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American Scenes: The Life of Jack Hayward

Dedicated to my mother

Lance Hawvermale

According to historians of American art, the art movement known as Regionalism flourished from 1920 to the late 1960s, interspersed with periods of popularity and decline. Like all “schools” of artistic expression, Regionalism waxed and waned with the ever-shifting phases of popular attitude; as a medium focused entirely upon inner American concepts and ideals—as opposed to broader, more universal themes—the success of Regionalism depended entirely upon the country’s desire for introspection. When America was embroiled in World War II and intent upon the international ideals of liberty and democracy, critics and laymen alike ignored Regionalism, turning instead to more abstract artistic expressions. When the nation rediscovered its agrarian roots in the 1950s and struggled with the electronic innovations of the 60s, a resurgent interest in American heroes and simplicities led to the rebirth of Regionalism. Leading the way throughout these social changes were three primary Regionalist artists: John Steuart Curry, Thomas Hart Benton, and Grant Wood. Each of these men achieved recognition on a national scale. Their works spanned the union to communicate common ideas to Americans everywhere.

But unlike the popular Curry, Hart, and Wood, many Regionalist painters were active at a local rather than a national level. There, they found themselves even more able to respond to the grassroots desires of the Midwestern mind because of their lifelong proximity to their subjects. Living their entire lives on the remnants of the great American frontier, these artists did not aspire to move millions through the deft stroke of their camel-hair brush, but simply wished to render on canvas what God had built so beautifully on land. John Noel Hayward of Alva, Oklahoma was such an artist. Hayward was not only a true contemporary of the members of the Regionalist Triumvirate, he was also—on a local level—a living example of the “American-Scene Man” of the 1940s, 50s, and early 60s.

J.N. “Jack” Hayward made northwest Oklahoma and nearby areas of Kansas and Texas art conscious, while at the same time preserving memories of the region’s past. Many authorities considered Hayward a rare jewel in a region of the country that was thought to be otherwise artless, boorish, and uninspired. Through the lives of the hundreds of students he taught and the moments of rural history he captured on his canvas, Hayward effectively conveyed the collective ideals of an entire region, though it was never his intention to do anything more than “just haul off and paint.” It was said that Hayward would just as soon have painted a new sign for the local barber shop than a portrait for the governor. 1

Jack Hayward was born on February 3, 1903 in an area of Indian Territory known as the Big Pasture near present-day Davidson, Oklahoma. The nearest post office was located in Lawton—75 miles away. Only eleven days after he was born, Hayward’s mother died of uremic poisoning, a result of complications during birth. Unable to singlehandedly care for his infant son, William Leigh Hayward entrusted the boy to his maternal grandfather, J. H. Rice, who traveled by train in late winter 1903 to bring the boy to Elk City, Kansas. Hayward would grow to adulthood in Elk City, and later in Frederick, Oklahoma. That first trip to Elk City was indicative of the struggles of that era; the train was delayed by a snowstorm, and Rice and the other travelers were forced to burn the floorboards of the passenger cars to keep warm. The train operators eventually employed the same method to fuel the engine when the coal supply was depleted.

As a youngster in his grandfather’s house, Hayward came to know the wit and wisdom of his grandfather, a man whose
circle of intimate friends included not only several Native Americans, but also one Clem Rogers, father of the incomparable Will Rogers. During this time, Hayward learned firsthand the stories of the white settlers, the hardships of the reservation Indians, and the rich history of the territory that became Oklahoma. Such influences would become apparent in his paintings, as he sought to present a history of the West on a localized, emotional scale.2

While Hayward was still attending school in rural Oklahoma—his own artistic expression limited to cartoons rendered on writing tablets during class time—vast changes were taking place in the aesthetics of art in the national forum. In reaction to the inscrutable complexities of abstract art, a new discipline of painting emerged. This grassroots style of art, commonly known as the school of the American Scene, reached its apex in the early 1930s, when a Depression-weary society looked to its own past for something in which to believe: folk heroes, common experiences, American myths. Earlier painters of such honest, traditional themes had been quickly dismissed as “quaint depicters of local trivia.”3 They found themselves pigeonholed as “regionalists,” their works roundly ignored as inconsequential to the greater art community. With the Depression, though, came a new yearning among the masses, a desire for a return to the traditional strengths and mores on which they believed this nation was constructed. The painters of the American Scene, “in ambitious canvases and sweeping murals...reasserted America’s faith in itself by holding up a mirror to the land.”4 Though the images in this mirror were often so stereotypically stalwart as to almost be caricatures, their appearance in grandiose murals won wide popularity. It was into such a world that Jack Hayward emerged, a 1930s genre representationalist with an easy familiarity for the subjects he painted.

Hayward had little formal training in art. Uncertain of his ultimate career choice, Hayward took a brief course in perspective drawing at the University of Kansas. He also attended the Northwestern State Teachers College (now Northwestern Oklahoma State University), but never earned a degree. It was while living in Alva that he married; Jack and Marjorie Hayward were wed in 1927, and spent the next several years traveling to various art institutes and learning under a number of professional painters. After a course at the Coaster School of design in Chicago, where he learned advertising and commercial painting skills, Hayward became a professional window-trimmer, designing and decorating department-store windows throughout Kansas and Oklahoma. According to Marge, however, “Jack was never very good at those nine-to-five jobs,”5 so it wasn’t long until the couple moved on to New Mexico, where Hayward learned watercolor techniques from the Sante Fe Regionalist, Arthur Hall. Some of Hayward’s finest works are sweeping scenes of the Southwest, inspired from the time he spent around Taos. In 1965, Jack and Marge traveled to San Miguel, Mexico, where they both studied at the Institute Allende under renowned artist Carlos Ozman. Marge was herself a skilled artist. She assumed the pseudonym “Carrico”—her mother’s maiden name—to individualize herself as a painter.6

During the early 1950s, Hayward found his niche in the art world. Other painters of the American Scene looked at the rural Midwest as the vehicle in which they could convey their traditionalist messages to the nation at large. In their opinion, “the American dilemma...arose from an unexamined tension between an agrarian past and a modern, technological society.”7 In order to unravel this dilemma, the popular Regionalists intentionally painted serene messages of respect for the traditional customs, while at the same time encouraging the viewer to accept modern innovations with an open mind. The future, they claimed, would then take care of itself.

Hayward had no such gilded theories. He was an outdoorsman and a historian, desiring only to capture a moment, an emotion, an old battlefield, depicting the attitudes and ancestry of a people so that Westerners might not forget their past. Though he was active during the heyday of the Regionalists and painted similar scenes, Hayward never identified himself with such artists. His credo was a simple one: “Learn to see and appreciate what is around you. God’s world is beautiful.”8

Somewhat unaware, then, of the social significance of his own contribution, Hayward traveled the Great Plains and the Southwest, from New Mexico to South Dakota, depicting local historical events, often based only on the verbal accounts of the
men who farmed or warred there. His subjects were never con­
trived from his own imagination. He painted what he saw or
what was described to him as true, thus his works displayed the
feeling and honesty of reality. Upon seeing an elaborate
Hayward sketch of a South Dakota man taking a bath in a cattle
trough, one might think the drawing a rather trite depiction
of the stereotypical American cowboy. The truth, however, is
that “Hayward happened to be around with a sketch pad when
the cowhand decided to hop into the tank for his weekly
cleanup.”9 Hayward did not attempt to paint a message or par­
ticular emotion into his work. He simply captured on his
canvas the emotion that was so evident to him in his subjects.

In the late 1940s, Hayward accepted a job with a sports­
mans’ magazine, Brill’s Outdoor Guide, and was employed with
the magazine until it went out of business in 1951. Hayward
was a lifelong outdoors enthusiast, hence his natural affinity
for the scenes that he painted. During his tenure
as advertising agent for Brill’s, Hayward had the
opportunity to visit many of the locales depicted
in the magazine—the perfect form of employment
for an avid outdoorsman. During this time,
Hayward’s skill as a sportsman brought him recog­
nition on a national scale, to complement his rep­
utation as an artist. In 1948, Hayward won the
title of national Trick-Casting Champion, and was
asked to appear across the country as a master fly­
caster. He demonstrated his prowess in this craft in the Frank
Dancer Sport Show, instructing his assistant to mark off 25
paces and stand motionless with a burning cigarette between
his lips. Hayward then proceeded to cast with incredible accu­
curacy, neatly extinguishing the cigarette as if his fishing rod
were a whip.10

Moments such as these distanced Hayward from his more
famous contemporaries. While Grant Wood was busy writing
his social commentary on the American Scene rebellion against
“Parisian aesthetics,” John Noel Hayward was living the
American Scene. His paintings resonated with the integrity of
someone who had seen and heard and smelled the scenes
depicted on his canvas.

Hayward’s affable manner and rootsy wisdom attracted
many students in the region of northwest Oklahoma, many of
whom already possessed a high degree of technical excellence
in oil painting. Among the students at his Woodward work­
shops in 1950 were several art teachers from surrounding high
schools. Characteristically self-effacing, Hayward remarked of
his class, “I learned quite a bit from them.”

Hayward’s thirty-year love affair with northwest
Oklahoma—specifically the Alva and Freedom areas—truly
began in 1951, when he opened his first art studio in Alva.
Located in the basement of what was then the Monfort Drug
Store, Hayward’s studio was set up in an abandoned bowling
alley beneath what is today Short’s Fitness Center. With his
easels propped on scoring tables and his paintings of Indian
treaties cluttering the bowling lanes, Hayward entertained chil­
dren from local high schools, tutored several students, and
worked on the many commissions he received for
his work. One of the paintings he finished while occupying this subterranean studio was a rendering
of the Osage Indian, John Stink. Like most of
Hayward’s subjects, Stink was a historical figure of
Oklahoma’s entertaining past. As the artist himself
explained, “John [was] an Osage Indian who was
buried alive, but dogs dug open his grave before he
suffocated. It was during a flu epidemic, and John
was in such a deep coma that his friends believed
him to be dead.” Hayward delighted in such tales, and his
schoolboy fascination with them was apparent in the emotion
displayed by the figures he painted.11
1962 his work was displayed in art shows at Panhandle A&M College, as well as in the Kansas cities of Goodwell, Sedan, and Independence. In 1964, under commission from the town of Elk City, Kansas, Hayward painted the nineteenth-century Davis Trading Post, which was formerly located on the Elk River just west of the city. The painting was then reproduced for the cover of *Elk City, Kansas—Then and Now*, a publication sold door-to-door by the local Junior Study Club. But even as his paintings reached new and more distant audiences, Hayward was able to keep his perspective, retreating to the quiet safety of the nearest fishing hole. Despite the fact that he was on his way to instructing a lifetime total of over 500 students and selling his paintings to collectors from as far away as Yorktown, Saskatchewan, Hayward retained his humility, softly remarking, “Anyone who can comb his hair can paint.”

On the national scene, Hayward exhibited his work in art shows across the country. Twelve of his oil paintings appeared in the Oceanside Art Festival from April 15 to 17, 1967, in Jacksonville, Florida. Fifteen years earlier, Hayward had first earned national recognition with his efforts for the state of South Dakota. In keeping with his tradition of painting only what was historically accurate, Hayward rendered what the secretary of the South Dakota Historical Society, Will G. Robinson, described as “a scene depicting the difficulty that Lewis and Clark had with Black Buffalo just north of Bad River on what is now the lower end of Main Street in Ft. Pierre.” Hayward first became interested in subjects such as the Lewis and Clark expedition through extensive reading, research, and amateur interviews with the actual pioneers who settled the West in the late nineteenth century. In this sense, then, Hayward was a true historian.

Always on the lookout for an entertaining subject, Hayward once remarked how he planned to paint a picture of an Indian taking his family for a ride in a hearse. As Hayward explained, “An undertaker had bought a new hearse and the Indian who saw it thought the fancy horse-drawn rig so pretty he bought it to take his family riding in. He also decorated his cowponies’ bridles with fancy plumes used in funeral processions.” This was the typical Hayward method of research and application. Such moments in history to him were priceless.

Perhaps Hayward’s greatest contribution to the state of his birth was his effort to publicize the beauty and rich history of northwest Oklahoma. He painted extensively the plains around Alva, the rocks and caves of Freedom, and the red bluffs of the Cimarron. Though Alva’s Monfort drug store was destroyed in a fire shortly after Hayward moved his studio there in 1951, the artist wasn’t discouraged. His next studio was located in the back of the former Bell Hotel. From there he moved to 129 Flynn Street, where he continued to paint and instruct. In a 1966 folio he compiled to be exhibited in show, Hayward sketched in charcoal eight different aspects of western Oklahoma, including the natural rock bridge near the Alabaster Caverns, a scene from the Glass Mountains, Red Rock Canyon, an old corral at Ft. Sill, Sheridan’s Cabin at El Reno, and a remarkable depiction of the Battle of the Washita, where the great Cheyenne chief Black Kettle was killed.
When he wasn’t busy with his numerous annual art shows, Hayward worked on commission. In 1966 Alva’s Central National Bank purchased a Hayward portrait of Miss Gertrude Meyers, a contestant in that year’s Cinderella Pageant. Just south of the Alva townsite lies the setting for his painting, *Evening of the Run*, a work which depicts the first Alva-area settlers on the night of September 16, 1893. In another commission—this one by the Freedom State Bank in 1950—Hayward depicted the Powers Ranch. In July 1970, four of Hayward’s paintings comprised the cover of the Pioneer Telephone Cooperative phone directory, which serviced the areas of Dover, Loyal, Kingfisher, and Omega. The subjects of these paintings included Jesse Chisholm, a grain elevator in Harper county, the bluffs of the Cimarron River near Freedom and the Left Hand Springs at Geary. Certainly one of Hayward’s most long-lasting contributions to northwest Oklahoma was the Nescatunga Arts Festival. Hayward was one of the original founders of the event, serving as the festival’s first president. He was also responsible for founding the Jack Hayward-Franc Wyatt Award, given annually to the outstanding senior athlete of Northwestern Oklahoma State University. Throughout his career, Hayward maintained strong relations with the Alva area, the city where he felt most at home.”

Though Hayward achieved a fair amount of local notoriety, he was continuously humanized by stories such as that of a certain hunting trip at a local pond owned by Ott Wiebener.

As Hayward related the story, he and several friends mistakenly opened fire on a group of wooden decoys that Wiebener had placed in the water to attract mallards. “Ott was as mad as a wet hen,” Hayward recalled, “and you couldn’t blame him.”

Although he never aspired to such aesthetic heights, Hayward successfully fulfilled the full scope of the Regionalist intentions. It was the written and spoken goal of Benton, Curry, and Wood to remind an industrialized nation of its agrarian beginnings, to reconcile old values with the electrified life of the twentieth century. In this capacity, Hayward brilliantly succeeded. Through his research and casual interviews, he unearthed individual moments of Midwestern history, and from his talented interpretation of these people and events, he was able to emotionally convey the simple grandeur of the past.

Though he never enjoyed the critical attention of other American Scene artists, Hayward was a far better guide to the Midwest region and its people because of his lifelong immersion in the land that he loved. He was the consummate “American-Scene Man,” a hunter, traveler, historian, and bard.

Jack Hayward died on July 18, 1977, at the age of 74, leaving behind a raft of work which reads like a history book of the Great Plains. Even twenty years after his death, Hayward’s paintings are still displayed in such prominent places as the Woods County Courthouse, the Freedom post office, the Eagle’s Nest Cafe in Freedom, and Alva’s VIP restaurant. Though Hayward’s work will probably never appear in a history text and his methods never taught in college art class, his aptitude for his craft cannot be denied. His legacy lies in the lives that he touched.18

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Endnotes
1 Daily Oklahoman, 9 April 1965.
4 Ibid., 63.
5 Mrs. Majorie Hayward, interview by author, Tape recording, Alva, Oklahoma, Oct.-Nov., 1996
9 Wichita Beacon, 26 January 1953.
11 Alva-Review-Courier, 12 April 1953, p. 24
16 Oklahoma’s Orbit, 17 April 1966.
17 Alva Review-Courier, 4 December 1966.
18 Freedom Call, 19 September 1996.
Looking Into the Keepsake Box

The bottom of a paper cup,
A bent twig, slender and smooth,
A stout hair from a horse's tail,
From these unlikely bits
We fashioned this funny flower.

White paper petals whisper
As I twirl the brown and tender stem
Bound by the horsehair thread.

We wound about ourselves
A delicate cord of declaration
And spoke three untried words
To each other for the first time
The day we crafted this blossom.

A keepsake, so fragile,
Outlasts our love.

by Valerie Reimers
There's a steamer trunk in the attic,
Full of Grandpa's war-time trinkets,
His over-the-years memorabilia, Red Cross
Maps of Rome printed on dirt-cheap paper,
1943 Soldier-issued booklets on German
History and Mentality. Each week he mailed
A little something home: pieces of Czech
Crystal, poems he'd written, matchbooks
From cafes in Madrid. Each week Grandma
Waited at the post office all day Saturday
For small packages addressed to Mrs.
Millie McCloud, and one time he sent
A sniper's bullet that caught him square
In the shoulder and said in the letter, “It
Tumbled me over, about five or so feet.”
And everybody in town had a look-see,
Heard Grandma tell the story: That's
A real I-talian bullet they took outta my
Ernie. Ten years after he died she
Took me up to the attic and let me unfold
A Nazi flag, told me the story behind
A pair of gold Soviet cufflinks, let me
Hold an R.A.F. pen. For hours we sat
Cross-legged snooping and meddling,
Carefully opening paper bags, sometimes
Whispering “God, this belongs in a museum.”
And when we were done, she grabbed an old
Shoe box, gathered what would fit inside
And said, Don't you dare tell your Ma.

by Todd Fuller
A Little Pain, a Little Forgetting

Where did love go? Did it slip through the hole in your pocket I forgot to mend? Or did you leave it at the office one night when you worked late?

I thought I pasted your love in the album with photographs of our children and pets, but when I looked, your face looked back at me blankly, as if I had no name of my own.

I've tried to remember when I last saw love—perhaps that weekend at the beach when you kept tipping the piano player—but no, you'd drunk too much to be able to love.

I can't place a time. Perhaps like cotton candy your love collapsed, little by little, to the final stickiness I sometimes wear when the sweetness has passed.

by Jane McClellan
The Siege of Troy

Everything wasn't all right again. Ellen wasn't alive, standing at the end of his bed in their house in Fresno, at her shoulder the wind blowing the white curtain. She was still dead from suicide in the artist's apartment in New York. Her wrist had bled onto one of her paintings, a green and blue abstract of the veins of plants. Six years ago Lambert had scattered her ashes in the Pacific Ocean, from a Piper Cub he'd rented out of Morro Bay.

Lambert wasn't in his bedroom in Fresno. He was awake now, in the darkened cabin by the Clark Fork of the Columbia River, ten miles west of Clarksville, Montana.

He and Sergeant Glad had arrived that afternoon on the interstate investigative exchange, Sheriff Blair picking them up at the airport and driving them straight to the river where the white unmarked car was parked. Lambert had gone fishing. Glad went to town. It was Blair's father-in-law's hunting and fishing retreat, the cabin with a red door and clay chinking between square-cut logs.

Drowsily, Lambert looked up at the stuffed heads above the mantel of the stone fireplace: elk, Rocky Mountain goat, big-horned ram. The pine logs had burned down to glowing coals. It was two by his shadowed watch.

Someone was pounding at the door.

He got up. His gun was in the bedroom.

“Glad?”

“Yeah, it's me, Phil.”

Lambert opened the door and Glad stepped in with a push of moist, pine-scented night air. Even in shadow, Glad's face was florid. The heavy, sweet smell of bourbon hung about him in a hot cloud.

“Hi, Phil.” Glad said. “How come you got the lights off?”

“I fell asleep,” Lambert said, looking at him.

“You won't believe what happened.”

Glad stood unsteadily in his new Western boots, looking fuzzily at Lambert.

“I need a beer to tell you.”

Lambert closed the door behind Glad and sat down in front of the fire again. Glad fumbled around in the kitchen and then returned with his beer and a slice of jack cheese. He flopped heavily into the other leather chair by the fireplace.

For a moment, Lambert turned, watching Glad swallow from the lifted can. A part of Lambert was still in the dream.

“I saw the strangest thing,” Glad said, setting the beer down on the coffee table between them. “I met this guy in town, in a bar—”

Glad slurried the last part over, glancing sideways at Lambert.
“He started telling this story. He said he was willing to show me.”

A blue coal popped, like a pistol’s report, in red and yellow sparks that shot through the screen and lay glowing on the flagstone hearth.

“Show you what?” Lambert asked. Lambert stared at the fire as Glad drank the beer.

“That’s the thing,” Glad said. He took a bite of cheese. “I told him he was putting me on, me being from out of state.”

“Putting you on about what? What else did you tell him?”

“This and that,” Glad said. He held the beer.

“Did you tell him you were a cop?” Lambert asked.

“Naw,” Glad said. “Course not.”

Glad stared at Lambert. In his left hand he held the cheese. “We got into this pickup, this big four-by-four, you had to use these steps....”

“What’s ‘undercover’ mean to you?” Lambert asked. “You went off with an unknown civilian, the first day of our assignment?”

“That’s the whole point,” Glad said. He frowned at Lambert. “Without knowing it, I was working, it was part of the investigation.”

“What investigation?” Lambert asked. “We just got here.”

“I was picking up information, leads,” Glad said, setting the beer on the arm of the chair. He winced, as if he sat on something sharp. He leaned forward, running his hand across the chair seat. “About this mutation thing.”

“*Mutation*?”

“Cattle,” Glad said, turning and resettling in his chair. “That’s what Pete said.”

“Pete?”

“We went way back into the hills, to this ranch. I saw a mountain lion, Phil. It looked like something escaped from the zoo. It stood still in the headlights. Big yellow eyes.”

Glad lifted two circled fingers to his eyes, staring out from beneath the brim of his huge black hat.

“‘Long tail. Pretty soon we come around a bend. There’s this old house, pretty run down. But this great big barn is all lit up....’”

As Glad talked, Lambert could see the darkened house and across the barnyard a barn with lights strung through the rafters, just as earlier he had seen Ellen in the dream, in the blue dress, standing by the blowing gauze curtain at the foot of the bed.

“There were wrecked cars, rusty machines scattered all over, like a junk yard. I hear this banging, like somebody’s hitting a steel drum with a hammer. Anyway, we climbed down and walked over to the door. It was true, Phil.”

“Still think I’m pulling your leg?’ Pete says.”

“What was true?” Lambert asked.

“There was a guy working, building a bull out of steel, with hides sewn across it. It looked like a real animal, only it was big, real big, as tall as this ceiling.”

Glad lifted the beer can from the chair arm, slopping beer. Then he set down the can and made a curved arc with thumb and finger. “The horns were like tusks, nearly this big around.” He pointed a finger toward the shadowed heavy-antlered elk above the mantel. “It would make that deer look like a pygmy.”

Lambert looked away, at the blue and orange fire. Glad shook his head, his big hat swaying back and forth in the dim firelight.

“We walk in and Pete says, ‘How’s it going,’ and this guy, this guy’s got a wrench, he’s on his back under the bull. He says, ‘Good, Pete. It’s going good.’ He keeps working the wrench, he doesn’t look over.

Hey, Jim,” Pete says. He taps the bull’s side with his knuckles. ‘I got a buddy here. I wondered if you’d tell him about your project.’ Jim doesn’t answer. Then he drops the wrench, he reaches up and twists some knob and this hatch falls open. He climbed right up inside.”

“Inside?” Lambert said.

“Inside. He pulled the hatch shut. Then there was this clanking sound and a motor turned over, smoke came out a pipe on one of the back legs. This great big head sort of dipped. It moved, Phil, I swear to God.”

Glad moved his head slowly back and forth, imitating the bull.
"It swayed from side to side; he could bend it either way." Glad lifted a hand to touch his cheek. "The face looked real. I mean real, the nostrils and lips, the mouth. It had two big eyes, like that deer, only bigger.

"Pretty soon the thing started humming, sort of vibrating, but not loud. Then the head came down, the horns were pointed even with the ground. It jerked, it started forward, I mean fast. Pete and I jumped out of the way. He nearly got us. The whole thing was on wheels, little airplane wheels hidden inside each big hoof. It went around in a circle."

Lambert saw Glad in a barn miles back in the hills, in his black hat and tall boots standing spread-eagled against the wall as the bull's white horns slipped passed him.

"That's not all," Glad went on, leaning and breathing toward Lambert, who kept his eye on the dissolving pine log.

"After a while the bull stopped. It just stood there, still, ten feet high. Pretty soon Pete walked up to it. He looked straight up. He knocked on the bull's chest. It sounded solid, like a tank, like it was armored. Then the head, this great big head, leaned down toward Pete. It was just above Pete's face, looking him in the eye.

"'Tell me again what it's for,' Pete says.

"Then the mouth opens up, I swear to God. From inside— I mean you can't see him, it's the bull talking— the guy says, 'Lucinda.'"

"'Who's that?' Pete says.

"'You know her,' the bull says.

"'No I don't,' Pete says.

"'Web Olson's wife. He keeps her locked up in the cellar. No one can see her.'

"'And he shoots at anybody that comes around his place,' Pete says. 'He kills rustlers. What's going to keep him from shooting you?'

"And the guy, I mean it's not the guy but the bull, the bull sort of lifts its head as if it's pissed, it says—"

Glad paused, bringing his chin tight against his chest, lowering his voice:

"'Did you ever read the story of the Trojan Horse?'"

Glad leaned back now, breathing heavily.

"'If you don't wake up,' Pete says, 'you're going to be dead.'

"Web Olson's a big wheel around here, lots of cows and horses. Pete says there isn't any Lucinda. She's a story, like Sleeping Beauty."

"Well," Lambert said. "That's odd." For a moment, Lambert had imagined the girl locked in the rancher's shadowed cellar, that she had Ellen's face.

"Crazy, huh, Phil?" Glad reached for the beer. "He could have killed us."

"It's strange," Lambert said suddenly. "If the bull is real, then the girl has to be too."

"Say that again." Glad lowered the can.

"If you build some incredibly complicated machine for some specific purpose, then the goal of that purpose must exist because there's a machine to produce it."

"You think the girl's real?" Glad waited.

"The effect precedes its cause," Lambert said. "The more complicated the plan, the more real she becomes. There is a beautiful girl held against her will, not because she lives on her own, but because she lives in the mind of another person. This person believes she is real, and he's willing to go to ridiculous lengths to find her, so she has to exist, in reality, outside his idea of her."

Lambert paused, staring at the river stones in the fireplace.

"In a way," said Lambert, "she always has. His idea came from somewhere."

"I don't get you," Glad said. He frowned again, staring at Lambert.

"It doesn't matter," Lambert said. "It's late. I'm just thinking out loud."

"I'm tired," Glad said, looking up at the elk. "I'm just thinking out loud."

"'I'm tired," Glad said, looking up at the elk. "All that driving, then the weird guy. We had a few drinks when we got back to town."

"Me too," Lambert said. "I'm sleepy."

"Go ahead," Glad said. "I'll finish this one, then hit the sack."

Glad still wore the black ten-gallon Stetson he'd bought in Fresno. Lambert watched him sitting there, looking straight ahead.

Lambert went into his bedroom and switched on the lamp beside the bed. He closed the door and undressed and got in
under the covers. He turned off the light. His window was cracked open and in the darkness he smelled the night breeze and felt its fresh coolness cross his bare arms stretched at his sides.

Under the wind he thought he could hear the moving river. He looked up at the dark ceiling, remembering Ellen, how in the dream she was alive again, happy, before Glad had hit at the door, and he could take her in his arms. He closed his eyes.

The water pipes banging as the shower ran woke Lambert from the wreck of time—

He'd been a Greek soldier, one of those with Ulysses inside the Wooden Horse.

On the beach, where piles of burning tents lit the curve of shore, the great prong-eared shadow of the Horse loomed across the sand. Then the Trojans' discussion, animated, involved argument, jubilant shouts, a priest's warning about Greeks bearing gifts. Great ropes were brought and the wheels creaked and echoed along a road between high stone walls until the Horse stood still, all was quiet.

"Drop the trap!" a shadow hissed.

"The rope," said the shadow, and one by one he and the others went down into the paved, midnight city.

He hated those dreams with a cast of thousands, every wheel spoke and sword hilt and epaulet real. It was like staring at a miniature battlefield in a museum, until you felt dizzy, sucked down into the toy world.

"You up?" Glad called. "It's all yours, Bob."

"I'm awake," Lambert answered. The dream was Glad's fault.

Lambert lay back in the bright morning light, watching dust motes circle across the ceiling. On each speck of dust, an ant-like army lined miles of white parapet above the plain of gold stubble, while Helen stood alone at the tower's balustrade—

He squinted, lying in bed a moment longer, then slowly sat up.

He stood under the shower until the water began to turn lukewarm. He got out, dried himself, then shaved. He went back to his room and dressed in levis and a sports shirt.

When he came into the living room Glad had breakfast laid on the coffee table: fried eggs, bacon, toast with jam.

"Looks good, Bob," Lambert said. He sat down in the leather chair. He started to eat his eggs. He was hungry.

"When I got up this morning I didn't feel good. I didn't know if I dreamed last night up, or if it really happened."

"Strange story," Lambert agreed. He tasted the hot, good bitter coffee.

"It wasn't funny this morning," Glad said. He frowned, sitting forward over his plate. "Just weird."

"Sounded like it," Lambert said. He chewed a piece of bacon.

"It gave me a creepy feeling," Glad went on, looking at his food. "Bad things. Weird bad. Pete told me about something else, some mutilation thing, cows or something."

"That's what you said." What Glad had actually said was "mutation."

"Skinheads and spaceships. Aliens. I can't remember," Glad said, "except he said everybody was spooked. Everybody's armed."

Lambert lifted a piece of toast.

"That bull," Glad said, shaking his head. "The way it was so big, and the way the guy climbed right up inside and made it move, the way its head lifted and fell, like it was real—"

"I'd like to see it," Lambert said.

"No you wouldn't," Glad said. He grimaced. "It was too big, like a robin the size of an airplane. And what you said last night?"

"What was that?" Lambert said, cutting up an egg with the edge of his fork.

"About the girl being real, Web Olson's wife."

"I was just kidding," Lambert said. "Speculating, from his point of view."

"Whose?"

"Jim's," Lambert said.

"Jim?"

"Pete's friend, the one who built the bull, who thinks Lucinda is real."

"I guess I'm not as hungry as I thought. Glad leaned back, wiping his mouth with a paper towel as he stared at his half-eaten breakfast. "I'll feel better when we get to work."
When Lambert finished his coffee he cleared the plates and stood at the sink.

As he did the dishes he could smell pine scent, pungent and dry, high up in his nose. He went down the hall, past Glad who still stood frowning at the bathroom mirror. Glad's collar was lifted; Glad adjusted his bolo tie. He had bought a whole western costume for the Montana trip. For Glad, now things had gone temporarily wrong.

Lambert waited in front of the cabin, breathing the morning air, listening to the rush of breeze through the pine boughs and underneath it the hushed roar of the river. He looked up at the endless blue sky so much higher and fresher and cleaner than Fresno's. Something smelled sweet.

When Glad didn't come out, Lambert walked along the grassy path to the river.

He stood on the bank near a clump of yellow wildflowers, watching the lit ripples go past like moving stairs down the middle of the current. He felt happy. He remembered the dream he'd had about Ellen, before Glad had come in last night and woke him with the story of Pete and Jim, of Lucinda and Web Olson and the bull.

The morning sun off the river was bright and Lambert looked away, contented, toward the shadowed water passing at his feet.

He stiffened, trembling.

"Christ!"

He looked again, then stepped into the quick current, felt the cold strong shock of the water, then moved through it.

She was two yards out, white, on her back against the pebbly bottom. The morning light and the ripples cast faint shadows across her face and still body.

He stared at her, held frozen in place. He didn't understand. He looked through a window, or into a mirror. She was smiling.

He plunged in his arm above the shoulder to grab an arm as he saw her blank beautiful face and her breasts through the icy wavering lens of the moving water.

"Shit!" Lambert said, standing upright, then nearly failing over backwards as he threw out his hands to balance.

Her cold wrist was hard as stone under the slick film of algae. Instead of relief, he felt surprise, an instant repulsion. He hadn't budged her, nearly been pulled in headfirst trying to lift her.

Lambert steadied himself, looking again at the nude woman lying on her back, staring up with open eyes through the water.

It was a statue, a woman made of stone.

He saw her tight smile again and turned, sloshed to the bank, slipped, got out, looked over his shoulder, then slogged back through the grass to the cabin, just as Glad came out the red door.

"Ready?" Glad squinted, slipping on his dark glasses.

"I've got to change."

Glad lowered the glasses. "What happened?"

In the bedroom Lambert swore under his breath as he stripped off the wet shirt and levis and threw them into a corner. He got a towel from the bathroom and dried off, then took fresh clothes from the bureau and put them on. He pulled on new socks and his hiking boots, cinching the laces fast and tight. The cold water still made him shake.

"You all right?" Glad said. He was waiting by the car.

"Yeah," Lambert said. "Let's go."

"You mind driving?" Glad said. "I'm still a little foggy."

Lambert began to breathe easier as he followed the gravel road, along the fluttering aspen that hid the river, then out onto the highway and the open valley between high rounded hills. He could still see the woman's white smiling face looking up through the water.

"You fall?" Glad asked.

"Yeah," Lambert said, looking straight ahead. He started to tell Glad about the statue, in case Glad should see it. Then he didn't. He didn't want to.

"Look," Glad said, pointing. "Over there."

Beyond the barbed wire fence Lambert saw the buffalo off alone under a pine, the one they had seen yesterday when Blair had driven them to the cabin.

"Can you imagine killing one, with a bow and arrow? From a horse?"

"No," Lambert said.
“Pretty scary. But not like a grizzly,” Glad said. “And at least it’s real.”

“Real?”

“You know,” said Glad. “Not hollow, with a guy inside.”

Why would anybody put a statue in the river? Lambert wondered. As a joke? Did Blair know about it?

Glad flipped on the radio. Lambert heard a dispatcher’s voice, a woman’s, then Blair’s. He was calling in his location. He was stopping to check in one more ranch, then coming in to meet Lambert.

They passed the tall brown mountain with pines along its crest. The airport came up on the right, a Howard Johnson’s. Lambert saw the downtown, one tall building and beside it the tops of square, red brick structures of three or four stories lined up against a bare hill.

It was a long four-lane main street, at one end a bridge and then snow-capped peaks rising in the distance.


Indians and cowboys leaned against brick, urine-stained store fronts and sat on stone benches with brown bags at their feet. Every fourth store was a bar with a faded neon sign: Trail’s End, Two-Timer, Grizzly Club, High Hat.

“I met Pete in here somewhere,” Glad said.

Lambert saw boutiques with fringed leather coats in the windows, a yogurt shop, a rundown residential hotel called The Oxford, on a corner the Cattleman’s Bank of Montana built of gray granite blocks.

“I’m glad that wasn’t there last night,” Glad said, nodding.

The cracked plaster Palomino was shackled to a lamp pole outside a saddlery shop. Next door a window was painted with mountains and blue pines, framing an interior of mountain-climbing supplies, ropes and special winches. Assault and deer rifles, shotguns and automatic pistols dreamed in shadow along the back wall. “Right there, I think,” Glad said, looking. “Moe and Larry’s.”

BUTCHER THE MUTILATORS!

The size and color of the letters, as if written in blood by an angry giant, leaped up under Lambert’s gaze. The red letters spanned the length of the vacant store’s window.

“See what I mean, Phil?”

“Where are we?” Lambert asked, swerving. He’d strayed over the line, a four-wheel drive pickup with a gun rack and a tall-hatted driver had raced up, honked and shot around him. Eat Beef. Bomb Baghdad.

“The sheriff’s at the other end, by the train station,” Glad said from behind his dark glasses. “You have to cross the river.”

They went up over a concrete bridge, across the quick Clark Fork that ten miles to the west passed by the cabin, where he’d gone in when he’d seen the woman. Another woman Lambert had mistaken for Ellen.

“Seven stories,” Glad said with admiration. “Used to be the tallest building in Montana. You know that fat guy on TV, the one who runs the bar? His mother lives there. Top floor. It’s all penthouses.”

Lambert glanced up to watch it in the rear view mirror, for an instant half expecting to see her half-funny, overweight son at a window.


Lambert signaled, waiting for an unshaven man about 60 in a torn plaid coat and suit pants who wheeled a boy’s bicycle across the street. He pulled the white Ford into the deserted lot, past an empty curb that said, “Sheriff Blair.”

“Where is everybody?” Glad said.

“I don’t know,” Lambert said. He switched off the key.

“I feel kind of nervous,” Glad confided, turning toward Lambert. “First day jitters.”

“Don’t worry,” Lambert said. He saw his own face doubled, mirrored like mug shots in the lenses of Glad’s dark glasses.

“We’re all right,” Lambert said, looking away.

“That’s right,” Glad said quickly. “We’ve seen it all, haven’t we, Phil?” Glad waited, grinning.

“I guess,” Lambert said. As he gazed at the green building, again he saw the white face of the woman under the water, felt the dead stone coldness of her wrist. She was still there, right now, in the river. Ellen.
“Let’s see what’s up,” Glad said, almost cheerfully now as he turned and got out. They crossed the lot and Glad’s new high-heeled boots cracked along the sidewalk. Glad held open the glass door.

In the lobby, a pretty Indian woman in a khaki uniform with sergeant’s stripes sat on a stool behind a high counter, speaking into a standing chrome microphone.

Behind her, through a glass partition, a grid on a chalkboard showed all cars were out.

“10-4,” she said. She frowned, then saw Glad and Lambert and waved them over.

“Black Hill Road,” the radio crackled.

There were shouts and confused directions. Her dark eyes looked up at Glad, then at Lambert.

“Black Hill Road,” she said, writing on the pad. “Over.”

“Opened fire.”

“10-4,” she said, bending to the mike. “Over.”

In the background, above the static and fuzz, Blair was shouting to someone between bursts of pistol fire. Then in a roaring sickening bark a heavy caliber machine gun erupted and there was the explosion of glass.

“Over,” she said. “Do you read?”

Again Blair came on, excited.

“Request back up. Olson Ranch. Over.”

“Roger,” she said quickly. “That’s a read.”

“Phil?” Glad said.

“I know,” Lambert said.

“You were right,” Glad said. “About the girl.”

“Girl?” Lambert said, trying to listen to Blair and the radio.

“Lucinda—”

The woman lifted her hand for quiet. She stared up at Glad, then at Lambert.

“Roger,” she said. “Sending car.”

Sergeant Lujan quickly issued Lambert and Glad flak vests, gas masks and automatic rifles. To keep the radio free, she nervously drew a map as Lambert watched and Glad loaded the guns. Then the two of them ran out to the car.

Lambert stuck the light on the roof and hit the siren, running the Ford back over the bridge and down the main street through two red lights, missed the sign for the on ramp, crimped the wheel and slid onto the interstate, cutting in front of a semi that honked and squealed its air brakes as its trailers zigzagged.

Lambert held the car at 110 for nine miles, afraid to push the Ford any harder. Glad frowned and shook his head as they heard the radio, the awful machine gun and Blair’s repeated calls for reinforcement, until the air went dead and Sergeant Lujan tried frantically to raise Blair again. Lambert shot past a cattle truck, then saw Lame Horse Road and took it, the tires throwing a cloud of gravel as he nearly lost the car in the tight unmarked turn, then hurried along the narrow two lane black top that switched back through tan pine-crested hills.

Lambert skidded the heavy car in and out of corners without hitting the brakes, slamming down the pedal as he came out each curve.

Glad lowered the window, cocking his head, then said, “I hear it. It’s up ahead.”

As he spoke, Lambert nodded.

“What’s that?” Lambert said.

“That’s it,” Glad said.

The dark mass the size of a trailer swayed from side to side. For a moment it looked like a stiff black elephant, before the Ford caught up and the detail emerged.

It was like an elephant only in bulk. Glad was right. Instantly, Lambert realized it was something strange and special—a magnificent human achievement, like Mt. Rushmore or the Eiffel Tower, Lambert thought.

Swerving into the other lane, staring up at the bull that dwarfed the car as he floorboarded the engine, he caught the quick flash of a long powerful flank, a tall hump above massive shoulders, the white glistening of wide rocking horns.

“We may need him,” Glad said.

In the mirror, Lambert glimpsed the perfectly sculpted face, saw the glint of great dark eyes under the rumpled brow. He thought the head lifted, in signal.

But inside the bull, Lambert thought, all Jim could see was the girl, Lucinda...

Lambert looked back at the road, pushing the Ford to reach Blair in time, leaving the towering bull to lumber alone toward Web Olson and his unhappy wife.
How lovely Custer must have looked that extra day in February cantering into Albemarle County the third uncivil winter. Leap year and in all of Virginia the only bright spot brighter than blond curls against blue wool must have been the first crocus spiking yellow out of the rusty mud. Not much happened. The pretty general burned few bridges, plundered the cabins of hibernating Horse Artillery for harnesses, axle-grease, skillets, and got himself commended by Meade, neglecting to mention in official reports the exploding caisson that scared him off. The shaken ladies of Charlottesville bought a silk flag and bestowed it on their defenders, yet on the hill not a single place came out of that day with capital letters. Charlottesville has no Wheat Field, Cornfield, Peach Orchard, no Bloody Lane or Bloody Pond or Bloody Angle. But Charlottesville has the Rio Hills Shopping Center. Peace is hell on those who never get it, so why make matters worse by pacing the asphalt and howling to cars apportioned by acre. You cannot serve both memory and Mammon? Forget the lament and settle for reading historical markers, I warn myself, but by the time I finish this one my two bored sons are slugging it out on the shabby back seat, each snarling He started it and both so crazed I'll never determine the causes they can't remember or know for sure why I hated this place until I saw a bloodied nose in my rearview mirror and turned to minister amidst the booming.

by Stephen Cushman
The Town of Fluvanna

Fluvanna was Shangri-La when I was a boy, high on a mesa off the road. The highway twisted past boulders and cactus canyons, a painted desert where cowboy movies were shot. During World War Two, my father never swerved, driving an old Ford fast to visit family. My sister teased,

seeing me stare, in love with lies she whispered about mansions, that name a mystery to my flat Texas ears—Fluvanna. After Saigon, my wife and I moved back to dry hardscrabble plains. We passed those signs at eighty miles an hour, our children howling in the back seat,

eager to see the beach. Last month, my wife and I slowed down and crossed the culvert, the winding, country road like a washboard, potholes unpaved for decades, loose gravel pinging. And there, at the top, Fluvanna, a farm town with dogs and elms and a Dairy Queen,

the state road the only street through town, except alleys with shacks. We didn't see the far side of the moon, only the same flat plains. One old couple rocked in the shade, on their porch swing. We found tricycles and bikes, a schoolhouse, a farmer swirling eight gold rows of dust.

by Walter McDonald
Motes of west Kansas dust swirled in a slanting shaft of light as Tessyn studied herself in the mirror. Her fingers picked at a limp satin bow and tugged at drooping shoulder seams. She squinted at her reflection; but no matter how hard she tried to alter the image she found there, the girl who looked back still wore the same plain dress, out of vogue and yellowed by the years. She sighed. Tomorrow was her wedding day...she should have been happier.

"My but you look lovely," murmured her Aunt Till as she bustled about the room. "Just like your dear sweet mama, God rest her soul." The older woman steepled her fingers as if in prayer. "You know," she continued, eyes bright with tears, "your mama carried her wedding dress all the way from Pennsylvania."

The girl nodded automatically. She had heard the story a thousand times in her eighteen years—the tissue-wrapped bundle stowed carefully in the Conestoga—and her response came like a school lesson repeated rote. "Yes, Aunt Till. She dreamed of the day her daughter would wear it."

"And now you are wearing it," Aunt Till plucked a handkerchief from inside her sleeve and dabbed at wet cheeks. "If only Emma could see her little girl now."

"But Till, she can't," Tessyn reminded her aunt. "She's dead. You know very well she died the day after I was born. She can't see me now nor possibly care what I wear."

At that Tessyn edged toward her wardrobe where a creamy white dress hung from a wooden peg. Since the day Frank had proposed, she had secretly set aside every penny she could for this dress. Now she ran a hand slowly along its delicate folds, trying to temper the enthusiasm in her voice when she said, "Isn't this a pretty dress, Aunt Till? It's store-bought. I haven't even worn it yet, and it's really the latest fashion."

"It's very nice, but..." Aunt Till's voice trailed off into a silence which expanded until it filled the room. The girl sighed again and let the rich fabric slip from her grasp.

A jingle of harness outside the open window intruded, drawing both aunt and niece out of their thoughts and into the moment.

"The choice is yours, Tessyn dear," said Till, "entirely yours." She attempted a weak smile, but her lip quivered. Abruptly she turned and disappeared down the hall, leaving Tessyn to stare at her retreating back. Almost immediately, however, a mischievous grin lighted the girl's face. Quickly she undid the row of buttons and stepped out of her mother's gown and into the new dress. She whirled about the room until finally, breathless, she stood before the mirror. Gone was the Kansas farm girl—in her place, a woman.

She closed her eyes and imagined herself in the tiny country church, the noon hour sun filtering through its single stained glass window. Family and neighbors filled the pews. If she strained her ears a bit, she could almost hear a gentle swish-swish as the new dress brushed her ankles on her way toward the pulpit. Gentlemen nodded, smiling, as she passed. Ladies murmured approval behind paper fans.

A light tap-tapping invaded Tessyn's fantasy. The annoying sound persisted until it pulled her back to the real world. Her eyes popped open.

"Papa!"

Her father waited solemnly outside the door. His eye swept in a wide arc from the bed, where her mother's dress lay carelessly discarded, to Tessyn's glowing reflection in the cheval mirror. He plowed work-gnarled fingers through the sparse field of his hair.

"Your Aunt Martilla sent me."

If he intended to remark further, the opportunity was lost, for Tessyn's three cousins, newly arrived, burst upon the scene—giggling, chattering, filling the room with their eager presence. They surrounded her, hugs lavished all around.

"Tess, is this what you're wearing?"

"You're so beautiful, Tessie."

"Frank will think he's marrying a princess."
They all spoke at once. By the time Tessyn disengaged herself from the tangle of their arms and looked up, her father was gone. In his absence lingered the sting of his silent reproach.

The happy mood evaporated. What remained was gray and heavy, a cheerless state in which the lively trio of girls seemed entirely out of place. Tessyn shooed them away, pleading a headache, comforted only by the fact she had not told a lie.

Alone again, she quickly changed into a practical daytime frock of brown cambric over which she pulled a tunic of coarse, unbleached muslin. Thus attired, she reached for the two white dresses and draped one in each hand. Holding them at arm's length, she stood in judgment, a humanized version of the beam scale in Mr. Wagner's general store, one side weighed down with duty balanced against the other laden with the wistful longing of youth.

Her arms grew weary.

From below, bits and pieces of conversation drifted upwards. Tessyn recognized her three older brothers among the murmur of voices and knew the house was filling with well-wishers. She hung the dresses, side by side, and stepped back for a final look. In the fading light, one called to her louder than the other and she made a choice. With a determined nod of her head, she shoved the old-fashioned gown into a dark corner of the wardrobe and slammed the door shut.

Downstairs the parlor buzzed with excitement. As Tessyn entered the room, all eyes turned her way. The figure of her Aunt Till cast the lone shadow upon the scene. The woman sat, firmly ensconced on the sofa, her face contorted by the effort to smile, and a lace handkerchief, wrung beyond all usefulness, braided through her fingers. Tessyn's shoulders slumped at the sight but only for a moment. A snippet of her earlier daydream replayed itself in her mind, and she could not help but smile, both at the lovely memory and at her waiting guests. Gracefully she moved among them, offering a flushed cheek for their kisses, shyly accepting their congratulations. She basked under Frank's adoring gaze.

Just wait till he sees me tomorrow, she thought.

By the time a tinkling brass bell summoned them all to the dinner table, Tessyn glowed.

Laughter added flavor to the meal, and it was not until rich brown mounds of apple Betty laced with cream had been served and consumed that Tessyn's dress again became the topic of discussion.

Melanie, the middle cousin, a smitten 12-year-old, wilted dramatically in Frank's direction and said, "I wish it was me wearing Tessie's beautiful new dress tomorrow."

The guests exchanged puzzled looks. Most were family, and like Tessyn, had long lived with the expectation of what Emma's only daughter would wear. Conversation ground to a halt, and Tess sensed her father stiffen. The girl pressed fingertips to her temples to deaden the ache mounting there.

I will not change my mind, she recited to herself. I will not. I will not.

She was about to give voice to her thoughts when her brother, Will, cleared his throat, breaking both the silence and the tension.

"Say there, little sister," he said. "Have you got your moon water yet?"

Caught unawares, Tess looked at him dumbly, totally at a loss as to what he was talking about. Once more, it was one of the cousins who piped up.

"What's moon water?"

Will smiled at the youngster. "Well...now you've asked, I reckon I'll tell you. The bride-to-be...that's Tess over there..."

He winked in his sister's direction. "...on the night before her wedding, hightails herself over to the nearest pond or creek and, if she sees the moon on the water, scoops up some of them moonbeams."

Now others interrupted.

"It's for good luck, honey."

"Yes, a long and successful marriage."

"Happy ending," added a third. "Like a fairy tale."
Tessyn’s eyes grew wide as she listened along with the younger girls. Finally she whispered, “it sounds fascinating, so romantic.” She stole a glance at Frank. “Why hasn’t anybody told me about this?”

“Surprises me too, sis,” said Will. “It’s Indian lore, and there’re always Indians around the farm. Seems you might have had some notion.”

“Well, I don’t.” Tessyn looked to her aunt. “Tell me more.” Instead of an answer, Martilla humpfed and said, “If you ask me, it’s just silly old nonsense.”

“Well, there’s a full moon tonight. Maybe I’ll do it...just to be sure, of course.”

“You’ll do no such thing. There’s a chill out tonight. You’ll catch your death.”

Till’s words closed the discussion and signaled the end of the evening as well. People rose, said their goodbyes and took their leave.

Much later, when the house was quiet and the sky aglitter with moon and stars, Tessyn knotted a shawl about her shoulders and tiptoed down the stairwell. The door creaked when she pulled it open, but no one stirred within as she slipped into the night. At the barn she paused and lifted a tin drinking cup from where it hung on a nail over the waterbarrel.

Eighteen summers of picnics by the pond guided her feet...past the big cottonwood, down the hill, across the field. The sweet scent of clover filled her nostrils, softening the bite of the cool night air. At the shore she elbowed aside cattails and thick growths of arrowhead to expose the velvety blackness of the water. Slivers of light glimmered across its surface.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I do see it. The moon in the water.” Planting her feet firmly on the sloping bank, she leaned over the edge of the pond and filled the cup to its brim.

As she turned to retrace her route home, a dark figure stepped from the shadows. Tessyn had not heard anyone approach, but now she felt a hand grab her sleeve. Surprise, and the sharp tug on her arm, caused the moon water to splash down the front of her dress and send the cup spinning to her feet.

“Miss Tess?”

In the voice she recognized Anyika, a young Indian woman whom she had often seen on her father’s farm.

“Mercy, Anyika, you scared the wits out of me.” She laughed, although tentatively, and placed a hand over her pounding heart. “And look what you’ve made me do. I’ve spilled the moon water. I do hope that’s not like breaking a mirror. I wouldn’t want anything to spoil my wedding.”

“With moon water,” answered the Indian girl, “you must take great care—but with choosing wisely, not with spilling.”

“What’s to choose? Water is water,” Tess said. The comment, however, was met with deep silence. Tessyn swallowed back an intended laugh and, with growing anxiety, asked, “Didn’t I choose well enough?”
“It’s not easy to trick Coyote.”

“What does a coyote have to do with this? It’s only a superstition—for good luck.”

Anyika released her grip on Tessyn’s arm. “Let me tell you how it is.”

Tessyn’s eyes followed as the other looked toward the heavens. The moon shimmered, a silver-blue disc in a pitch black sky, perfectly round, and dotted with shadows which formed the sketchy outline of a face peering down on them. Quietly Anyika began to tell a story.

“When Moon Woman was born, her father, according to the old ways, promised her to the chief’s son for his wife. Moon Woman loved her father, but when she became of age, she hated the thought of being forced to marry the chief’s son, so she ran away. Coyote found her. ‘Do as I tell you,’ promised Coyote, ‘and you will never have to marry the chief’s son.”

“What did she have to do?” interrupted Tessyn. “Something horrid, I suppose.”

“He took her into the forest. In the middle of the forest stood a ladder. The ladder led straight up, so high Moon Woman could not see where it ended only that it penetrated the very tops of the trees. Coyote told her, ‘Climb as high as you can.’ At first, she was afraid. But worse than her fear of the ladder, Moon Woman dread the thought of marrying a man she didn’t love, merely because it was expected. At last, one slow step after another, she began to climb. But Coyote is a trickster. The ladder led to the moon. When she had ascended all the way up, he took it away and left her a prisoner. Alone and isolated.” Anyika pointed over her head. “Up there.”

Tessyn shuddered.

“Well, at least she didn’t have to marry the chief’s son.”

Slowly the woman nodded. “That is true,” she said.

“But, I guess, being trapped on the moon is even worse.”

“True.”

“Maybe the chief’s son would have been a good husband anyway.”

This time the Indian woman stared straight ahead, saying nothing.

“That’s such a sad story. I thought moon water was supposed to bring good fortune.”

“You must listen to the end of the story. It is believed that at night Moon Woman tries to fool Coyote and break his spell. She looks down over the earth and places her image in the water. If a girl scoops up the face of Moon Woman, she will find the happiness Moon Woman lost. But the girl must not be lazy or careless.”

“What happens if she is?”

Anyika paused, as if considering this unlikely possibility. Finally she said, “Coyote will have won.”

At first Tessyn dismissed the woman’s words as childish myth. She was confident she had already chosen well. Frank was kind and hardworking. They would be happy with or
without moon water, yet the tale disturbed her and a shiver crept along her spine. Once more she gazed out over the pond. It sparkled with light. It beckoned her to be the one to trick Coyote at his own game. When she looked back, the Indian girl had gone as quickly and as quietly as she had come, leaving Tess to wonder if it had all been a dream.

Thoughtfully, she retrieved the cup.

“Choose carefully,” she told herself.

Closely she studied the patterns of light. She watched as the moonbeams wavered, then settled into the shape of a woman’s face. Into the pond she plunged the cup. With her dripping prize in hand, Tessyn smiled.

“So, Coyote...” she began, but then noticed something.

The spot where she had drawn the water now rippled with a thousand pinpoints of light. Had she truly captured Moon Woman’s image or had she missed? She waited for the pond to calm and gasped as a face took shape a little ways away. She waded into the water and reached out to the Moon Woman. Again she dipped the cup. And once again she could not be sure. She tried a third time, and a fourth.

“This is foolish,” she cried, but even as she spoke, her eyes scanned the surface for the reemerging face. With each attempt and failure, she doubled her efforts. Her dress caught and tore on the point of a fallen tree limb, but she hardly noticed. Right and left she thrashed about until her skirts were drenched and her soaking hair clung to cheeks and shoulders. Finally, exhausted, wet and wheezing, she raised the cup in triumph.

“I’ve got it.” Out of the water she clambered. “I’ve got it. I’ve got it,” she repeated. Yet, despite her words, a sense of uncertainty followed her home.

Tessyn decided against lighting a kerosene lamp lest it wake the household, but once safely inside she realized there was no need. The moon spread a pale, silvery glow throughout her room. It lighted the way to the dresser where she gently placed the cup.

One last peek, she told herself, but when she looked into the cup, a strangled “Oh no!” escaped her lips. The moon water lay still and black as death.

Tess trembled now—but not from the cold, wet clothes. She felt Moon Woman watching her through the window, judging her, deciding her fate.

Just then the door flew open, bathing Tess in a rectangle of yellow-white light. Martilla stood in the doorway, lamp held high. At the sight of her niece, the scowl on her face immediately changed into a look of concern.

“Lord have mercy,” she exclaimed and ran to the girl.

Through chattering teeth and great heaving sobs, Tess told about stealing out of the house and her encounter with the Indian girl. “The pond...Moon Woman...a ladder...I tried to get...the face is gone.” Tess grabbed the cup and thrust it toward Till. “See, I didn’t trick Coyote after all.”

Till wrapped her arms around her niece. “Don’t you worry none about some old story. Let’s get you into something warm and dry.”

While Tessyn stripped off the sodden clothes, Till pulled a thick quilt from a chest and unfolded it across the bed.

“Please don’t tell Frank. Don’t tell Papa. Anyika told me to choose carefully but I didn’t.”

“Tessyn, honey, you listen to your Aunt Till. No cup of water is going to make a hoot of a difference to your life with Frank. He’s a good man, and you are surrounded by people who love you and will keep on loving you—no matter if sometimes you do make a poor choice. I know that Indian story, and, in my opinion, child, that old Moon Woman got herself into a mess all by herself. It has nothing to do with you.”

Martilla wound a towel around Tessyn’s hair. “Now, you put on a nice warm nightdress and get under the covers. I’ll see you in the morning.”

The door clicked shut.

The moon again became the sole source of illumination, throwing shadows all around and coloring Tess’s mood a somber gray. As Tessyn reached into her wardrobe and groped around for a flannel nightgown, her fingers brushed her mother’s wedding dress.

“Choose carefully.” Tessyn started. The warning was so real it sounded as if Anyika herself whispered into her ear. “Choose carefully.”
Suddenly everything was clear. Such a little price to pay to do the right thing in the first place.

Clad now in soft flannel, Tessyn stepped in front of the open bedroom window. The moon water held no meaning for her anymore. She took the cup and tipped it over the sill, slowly dribbling the contents into the dust below. Next she carefully removed her mother's dress from where it hung and readied it for the morning.
Blaine County is crossed by two major streams, the north and south branches of the Canadian River that join together briefly in eastern Oklahoma before draining into the Arkansas River. Known locally as the North Canadian and the South Canadian, the rivers flowed untamed by dams when I was growing up and provided a great recreational resource for county residents. Until Roman Nose State Park was developed with federal money in the mid 1930's, there were no public swimming pools in the county. Cooling off in the muddy river was a popular summertime diversion.

Residents of the Mount Pleasant community supported an active community life even during the hardest times of the Great Depression. With a number of teenagers in the leading families, some kind of community gathering was organized almost every Saturday night during the summer. Although usually held as a party in a family home, at times the get-together was an evening picnic on private land in a grove of trees on the flood plain. A community
resident had ties with the owner who made the site available for community use on the Fourth of July and on summer Saturday evenings.

Even in the drought years of the 1930’s, both rivers would flood and overrun their banks during the spring and early summer rainy season. The South Canadian, while a tiny narrow stream meandering about its sandy half-mile-wide bed much of the year, became a raging torrent of muddy water when heavy rains fell on its watershed. After our family moved to the Langer Place in 1934, only four miles from the river, on a quiet evening we could hear the rumble and roar of the raging waters when the river was at flood stage.

The home of Dwane and Dwight Londagin, two of my closest friends in high school, was located on the north bank of the South Canadian River near the Highway 33 bridge. Exploring the river with them was always an exciting adventure. When the river subsided from flood stage, a few isolated pools would be left, ideal for swimming. On one visit, an unusually large and deep pool had been formed a short distance from the river bank. A huge hollow tree stump claimed by two poisonous water moccasin snakes as their home floated near one end. The snakes cautiously watched us as we frolicked naked and splashed and swam in the water at the opposite end of the pool. We kept an even closer watch on the snakes to be sure they did not leave their lair.

Thickets of wild plums flourished at locations along the sandy banks of the North Canadian. Our neighbor, Harley Woldridge, seemed to know just when the plums would be ripe. On a morning in August, the Woldridge car, loaded with children, suddenly appeared in the driveway. My good friend Donald had urged his father to let me accompany them on the trip to pick plums. We loaded one of our wash tubs and two milk buckets into the car and headed for the river. The bushes on the high north bank were loaded with ripe red plums, large and luscious, much bigger than the wild plums we called sand cherries that grew at the edge of the woods and along roads in our neighborhood.

With the seven or eight pickers, we cleared the thicket of its ripe plums by lunch time and retreated to a grove of trees adjacent to the Frisco railroad bridge for a lunch of fried chicken, bread and butter sandwiches, and apples for dessert. While Mr. Woldridge napped on a pallet, we youngsters could no longer resist the temptation of the flowing stream. Fully clothed because we were a mixed group, we played and cavorted in the muddy water of the shallow flowing stream. The excitement was heightened when a Frisco steam engine pulling a short string of freight cars crossed the bridge and routinely blew its boilers over the stream sending ear piercing jets of steam into the air over our heads.

River play brought tragedy as well as fun. A neighbor’s son, a promising young man in the prime of his adolescence, on an outing with friends dove into a murky South Canadian river pool at a place he had successfully dived the previous day. But the shifting sands of the flowing stream had changed the bottom overnight. The lad so severely injured his spine his limbs were paralyzed. Within a few weeks he was dead.
Feather River

In late May we'd drive north
for the shad run, launch
the john boat at Oroville
and sit for hours, anchored,
letting our red and white
leaded flies drift with the current,
erking our rod tips occasionally.
The gauze of cottonwood trees
floated through the air,
landing on the river's vicious
swirls: "If you fall in, you'll drown
instantly," my father said.
I was eight or nine,
wore a cowboy, hat and an orange
life preserver, nestled
my blue-jeaned butt
on the hot aluminum seat in the bow.

Taking me fishing was meant to be
an act of love, I knew that
even then, but my father
was always exasperated in a way
I've only lately come to recognize.
He had no patience for my inevitable
birdnest of monofilament,
my dreamy gaze toward the bank.
And now, when my daughters
accidentally knock their cereal
from the table and the bowl
goes somersaulting
to the floor, or when they wreck
their bikes, again,
I sympathize with his lack
of sympathy. I'm furious
at childhood gracelessness,
more aggravated by broken spokes
than compassionate for bloody knees.

So, is it some genetic character defect,
this lack of charity?
I feel guilty, as my father must have,
but helpless, too. I lie awake
while my wife keeps time
with her soft snoring, and pray
to the God I don't believe in
to scour my septic heart,
to make it bright as a shad
exploding with a silver
shimmer before it vanishes,
with a splash, into the cold green river.

by David Starkey
Remodeling

September dulls the taller spiky grass.
The day's post stands between 2 doors.
Another afternoon spared rain, I open the attic again
to bring the apple breezes in,
the medicines boxed and brought to curb,
the walnut trim garaged, salvaged
along with the square nails of its century.
The remodeling begins in innocence
almost. *Meister, Heaps.* I repeat their names
and see their bodies now, as slow
as dirigibles, too many dead to count. And
this house, I think, will never quite be ours,
hearing the village noise in it, this music softened
in its pass among the arm-chairs, redirected
by lamp-glass. I tinker then to set the image
straight, to stay this course toward ceremony,
abiding the dearth or feast in it, the course
of a desert century, reading the daylight now,
building on the rain gauge, and this light building
on our neighbor's polished chrome
and his cast wheels. The water's drinking safe,
they tell me, in innocence almost,
clearing the village streets to bring in fiddlers
and dancers, opening the parade streets
for the convertibles, the attendants, queen,
the first of an evening's sweethearts
perched to tour.

Today I piece and fit this broken ribbon-work,
restore the 19-4 in it, resisting the will
that means to crowbar down, build clean,
to spill these windows down in shards
on beds of peppermint. I have this day ahead
to sort a morning's boasts
from its concessions, a day the elevator,
the tandem loads of grain, the feel of this pen
declare one time, in innocence almost,
recovered with the pistols and the gold accessories
from grandchildren. I mean to make
my way, wide of the hanging plants, down
to this basement, I believe, tall enough
for backboards, its furnace and water-heater
blocked, expecting snow-melt
and spring floods. I feel the local news take hold,
the hold of place as personal, meaning
to seal the gap-board shed, to patch and level
the stone porch that had been worry
to the dancers, feeling the spin again and catch,
of gravity, of prayer, of their voices,
behind the masks of plastering, drawing
the mind to visitors, the undertones
of the eccentric abiding story-line, and
the digressive loops of smalltalk,
holding on for love.

by Robert Lietz
His hands looked perfect, pink, two-and-a-half years old: fat
dimpled backs and pudgy fingers, nails as shiny as his stuffed
bear’s eyes. One hand still clutched his pacifier; the other was
curled into a loose knot, his thumb in his mouth. Christopher
held his bear in sleepy embrace, arm around neck, face against
fur—the silver cub Matt had given him on their first weekend
together in the new house. Two older bears lay at his feet. The
parallel welts across his palm and fingers were hidden now, but
Matt could see them anyway. He’d dreamed about them: red
and raised where Christopher had grabbed the baking rack in
the sink last night, glistening and still very hot, hissing up out
of the soapy water. Matt winced as he heard his child’s shriek
again, felt the little tug where the flesh had stuck. In his dream,
Alice had answered Christopher’s shriek—torn him from Matt’s
arms to clutch him at her own breast, snarling at Matt like
some savage beast as she backed away, all teeth and fangs, blood
lust and maternal instinct.

Christopher had been trying to help him, standing on a
chair in front of the sink and talking to himself, saying “oohhh,
yes...” just before his unbroken scream began. Matt couldn’t
make him stop. Holding ice to his son’s palm, he couldn’t
touch the terror or the pain. He walked around the kitchen
with Christopher in his arms, stroking the back of his head,
talking low words, trying to explain that hurt wasn’t perma­
nent; that time healed. But he was talking to himself, and to
a child in diapers: his words were just soft lies in the roaring
pain. Matt wanted to just take the child’s pain away, take it onto
himself with all the rest of it.

He hugged his son and rocked him, but Christopher
wouldn’t stop screaming. When Matt gave him the pacifier he
spat it out on the floor—furious, betrayed. Matt went into the
bathroom with Christopher howling on his shoulder, twisting
and squirming in his arms. Cradling him against his chest, he
unscrewed a child-proof bottle of Tylenol with his teeth.
Christopher shoved the plastic bottle in his face, bawling, splat­
tering them both with the bright red syrup. Shrieking in his
ear and choking for air, Christopher thrashed, roared, louder
and louder, until Matt suddenly screamed himself, clapped his
hand over Christopher’s mouth and ran with him to his room.
He dumped him onto his low mattress and fled outside. Alone
on the dark porch, Matt jammed his hands hard over his ears,
but he didn’t shut out the sound of screaming, and he couldn’t
stop trembling.

Now there was nothing but the sound of breathing.
Christopher looked peaceful at the end of his nap—thumb and
pacifier and bear—sleeping on his crib mattress on the floor
in the old pantry. That was the first room Matt had fixed. He
removed the filthy sagging shelves, spackled the holes in the
water-stained walls, and reglazed the broken glass in the single
window. He painted almost everything bright white—ceiling
and walls, door and window casing. For the greasy wooden
floor he chose a dark shiny blue. On the weekends he had
Christopher, they made mobiles of bright colored paper—fan­
tastic shapes that Christopher drew and Matt cut out. Together
they glued them onto cardboard with sticky fingers and rubber
cement, then strung them with fish line from coat hangers.
Now they had eight—completely filling the white space over
Christopher’s head with outlandish swatches of primary color.

Christopher gripped his pacifier in his uninjured hand, fat
fingers clenched around the rubber tip shaped like his mother’s
nipple, shaped to mold the plastic bones of his palate. Matt
spoke his name softly; Christopher murmured and stretched,
then settled more deeply into sleep, smiling, so full of grace
Matt didn’t want to disturb him again. He smiled himself. For
an instant everything made sense: love was all that really mat­
tered, and right now this small fragile person beside him was
the only thing that was keeping his ability to love from being
extinguished completely.
Matt let out a long sigh. He knew that in a few hours he'd have to go through another exchange with Alice, trade his son for that gutted feeling. He looked at his watch, then kissed Christopher's forehead. He gently removed the Nuk, uncurling each dirty finger. When Christopher shuddered and started to cry again, Matt put the pacifier in his own mouth to moisten it, then stuck it into Christopher's. He wondered if it was just at his house that Christopher had so much trouble waking up, or if he had the same problem at Alice's. He didn't remember the problem from before, when they all used to share the same bed together. They'd slept as peacefully as Buddhas then; Chris would wake up smiling. Twice last night he'd woken crying. And once, by accident, Matt had woken them both—calling out Alice's name into the sweating darkness.

Matt walked the two older bears over the edge of the mattress, calling one Chris, making them talk to each other, appear and disappear under the red and white checked flannel sheet. Christopher ignored the bears, sucking profoundly on his Nuk; he looked hard at Matt for a long time before he finally made a little smile. Matt picked him up and carried him into the bathroom, hugging him tightly.

Half a century ago that room was the back parlor, in the days before indoor plumbing. "Kitchen," Christopher said, his Nuk dropping onto the floor.

"Your diaper, Chris. Time to change your smelly pants." Matt set him down on the new bathroom rug and wet a washcloth.

"Kitchen," he said, squirming, trying to reach the long scarred table near the toilet. Matt had shortened the table's legs, and painted it the same bright blue as the pantry floor. Christopher's sink, stove, pots and pans were set up on the shiny dented surface.

Christopher grabbed a silver pot from the toy sink, spilling water over himself and the dirty cracked linoleum floor. With one finger Matt snagged the waistband of his diaper, pulled him back and laid him down on the rug, pinning him there gently with two fingertips on his chest. He stripped off the old diaper, grimacing, picked up Christopher's legs and quickly washed him. Matt dried him with a new towel, then used it to soak up the water on the floor before tossing it into the clawfoot bathtub with the stinking washcloth. He smoothed on a clean diaper, carried Christopher back into the pantry and set him on the mattress with his bears. Matt rummaged around in the drawers of the battered bureau, full of hand-me-downs from the woman at the general store. The bureau was another piece of furniture abandoned with the house—Matt had brought it down from an upstairs bedroom, painted the frame white and the drawer fronts bright blue.

"We're going on a Jeep hike, Chris," he said. "We'll need these pants," pulling out orange overalls. "And this shirt," he said, tugging the green and yellow striped jersey over Christopher's head. He tickled his fat belly. "And these shoes and socks." Christopher giggled. The sneakers were mismatched, part of a collection of salesman's samples the woman at the store had picked up at the dump. Matt finished dressing Christopher. "Hold still now. Double knots. Okay, come on."

They went into the big kitchen. Christopher started to whimper when he saw the sink; Matt shuddered and gave him another hug, then a rice cake with a cup of apple juice. Setting the day pack on the cold iron stove, Matt went around collecting a spare diaper, some insect repellent, a sweater for Christopher, his little hat, extra rice cakes, a canteen and the three bears.

Christopher sat in the middle of the floor, his eyes scanning the edge of the ceiling. The upper border of the kitchen walls were covered with a frieze of paintings he had made their first afternoon in the new place together, the grimy house empty and Matt with no idea what to do. He drove them to a store, bought some poster paints and brushes and two pads of white paper. They spent the afternoon splashing bright color in the dingy room. There were so many paintings Matt was able to staple them in an unbroken line around the kitchen's high perimeter.

They went out through the front parlor. A shortened table stood there, too, covered with picture books, coffee cans full of crayons and markers, and the poster paints, tops left off jars and the paint all dried and cracked. A pile of new sheetrock stood in the center of the room, bed—high and covered with Matt's sleeping bag and pillow. Alice had criticized him for sleeping on sheetrock—"You don't have to be such a martyr. There are five old beds upstairs." She had lost touch with everything.
though: that first night, he had slept on one of those upstairs beds, and all night long he dreamt of past sleepers there making love. He woke up convinced that something vital had been lost, bled out—that all the sadness left was hardening into permanent anger.

He felt Christopher tugging his pants leg. Matt picked up the orange jar of paint, spun it in the air with his thumb, caught it and handed it to him. Christopher carried it out onto the porch, then dropped it when he saw the cats. Squealing, he tried to catch one. Matt checked his pocket for the spare Nuk. Only one cat tolerated Christopher—Sunshine, the young neutered female. Matt picked up a couple of beer bottles and brought them inside. Alice would be picking up Christopher in just a few hours. Saying good-bye to him at the end of each weekend was becoming the hardest thing for Matt to do, harder even than his confused feelings about seeing Alice. Losing Christopher over and over, these weekly encores of loss.

“What’s that?” Christopher asked, pointing.

“That’s your hoe, Chris. You know that.”

“Shovel?”

“I don’t know where you left your shovel. Maybe in the barn. We’ll check.”

Matt picked him up and carried him down the short hill. His hoe banging against Matt’s leg with each step. In the barn there was a set of toy carpenter’s tools, a tiny bow with arrows, a pair of very short yellow skis, and Christopher’s miniature garden implements.

They found the shovel, and loaded it with the rake, hoe and day pack into the space behind the Jeep’s seats. Matt shifted into low-range and drove across the brushy fields, past the upper field barn, across the high pasture to the caved-in deer camp just beyond the edge of the woods. They stopped there where the logging road began, too grown over now even for the Jeep.

Matt unbuckled Christopher from the car seat and lifted him out onto the roadway. Christopher moved away, unsteady and slow on the rough ground, legs stiff and gait awkward. Matt stood watching him, thinking that, in some ways, all the talk and argument notwithstanding—parents, counselors, mediators, attorneys—no one ever paid any real attention to Christopher. Adults defined the limits of a two-and-a-half-year-old life, and then just worked on containment.

Christopher called something to him, but Matt had stopped to consider the ruined deer camp. “Wait, Chris,” he said absent-mindedly. He pushed his finger into a damp, greenish board. The roof had collapsed and vines grew through the walls. Some glass remained surprisingly unbroken, glinting among soft, mossy wood. Someday the house he’d just built and had to sell would look like that. It made his mouth taste sour.

He didn’t hear Christopher crying at first. He looked up and saw him sitting on the ground, wailing, bright red blood welling up out of a scratch on the palm of his burned hand, shaking it as if he could shake away the pain.

“Shit,” Matt said, hurrying forward.

Christopher held out his hand, looking scared and confused. He was only a few yards away. Matt sat down, pulled him onto his lap and hugged him. “Jesus, Chris, your poor hand.” He washed his palm with water from the canteen, examined the
They lingered in the late afternoon sun for more than an hour, picking berries and eating them. Matt held each cane clear and Christopher plucked the juicy berries, studying the thorns carefully, smearing his mouth with the purple fruit.

Finally, gorged, with splotches like bloodstains all over his hands, Christopher brought blackberries to his father. He stood small and silent in the dusty roadway, clenching the fruit tightly in little fists. When Matt bent down to his level, Christopher reached out and touched his lips, then solemnly pushed the broken fruit into his mouth, one piece at a time.

shallow scratch, then hugged him some more. Christopher’s crying slackened. “It will go away, Chris,” he said. “The pain will go away.” He smiled down at him. “Bye, bye, bad hurt.”

“Bye, bye,” said Christopher. He squirmed out of Matt’s lap and stood in front of the briars that had scratched him, peering intently into their depths. Matt watched him, wondering how long it would take his own pain to go away. It felt beyond ever healing and made him feel like a liar to his own son. He extended his index finger. Christopher gripped it with his good hand and together they walked down the road. When they reached the next section of brambles Matt moved ahead and held the thorns out of the way. Christopher stopped. “Look, Papa,” he said. “More berries.”

“Um-hmm. Lots of berries. C’mon, Chris. Stay close behind me so you don’t get scratched again.” And good luck with that, he thought; I’m no guide for you.

Thorns everywhere, lacerating wounds not even closed. The pain will go away, but the scar tissue won’t. You’ll lose some ability to feel, probably. It’s a careless world we live in, Christopher, careless and uncaring. Matt looked back: Christopher hadn’t moved. “Chris, hey, let’s go.”

“Papa. Berries.”

“I know, Chris, I know. Lots of pretty berries. Come on now.” Matt stood in the path as Christopher came up to him.

“Berries, Papa.”

“I see, Chris. Berries. Neat,” Matt said. He looked at his watch. “C’mon, my little friend, time to go back. Your mamma’s coming to pick you up, and we need to be clean and ready for her.” He squatted down. There was going to be hell to catch this time, when she saw his burned palm.

Christopher came right up to him. “Papa,” he said, reaching out both hands and taking Matt’s face, digging his tiny nails into Matt’s cheeks like talons. “Papa, look.” Matt grimaced, but didn’t pull back. He could see himself caught in his son’s eyes. “Listen to me,” Christopher said, very slowly, linking the words together. “Berries, Papa. Berries you can eat.” Then he let go of Matt’s face, walked a step toward the brambles, and pointed to the blackberries among the thorns.
Hamlet Pere

May I die like Hamlet's father:
interrupted, unredeemed and
napping; having meant to
return that very afternoon
some books that were quite overdue.
With telephone numbers
of carpenters and camera stores
roaming my papers
from which I meant to round them up
and organize them into categories like "House"
"Cat" or "Health Insurance." May I
die with friendships
in various stages of disrepair
and indecision, phone calls owed and intended,
catalogues marked with things
I haven't ordered yet.
May I have promised at least a dozen
letters of recommendation
so law schools and graduate schools up and down the East
have to be notified, no, she's
dead, she won't be writing. Let them call from Newton
to say
It's June, are you ever going to come
pick up your parka?
Let every beautiful, fragmentary thing I've ever written—

— bright unstrung shining stones —
a popcorn trail towards
home, home —

let them be left unfinished
like the daily chaos they came out of,
local and free
from the need to be art.

But what
will they do without the wicked witch,
the stage mama with her designs on them?
Will they rise like white
bodies from notebooks and file drawers?
Graceful as dancers and
vengefully holding hands? Well,
I'll be gone; they can do as they please. But

  did I say white? When I was alive
they were sharp colors
like the rainbow on the pavement —

all in pieces
after rain!

by Linda Bamber
We began poking about Oklahoma with Tulsa, Oil Capital of the World boosters claim, westernmost border of the Ozarks according to maps, an anomalous metropolis thumbing a defiant nose at dustbowl and depression. Tulsa began life in 1836 as Tulsey Town, which ethnolinguists derive from *tallasi*, a Creek Indian word that translates prosaically as *town*, to the chagrin of romantics. It’s hard to wax nostalgic about a place named “Town Town.”

However Tulsans feel about it, though, the occurrence of their city’s name in a palindrome provokes our linguistic hormones. Palindromes are sentences that read the same backwards as forwards. *A man. A plan. A canal. Panama!* for example, which, it’s said, Thurber exultantly recited over the telephone to a sleepy Harold Ross, his editor, at three or four a.m. Another old favorite is the apocryphal introduction in the garden of Eden, *Madam I’m Adam*, to which the fickle lady supposedly answered, palindromically, *Name no one man.*

A *slut nixes sex in Tulsa*, though, outclasses the competition, a serendipitous triumph of vocables attached to reality by only the most tenuous of threads.

Getting down to business, we must admit that Tulsa isn’t truly in the Ozarks—not geographically, not in tone, certainly not in the minds of Tulsans. It is, however, the natural gateway to the Oklahoman Ozarks and a city so interestingly varied and so neatly contrasting with the Ozarks that to leave it out would be churlish, a case of being penny-wise and pound-foolish with one’s adventure.

For us, Tulsa begins with two wonderful museums set in a section of city redolent of money—old money bark-shaggy with robber baronism, new money slick as the marble-clad foyers of the downtown banks, nonchalant money that buys blacksmith-wrought iron fences which open to private driveways whose leisurely curves furrow a green froth of lawns graced by mansions where ostentation sits, to borrow T.S. Eliot’s words, “As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.”
continues along Rockford Road, crossing Utica Avenue at 29th Street making a pleasant interlude for connoisseurs of conspicuous consumption.

At the end of 27th Place, across Rockford, we entered the Philbrook, a museum of particular charm, if only modest holdings. Long, low, pink-and-brown stone wings meet at a ten-sided rotunda which becomes, inside, a smoothly curved, nearly spherical dome. The rotunda is a 1990 addition to the original Philbrook mansion, and inside and out it forms the inevitable focus of attention.

The Philbrook has a little of everything from Renaissance painting to African sculpture, but the gardens on a mild day will enchant even the dourly adamant non-intellectual. Their twenty-three acres celebrate ways of creating order from an inherently undisciplined world of earth and plant. A formal garden complements the house's Italian Renaissance design. Beyond this section, strollers wander through and past a simulated Roman grotto, a reflecting pond, and similar fancies. Browsers will find brief notations on plaques along the way while the dedicated may purchase *The Villa and Garden Handbook* at the Museum Shop.

On the way to the Philbrook Art Center we happened across the Woodward Gardens and Tulsa Garden Center, just a few blocks away. The gardens are magnificent, particularly from late summer to early fall when terraces of dusky red roses lead the way up to a Spanish-style brick-and-shingle meeting center. Beyond, a greenhouse and then Woodward Park itself invite stressed-out travelers to enjoy a few minutes away from the city's hustle and bustle.

The casual visitor may be lucky enough to wander into a photographic session of a bride-to-be, as we did. She seemed, for a moment, to float against the backdrop of Greek Revival colonnades enveloped in white-satin-and-lace. Photo session over, Ms. soon-to-be-Mrs., who apparently had to get back to work, proceeded to slip out of her wedding duds and into blue jeans in the parking lot, undignified, but practical ...and a serendipitous bit of entertainment for the accidental spectator.

Insatiable museum-goers, we decided to take a gander at Tulsa's Jewish museum, The Gershon and Rebecca Fenster Museum of Jewish Art. It happens to be a near-neighbor of the Philbrook, which is convenient for first-time visitors.

The Fenster Museum developed as a grassroots community effort, spearheaded by members of the B'nai Emunah Synagogue, to preserve and display Judaica. Its four galleries occupy space in the lobby and adjacent rooms of the Synagogue, which also boasts an auditorium-cum-theatre and a lively drama and film program, all open to the public.
Wandering through the galleries, we come across adjuncts to Jewish life dating from the late-Renaissance to the twentieth century. Ivory-handled circumcision knives vie for attention with festive kitubot, examples of the formal marriage contract required by Jewish law to protect the bride’s property and set forth her rights. A collection of Jewish New Year cards peers up from glass cases. Of note is a curtain that once hung before The Ark, the tapestry handworked in colored-silk interwoven with silver-gilt thread. Biblical tableaus parade across a flowered field whose borders enfold the field in skyblue. A separate room houses Jewish costumes and ceremonial cloths.

A misprint in the descriptive label headed “Marriage In Jewish Tradition” should provoke a smile. An interchange of c and a, created the statement, “This [the canopy under which the couple stands] creates a scared [sic] place in which the ceremony is held.” Alas, too often true.

The Gilcrease Museum likes to boast, and with good reason, that it houses “...the world’s largest collection of art of the American West.” Hung with the panache appropriate to serious art, though possibly a bit too much to absorb and appreciate en masse, the Gilcrease holdings prove two important points: 1) the art of the American West starts early and builds to greatness—there is nothing provincial about it, 2) it’s a lot more fun to look at pictures while wandering about clean, softly-lighted spaces than while tramping along the dank and dingy corridors we often encounter when “doing” art on our European grand tour.

One of the nicest ways to begin an acquaintance with the Gilcrease may be via an introductory tour by a volunteer docent. The tours are given at 2 p.m. each day and are free. Each docent infuses the tour with something of his or her interest along with an overview of the collection. One concentrates on the colonial or Federal history depicted by early artists such as Copley and Stuart; another compares Winslow Homer’s handling of light in his oils and watercolors while a third may concentrate on the differences between Russell and Remington, relating those differences to the artists’ training and personality before talking about the Rockies’ entrance into America’s psyche through the romantic visions of such painters as Bierstadt, Church, and Moran.

After a tour, we found ourselves wandering back to a group of gouache and watercolor sketches that Olaf Seltzer sent back east, vivid and lively buffalo, campfires, cowboys riding herd. These wonderful impressions sketched on envelopes and the margins of letters turn up just around the corner from the Russells, and seem to us in no way inferior to Russell’s work though on a much smaller scale.

The Gilcrease, we found, has its own outdoor pageant, 440 acres of garden, or, to be more accurate, gardens, each defined by style or theme. The Pioneer Garden, for example, intermingles edible plants on which pioneers fed their physical bodies with ornaments that fed their nostalgia for their European home; the Gillies Garden incorporates carved symbols derived from Native American ceremonies; the Byron and Audrey Boone Grove, lays out a festival of Austrian pines, dogwoods, and Oklahoma redbuds which runs the gamut, according to the season, of green, white-and-pink, and red.

America’s love affair with the automobile, which may reflect love affairs consummated in the automobile, Mac’s Antique Car Museum should give jalopyists and tinkerers a few happy moments. We had to admit to a yearning—that stopped respectably short of lust—for the star of the museum, a lovingly-restored 1926 Chrysler Roadster, the sort of vehicle that prompts a wistful shake of the head followed by heart-felt, “They just don’t make ‘em like that anymore.”

Tooling around Tulsa and environs can be an entertaining and inexpensive pastime. Oral Roberts University dedicated its campus here in 1965, and the purposeful parade of clean-cut and determined students always seems to comfort those worrywarts—of whatever religion—who equate youth with hellfire-and-damnation.

We joined the faithful scurrying about The Prayer Tower, whose futuristic design suggests a polyhedral cigar balanced on a thickened base and flaunting a steel-and-glass tutu a little above its midpoint. Though it bears more than a passing resemblance to Seattle’s Space Needle, by the way, The Golden Driller, a 55 foot tall wildcatter caught in a sedate moment, offers a nearer and locally more relevant rival. The big fellow stands tall before the Exposition Center at Tulsa’s State Fairgrounds, home to sundry events during the year, rodeos to craft fairs.
Every third year, The International Petroleum Exposition, billed as “the world’s largest industrial trade show” takes pride of place at the Center. 1997 being such a third year, tourists may wander around the drill rigs, seismic boom boxes, geologic charts and all the rest of the high-tech equipment needed to get at and get out the black gold on which we all depend.

Driving around one day, we happened on the Morning Star Baptist Church, East Pine Street and T. Oscar Chappelle, Sr. Place, about 1000 East on Pine, and stopped to take a few pictures. Nobody seemed to be around and the door was locked, so we saw only the minuscule and uninformative slice of the interior visible through a front window. As we were leaving, though, a limousine pulled into the parking lot and the founder’s son, The Reverend T. Oscar Chappelle, Jr., ushered a group of parishioners inside. We were able to speak with Reverend Chappelle, Jr. briefly a few minutes later as we and he left almost simultaneously.

His father, for whom the street is named, got the idea for the church’s unusual design while traveling and had an architect draft plans which were realized in 1965.

Conceived as an Eternal Flame, the Morning Star Baptist Church also suggests cupped hands, a dual-symbolism, if you will, the flame of faith and the comfort of the church. The flame motif is repeated twice, first in the form of a stained glass window embraced by the inward-curving walls, then by twin doorways placed symmetrically at ground level equidistant from an imagined vertical center line. Unfortunately, the uninspired rectangular forms detract a bit from an otherwise graceful facade spangled with stars.

For contrast, we drove over to 1301 S. Boston Street to sample the “Cathedral”-style Boston Avenue Methodist Church, which has achieved the distinction of a listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The church sends its tower, complete with chapel at the summit, soaring 255 feet above the ground, and is considered the first example of skyscraper engineering to be integrated with traditional cathedral form.

Those for whom the intricacies of the country’s river systems exert some fascination should mosey on over, as we did, to the Port of Catoosa at 5350 Cimarron Road in nearby Catoosa. The largest inland port in the country, it plays a major role in the region’s economy as the guidance center for the 445-mile McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System. The Arkansas Waterway Museum displays photographic records of the river, and riverboat and marine artifacts salvaged or collected over the years. There’s also a Cherokee Nation Arts and Crafts Center at the Catoosa Interchange should an irresistible urge to shop overwhelm you in this unlikely setting.

Inveterate bargain hunters, we would have driven 20 miles northeast of Tulsa to Claremore, which calls itself “The Den of Antiquity” and boasts of more than 400 antique dealers, for the chance at an arrowhead or rusted iron cauldron, but Claremore has a greater claim to fame in the birthplace and burial site of Oklahoma’s favorite son, Will Rogers. Actually, Rogers himself claimed to have been born “halfway between Claremore and Oologah before there was a town at either place,” but always spoke of himself as being from Claremore. He liked to say, “nobody but an Indian could pronounce Oologah.”

A 20-acre site on a low hilltop overlooking the city holds his remains and those of his wife and their infant son. He intended to make it his retirement home. Fate intervened, however, in the form of a fatal plane crash in Alaska in 1935. Now, a stone building commemorates the legendary humorist, actor, and columnist.

The memorial itself, made up of the tomb, three galleries, and a carefully landscaped and maintained terrace garden, virtually bulges with Will Rogers memorabilia—playbills, saddles, photographs—which supplement an extensive library. A small theater shows Rogers’ films daily, drawing from the 71 movies.
50 of them silent, that have been preserved. In front of the building, a copy of the famous Jo Davidson bronze (the original is in Washington, D.C.) slouches toward those who come to pay tribute—Rogers, hands in pockets, sporting his familiar grin. The base of the statue bears the oft-quoted line, “I never met a man I didn’t like.” Elsewhere in and around the stone edifice, other statues, including one by Charles Russell, consort with paintings by various modern artists.

We went on about 12 miles to the northwest. Where State Highway 88 meets U.S. 169, Oologah, pronounced as it’s spelled (the double “o” like the double “o” in “boot”), in due course appeared. Three miles northeast of the town, we entered Will Rogers State Park, the site of the house in which Will Rogers made his worldly debut.

The year was 1879 and the birth took place at home, in a log-cabin that grew by additions over the years into a house. That house was moved one mile west of its original site nearly ninety years later, as the 1960s drew to a close, to accommodate the Oologah dam.

We toured the house the only way one can, in the company of guides decked out in period costumes. The furnishings are not original, but they are of the period, and give a sense of what life was like in the 1890's, when Oklahoma had not yet been admitted to statehood. An Amish-constructed barn, complete with animals, sits on the grounds and can be visited any time.

Seen from the house, Oologah Lake stretches lazily out toward the horizon in silvery silence while longhorn cattle, horses, and goats graze peacefully on swathes of adjacent farmland.

We spent part of the next day at the J. M. Davis Gun Museum. More than just a collection of guns, although there are something like 20,000 of them on display, the museum showcases an impressive array of musical instruments, steins, saddles, animal trophies, Indian artifacts, prehistoric pottery, and knives and swords from all over. World War I enthusiasts can pore over a selection of 600-plus posters generated by the war-to-end-all-wars while those interested in John Rogers, a sculptor of the second half of the nineteenth century, stroll among his bronzes of ordinary people talking, working, resting as they did 150 years ago.

It would be remiss of us not to mention the gunsmith shop, circa 1840, faithfully replicated in wood, with a contingent of live riflemen on hand demonstrating muzzle-loading techniques and discussing the finer points of gun construction. The world’s smallest automatic pistol, the Kolibri, weighing 2 1/2 ounces and firing 2.7 mm cartridges, also vies for attention, along with an exquisite Miquelet lock, the bronze-inlaid firing mechanism of an early rifle whose stock is an arabesque of marquetry-work in ivory and bronze.

John Monroe Davis, the museum’s founder, first became interested in guns in 1894 at the age of seven, when his father presented him with a muzzle-loading shotgun. Seventy-one years later, his collection had grown to the point of overflowing seven rooms, the lobby, and the ballroom of the Mason Hotel in Claremore, which he owned. He then turned over his holdings to the state of Oklahoma which agreed to preserve it for public display. Four years later, in 1969, Davis celebrated his 82nd birthday at the opening of the present museum.
“Estate Sale,” says the sign, and strangers fill your house like the fog surrounding it; they come with coffee Thermoses, steaming mouths, a pocket full of change. They check the couch’s seams, run their fingers along the cool grain of your table, squeak the springs of your empty bed, unfold your clothes. They see your linens as future quilts, your wedding picture as an empty frame. There is a box on the stairs, beneath the sign that says “Empty basement. Do not enter.” Is this where you have hidden to watch your world break into pieces at twenty-five cents each? Your head could be twisted, your eyes forced open by your shrinking skin, pulling back your cheeks to a strained grin. If I could buy you, I would. If I could take you home in the back of my station wagon, a thick rope holding you in, I would take you with me, prop you up in my living room, build you a fire to keep warm.

by Allessandria Polizzi
Death of an Oklahoma Boy

The “sooner state” is where I spent the first sixteen years of my life. The so-called “sooner state” is where people do things sooner I suppose—such as marrying and divorcing or giving birth or dying or even absconding from home as I did. Some memories, but not all memories, of Oklahoma I like to remember, such as the hot, dusty mid-summer days on Martin’s lake with my older brother Luke, and our fishing buddies where, sooner or later, we always concluded each outing with a swim in the cool, murky water. I can still feel the slimy silt from the lake bottom squashing up between my toes and the sweltering sun beating upon my head and face and the lake water washing the beads of sweat from my body. The moss fights I remember too, which required first diving to the depths of the lake to pull up handfuls of heavy wet moss and then surfacing to heave them into each other’s faces.

These wonderful memories of my boyhood days in Oklahoma are forever on my mind, but only with a delicate fortitude, for I must confess to an emotional accord which has them linked, as mere fleeting preludes, with painful times that I cannot seem to chase away and from which I cannot run or hide. For instance, I cannot reflect upon those times at Martin’s lake without taking into account my own unfortunate Mom who, in her constant state of anxiety, must have viewed life merely as a road cursed with many pitfalls, like an old castle hallway with a thousand inspired gargoyles. It was she who expressly forbade any and all such swimming activities in the name of safety. Her level of concern for our safety, however, seemed to vacillate wildly depending upon the mood and proximity of Dad, who afflicted Mom like a magnet does a compass, and for this, Luke and I took her to be falsehearted and fickle when it came to her concern.

“You’re going to catch tetanus and die from that water if you swim in it,” she would warn. Upon departing the house, she would inspect beneath our shorts in search of the tattered swim trunks, which were stowed in our cluttered tackle boxes. We all feared the dreaded tetanus, yet we kept swimming, often wondering what tetanus was and how the dying process would occur.

I also like to remember the gray storm fronts which would barrel in from the west like a steam engine, spewing rain and hail and, best of all, lightning, so that from my bedroom window, our barns and horses and Angus cows were made visible like black and white still-photos. Sometimes we would scurry to the underground storm shelter in our backyard for protection against the high winds and twisters. Mom and Dad and Luke and I would sit and stare at each other quietly for an hour or so until either the storm passed, or Dad became restless and needed a drink, as he did on one particular occasion.
“Cliff, don’t you think we might wait another few minutes to go inside, you know, so the storm will be completely gone,” Mom offered in the sheepish tone reserved only for my father.

“Ah, it’s over, the worst is over,” was his reply, as the booming thunder vibrated through our bodies and the hail pelted the aluminum ceiling of our cramped in-ground shelter.

“Don’t you’re worrying, Edie. Let’s go boys.”

“Kids, grab your pillows and put them over your heads,” Mom said. We knew the routine; we’d done it before. Mom made us carry the pillows ever since that time a tangerine-sized hail ball hit me on the head, splitting my scalp open, and knocking me unconscious for over a minute.

Once inside our double-wide mobile home, Dad plunged his already half-drunk body into the leather recliner and belowed, “Luke, whiskey-coke please.” Luke was already at the living room bar, for he knew Dad well.

“You’d better damned-well be joking. I told your mother to pick up a case last week. It’ll be in the cupboard below the sink,” he muttered with visible restraint, while nervously digging into the surface of his right thumbnail with the thumbnail from the opposite hand. He performed this compulsive act so frequently that each fingernail was abraded into a mere flakey concave membrane overlying the pink nail bed.

“Nope, none here,” after a brief pause.

“Jesus Christ. Dammit, Edie, where’d you put the Jim Beam I asked you to get last week,” was the shotgun-like response.

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry. I completely forgot you were nearly out,” pleaded Mom as she walked from the kitchen toward the recliner, with a consolatory expression on her face.

“Sorry, sure as hell doesn’t put whiskey in my glass, now does it?”

“I’ll send Luke out for it now, if you’d like?”

“Dammit, can’t you see it’s storming outside with a wall-cloud a mile long. Who the hell in their right mind would send their own child into that weather for some damned whiskey,” he yelled, jumping up and marching toward the bar.

“Luke, make your father a double gin and tonic, please,” came Mom’s response.

“To hell with your gin and tonic, Edie,” Dad snarled as he took an empty whiskey bottle and heaved it through the 3’ x 5’ living room window shattering it into a thousand shards of glass. He then grabbed the bottle of gin and headed for the bedroom. We knew what went on behind those closed doors. Cleansing his mind of the anxieties and unpleasantries of daily living, the gin became his mistress who lay before him her body and soul and afterward, with a numbness and somnolence that only she could provide, he took to slumber as a welcome end to the day.

My father was a cattle rancher, and we lived on a 5,000 acre spread outside the small town of Pawhuska, Oklahoma. He worked hard from early morning until well past dark six or seven days a week. He was a real cowboy. His well-starched jeans were creased in the front and tucked into his boots; he wore a cowboy hat, chewed tobacco, roped and rode horses and drank a lot of whiskey. My father possessed all the trademarks of a true cowboy, or so I grew up to believe.

Rodeo was the only passion Dad ever knew, outside of the ranch of course. He was raised on that same ranch, learning many of the skills performed in rodeos, though he never competed. His heroes were the bronc and bull riders.

“I like watching a man hold onto that rope for his life; that’s what takes a boy straight into manhood,” he once told me.

At twelve, I had only one hero, and he was my fourteen-year-old brother, Luke. We did just about everything together; we shared the same bunk beds, he on the top bunk and I on the bottom. We fished, hunted and did our chores after school together. Side-by-side on horseback, we would hustle the cows
from pasture to pasture. Luke was my best friend, and I was his. Living in the country seemed to make us best friends, for there were few others around from which to choose a friend, and we thoroughly enjoyed each other. He often helped me with schoolwork, as his grades were always excellent, and mine were only less than average. Luke showed me how to rope and ride and how to dress and act in junior high school. I, in turn, would cheer louder than anybody when it was his time to ride for the local high school rodeo team. He always won.

Luke’s winning at the rodeo was all-important to Dad. “It’s going to make you rich and famous son,” he exclaimed one evening holding Luke’s newest trophy, while driving home in victory from whatever small town rodeo we’d just been to. Rolling down some state highway through the golden flatlands of central Oklahoma, he peered at me from beneath that black felt cowboy hat and said, “You watch your brother, Alex, that’s how you’re going to do it. Starting next year, I’m going to have two champion cowboys for sons.” I was excited at this prospect, but not for the obvious reason that many would assume. You see, I didn’t much care for the rodeo, with the noisy crowds and lights and corralled animals and the mixture of dirt and blood in my clothes. I preferred the peaceful qualities of Oklahoma, like the sound made by a largemouth bass surfacing in a quiet pond to snatch a minnow or the sound of air whistling through the feathers of a woodduck in flight or the silence of a great blue heron wading along a creek bank. But, attention from my father is what I yearned for, and I was willing to ride the biggest, meanest, most life-threatening bull in the world to get that attention.

It was during my thirteenth year that everything changed for our family, and the attention which I had been coming of age to receive was never realized. Dad was having Luke train on the Angus bulls we were using for stud. It was that year that I recall him teaching Luke to use the suicide wrap, which meant that the leather rope used to wrap around the bull-riders hand several times was tucked beneath itself. The suicide wrap prevented unwanted and inadvertent loosening of the rope, but this advantage placed the rider at great risk if he fell off before untying the wrap with his opposite hand, for he would then have to cling to the bull until somebody could untie it for him or until he could manage to finagle his hand free.

Dad and I would sit on the wooden fence around the ring Dad had constructed and watch the grunting, snorting mass of black muscle race about, bucking and jumping while Luke, with his left hand held high in the air, was jerked back and forth. Luke’s bronzed torso with sinewy muscles and light blonde hair would be covered with sweat and dirt, and his face would glow of a fierce determination matched only by the bull on which he was sitting. When Luke was thrown, Dad would run into the ring to distract the angry beast while Luke regained his bearings and scurried from danger. “Get ready for another ride son, you’re starting to wear him down,” came the usual command.

Luke soon became recognized as one of Oklahoma’s best junior rodeo competitors. Dad talked more and more about Luke turning pro some day and making a lot of money.

“If we can pull off a victory this year in Stillwater, I think we could go pro once school is out,” he bragged to us all one night. Stillwater is where the state high school rodeo was held that year. The high school state final is the largest and most competitive event of its kind in Oklahoma each year, and families from around the state congregate to watch their children compete.

The bull riding competition was well underway, and the carnival-like atmosphere generated a contagious electricity among the spectators. The hazy night sky was illuminated with bright stadium lights. The round, red clay floor of the arena was encircled by over three thousand giddy spectators. I remember watching Dad run back from the concession stand with an arm full of hotdogs and soft drinks. He was like a playful little boy in a sprinkler on a hot summer day. Mom and Dad later settled into the bleachers with their arms around each other, smiling and talking to each other like two teenagers in love.

“Luke Garvey from Pawhuska, Oklahoma, will be riding a young, vicious Brahma bull. Let’s wish him luck people, he’s going to need it tonight,” bellowed the announcer into his microphone. The crowd roared an approving roar. We watched with intent as the gate flew open, and the massive tan bull with
long floppy ears sprinted toward the center of the ring kicking his hind hooves far into the air while jerking and turning with violent attempts to rid himself of Luke. Within a few seconds, Luke toppled to one side as the bull spun around. His hand clung to the suicide wrap and his vulnerable body slammed dangerously against the bull's side. A rodeo clown lunged over the bull with selfless courage and, in a matter of seconds, untied the rope releasing Luke's hand. Luke fell to the ground kicking, and he began to scramble away. The bull turned a tight circle at that moment, and Luke was forced to encounter it once again, but this time at a much greater disadvantage. The rodeo clowns converged upon the scene to distract the violent bull. But, in one instant the bull knocked Luke back to the ground, and by some unfortunate twist of fate, its rearing right hind-hoof struck him at the posterior base of his skull. Across the now silent arena, a sharp and ever-so-loud “pop” was heard, like a major league baseball player's bat stroking a fastball from the park. The crowd gasped, and I heard Mom scream. We watched with horror as the bull danced wildly around Luke's lifeless body.

"He died doing what he did best," Mom lugubriously stated as we mourned over Luke on the emergency room bed at a Tulsa hospital. "Doing what he did best." The phrase has stuck with me ever since she uttered those words, and I often ponder what could have been meant by this. I wonder how anybody could even presume to know what a young man at the age of fifteen does best or even wants to do at all. I don't think Mom knew Luke anyway, because he often told me that his dream was to attend college and then medical school. I think he would have made a good physician, too.
Oklahoma Aubade

Let day assemble itself
in this one-room apartment
over the Boarding House Cafe,
the clinging odor of bacon
on his skin, while the Chicano owners,
in this old southern plains town
prepare to open for breakfast.
Hotel Quai Voltaire,
in Paris, France,
this ain't.
Only last year, he thinks,
from our balcony overlooking the Seine,
Marie and I phoned
room service for two,
petit déjeuner, cafe au lait
et deux croissants, s'il vous plait
& then disrobed.
Yet no lace lingerie
litters this frayed green carpet,
only old magazines,
without a clue concerning the day's
expectations, its inevitable griefs,
or how blood aspires
toward another body or simple
breakfast in bed, as,
from his busted-spring mattress,
he queries the ceiling—
How come I'm here?—
and watches a moth swirl
through the sluggish fan blades,
then drift into a dusty corner
and drop.
This ain't Paris, for sure—
the prairie edging in,
wind drying out memories,
the day's sun-parched labors ahead.
Give him something more,
something other than
a hollowed-out past,
and spindly-legged prospects,
 something to face the recognition
with dawn
of aging alone,
when tired eyes unseal
to sour cigar smoke residue,
and slotted light yellow on the walls.
Let him think, This is morning.
Give him this day,
Give him something fine to wake to,
if not limbs entwined, a kiss,
then some speck of hope,
as hours pass and the afternoon heat mounts,
that storms may wash through here,
or that the promise of a cool bath
is a promise worth keeping.

Peter Donahue
Harvey's Lake Tahoe

I have been told that Grandmother stayed for days at a time in places like this, napping in the ladies' room when she had to. In halls bereft of natural noise and light, she'd assume the supplicant's posture before the spinning eyes of nickel machines. More than once she admitted, I've been told, that keeping faith in the slots was easier than keeping it in marriage: while machines might delay making good on their promises, they never wholly reneged.

I have been known to enjoy such faith, but have always preferred to drape myself over the buzzing bodies of craps tables. At first, I usually walked out broke and not a little drunk. It was in Biloxi I learned the trick is to keep many bets working at once: C&E, line, odds, hardways, come, don't come, field, numbers, press. Dice will do as dice please, yet there will be some return. Learn to spread your bets wide as you can. Something will return.

by Lisa Verigin
My Dear Herbert,

I leap towards health like the mountain goats
springing along the summits that surround our cottage.
Who would have thought that just six months ago
London specialists gravely shook their heads.
This air salubrious as Prospero’s island.

My only care is for Emily:
the fetus a mustang bucking inside her.
I fear a Heathcliff of the peaks—
like the one who rode in last week,
to turn my boys into worshipful puppies—
will frighten her into a miscarriage.

He was guide for a Miss Starling of Hampshire.
A more mismatched pair I’ve never beheld:
she, a paragon of English breeding
despite sitting her mount like a man;
he, legs bowed like a bison’s horns,
his face savaged by a grizzly bear,
or so he told my boys as he whittled and spat.

When I offered him a glass of ale
after the meal I allowed him to wolf on our porch,
he refused, but glared at the tawny liquid
as if he meant to rip it from my grasp.
He slept in the barn, and I not at all,
expecting my throat to be slashed,
Emily ravaged, the boys torn apart.

After breakfast, he left some silver
with a look that told me how little
he valued our attempts at hospitality.
He flipped the fetish he’d been carving
to my Timmy, who pleaded for a demonstration
of six-guns at the bottles he had placed on a fence.
Six shots shattered the high valley peace,
Emily shrieked, six glasses exploded,
and while vapours drifted up to the snow-caps,
the two riders grew filmy as a distant mirage.

Emily sends all love. How we wish
we could share your jolly Yule board!
Perhaps a demure girl, and no wolf-cub,
will arrive to enliven our December exile.
The boys prattle only of Mr. Sprockett’s skills:
vainglorious as Grimm’s Little Tailor.
In a Letter to Her Sister, Sophia Starling Comments on the Hospitality of the Lovells

Dear Aggie,
From Englishmen I expected better.
To me, they groveled as if a potentate,
treated Mr. Sprockett like a stray cur:
they insisted I use their best bed,
the mattress stuffed with pebbles
when I thought of my guide and companion
in the stench and cold of their barn;
the dinner they served me was seasoned
with feathers, to watch him eat on the porch,
as if such a man could be anyone's servant.

Still, one must pity them:
he, a recovering consumptive;
she, frail as an aspen leaf in this early autumn,
with child, besieged by rampaging sons,
a mouse to local merchants voracious as owls
to outsiders squeamish at the sight of muddy boots.

Her hair, pale as dry straw, jumped
when Mr. Sprockett trod her porch.
Her sons listened rapt as shepherds to Homer,
while he talked, and whittled a semblance of the bear
that had dragged claw marks down his face—
to terrify her, make Mr. Lovell take
the scars as affronts to his bruised honour.

At dawn, Mr. Sprockett paid for our lodgings:
better that insult than his answering their coldness
with the violence for which he is notorious.
He gave the gorgeously carved grizzly
to their youngest son, but when the boys shrieked
for a display of western marksmanship,
Mr. Lovell looked ready to go to law
with the entire territory.

by Robert Cooperman
Dear Eddy,
I've met the famous John Sprockett!
From all the stories and dime novels,
I expected a hell-breathing buffalo
goring everything in his path.
His face did wear those scars folks whisper of,
afraid he'll shoot them for staring,
hoping someone else will provoke him
so they can tell children and grandchildren
they saw Old One-Eye send a discourteous skunk
on a bumpy cart ride up Boot Hill.

If you ask me, he was sweet as sorghum,
guide to an English lady, showing her
the mountains before hard weather set in,
him a bull with a ring through its nose,
soft as the rawhide Ute squaws chew
before fitting to the feet of their chiefs;
the two of them as honeyed on each other
as a bear's tongue lapping at a hive,
only both stiff as pallbearers.

They stopped over to rest their horses
for the long ride back to Denver.
Cutting it fairly fine, to my thinking—
before ground locked up under snow.
I doubt she'd mind freezing to death with him:
all responsibility removed
while he held her as the fuel gave out.

If he looked at me that way,
my skillet might've melted.
You'll scold me for not speaking ladylike.
It was Ma dying, Pa leaving,
and me barely ten, you not out of nursing dresses.
My, but look at you now though:
high school learned and a surveyor.
Still, to be kissed by John Sprockett!

by Robert Cooperman
Dear Aggie,
I shudder to remember three nights past, when Mr. Sprockett staggered into my room—a bed divided from others by a curtain—his breath rank with drink, the lightning strokes of his scarred face dancing like storms on the Sangre de Cristos: mountains of a dry Hell south of here. He stared, a grizzly drooling to cannibalize a cub, pulled his revolver, and as I gasped in silent terror, clamped the muzzle to his skull. My hands let go of the rough bedding to fling myself at the pistol.

He raised an arm to swat me, a panther dashing a noisome terrier, then, sobbing, he collapsed; I cradled his shaggy, ruined head, but he pushed, no, nudged me away, and extracted a bottle. “You’ll be the death of me,” he murmured, his face buried in my unbraided hair. Nothing more occurred, I swear, except his tears stinging my tresses.

In the morning he sat his horse, had my mount saddled, all aloof innocence. Call me a fool, but I can tame him, have tamed him, somewhat, already. Tonight, we stopped in Salida, an inn with doors and locks. To show him my confidence, I have not used the heavy key. I told Mr. Sprockett I intended to write letters and read.

He will not intrude, I know that by the penitent silence he has kept through country more searing and wild than anything in safe, placid Britain.
From the Diary of Sophia Starling, Concerning Her Night at the Grand Hotel, Salida, Colorado Territory

What lies I wrote Aggie, 
afraid to tell her I hoped 
Mr. Sprockett would kick down my door 
like Caesar catapulting molten stones 
at the wood forts of jabbering Gauls. 
I left the door unlocked, not to show 
that half-tamed panther I trusted him, 
but to feel his breath— 
even if it smouldered of bad whiskey— 
scorching my mouth, neck, and breasts.

But he stayed away, afraid 
of the souls he has sent to Hell, 
of the cheap women he has taken 
with not a thought or touch of tenderness.

I’m tired of pretending— 
like all the good ladies of my class— 
that I’ve no love of the barn, 
have never seen the thrashing dance 
of an eager thoroughbred stud; 
tired, too, of saving myself for staid nuptials. 
I burn as we ride landscapes so glorious 
God must have gasped to create them.

If only John would take instruction 
from my mare, his stallion. 
His nips and nudges set her kicking 
when they’re hobbled for the night. 
Still, she takes care not to bloody him 
with hooves sharp as scimitars; 
and after her fit of maiden pique 
she waltzes taunting buttocks into his flanks.

I fear if I were to play such a wanton, 
Mr. Sprockett would leave me in the wilderness, 
as shocked as my conventional sister 
by what he mistook for a nun’s purity.

by Robert Cooperman

Robert Cooperman’s poems are from The Badman and the Lady soon to be published by Basfol Books.

TO BE CONTINUED IN FUTURE ISSUES
Contributor's Notes

— Linda Bamber's book on Shakespeare from Stanford University Press, Comic Women, Tragic Men, is now in its second printing. In recent years she has concentrated on fiction and poetry, publishing in magazines such as Ploughshares, Tikkun, and The Kenyon Review. Her short story "The Time-to-Teach-Jane-Eyre-Again Blues" won a Ploughshares/Cohen award for best fiction of the year. Her poetry manuscript, Never Again, is currently making the rounds. —

— Mark A. Brandenburg, M.D. usually limits his writing to health and science related topics. He has been published in various medical journals including Consultant, American Journal of Hematology, and Cortlandt Forum. After approaching the end of his residency in emergency medicine, Brandenburg plans to dramatically change his area of writing interest to that of fiction. —


— Peter Donahue has published poetry and short fiction in such journals as Weber Studies, South Carolina Review, Red Cedar Review, and Midland Review. He is currently finishing a Ph.D. in English at Oklahoma State University, where he works as associate editor of Cimmaron Review. —

— Carla Dietz Fortier has been writing short fiction since 1991 with some success in small presses. Credits include Grit, Thema, Words of Wisdom, and Potpourri, among others. When not writing, she enjoys traveling west "collecting" ghost towns. —

— Todd Fuller has completed an M.F.A. degree at Wichita State University and is now at work on his Ph.D. at Oklahoma State University. His poetry has recently been published in Wind, The Dog River Review, Elysian Fields Quarterly, Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature, and Bottomfish. He is also working on a long sequential poem, "Old Timers." —

— Nels Hanson's pieces have been published in the Southeast Review, South Dakota Review, the Texas Review, Black Warrior Review and the Antioch Review. His story, "The Silver Horseshoe", was a semi-finalist in the 1994 PEN Syndicated Short Fiction Contest. —

— Lance Hawvermale is a history/English major at Northwestern Oklahoma State University in Alva. Hawvermale currently resides in Cherokee, Oklahoma. His article, "American Scenes: The Life of Jack Hayward," depicts the life of Hayward, a nationally recognized artist who specialized in the Southwest and its history. —

— Robert Lietz teaches at Ohio Northern University. Over 230 poems have been published by Antioch Review, Epoch, The Georgia Review, Ironwood, Massachusetts Review, Missouri Review, the Ontario Review, Poetry, Seneca Review, Shenandoah, and other journals. L'Epervier Press published his first three collections, Running in Place (1979), At Park and East Division (1981), and The Lindbergh Half-Century (1987). Sandhills press published his fourth collection, The Inheritance, in 1988. Dangerous Light, a chapbook, was published in 1991 by Franciscan University Press. Storm Service, was published in 1994 by Basfol Books, which will also publish After Business in the West: New and Selected Poems. Two manuscripts, West of Luna Pier, and Character in the Works: Twentieth Century Lives, a sequence that creates the lives and times of individuals whose names have been engraved on old fountain pens he has collected, are currently seeking publishers. —

— Jane McClellan is a retired English teacher and professor with a Ph.D. in British Literature from Florida State University. She has recently published work in Whiskeys Island Magazine, Ellipses: Literature and Art, Blue
Contributor's Notes

Unicorn, Sierra Nevada College Review, and Sonama Mandala Literary Review.

Walter McDonald’s latest book is Counting Survivors (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995). Two other books are After the Noise of Saigon (University of Massachusetts Press) and Night Landings (HarperCollins).

Allessandria Polizzi has had poems published in various journals including Context South and The Bridge. The California native recently began her Ph.D studies at the University of North Texas. She received her Master of Art’s degree from CSU Fresno in 1995. She is currently interested in feminist theory, the monstrosity of the feminine in literature and film, and the feminist essays of Margaret Fuller.

Valerie Reimers is an assistant professor teaching English at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English at Southwestern and holds an MA from the University of Central Oklahoma and a Ph.D. from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. She has published poetry in Cooweescooshee, a literary journal published by Rogers State College. She attended the 1996 Oklahoma Fall Arts Institute’s Writers’ Workshop in Nonfiction.

Ken Robertson grew up in Blaine County between the North and South branches of the Canadian River. He now lives in Decatur, Illinois. “The Rivers” is an excerpt from his book Growing Up in the OK State.

Sondra Rosenberg received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Illinois, Urbana, and taught literature and humanities at the University of Illinois and the City Colleges of Chicago until her retirement in 1991. Born in Austria, she grew up in London and New York; today, Chicago and Hot Springs, Arkansas, are the bases from which she travels to more exotic lands. In addition to reviews and feature articles in travel books, periodicals, and on radio station WNIB, she co-authored The Ozarks Traveler (Red Crane Books) with her husband, Stuart J. Silverman.

Philip Russell’s recent fiction is presented in Blue Line, The Capilano Review, Java Snob Review, Jeopardy, Lynx Eye, Minimus, Porcupine, Slugfest, Sun Dog: The Southeast Review, Thema, The Wascana Review and The Wolf Head Quarterly. More work is upcoming in Crazy Quilt, Standing Wave, and Wind. Russell’s stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and his novel Body and Blood has been named Publisher’s Finalist in the Fiction Writing Fellowships Program by the Heekin Group Foundation. The book will be released by BkMk Press (University of Missouri-Kansas City) this fall or winter.

Stuart Silverman has had over 250 poems published in 60 different magazines and anthologies. Born in Brooklyn, New York, Silverman was educated at Brooklyn College, Columbia University, and the University of Illinois at Urbana. He writes both free verse and formal poetry. The former Chicago restaurant reviewer collects art and antiques and occasionally writes food and travel articles.

David Starkey teaches creative writing at North Central College in suburban Chicago. His recent poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in The American Scholar, Chattahoochee Review, Descant, Mangrove, The Nebraska Review, Poet Lore, Tennessee Quarterly, Santa Barbara Review, Writers’ Forum, and others. In addition, he has published several collections of poems with small presses: Koan American, Adventures of The Minor Poet, and I Will Not Do Anything Stupid Again. Open Mike Night at the Cabaret Voltaire is forthcoming from Kings Estate Press later this year, and Starkey’s Book of States is being sold on the World Wide Web by Boson Books at http://www.vnet.net/boson.

Lisa Verigin’s work has been featured in the chapbook anthology Four by Four, and individual pieces have appeared in such publications as New York Quarterly and Plainsongs. In addition, she has work forthcoming in The Catholic.
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