in so much wind. They go with knees slightly bent so as not to be surprised and turned bottom-side up. And they go the right way to suit the blow. The Kennebec sheep have heads raked like the funnels of oceangoing steamers. Wind is a first-rate tonic, though. It can clean a man's mind out well. A man coming in out of a wind is apt to be pretty good to his children, I have noticed.

We raise pretty fair fogs up around the Kennebec. They march up the river in August like Caesar's legions, and they push the world back inland for miles. They wipe away islands and towns. The Kennebec cows have to be able to navigate them when they come home from pasture, and the small Kennebec boys who follow their bells, as lobstering men follow the bell buoys, have to carry a compass somewhere between their wide ears. August days may be only two hours of sunlight long. I am surprised the Popham colonists did not speak of the fog. There must have been some that day.

You can't be sure of Maine weather. The farmers reckon it lucky if they can get their beans in by Decoration Day. Even then, June may turn out frosty. Any full moon is almost sure to bring along a silver blanket that leaves the tomatoes looking like the last slice of bacon on a side-slab. There's one month, Maine folks say, when you can count on having no frost. July. I believed that till last Fourth of July. I had to set out my marigolds over again after that.

It can rain harder along my river than in any other place I know. It isn't rain. It is an aerated waterfall. A sou'east rain makes the windowpanes look like the walls of an aquarium. You expect to see a haddock look in on you any minute. But, then, a sou'wester is nothing to sneer at. It has given its name to the best Kennebec hat — with a long slope aft to keep the rain off the top joint of your spine if nowhere else. Oilskins are almost a national dress along the Kennebec. They are just as useful when plowing as when pulling lobster traps. It's raining pitchforks — that's an accurate Maine description for a lot of Maine weather.

Not that we don't have snow. We do. Up to the eaves of the woodshed, and the boy has to walk through a canyon to fetch in his armful of birch and maple stove-wood. Six feet of snow on a level is not a usual thing in Maine, because Maine is almost never level, and the winds wouldn't let the snow lie there if it were. It snows that deep, but it all gathers round the tie-up to give the boys more to do to get the bull to the watering tub down a Grand Canyon of Carrara marble. Often you can recognize a farm by the cupola on the barn or the kitchen chimney smoking.

Snow is one thing. But cold is another. We have that too. Cold enough to freeze the whiskers off a brass monkey, as the saying goes. Cold enough to go with a cane. Cold as Charity. Cold as the porridge at the poorhouse. Cold enough to stop a clock. Cold as slow molasses running uphill. There are a lot of Maine proverbs for cold. It is one of the best crops of the state.

When a Kennebec man goes to bed in winter he wears his wool socks, a flannel nightgown, perhaps his overcoat; he has two spruce-beer jugs filled with hot water for his feet, a hot flatiron for his back, and his complete supply of Boston Transcripts between mattress and springs. If he has a wife, he sends her along ahead of him to warm the bed. Likely as not, when he wakes up in the morning there are icicles on his mustache, if he has one. When he gets up to light the fire for his wife, and sings to keep his courage up, he sees his song right around him in the air.

By the last of March he may omit the flatiron.

It's not to be wondered at that Kennebec people are a tough crew. They've had to be to get through a Maine winter. The pindling ones perished before Wolfe captured Quebec.

But there's a bright side to all this. Apples that have a hard time in a brief summer, an acid soil, and an early frost, taste all the sweeter for that. "Sweet are the uses of adversity." The rigors of a spring day may clear the air until a man living along the Kennebec feels like a man living in the heart of a chandelier. And there are days in January, after an ice-storm, for which chandelier is a pale word. It is like walking through a web of rainbows to be up and out in such a glory. Every bush coated with cut diamonds, and the hills looking like the hills of the Apocalypse. It is a fine thing to be alive in such splendor, and the splendor of the days gets into a man, and the splendor of nights so clear that the stars snap like sapphires overhead. The gulls go over washed whiter than snow. Cleanness and sharpness can put an edge on a man like a whetstone. It is the making of Maine's wit and sharpness of mind. It makes the Maine eyes their peculiarly true blue, and the people sparkle like their granite and snow. It powders homely Yankee faces till they are handsome, and makes the corners of a man's eyes crinkle up, and he laughs in spite of death and taxes, zero weather, and everything.

There are days on the Kennebec, winter and summer, when the sky is so like crystal that you know you would strike the tone of an old goblet if you could reach high enough to flick it with your fingernail.

A person cannot live among these days and so much granite and pungent bayberry and sweet fern and clean evergreen without getting clear and good-smelling inside. Bedrock living comes natural in a place where winds stir things to bedrock. A man can get used to loneliness when it is in so shining a place. The hardness of Kennebec winters and ledges is the hardness of peace and serenity.

Robert P. T. Coffin (1892-1955)
Brunswick

Review

The Funeral Makers / Cathie Pelletier

(MacMillan, 1986)

This is not a book for everyone, but it certainly could be. Only if you can close your eyes and shake your head regularly through the first fifty pages do you stand a chance to enjoy fine writing and intriguing twists of phrase and thought and to finally meet some captivating people. Without an ulterior motive or advance warning, many readers will probably never discover the thought-provoking and entertaining writer who presides over the finer chapters of *The Funeral Makers*.

What makes this a difficult book to get into also makes it interesting for anyone intrigued by the writing process. In the opening chapters, the author tugs at your shirtsleeves, as irritating and distracting as "a cat walking on your newspaper while you're reading it." She wrestles with alien characters and a slapstick tone like that same cat attacking a ball of yarn, trailing dangling participles, overworked adjectives, mangled metaphors, and tangled sentences. Some time before chapter four, this pest will drive most readers to pick it up by the scruff of the neck and toss it out into the dooryard. Too bad.

The more patient reader will meet Violet LaForge and Chester Lee and discover the voracious and ineluctable trap of Mattagash. Even "the trees around Mattagash saw a lot more of the world than the people did." Not coincidentally, they have to be chopped down before they can get away. For the people, it's not quite so easy. "All of Mattagash was a big mousetrap where someone had taken the cheese years ago. Just an empty trap waiting to spring its rusty mouth shut." Truly, "To escape Mattagash, you must be very cunning." Or very dead.

The people of Mattagash tell us not that you can't go home again, you can't leave. Half the characters are stuck in some sort of prison made neither of stone walls nor of iron bars: suffocating marriages, decaying bodies, and genetic desperation imprison these folks. Where is home? It's a place where nothing ever changes, peopled by Sarah Pinkhams who manhandle morality until it is small-minded and uncompromising. The only escape is some sort of passion, for missionaries, fast cars, or magical consorts, all of which prove to be temporary and illusory.

While these themes provide the substance of *The Funeral Makers*, Chester Lee Gifford furnishes the spark. Undeniably worthless, contemptible, and degenerate, "evolved from generations of mutant Giffords" mired "in the murky slime," Chester quickly becomes the hypnotic focus of empathy. He's a clown with feeble delusions of grandeur. Riding on his white horse, driving the noble Packard to freedom, seducing the most unlikely of damsels, he is the romantic-hero obscenely exaggerated to absurdity. Chester is the ridiculous reflection of romantic aspiration for whom you can't help but have contempt but with whom you can't help but identify.

If you read the book jacket synopsis you will undoubtedly wonder what book the blurb writer read. If you reflect further, you may wonder why the second part of the book is so much better than the first. You may ultimately wonder whether anyone at MacMillan bothered to read the entire book. My guess is that some ambitious editor smelled another literary Grandma Moses. Consequently, very little editorial attention was paid to this promising first work and the author was left to struggle with her subliminal editor. When she finds her voice and focus, the book offers some fine reading.

Cathy Pelletier does persevere; regrettably, many of her readers won't.

Lee Stephens
Portland

REVIEWS

***The New Year's Owl* / Susan Shetterly**

(Yankee Books, 1986)

Some nature writers, like Annie Dillard or Joseph Wood Krutch, were already well along as literary people when they found nature as a subject. Others, like Aldo Leopold or John Muir, were naturalists whose passionate concern for the outdoors boiled over into words. When you read Susan Shetterly's work, though, you get the sense that her writing and her natural history co-evolved as aspects of the same personal development. Information, observation and expression are so skillfully integrated that before you know it our eyes have been opened to parts of the world you had never seen, and you've learned something without the painful formality of instruction.

The New Year's Owl is arranged by seasons, but there is a deeper story beneath, the story of a family "homesteading" in downeast Maine, with all that the term implies, *making a home*, making or discovering true human dignity and civilization in the border territory of man and wilderness. There is an elegance of language and of living in this book, a very fertile tension between acute, city-honed highly sensitive observation and the simple, deliberate expeditions into nature that dominate the book. It speaks for all of us who put the city away and moved to Maine back in the seventies.

Both Shetterly's essays and her husband Robert's etchings commemorate this successful cultural synthesis. You can see it from the very first piece. They are dressed up to the hilt, heading down the road for a costume party with all the sophistication of consciousness that that involves, and someone shows up with an injured owl. The costume party is forgotten. The Shetterlys feed the owl beef strips marinated in milk and begin surgery on its wing.

This is no ordinary nature book. Susan Shetterly is impatient with mere observation and the dry satisfaction of having *seen*. She goes for contact instead. She takes the world as her household, allowing nature into the emotional depth usually reserved for one's family — and the potential for tragedy and loss. She is marked from the outset as one who will not just passively observe, but will have to co-suffer with the natural suffering of things. She is a child in a zoo watching a gorilla who starts spitting at people through the bars. Everyone else backs away. The gorilla spits at her once and she holds her ground, then again. A tremendous stamina and courage comes through in these essays, whether she's near-drowning in a swamp or facing down a hunter who threatens to violate their property. It manages to articulate the responsibility we all accepted in choosing Maine, a responsibility for life that we all keep guessing at, feeling unconsciously, but here it is in plain print.

This is exactly what it means to be a steward of the land and a neighbor to other humans. The book cuts open the skin of theory and habit that separates us from the world and shows the living tissue of ecological relation underneath. The endlessly-debated matter of poisoning herring gulls to save terns is put in a new light by a visit to the local dump where the gulls feed. *She teaches us that to see is an active, not a passive verb, that attentiveness involves risk and commitment, and we share through language the privilege of her attention. We are reminded of the shamans in their dark, northern climates, putting on bird-costumes to fly between our place and the forgotten place of the animals to bring us news.*

The New Year's Owl is full of information about birds and animals. You learn how smelt copulate and where monarch butterflies spend the winter. You learn the history of the landscape and the occupations of its people. You end up with a lot of knowledge about the natural world and you have been taught so well that you forget that you learned it and feel that you knew it all along. You have become through these essays part of the author's life and of her family. But there's also an uncanny aspect to this writing. The author is a poet who uses metaphor to expand her vision, and ours, beyond the present time and space. Smelt fishermen gather in the moonlight in Steuben. All you see of them is the glowing points of their cigarettes. "It is as if they had gathered here to row, with long-stemmed oars, a heavy black-timbered boat out into the bay." Such evocations of dream-like ritual and deep history make it a good book to read on a winter's night before going to bed, when the real and the unreal begin to transform into each other.

Robert Shetterly's illustrations develop the uncanny, shape-changing multiple faces of nature that are hinted at in the prose. These etchings, by now familiar to anyone in Maine, show with tremendous humor and compassion that seeing is also an act of transformation. We turn these drawings over one after the other and finally must say yes, of course, the same healing, rehabilitating creative force that pushes natural things through their changes is also in our own minds. It is our mind creating itself while it looks on. Human and natural creation become the same, and in these frog eyes and heron eyes and chicken visages we find our own reflections staring back, asking the question we hadn't thought of yet.

Sociobiology tells us that all human emotions and ideas ultimately evolved for their survival value, the survival of the individual and his gene. Whenever I encounter a sociobiologist on the street I ask him the same question. What is it in our genetic structure that would make people campaign to save another species? They can never answer. But here is the evidence of human compassion reaching across the species barrier that has nothing at all to do with human survival. Or does it? You read these essays over and realize that these dramas of midnight bird-rescue and bird-rehabilitation, these moments of unselfishness in the sardine factory, offer a glimmer of possibility for another kind of survival that is not yet in the lexicon of neo-Darwinism. The book is about freedom and survival, a family surviving on the edge of the country; and the acts of healing and rehabilitation they perform are absolutely inseparable from their ability to endure. The sociobiologists are both right and wrong. We are programmed to survive, but somewhere in the instructions is also a message to help out. Humans in Maine and elsewhere have so much to be ashamed of in their long history of predation on themselves and others. This wonderful book may help force us to see that maybe in spite of our story we're somewhat better than we had thought.

William Carpenter
Stockton Springs
teaches at COA

***Picking Up* / Lucy Honig**

(The Dog Ear Press, 1986 — Winner of the 1986 Maine Novel Award)

In *PICKING UP*, readers catch a glimpse of April Devoe, a commonplace, lonely woman whose existence in downeast Maine is defined by her hard, back-breaking work in the potato fields and her equally difficult struggles in a family marked by poverty, infidelity and abuse. The drudgery of her life matches the bleakness of the landscape. Surrounded by acres of unpicked potatoes, she describes her life as a "great big field of potatoes that's got to get picked up, and I can never finish and no one ever helps." April Devoe is tired, tired of the struggle, tired of the unending work, tired of her disheveled family life. She wants to make all of it better, but her attempts seem futile.

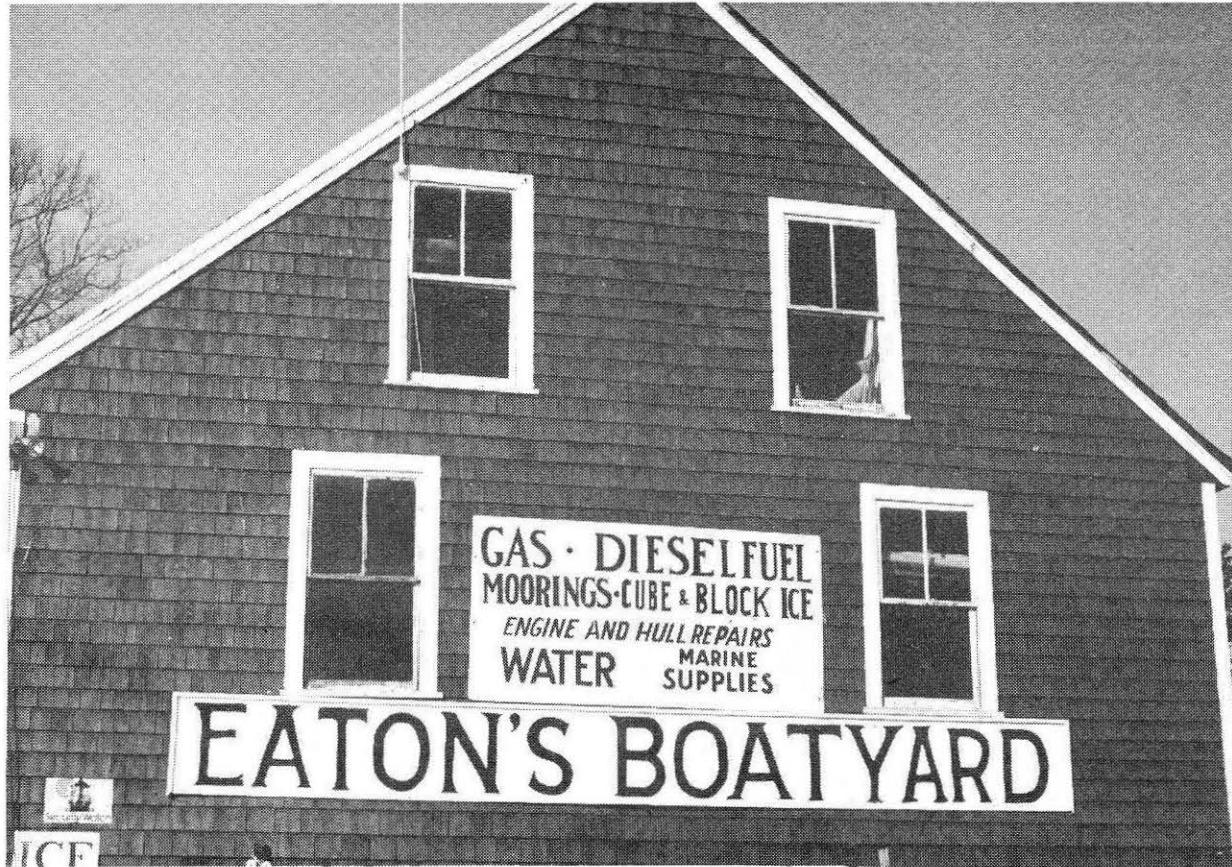
But as desperate as her situation appears, April Devoe dreams. She imagines a life of endless choices, like the world of the homesteaders "from away" who form the food co-op and live in dome houses. She pictures a household where a family relaxes in each other's company without conflict, without hate. She fantasizes about romantic love and the attention of a caring, sensitive man. She dreams of work that is fair and satisfying. "One day of good minutes. That was what she lived for. That was the whole thing."

April Devoe is handicapped by the circumstances of her birth. She fears the

unknown, and her relationships seem all wrong. Gradually Lucy Honig discloses April's plight through her expectations of the people around her and her inevitable frustrations when they fall short. Especially convincing are the raw dialogue between April and her mother Sally MacQuarrie, the strained interaction between April and her ne'er-do-well husband John, the battles with her three unruly sons, the daily confrontations with her co-workers in the fields. However, it is April's restlessness that moves the story along — and her restlessness that saves her.

Undoubtedly, this first novel will receive attention. Readers will be tempted to compare *PICKING UP* to Chute's *THE BEANS OF EGYPT, MAINE*. Critics may include this novel in their debate about the *Maine* novel. April Devoe leads an ordinary life that is uncommonly difficult, a quiet life of despair transformed into hope.

Carol Kontos
Windham
teaches at UMA



Review

Relations: Selected Poems 1950-1985 / Philip Booth

(Viking Penguin, 1986)

The cover photo of Philip Booth's latest volume, *Relations: Selected Poems 1950-1985*, is pointedly absent of people. A gull stands on a wharf post in a direct line across from an empty fold-up chair. Both are framed by Castine Bay, I suspect, and the water is also empty of boats and people. And yet the word *Relations* in the title smacks us hard in the face: the letters are bold and black, they beg our attention. And the poems in this volume, gathering together work from his six earlier books and including new selected poems, are very much concerned with relations and relationships the poet has experienced and is still moving toward.

'Crouched hard on granite, / facing a weathered sea, / I breathe as slow as rock,' Booth informs us in "Voyages" from his third book, *Weathers and Edges*. And even though the poem is titled "Voyages," the poet is still back in the harbor, poised like the gull, rooted on the ledge, 'bound / as I am to the very edge.' The poet journeys inward, not outward, hugging the tideline like the snails and finding his own horizon like the hulls of the poem. The tension between inward and outward possibilities for change and experience are reflected in the makeup of the poem's structure itself. Booth's two sestets, also divided into halves of three-line stanzas, move from the external landscape of *granite* and his own human *butt* in the first sestet inward to *sea* and *eye*, where the voyages are taken into the human imagination rather than on the Penobscot Bay. Of course, Booth being a sailor himself, knows the external experience of sailing and owning a boat, but the poem tugs inward, reflecting on the transcendent sense of place. In the second sestet, the end words of the first and sixth lines, *ledge* and *edge*, again rhyme and are employed in the same way as the first sestet. Here he is poised like the gull and empty chair of the cover, alert and responsive to the relationship between inner and outer landscape.

Place is no superficial "home, sweet, home" for Booth. It is a deep-rooted, historic, hard-earned location. It is a spot his own ancestors, going back three generations, have nurtured and handed down to him for safekeeping. It is a place to dream from, the collective unconscious so well endowed and overflowing from the family heirlooms, 'my mother's grandfather's clock,' the magnificent old woodstove which link the poet to his relatives, his village, at the edge of this northern New England tide, where his 'feet feel into the hillside' and he is 'relative to every last house.' ("Before Sleep")

What saves Booth's work from sentimentality is his voracious concern for language that challenges and probes his experience, these relations. Booth never lets himself off easy: he crouches hard on granite, he reflects that 'Granite takes nothing for granted,' he goes out to fell oak and 'think woodlots,' not knowing what is really true, realizing the one constant in life is change.

One of Booth's most frequently anthologized poems, "Eaton's Boatyard," in-

EATON'S BOATYARD

To make do, making a living:
to throw away nothing,
practically nothing, nothing that may
come in handy;
within an inertia of caked paintcans,
frozen C-clamps, blown strips of tarp, and
pulling-boat molds,
to be able to find,
for whatever it's worth,
what has to be there:
the requisite tool
in this culch there's no end to:
the drawshave buried in potwarp,
chain, and manila jibsheets,
or, under the bench,
the piece that already may fit
the idea it begins
to shape up:
not to be put off by split rudders,
stripped outboards, half
a gasket, and nailsick garboards:
to forget for good
all the old year's losses,
save for
what needs be retrieved:
a life given to
how today feels:
to make of what's here
what has to be made
to make do.

Philip Booth
Castine
teaches at Syracuse

sists on making a life of 'what's here/ what has to be made/ to make do.' As in the cover photo of *Relations* and in many of Booth's poems, we are faced with a location or landscape without human beings, but the human spirit and possibility of all things human is suffused in the poet's reflection on that place. Eaton's Boatyard is obviously a place frequented by the poet. He has used these tools and materials, in his continual search for 'the requisite tool.' The poem is a probing search for a way to make a living, one's life,

the piece that already may fit
the idea it begins
to shape up.

Kathleen Lignell
Orono

is a poet and editor at UMO

Fifth Grade, Second Period Social Studies

*The girl who sits in the fourth
row, sixth seat, Fifth Grade
has a body that skipped ahead of her
as if it wanted to be in the seventh
or eighth with breasts and hair and blood.
The girl in the fourth row, sixth seat feels it
is unfair her body has a mind of its own
that has twisted her out of shape and makes demands
and she cries to please wait and let the others
catch up in fractions and science and spelling
and when she writes her name and numbers the page
and puts her crayons away. The girls who sits
in the fourth row, sixth seat, stares into the corner
where the calendar is marked with Autumn leaves
and where she lies under a voluminous cloak,
dark as the insides of a pumpkin shell, where her cheeks
are two moons, pale and sweet in clouds of hair,
and she is nursed and fretted upon by streams
of visitors who bring her toys and treats
and remark how she is frightfully ill and terribly
small and where she can make herself grow
or not, just like a spore, far from the laughter
in the hall and on the stairs, far from being pushed
and touched on purpose or by mistake.*

*The boy in the red shirt next to her
has been chosen to spy down her shirt
and through her button holes and report
at recess on the playground if they are
scoops of ice cream, jelly rolls, marshmallows,
whether they are play dough or putty or cool and moist
as the Pueblo clay in the picture on the classroom wall
or hot as chocolate pudding thickening and everyday
they want more and more beside the seesaw and the jungle
gym as if he carried tales from the land of milk
and honey. The boy in the red shirt, fifth seat
Fifth Grade has two left feet and hands that can't
catch anything, that make him wish that he was dead.
The boy in the red shirt overhears the teacher whisper
he is slow, so he knows those small creamy hills
and valleys, those shadows moving over her paper
as she writes between the afternoon bells
are all he has.*

Roberta Chester
Orono
teaches at UMO

Hot Air Balloon Ride

*In the beginning
fear shrouds the field in loose colors,
sulks in its basket.
Strangers gather.
The wind drops
as the bright folds build
in the monumental dusk.
And then it's over.
We are risen,
distilled into our own distance,
windless
(for we are members of the wind),
fearless
(for we have become the fear of others).
Here at last —
O, vacant, soft cathedral! —
trust works,
principles hold,
while in some other world
deer cross clearings,
horses make for barns,
tractors blacken fields,
and only the nesting bird thinks of looking up.*

Daniel C. Bryant
Portland
practices medicine

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