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W E S T V I E W

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Stylesheet

1. Submissions should be typed on 8.5" x 11" white paper; prose should be double spaced. Include a SASE.
2. Submitted artwork should be suitable for black and white reproduction. Work should be no larger than 8.5" x 14". However, photographs or slides of larger work may be submitted. Submitted artwork with a SASE will be returned.
3. We accept and enjoy formal verse, free verse, and prose poems.
4. Include a brief biographical sketch for our contributors' notes.
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Cover artwork by C. Michael McKinney, "Wildflowers Chickasaw National Recreation Area"

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Photo by Chad Martin



The Crystal Radio

by Wendell Mayo

After Pauli's mother was killed at a railroad crossing just a mile from their home, his father, Joseph, quit his electrician's job and put the house up for sale. There was a period of time after the funeral, which had not been terrible exactly, only unmemorable, quiet, unpierced by anything. Even the sympathy-givers had been only two in all. But the lack of sympathy-givers did not surprise Pauli. His parents had no living parents; their relations were mostly distant, removed either by birth, or by many miles. His family had sacrificed its closeness to outsiders, even neighbors, for a special intimacy that had become as familiar to Pauli as his own skin. The neighbors immediately on either side of them had stopped by and left fruit, two baskets on the same day. Joseph had let both fruit baskets rot on a window ledge.

Two weeks after the funeral, Pauli found Joseph putting newspaper down on the kitchen table. Pauli watched him carefully arrange his soldering iron, flux and lead wire, and needle-nosed pliers in front of him. Then Joseph rose from the chair, went to the sink, and gazed out the window to the back yard.

"Maybe we still have enough old things laying around to make you that radio I've been promising you," he said.

"Maybe we should just buy one, Dad."

"No, Pauli," his father replied, removing his heavy, black-rimmed glasses and wiping his eyes, "I've been promising for years."

Joseph found an empty toilet paper spool in the master bath off the bedroom where he and Pauli's mother had slept. Then he rooted through the jewelry box on the dresser and came up with a small galena crystal. Pauli was not surprised Joseph had found the crystal among his mother's pearls, her favorite cameo, a high school ring, and some old bottle caps which displayed a tiny pennant of the New York Mets, and *World Series*

Champs: 1969. The miracle team. When Joseph attended electronics school at night, he brought all sorts of gadgets home. Both Pauli's mother and father had been pack rats, and somehow the mingling of these metals and stones, including the galena crystal, carried warm feelings and memories in them. Pauli's mother was a fair and lovely woman. She had needed only a single embellishment, like the soft light trapped in a string of pearls, or the creamy color of a small cameo centered on a cotton blouse, to give her a comfortable appeal to everyone who knew her. She had also been a beer-toting, blue-jeaned, rabid fan of the Mets. But only Pauli and Joseph knew that part of her.

His mother's affection for baseball was the fulcrum of most of the household humor. As she had often told Pauli, she and Joseph had met leaping from their bleacher seats to snag a homerun ball, which had just cleared the fence. Joseph, being taller, but not as quick as his mother, jostled the ball from her hands at the last instant and settled to his seat with the prize. Later Joseph, then the stranger, handed the homerun ball to Pauli's mother.

"After all," he smiled, "you waved me away—I'm just glad we didn't crack our heads."

So that was how it started. There were no familial rivalries to resolve when they were married. No new bondings to be made. No previous marriages, no surrogate parents of old times. Pauli's mother had confessed, sometimes in a bashful hue of pink, she had saved herself for Joseph, and although Pauli had no real knowledge of the danger she might have saved herself from, she had, in his estimation, come to the proper point in life: to become his mother, wife of Joseph.

Like Pauli's mother, Joseph was easy-going and polite, even when grounding Pauli, something he always put in terms of a question, such as, "Why don't you spend a few days around the house help



ing your mother with the chores?" Or, "Perhaps you would like to spend a little time in your room?" What he and Joseph shared was simple: Pauli's mother. They were a threesome, each contributing something at every family event. At dinner, Pauli pitched his stories from school, Joseph his from work, and the electronics school. Pauli's mother pitched the vegetables to them both: "You two!" she'd shout. "You're impossible!"

A little later that morning, Joseph found an earphone from an old Navy radio headset, a rheostat, and a small coil of copper wire in the garage. He announced his discovery quietly to Pauli. Joseph came into the kitchen, positioned these components on the table, then got back up, and went into the cupboard under the sink. There he found a can of spray lacquer and some sandpaper. With the teaspoons in the silver drawer, he discovered several capacitors, one of them a variable capacitor.

"A tuner," he whispered to Pauli.

Joseph smiled for the first time since Pauli's mother's passing and the onset of the grim prospect of selling the house and moving. "This is it," Joseph said, motioning at materials spread on the table. "Believe it or not, this is all we need."

Joseph sat at the table and started work. First, he wrapped the copper wire around the toilet paper spool and snugged it at both ends. Then he spray-lacquered the paper roll heavily to keep the coiled wire from shifting. He set it aside to dry, got up, fixed a bologna sandwich, and ate it with one hand as he sanded clean the leaders on the rheostat and tuner. Then he turned back to the lacquered tuning coil and sanded clean the leaders on the rheostat and tuner.

He drew a small diagram of the radio on his napkin, paused to study it only a few seconds, and



Photo by Joel Kendall

with the remaining copper wire, soldered the wire leaders on the crystal, the tuner, the rheostat and the earphones. He stapled the components onto a small square of corrugated cardboard he had cut from a Mayflower moving carton.

Pauli grew excited as Joseph finished the crystal radio, and more than his own anticipation of its completion, he thrilled at seeing Joseph complete the project with so much industry.

But as Joseph put the last touches to the radio, Pauli saw him grow sullen. He slouched in his chair, and the gray, lost look he had often had since the passing of Pauli's mother came over him. He slid the crystal radio over to Pauli slowly. "Here, Pauli—why don't you go and give it a try: just move the tuner—here—back and forth until you pick up something."

Joseph went into the living room and lay on the sofa. Pauli took the radio and walked to his room, the bedroom next to the room which had been Joseph's and Pauli's mother's. The door to this was closed, and this, like Joseph's discovery of the crystal in the jewelry box, did not surprise him. The door was often kept closed since his

mother's death. Joseph had taken to sleeping on the sofa—when he could sleep.

Their home was a simple plat house, and it had always seemed small but cozy to Pauli. Now, since his mother's passing, the rooms seemed wide and vacant, especially full of space when, for instance, his father took to the sofa, and Pauli stood to watch him rest there. The first few days after the funeral, he would watch his father's chest heave and fall on the sofa. Gradually his father's breathing became almost imperceptible. Then Pauli would swell with fear that Joseph had died, too—and he longed to roust him from sleep, but then, he became more afraid of waking him than of his possible death. He felt somewhere in the depths of Joseph's sleep, the silent passing of the truces between them. He was glad to have the radio. He didn't like to think about Joseph that way.

Pauli sat on his bed and pressed the earphone to his ear. He moved the tuner several times the full length of its travel, very slowly, nudging it with his thumb, but heard nothing in the earphone. He got up from the bed and placed the crystal radio on his window ledge and tried again. Still nothing, just silence broken only by the rumble of a long, lumbering train running in the poplar woods behind the house. While his mother was alive, he hadn't noticed the trains, but now he heard their solemn sounds each time they traveled through. Often he feared that Joseph might hear the train coming in his sad, deep sleep. But more than these fears was the nature of the impact that had killed his mother; it was incomprehensible to him that something sounding so distant could have mangled the family car so badly and killed his mother. Now, more than anything, Pauli wished he could stop the trembling of gigantic diesels in the frame of the house; he wished he could silence the distant whistle blast. At times it seemed unendurable.

Pauli tugged gently on all the soldered connections of the crystal radio. Satisfying himself the connections were secure, he took the radio downstairs. He listened into the earphone as he de-

scended the steps. He walked quietly, slowly, so as not to wake Joseph. Still, there was nothing but silence in the crystal radio, silence in the house. Pauli took the crystal radio into the kitchen and down the stairs to the basement. There, he opened a small door into the crawl space under the house. The crawl space smelled of dampness and concrete. The light was burned out, so he kept the small door cracked to provide himself enough light to work with. He laid the crystal radio on the cool cement floor of the crawl space. He continued to nudge the tuner.

The silence in the crawl space seemed perfect to him, and soon, with just the right pressure of his thumb on the tuner, and with the investment of much imagination, Pauli began to feel the slightest, most minute vibrations in the earphone—then sounds that throbbed in a ghostly way, but that resembled anything but language. They seemed to pulse, then end suddenly, leaving him again with no notion of sound at all.

Pauli worked the tuner for a long while, then he heard Joseph rise from the sofa, go into the kitchen, stop, then take the basement stairs. Soon he saw Joseph's shadow in the periphery of his sight. Joseph went to his hands and knees, leaned into the opening of the crawl space, and placed his hands on the concrete floor.

"Pauli, what are you doing down here?"

"I'm trying to get the radio to work."

Joseph leaned farther into the crawl space, took the radio and earphone from him, and started upstairs. Pauli followed him. He called after Joseph.

"Maybe it needs batteries or something?"

"No, the crystal is all it needs," he replied.

Joseph climbed the stairs, and stopped in the kitchen.

"Well," he said, setting the radio behind him on the counter, "did you get anything at all?"

"Down in the crawl space I thought I heard something."

"Couldn't you make it out?"

"No—I mean it might have been a song or



something."

"But you're not sure."

"I don't think it works," Pauli said.

Joseph took a glass from a cupboard, walked over to the kitchen sink. He filled a glass with water and pursed his lips to it: then he went gray all over again, like Pauli had seen him other times before. Joseph took the glass from his lips without drinking from it. He set it on the counter. He turned and stared out the window over the sink.

"We had an agreement you would cut the grass," he said. "It's gone a month now. I've got buyers coming to see the house tomorrow."

Pauli wanted to tell Joseph it was nearly dark, too late to mow the lawn. But Joseph never turned from the window.

"Dad," he whispered.

"Cut it," Joseph said, angrily, still staring out through the window to the side of the house. "Damn it! Just cut it, Pauli."

Pauli went down the basement stairs. Above him, he could hear the sofa sag in the living room. He went out the back door of the house, into the garage, and gassed-up the lawnmower. He pushed the mower out of the garage and onto the driveway. He pulled the starter cord; it whipped back into the housing and the mower sputtered. The lawn was thick and patchy in different shades of green where crabgrass had taken root. The mower sobbed as he forced it over the clumps. Morning glory had woven itself in and through the chain links of the fence, and after finishing the lawn, Pauli spent time unraveling and removing the tough vines. The sky was turning from blue to black. Stars began to tack themselves across the sky. The grass clippings smelled sweet to him. The neighborhood had quieted. Soon, there would be another whistle and the tremor of the evening train.

When he'd finished, Pauli washed his hands in the tub in the basement and went upstairs into the kitchen. He finished the water Joseph had set down on the counter, and went upstairs to the bedrooms. Pauli found Joseph in the room, which had

been mostly shut up since Pauli's mother passed away. The window overlooking the back lawn was open. He could smell the mild fresh scent of the cut grass. He could feel the cool air moving through the room.

Joseph sat at the foot of the bed. Electronic components were piled on the bedspread beside him: some old vacuum tubes with black spots on them where they had burned-out, capacitors, transformers, and resistors—all of these mixed with his mother's bottle caps. Pauli thought he must have gleaned it all from the top of the dresser and its drawers, and considering the size of the assortment, from the closet and his mother's old hope chest as well.

The crystal radio lay in Joseph's lap, and he bent closely over it, cupping the earphone tightly against his ear. Joseph listened intently into the earphone, and with such a peaceful expression Pauli was sure he had picked up something.

"What are you getting?" Pauli whispered to Joseph.

"Pittsburgh? There are lots of stations in Pittsburgh."

"Whatever it is—it's not Pittsburgh," Joseph said.

"It could be anything," Pauli said, "this time of night."

His father handed the crystal radio to him, and went to the open window. Pauli watched his father listening closely for the vaguest sounds carried in the night air.

"What do you think it is?" his father whispered, not turning from the open window.

Pauli pressed the earphone of the crystal radio to his ear to hear what his father had heard. But he heard nothing in the earphone. A terrible, intimate nothing. That alone. And that was what he was ready to tell Joseph. But once more he turned to watch his father listening out the open window.

"It could be anything," he told him. "Anything at all."



Pawn Shop Guitars

by Greg Young

I'm looking for a bargain,
a solid-top acoustic sacrificed
for food or rent. The Gibson smells
of cigarettes—a dance hall darling
dropped too many times.
She won't hold tune.

The classical is cracked
as if neglected then banished
to dry attic heat where
wood shrunk and strings
went slack as fishing line.

I ask the man about the Martin,
yellow-tagged behind the counter.
He hands it to me. I stroke the neck.
He studies my face, smiles,
chews his unlit cigar.



Dawn on the Outer Banks

by Walt McDonald

Someday, when grandchildren
flip through family albums and find
these brittle photos of the coast,
the week they ran to us
and giggled in the surf,
will they remember?

Hoard, work fingers to the bone,
give heart and dollars
to all good causes that knock,
it doesn't matter. This conch
washed up and hollow as a heart
is ours, for now.

If all our heart strings snap,
flapping in the gale-force sugar
of good deeds, and we're old,
picking up pennies spilled
from a thousand alms,
it doesn't matter. Give,

if we wish, just do.
The tomb takes care of time.
On a peaceful beach one year,
grandchildren danced and called us
Meemaw and *Pop* all salty summer,
sweeter than ice cream on a stick.



Dear David Ignatow, or Against the Odds

by Ryan G. Van Cleave

It's an omen, perhaps,
that white-throated blue jay
that appears each dawn
on the shortcoming of lawn
that is my front yard.
How he pecks and pulls
at worms that aren't there—
I think of my Cousin Mike,
who carried lockpicks instead
of a briefcase. I am a species
related to the night. The sky
is always splattered with stars,
even if I can't see them.
When the jay takes flight
again, the cypress wind cool
under its wings, I feel myself
in this chair, at my desk, huge
and earthbound, a mere rustle
in the white-bloomed azaleas
that grow and grow but never
seem to get anywhere.



In the Field:

Larry McMurtry and Archer City, Texas

by Leigh Holmes

Every so often it is a worthwhile endeavor for academics to get out of the office and into the country. Like an overly helpful St. Bernard with library card attached to collar, an academic in the field sets up a kind of portable museum; this narrative is about a trip taken to Larry McMurtry's Archer City, Texas hometown, to work with both a museum's perspectives and a collection of memories from the novels set there. Cities like Venice, Italy are said to be open air museums. In goodly St. Bernard fashion, I propose that we explore how the principle of the open air museum works in Archer City.

Sometime about an hour after leaving the house in Lawton, we are a few miles to the south of Wichita Falls, Highway 79, which junctions off Highway 281 and takes us west to Archer City. Although there is nearby Thalia, which is also the name of a town in McMurtry's novels about this area, Archer City is primarily the material and the spiritual home (an oxymoron?), the place where *The Last Picture Show* was filmed in 1971 by Peter Bogdanovich and others whose film careers jumped afterward (Busby 21).

Having been previously aided visually in our knowledge of the area since both wife and I saw the *TLPS* and read the novel, the scenery of the 17 mile drive on Highway 79 puts us pretty much in touch with what we remember it looking like. During the ride, we see oil wells, some pumping, some two and three times as tall as a man, others looking very small.

The cattle we pass mostly stare at fences. Upon the sides of the highway sit scattered drilling pipes

and rusty pieces of maintenance equipment. Small, light-colored frame houses fly past, as do brick mansions sitting far off the road.

Sometime back in Texas history, there seemed to be a wide-reaching agreement not to push zoning ordinances, not to come up with master township plans and not to regulate much of anything. Part of the physical aura of Texas and western Oklahoma comprises a version of the national helter skelter, with an oil well here, a mansion there, here a shack, there a shopping center: McMurtry Americana. The crazy-quilt whizzes by. Long an area person, raised in other regions of North America, I halfway work on a feeling of local pride.

Downtown Archer City consists mainly of a city square, with the Archer County Courthouse in the middle of the town and situated in a shaded, grassy area. There are permanent stone benches and large and accommodative picnic tables in front. Hauling a cooler, we find what may soon be a little shade. Sitting, we sip at cold drinks and eat lunch.

There is a long marble stone memorial monument near us. We gaze at it. "The World War Two veterans have their names going alphabetically toward the middle," Wife says. I observe the names of many hundreds of veterans.

The monument alerts us to the fact that these people of the area are real people, many of them quite private in their individual lives, not necessarily the representational characters of McMurtry's fiction, the latter being characters



Photo courtesy ABCNews.com

whom we will re-imagine later, when we get over to Archer City High School.

Looking at the tourists, two large law officers walk by, smile, wave, and go into the court house.

McMurtry's grandparents moved to this area in 1887 (ING 145). After having lived in D.C. and Los Angeles, McMurtry himself seems to have been brought back here by the important associations of the place. Perhaps he was brought back by the people, perhaps by the city's size, with one cafe and one Dairy Queen. Maybe it was by its tranquility. Possibly the prospects of staying here offer a kind of moral grittiness, of toughing it rather than floating in some place in which many other fashionable people reside.

We finish our sandwiches and begin the consumption phase of our trip, pleasurable book browsing and purchasing.

Archer City's town area includes within the Booked Up complex four buildings that are former stores, a Ford dealership among them (Watson 81). The four buildings now house the books of McMurtry's bookstore, Booked Up. Located in the headquarters store, Building 1, to the left of the entrance, in the east part of the front area, is a working office and a main office with a credit card machine. The front area includes first editions as well as an air conditioner, a sought-after item on this warm day. Behind the windowed front part of the store is a huge warehouse area. Light comes through the angled tilt windows in the back area, and we see shelf upon shelf of books, of literary criticism, literary biography, autobiography, African American writers and miscellaneous literary categories. In a separate, adjacent room to the west are books about Texas, Native American literature, western Americana and genre fiction. Here, Wife parks herself, the room being the coolest save the air-conditioned office, where traffic gets heavy. She is interested in genre fiction.

After finding a copy of the letters of Malcolm Cowley and Kenneth Burke and a book of critical essays on Cynthia Ozick, I have difficulty finding

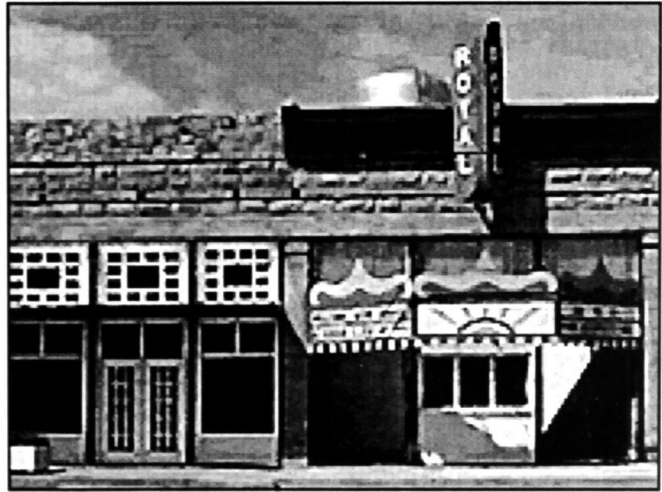


Photo courtesy ABCNews.com

anything by author Maya Angelou. I hope to locate a few autobiographical volumes.

A helpful worker with a Texas accent helps me look for a few minutes but unsuccessfully; then she disappears.

She reappears with McMurtry at her side.

"Angelou's poetry is in the store across the street," McMurtry says in an amiable voice. I say, "Thanks. I'm looking for her autobiographies." This is not the time to discuss *Duane's Depressed*, in whose central character from Archer City and his mid-life crisis I recently experienced a troubling interest.

McMurtry is satisfied that I know where to find things and with his colleague moves to another part of the store.

I continue to peer at a shelf area that I have been working for the last few minutes.

Shortly thereafter I find two autobiographies by Angelou, announce the find to McMurtry and his worker and move to the nearby western Americana and Native American literature area. There I spot N. Scott Momaday's *The Names: A Memoir* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. I take the less known but ultimately pleasing *Names* to the cashier. In the office, a seasoned book connoisseur also moves around, owner of several rambunctious yipping dogs.

On the other side of the street from Building 1

are two other stores. One houses art and architecture which we won't have time for today. The other consists of publications about books, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century publications, fiction before 1925, foreign works and translations. At a fourth locale across the street from the courthouse are a few favorite reading subjects —film, drama, linguistics, reference. We amble over there.

Outside, *The Last Picture Show*'s deaf Billy still cleans up the street in the imagination. Billy's sense of worth led him to do something that the local economy still cannot easily accommodate. Sweeping the streets in a voluntary effort, Billy provided a natural response to a time of economic decline and movement of people from the town. He was supported by a benefactor, Sam the Lion, and spent time at Sam's declining cafe, pool hall, and picture show. Billy was a friend of Sonny Crawford and Duane Moore, and after Billy's death and Duane's departure from the town for Army duty in Korea, we are told that for Sonny, "It was another one of those mornings when no one was there" (213).

In these later years of reflection, Billy, Sonny, and Duane seem more and more to foreshadow events to come in American life, especially in their 1950's style enactments of powerlessness and isolation in this Texas town. They seem to speak for a larger portion of rural regions, especially the American Plains, some areas suffering severely because of their dependence upon the production of single commodities, like wheat in North Dakota. The benefactors who remain seem to be less effective, given the economies of these smaller communities.

We ask directions on how to get to the high school. Then we head west on Highway 79, passing the Dairy Queen of McMurtry's autobiographical *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*.

As mentioned, Archer City can be discovered in much the way one discovers an open air museum. Yet a city like Archer City, with literary places and characters redolent in their associations

with historical eras, works as another kind of museum. If the text *Theorizing Museums* could be expanded, we would demonstrate that literary open air cities depend upon readers whose experiences and knowledge comprise a special perspective. A historical perspective enables them to provide what a visitor gets with a museum painting or a display case, and less stylistically, that is, a sense of history. All of us have special periods in our lives. For me, it's the fifties and one or two decades beyond.

Driving north toward a park area and the high school, Archer City in this location has for us the aura of decades, of "then and now" qualities. We take a right turn near a sign indicating the county fair grounds. Coming to the park's area for cars, we stop before some rusty, used looking park equipment. A parking lot rail immediately before us is also rusted, reminiscent of the theme of decline of the town in *The Last Picture Show*.

Someone must surely be able to conceive a simple plan to accommodate the simplest of community needs like painting a rusty parking rail in a small Texas town. The plan might work through volunteers. Billy swept the streets, and the idea



must be out there.

We sit in the car.

Literary cities like Archer City give testimony to the ideas of their authors and activities of their fictional characters who dwell in them. McMurtry dealt with the loss of Archer City's only picture show as a response to a slough of economic forces. A drive through this city gives continuing evidence of these problems. Only so many people can own or operate oil wells.

Driving again, we spot the high school, not far from the park. Literary scholarship, psychology, economics, and sociology are the museum's called-upon disciplines for approaching this building. Archer City High School and the Texhoma world of the fifties through the nineties seems to be emblematic of larger sections of the nation. In the Archer City/Thalia novels, Sonny, Jacy, and Duane experienced the *zeitgeist* of decline and exodus as Jacy shifted her interests from Thalia to Wichita Falls and eventually moved to Dallas in *TLPS*. In *Texasville*, she returned to brood upon a lost world of youth, which, by the time of the novel, the eighties, was sensed as substantial by many youth of the sixties.

The recent novel *Duane's Depressed* antici-

pates the unfolding era's consciousness. Duane's discovered at age 62 that there is a need for good literature, that Henry David Thoreau had thoughtful things to say, and Duane's discoveries are a sign within a more recent consciousness of urban sprawl, abandoned strip malls, and roadside trash. In the novel, Duane Moore desires to leave his pickup permanently parked and to explore the surrounding area by walking and biking along the highways of the area. He becomes disgusted with roadside trash during his long walks.

The world of Thalia/Archer City, its high school and the novels' people of the fifties, the eighties and the nineties, comprises a textual inscription of the culture's developing consciousness.

On this day, Archer City High School offers a surprise. It has solidity and fresh tan color to it, an impressive building. Within that building, the high school's English teacher in *The Last Picture Show* had reminded this reader of the hopefulness for supporters of literature of the fifties, with that era's linkage of formal literary expression to popular culture through television's *Playhouse 90*. In the betrayal of that teacher, the book foreshadowed a shift which had become apparent by the book's publication date of 1966, the separating of literature from popular culture, the removal of English teacher John Cecil in *TLPS* from his place of employment, said removal hastened by interpretations of masculinity attaching to John Cecil's fondness for poetry classics. Yet John Cecil was a person who "managed to keep liking people" and "was always hauling a carload of kids to a fair, a play, a concert" (*TLPS* 32).

Despite the interpretations of formal poetry by some of the people in Thalia, forms of informal poetry began emerging as poetic lyrics merged with music during the sixties. Persons who study poetry have traced and detailed this historic movement.

Driving today away from the school, one sees only a few trees in the neighborhood; a tree-planting campaign sometime would have been nice.



Photo courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society



The museum's question: Did the Archer City novels demonstrate a kind of progress? One of *The Last Picture Show*'s concerns was decline and voicelessness. Having a voice, we find in the later *Duane's Depressed*, requires that a person must do the things that are necessary to locate it.

Voicelessness originates from whomever it is that one sees as important enough to have in a dialogue. For the two earlier Thalia/Archer City novels, the assumed "listeners" seemed to be the artificial worlds of media and film, including the 'B' films Jacy Farrow acted in. For Duane Moore in *Duane's Depressed*, it was a dialogue with self.

Duane Moore in the nineties came to locate a personal voice for all seasons as he began in his isolated cabin to live a lifestyle that went back to Thoreau, a voice of the 1840s. It is a new vision that he might have benefitted from acting upon earlier, bored as he was with running his oil company.

We view as a telling progression the fifties' perspectives offered by Sam the Lion, Jacy, Sonny, Duane, Ruth Popper and Billy; the eighties' Duane and Jacy; and the nineties' new Duane and his relationship with therapy in the form of literature.

Thus from the museum's perspectives, we see the legitimacy of the views of these people of the fifties as they were in the youth of their lives: these insights do not arise from a novel that can be labeled merely regional, implying no broader socio-cultural connections.

The museum's representative is upon the verge of a declaration: The Archer City/Thalia novels move beyond the regional; they offer insights into the patterns of rural American decline and renewal. Our visit here supplies the visible grounds of those insights.

The visit to McMurtry's home city, the town that provides characters and settings for three of his novels, provides compensations, if only in the minds of visitors. When later we drive home, we feel contented about a day of book buying and reflection.

Quixote-like, later, among friends, we spread our pleasure by means of sharing, talking up Archer City and the bookstore and McMurtry's fiction, and the imaginings of an afternoon.



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Soapberry

by Donald Mace Williams

I let it get too dry in our bad summer,
Its first, my seventy-first, some worse, some better,
And in a day its leaves turned brown and fell.
This is a tree designed for hardship, meant
To go long rooted journeys dry as a camel,
To bow with the wind today, spring back tomorrow.
What I forgot to consider was its newness,
Its roots, not weaned yet from the soft dirt ball they groped from
Like just-born trout with egg sacs still attached,
Slow, yet, to butt through dense soil not pureed
To feed young trees but tough like all things here.
We ease our children's way through gristle and crust,
Through hail and thunder, love and government,
And yet their roots draw back or atrophy
Or, like mine, squirm around the hard spots. Still,
It may mean something that at last my tree,
Watered, these days, as if, though well adapted,
It yet needs love and coaxing, put out leaves
As green in late September as in May,
And if the winter's not too harsh, may live.



Smokes

by Virgil Suarez

It's hard not to think of him
everytime she lights one up,
just like the ones he smoked
late at night while he pounded
the typer, drank wine, and
listened to classical music
into the late hours when even
cats stopped their fighting
on all the fences, in all back
yards: mangalore ganesh beedies,
made in India by, they say,
lepers, men and women missing
finger tips, whole fingers,
and she leaned back on the rain,
her hair luminous in the sun,
plumes of the smoke like snakes
there—"too bad I never met him,
you know," she said and exhaled,
"even though I trekked out
to San Pedro several times . . ."
The smoke lingers over her head,
then rises slowly toward the rafter.
"Didn't know anybody out
there, and I didn't want to just
show up." By then he was sick,
dying and so my books were
never signed. Now I sit here
and smoke these, read the words,
think of the man who showed
so many the way to poetry."
Long after she smoked,
the smell lingered on that porch,
greeted me each time I entered
her place, over the door,
her red lipstick cursive:
BUKOWSKI LIVES!



The Faeries Come for Mrs. Lake

by Penny Susan Rose

Veronica Ann Vickson of Nantucket wed James Edward Lake of Connecticut. She had been in for teasing from people of a certain age, with the name Veronica Lake, but as she grew older, she kept quite definitely to herself. People said she was an invalid, or that she suffered from the phobia that keeps a person from venturing out. A tall stone wall surrounded her property. No telephone line snaked in from the street. No antenna roosted on the roof. Her hair *was* abundant, fair like the starlet's, but decidedly graying. She wore it in a heavy braid, or twisted up into a sumptuous bun. Sometimes she drew the sides back with combs and let the length of it wave past her waist.

"Usually, it's the braid," whispered Iris Lessing to Amanda Reese. The girls were peeping through a chink in the stone wall, watching for Mrs. Lake in the moonlight.

Twelve-year-old Iris had lived next door to the Lakes for a relatively short time. Her bedroom window looked down on their garden, and she had become something of an authority on Veronica Lake. James Lake, though he walked with a limp, and wore a scowl intensified by a livid scar on one cheek, *was* interesting—but Iris had rarely seen him. It was the magnificent garden, and the votive attendance of Mrs. Lake upon it, that had caught her up.

It began in the autumn when Mrs. Lake's garden defied the season, burgeoning well past summer. Fronds and blooms frothed over the wall, ivy clung to the blue-gray stones, and mosses colored the mortar. The garden burbled with water sounds. Trees shushed with every breeze. Birds rested there at night, and their songs woke Iris each sunrise. She got up from her bed and peeked down at the garden from behind her curtains.

Wearing her quilted robe or her lavender kimono, Mrs. Lake emerged, her braid frowzy from sleep. She moved slowly, appearing and disappear-

ing on winding pathways. Ferns unfurling, maples and oaks, shrubs in flower, and rose bushes with mighty thorns and delicate thorns, blossoms of every kind and color that pushed up through the green, mossy earth, or dangled on long runners, or burst from smooth branches, all seemed, perceptibly, to lean toward Mrs. Lake as she passed.

She filled bird feeders with seed from a tin. She scattered nuts for chattering squirrels and raucous crows. She tended stone altars, leaving curious offerings, some of which glinted in the morning light, and which, Iris suspected, were gemstones.

This spring night was momentous for Iris and Amanda, peering through the chink in the wall. Before full nighttime and the rising of the moon, they had pierced their right thumbs with a sewing needle and like lips in a first kiss, had pressed thumb to thumb mingling their blood. Then they had pressed the crimson digits onto a parchment specially prepared for the occasion, leaving perfect thumbprints beneath careful signatures.

That afternoon, they had borrowed two sheets of Iris' mother's best stationery. It was handmade paper, ivory-colored, ragged-edged and almost translucent, with bits of nubby linen in it. On one sheet, the girls arranged pressed blossoms and leaves that Iris had acquired by climbing the stone wall between her ordinary back yard and the moist paradise of Mrs. Lake's garden. They applied a layer of white glue to the second sheet and put the two together, then squashed the whole beneath Iris' well-thumbed *Oxford English Dictionary*. By evening, the glue had dried to form the parchment.

The wording had been difficult. Not because the girls were twelve and had insufficient vocabulary. Quite the contrary, Amanda was a reader, and Iris, as evidenced by her tome of a dictionary, had an affinity for words. Their abundance and specificity pleased her; arrangements of letters meant



something.

"Like h-e-r," said Iris to Amanda. "It means female and ordinary, but add an o and the word is h-e-r-o, male and *extra*-ordinary. Everything reversed by one letter."

"O," mouthed Amanda, as if tasting the significance.

So it was not lack of words, but that the words must be suitably enigmatic and, at the same time, bind the girls eternally as blood-sisters.

Amanda had looked on while Iris, who wrote the better hand, practiced on sheets of ordinary paper, wielding her father's expensive fountain pen with its broad, masculine nib and pitch-black ink. They worked by candlelight at Iris' half-round desk, in front of her bedroom window, looking down onto Mrs. Lake's vespertine garden.

At last, the parchment was inscribed:

Iris May Lessing and Amanda Jane Reese do hereunto press their blood-crimson thumbs on this eve of April 8th 1983. They do freely swear that, from this day until forever, they will guard, jointly and severally, even with their very lives, all of the secrets that have been, or will be revealed to them about her, and that they will be blood-sisters until the day they die whether through old age, accident, disease, heartbreak, or misfortune, which they doubt.

Iris May Lessing Amanda Jane Reese

"Until the day they die," the little girls murmured, pressing crimson thumbs to the parchment.

Iris shivered as if she had trod on a newly filled grave. The sensation was disturbing and familiar.

Carrying flowers to her grandmother's grave in Oregon, she had once stepped upon a newly sodded mound and it had yielded beneath her feet. Only slightly more pressure, she had thought, and she would find herself six feet under, presenting her bouquet to—to what? A worm-eaten cadaver? An articulated skeleton? She had never thought, in real terms, of what lay beneath the rolling greenery. The fact of her dear grandmother's body, all those bodies, buried there, changing. Words had

cascaded in her mind: moldering, corruption, desiccation. It had been something of a shock, and Iris had shivered until her teeth chattered.

That shiver had come for the second time when her stealthy, booted feet first touched the wintering earth of Mrs. Lake's garden and it too had yielded.

"Why does our blood turn brownish, Iris?" asked Amanda.

"Oxidization," answered Iris promptly, happy to be distracted from grave thoughts.

Amanda appreciated the fact that Iris generally knew the answers to things. She always had her nose in some book or other. Not only storybooks with fanciful pictures of the kind that Amanda preferred, but all kinds of books with big words in them, like *ozid . . . oxdiz . . .*

"What does *ozdixization* mean?" asked Amanda.

"Oxidization," corrected Iris, gently. "It's like rusting," she said, cocking her head in a way that she had acquired from her father, blinking her big, brown eyes behind her eyeglasses.

Amanda found the response comprehensible. She knew that human blood contained iron, and that iron exposed to the elements rusted. When she grabbed hold of the wrought-iron railings of her own front gate they colored her palms, and it did look quite like the thumbprints on their parchment: brownish-red, like rust.

Ozdixization, Amanda thought to herself while her blood-sister loosely rolled the executed parchment, bound it with a dark-blue corded ribbon, and placed it in her rosewood box.

The girls had been fast friends for two long months, before Iris had revealed the box. *Fast* friends because their bonding was like the two pieces of stationery joined with white glue. They were, finally, inseparable. *Long* months, because winter had muffled and slowed the days, and those days had been full of mystery and revelation. Looking back, two months felt like years to the little girls.



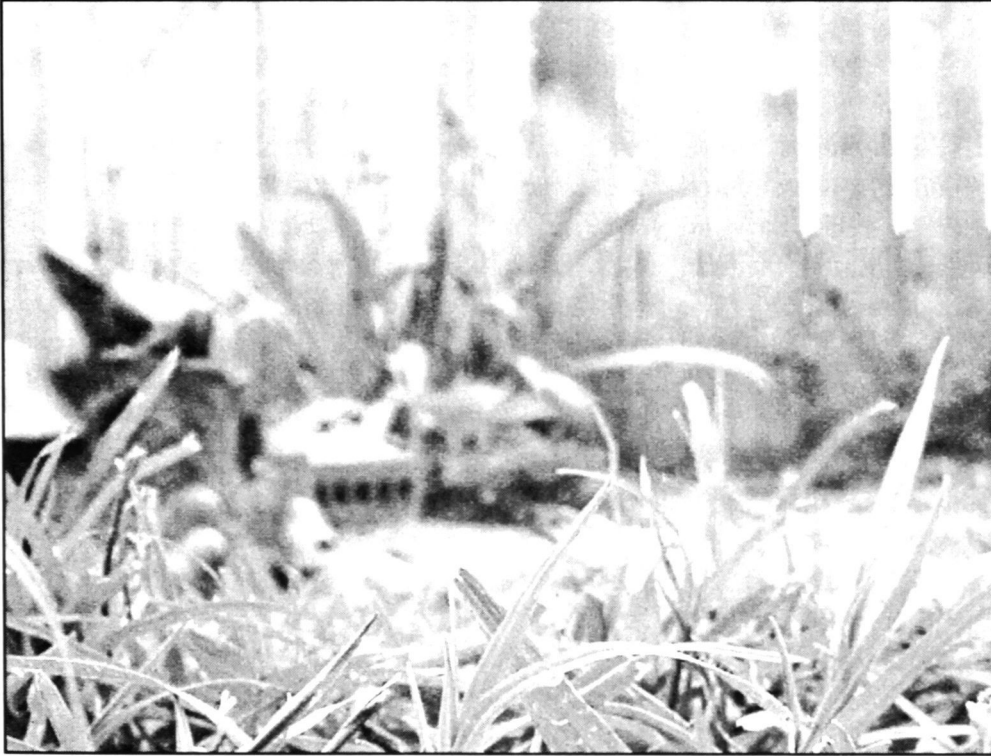


Photo by Joel Kendall

"If you swear to keep it absolutely secret," Iris had said to Amanda, "I'll show you something wonderful."

Iris had this way of creating excitement. It never had to do with mundane things, whispers about girls and boys at school, but always, Amanda had learned, about things that mattered. Amanda had solemnly placed her hand over her heart. She had sworn by all that was holy and by all that she loved that she would never ever reveal the fact, or the contents, of Iris Lessing's precious, rosewood box.

"Grandmother gave it to me when I turned seven. Her grandmother gave it to her when she was seven and her grandmother to her, and so on. I'm to add at least one important thing, and give it to my granddaughter when her turn comes."

The rosewood box was twelve inches square, ten inches deep, hinged with ebony wood, intricately carved with vines and flowers. Hummingbirds burrowed into blossoms. Snakes slithered on branches. It had a hooking latch of ivory and silver. Inside were wonderful things, smaller boxes

and bags of velvet. The fact was, for Iris the greatest pleasure came in the sharing of them. With Amanda Reese, she dared to trust once more.

First, she revealed a sweet-smelling cedar box, in which there was a miniature tea set, including the long-spouted teapot and the sugar bowl, each with proper handles and removable tops. There were six cups and saucers, a creamer, and tiny spoons carved of cedar, rubbed smooth.

With the box lid closed, the surface acted as the table on which the girls arranged the pieces. They passed the teapot back and forth, filling cups with imaginary tea.

"I suppose we're too old for this now," Iris said, as they soon tired of the game, "but I love touching the pieces!"

A few days later, she revealed a music box, the size of a pocket matchbox. A peacock rose up when she opened the lid, fanned his brilliant plumage and rotated left and right, opening and closing his golden beak to the tune of *The Night We Were Wed*.

In a black velvet box, there was a necklace of amber beads, with matching bracelet, and pendant earrings. Inside each bead were the preserved bodies of ancient insects. Exceedingly small, scarab-like creatures.

There was an odiferous bundle of sandalwood incense, slightly burnt at the tip, encircled by dried weeds, the whole tightly wrapped with braided yarn in a rainbow of colors. Iris called it a smudge-stick.

"For chasing away evil spirits. I had to use it that time, after Marsha Gates."

"Oh gosh!" Amanda had heard about Marsha Gates in graphic detail.

There were two groupings of netsuke, extremely valuable, though Iris had no sense of that. There were three squatting monkeys: one covered his eyes with his hands, another his ears, the third his mouth. Her great-great-great-grandmother had attached a label to the bottom of each figure. The words: See No, Hear No, and Speak No had faded to lavender. The word Evil had disappeared, if it had ever been there.

The second grouping was of three robed, Oriental women. The figures were affixed to a base of carved mahogany wood that formed a lake before them, and a mountain behind. The eldest, serene and wise, sat upon a mat with a scroll unrolling across her lap. Her right hand raised, palm up, gestured toward the lake. The second woman, pinch-faced, stood back peering suspiciously at the first. The third and youngest gazed, wide-eyed, at the water. A wave was rising from the lake, standing as high as her elder's upraised hand.

"I think they're sisters, don't you?" said Iris.

"The pinch-faced one looks so jealous!" said Amanda.

There was a blue velvet bag, cinched with a cord of bright yellow. It contained a deck of Tarot cards, each one hand-painted in the Egyptian style: beautiful, mannered illustrations of the cups and swords, pentacles, and wands that looked like budding lilac stems, only thicker.

Iris had known Amanda for four months before she mentioned Mrs. Lake. She had been testing her Connecticut friend for worthiness, and Amanda understood. It was because of the girl in Oregon: the red-haired betrayer, Marsha Gates.

Like Amanda, Marsha Gates had excitedly sworn a vow. The rosewood box had opened. She had seen the amber beads, with the promise of more to follow, but, in a moment of weakness, Marsha had failed Iris. She succumbed to her so-called best friends. The ones that looked askance at Iris Lessing because she was "a brain," had no interest

in clothes and make-up. Because she wore glasses and looked over the tops of them when she spoke, like the Principal did. Because she read during recess and did not skip rope or play dodge ball. Because she rode her bike alone, avoiding the common routes. Especially because she volunteered in class and gave the right answers. Or worse, raised her hand to *ask* a question, eliciting a response to which she would eagerly listen while the class slunk deep in their seats, rolling their eyes at one other, murmuring, "Geek."

"We wanna see your amber beads, Iris," demanded Jan Steuben, the most popular girl in class, one day. She towered blondly over Iris, backed by her legions, including, horribly, Marsha Gates. "And the bracelet and earrings that match."

Iris, seated beneath an oak, raised molten eyes from her book and flashed Marsha a murderous look over the top of her glasses.

Marsha already felt ill. It had been exciting when she had intoned the oath, and Iris had opened the sweet-smelling box. The fact was Marsha liked Iris. She had not meant to tell. It had slipped out at a slumber party at Jan's house.

"Lucky your mom didn't make you invite Iris Lessing," dark-haired Melinda had sniped that night. She snuggled into her sleeping bag, careful not to smudge her newly applied red-organdy lipstick.

"Yeah," said her best friend, waggling freshly painted fingernails, "know-it-all, goody-two-shoes Iris."

"She's not so bad," Marsha had stupidly said. "I've been to her house . . ."

Jan Steuben, Melinda, all the girls had swarmed over Marsha like army ants. Why had she been hanging around with *that* creep? That was when it slipped out, about the rosewood box and the amber beads, and now Jan was determined to see them for herself.

Iris felt her spine harden as if taking strength from the oak. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Jan Steuben."



A feeling of doom, like a dark-gloved hand, pressed upon Marsha's head.

"Yes, you do, Iris Lessing!" insisted Jan, crossing chubby arms on her budding chest, kicking at fallen leaves. "Marsha told us all about it. Don't have to be stingy just 'cause you're a string bean."

Several girls sniggered plumply, inching closer to Marsha.

"I regret to inform you, Jan Steuben, that Marsha Gates has fabricated a story, presumably to increase her importance in your eyes. It has, however, no basis in fact!"

"Liar!" shouted Marsha, breaking ranks. "You showed me!"

Iris cocked her head. She closed her book and stood up.

"Lying," she said, "or Treachery? Which is worse, Marsha Gates?" Then: "There is *no* box," she said, looking level-eyed at Jan Steuben.

Casting a final, fiery glance at Marsha, Iris turned on her heel and walked away.

"What's treachery mean?" asked Melinda.

"There is so a box," Marsha sputtered, turning to Jan and her minions. "It's full of things, treasures!"

"Like what?" said Jan, feigning boredom. Her target had slipped away, so neatly, with her dignity intact. It seemed about to diminish Jan in the moment, and that sensation of diminishment, prickling on her skin, was intolerable.

"The amber jewelry!" said Marsha.

"Yeah, and what else?" demanded Melinda, bouncing a black-and-white dodge ball near Marsha's feet, forcing her to skip back awkwardly.

"There were other boxes and velvet bags. She didn't show me everything. But she was going to! It's full of neat stuff."

"She'd show us those beads *if* she had them!" said Jan. "Anybody would!"

"She would!" the troop chimed in. "Who wouldn't!?"

Marsha realized that she was now the target. The hand of doom pressed harder. Her stomach

churned.

"You know what, Marsha?" said Jan Steuben. "You're the one who's full of it. Full of baloney!" she said, and then the coup d'éclat: "We think you're a total liar, Marsha Gates."

Jan Steuben and her troop turned about-face, hair fanning like banners as they marched away in lock step.

Marsha Gates, Traitor or Liar, in exile at 12 years old, could move neither forward nor back. She would bear solitary confinement, the brutal snubs of her former friends for upwards of four school days (it would seem eternity) before Jan Steuben finally pardoned her.

Iris Lessing, on the other hand, would never pardon. She went straight to the nurse's office complaining of headache. She looked ill. Her skin was pasty, her eyes red-rimmed and she had a history of migraines. The nurse stuck the obligatory thermometer into Iris' mouth but before she even looked at the reading, she called Mrs. Lessing.

Elena, the Lessings' live-in housekeeper, fetched Iris home from school. She had seen her little I-reese like this before, in the grip of an awful headache.

Iris held her misery in check until she got home, then bolted upstairs to her room and shut the door. She burst into tears at the awful betrayal of Marsha Gates. She would never, *ever* trust *anyone* again!

Elena knocked at her door. "I-reese? Did ju took your medizins?"

Her tablets and a glass of water were on her bedside table. "Go away, Elena, please. Tell Mom I don't want dinner."

Soon after this unpleasant event, the Lessings moved to Connecticut, arriving in the flaming autumn.

Iris was glad, glad, glad! She made no friends at her new school. She obtained her library card and spent the early autumn reading in the woods beside the streams where leaves were blazing and soon would fall. She had discovered poetry, Emily Dickinson, William Butler Yeats, and Stevie Smith



with her funny line drawings, and great poems like "Not Waving but Drowning."

Then, there was Mrs. Lake, and it was partly because of what she *did not* do that she came particularly to Iris' attention.

So many leaves accumulated as fall progressed that Iris' father raked them into piles and burned them in the gravel driveway as their neighbors did. Iris loved the smell of burning leaves, reminiscent of her smudge-stick. "A pleasing odor unto the Lord," she had read in the *Old Testament*. She knew the reference had to do with the fat parts of animal sacrifices, but it seemed to her that this scent of burning leaves must *also* be pleasing to God. Whoever God was. Wherever He was, and assuming He *was* a he, and that He had nostrils, which she doubted.

Given that, the question of how it was that an odor could in fact *please* Him had occupied Iris for some time.

Elena scrubbed, then wrapped enormous, brown-skinned potatoes in aluminum foil. She pierced them with a fork and tossed them deep into a pile of burning leaves. When there was nothing left but hot embers, Iris' father poked around with the rake and retrieved the potatoes, blackened on the outside.

The Lessing family sat down on smooth gray and blue rocks that formed the curving edges of their driveway. Inside the blackened foil, the potatoes had baked to fluffy perfection. Some had burst open. The smoke and even some ashes had got in a little and flavored them.

"Pretend she's pepper," said Elena and everyone laughed.

They buttered and salted the steaming hot potatoes, then gobbled them up, blowing on their fingers. It was messy, lovely, and completely spoiled their dinner, which Elena did not mind because, "I don't kook heem yet, an' no deesh for washes!"

Leaves burned day after day in gravel driveways all around the neighborhood, but *not* in Mrs. Lake's drive. This was puzzling because Iris had

been watching. She had seen Mrs. Lake raking and weeding, collecting debris on a piece of burlap, carrying it out of sight around the side of her curious stone house. But Mrs. Lake's collection bin was never full of leaves or the branches she pruned, or the weeds she pulled, and she did not burn them. What, Iris wondered, did she do with them?

Spying was not, Iris knew, polite. People were entitled to privacy. Her parents did not barge into her room without knocking. She had even quite recently resisted the temptation to rummage through Elena's room after glimpsing something through her open door. There was a photograph of a uniformed man on her bedside table. It sat beneath an icon of the Virgin Mary. Rosary beads hung over the silver frame, and a votive candle burnt perpetually before it. Instead of prying, Iris asked her mother about it.

"That's Elena's husband sweetheart. He died in a plane crash in Nicaragua. She rarely speaks of him. It always makes her cry."

Now, husbands were a mystery to Iris. Her parents were what people called "a lovely couple," and Iris loved her professorial Daddy to bits, but why was it, she wondered, that every girl was expected to want a husband? She understood the functioning of the human body—the egg and the sperm, but what of Mrs. Lake? She seemed not to have any children. So why had she bothered to take a husband? Why was he so frequently absent, or if present, why did he never venture into the garden? Furthermore, why did Mrs. Lake never go out? Why did the leaves on her trees turn so much later than all the others did, and why did she not burn them once they fell? What was the function of the small altars? What were the offerings upon them, and for what, or for whom were they? Questions numerous as autumn leaves piled up in Iris' mind.

She had never even seen the whole of the odd, two-story, stone house. It was practically invisible from her window, and from the roadside, except for three nobbly chimneys above the treetops. Most importantly, she had never properly seen Mrs.



Lake, only from above or through a chink in the wall.

Early winter, one Sunday, Iris begged off church as she often did. Then she bundled up against the cold, mittens, boots and all. She walked through the woods to the stone wall bounding Mrs. Lake's garden furthest from the house. Her boots scrunched loudly in the snow.

It was almost too easy. Although the stones in the wall were smooth, rounded, even slippery, there were perfect footholds and handholds. The next thing Iris knew her booted feet touched the ground. It yielded to her weight, and she shivered.

It was strange. Like Dorothy in Munchkin-Land Iris thought, because, although snow had fallen in this garden, it was not stark, black and white and gray like the outside world. There was a superabundance of color. There were dark-green bushes with masses of purple, green or red berries. There were evergreen trees, teal-blue, compact, and vibrant. Their branches, spaced in perfect symmetry, turned up at the ends and oh, the spicy scent. There were mounds and hillocks covered with snow, but showing a golden fringe of straw at their edges. Beside a sapling maple, stones were stacked to form a niche and a platform on which there sat small wooden bowls filled with milk and honey. There were shiny rocks, bits of colored crystal, and infinitesimal seashells, artfully arranged. Wind chimes of bamboo and burnished copper hung from branches above this altar. They tinkled and chimed in the breeze. Iris heard water splashing in the distance. Birds singing. She was almost dizzy with impressions.

Scrunch. Scrunch. Someone was coming! No time to get back over the wall!

Iris hid as best she could behind the berried bushes. Why, oh why had she worn her flaming red parka? Her heart pounded in her chest. Her breath made visible mist.

Mrs. Lake came down the path wearing her quilted robe cinched with a wide embroidered cord. She was shaking her tin of birdseed. Tipping it out

here and there onto the snow, filling feeders that hung from the trees. She was touching branches and winter blooms, scattering walnuts and peanuts from her pockets. She came to a full stop as creatures appeared to gather what she scattered.

Iris had never seen squirrels with tails so plush, hands so quick and perfectly formed, or birds with such red breasts, and blue breasts, and iridescent wings, or crows so sleek and cocky.

Peering through the berried bush, Iris found that Mrs. Lake was starkly beautiful. She had intelligent, blue-gray eyes beneath wide eyelids. Her lashes were short, but dark, and her brows were dark too. Her expression was mobile, changeable. Her lips were neither plump nor narrow, and were a faded red. Her skin was not deeply wrinkled, but fine lines radiated from the corners of her eyes, and above her upper lip. Her cheekbones were pronounced with a blush on them, as if she had pinched them or rubbed them with a coarse washcloth or chapped them in harsh weather. Her jaw was strong. Her hair, blonde and gray in its thick braid, swung over her shoulder like heavy rope when she bent down. Her face had a freshness about it such as New England women often have, a beauty that would have been ordinary if made-up. She was tall, 5'7" or so, and slender to judge from her wrists, her neck, and her long, narrow feet, which were, to Iris' amazement, bare, the toes red against the snow.

Mrs. Lake drew very near Iris' hiding place. She paused. Had she noticed Iris' bootprints, the red of her parka? She reached out with her long-fingered hand to touch the bush behind which Iris crouched. She murmured softly. "Sir Venus," it sounded like. A name? Maybe a botanical name?

Mrs. Lake moved on, following the path away toward the water sounds.

Iris scrambled out of her hiding place, face burning. She clambered back over the wall. "Kansas," she thought, standing in the black-and-white world again.

It was not long after that first of many incur



sions that Iris met Amanda Reese in the library. She liked Amanda at once, the way she read, with a dictionary at hand and curling a strand of her curly blonde hair around her index finger, sometimes drawing it to her lips in concentration. Two months later, Iris showed Amanda her rosewood box. Two months more and Iris would show Amanda Mrs. Lake.

First came the last amazing treasure from the box, as unusual as the Egyptian Tarot cards. It was a brown satin bag with a silver snap closure. It contained three strange coins, and a black book with writing inside, and a larger book with a yellow binding and a dove-gray paper cover. The coins were round with squares cut out of their middles. One side thickly inscribed with Chinese characters, the other sparsely with Persian characters.

"What are they for, Iris?" asked Amanda, holding the coins in her hand.

"Divination."

"For telling the future. Like the Tarot?"

"Right, or for understanding the present or the past. You think about a question or a problem while you hold the coins in your hand. Then you toss them, six times."

Amanda tossed the coins onto the carpeted floor where they were sitting, cross-legged, heads close together.

"They're even or odd, depending which side comes up. The Persian side is worth three. The Chinese side is worth two. You total up the threes and twos. If the sum is even, you draw a broken line like this: -- and for odd, you draw an unbroken line like this: —. You have to deal with changing lines. I'll explain that later. See," Iris opened the small black book in which hexagrams had been transcribed by many different hands. "Straight or broken from the bottom until there are six. That makes two trigrams or one hexagram. Each combination has a meaning."

"It's like secret code," said Amanda, scanning the lines stacked in all possible combinations.

"It is! You interpret them with the *The Book of*

Changes. I'll show you."

Iris glanced toward the window and jumped to her feet.

"The moon is up, Amanda! We have to go! She'll be beside the stream."

This was the night. The moon was full. The parchment had been made. Decorated with the leaves and flowers that had fallen at Iris' feet like offerings each time she had breached the wall, and she had breached it many times, day and night all through the winter and into the spring. Iris and Amanda had mingled their blood, executing the parchment, and on the strength of that, this spring night, they would enter Mrs. Lake's garden as sisters.

"When she wears it loose with just the barrettes, it gets caught on the thorns and branches; when she wears it in the bun it starts falling down when she's pulling weeds; so it's usually the braid. But at the full moon, she sits at the gazebo by the stream, and loosens it and when she brushes her hair, that's when it happens"

Iris was whispering. She and Amanda held up the hems of their long robes taken from the dress-up trunk, specially, for this night. Tiptoeing, barefooted through the sleeping Lessing house, past the master bedroom, down the blessedly carpeted stairs. Past Elena's door, then through the gleaming kitchen, past the shimmering, eerie white of the stove, and sink, and refrigerator, they had darted out the back door into the balmy spring night.

The lawn was silver with dew, and the girls had left a trail, like snails, all the way to the wall. They peered through the chink, and then Iris gathered up her robe and climbed, waiting to help Amanda, whose knees were knocking with excitement.

"Put your foot there," she whispered.

Over they went.

Night-blooms perfumed the air.

A mockingbird burst loudly into song. His vast repertoire, the sequence unvarying, he would sing until midnight had passed.



"This way. Toward the stream."

"The ground is *so* soft."

"Shhh! Dichondra. Watch out for sprouting bulbs. Don't crush anything!"

Amanda saw tongues sticking up from earth, the beginnings of narcissus or freesia maybe, or tulips. Ferns made lacy patterns of the moonlight, fronds stirring gently as the little girls moved past.

Amanda heard the stream. Then she saw the gazebo that stood on a rise beside it.

Mrs. Lake was sitting on the bottom step. Her long legs stretched out, so that her naked heels just reached the burbling water. Her Grandmother Irene Vickson's elegant silver hairbrush lay in her lap. She was loosening her braid over one shoulder.

"They'll come," whispered Iris. She pulled Amanda's hand so that she would sit low behind the screen of ferns.

Veronica Lake began to brush her hair, and her rhythmic strokes seemed to make a thrumming sound in the air. She conjured the memory of her grandmother, Irene, remembering the time before she fell ill. She imagined it was Irene's soft hair passing through the bristles.

Lights began to flicker in the foliage around Mrs. Lake.

"Oh?!" whispered Amanda.

"Shhh!" whispered Iris, who was concentrating on a picture that was forming in her mind, much more clearly this time than any of the times before.

James and Veronica played in Irene's garden when they were little. They courted there when they were grown. James *had been* attuned then, though he could not see as clearly as Veronica and Irene did. They married in Irene's garden, and June perfume had enveloped them like the promise of sweet things to come, the promise of children, and abundant life.

Then the tentacles of war embraced the world. James Lake volunteered for duty, as did most of the men in Nantucket. Veronica remembered that day, when James came home to tell her. She was

planting sweet williams and kitten-faced pansies.

"James, why? You could never kill anyone, could you?"

"Vee," said James, wiping a smudge from her young cheek, "I know every man in this town. No one *wants* to go. Oh, maybe a few do, but mostly everyone is scared. I can't let someone else go in my place."

"But if no one went there'd be no war!"

How naïve, they *had* to go because the enemy was brutal. Violence bred violence. The war was already visible, in the piles of tires and scrap metal collecting in the town. She had felt it coming, a spreading disease like canker, like mealy bug scales on the underside of leaves, like white fly. She had felt it everywhere, except in Irene's garden. Even Irene's death, when it came, came quietly. James carried her into her garden on the night that she died. He held the old woman in his arms. She was so light.

"Take care of Vee," said Irene, "and the garden. Take care of the garden, James." Then, anxiously: "Do you see them, Vee? I can't see them!" James felt her shudder in his arms.

James Lake really saw them for the first time then. Small lights gathered in legions as Irene was breathing her last. His eyes filled with tears, blurring the lights until they were bright streaks in the air all around him.

"I see them, Irene," said Veronica.

"They've come for me then," she sighed with relief. "I was afraid . . ."

"Go, Irene, we release you, with love," said Veronica.

James felt something change. Irene's body becoming still lighter, almost as if she would rise out of his arms, a dandelion spore on the wind. Then, he saw something that he thought he would never forget, but James did forget, because we humans do: extraordinary things blotted out by horror or even just by time, if we are not careful.

James inherited 6 acres of land in Connecticut. There, he and Veronica decided to build their



home. They built a stone hut that was mostly a kitchen to live in. They dismantled Irene's modest house, saving wood, stones, doors, mantles, the windows and sashes. They built their home with those parts, and with the gray and blue stone that came up in every shovel-full of earth they turned in preparation for their Connecticut garden. Neighbors were happy to bring more stones. Some even helped to set the foundations in place back then, when the Lakes still spoke to their neighbors.

Veronica Lake brushed her hair by the stream and remembered how they had transplanted Irene's garden. It was work but fun too, seeing the garden reborn. Truckload by truckload they moved it to Connecticut, finishing just as basic training began for James. Then he was sent away to fight, to die, or worse, as he came to see it, to live.

The small lights were moving purposefully about, growing stronger and larger as Mrs. Lake brushed her hair. Amanda stifled a squeal. She squeezed Iris' hand.

"She seems tired," whispered Iris.

"Does she?" Amanda could not tell.

Iris could feel it, as surely as she was reading Veronica Lake's mind. She had felt the tiredness before, the first time she had spied on her under the full moon. There was another garden, an old woman and sadness. There was a young man and despair. It was in her mind again. Iris could see it all, clearly.

Veronica conjured the day that she went into the city to wave goodbye to James. He looked strange with his beautiful brown hair shorn, wearing the pressed, khaki-colored uniform. It was shocking to see him move with precision, marching as one with his unit, eyes straight ahead unseeing, already changing, though he managed a wink for her.

James *had* seen the lights when they came for Irene, but it had been the first, and the last time, so



Photo by Joel Kendall

it seemed. Sirvinus had been entirely visible. His Deva shape enclosed in a fountain of colored flame, exactly as Veronica and Irene had so often described him. As James Lake marched away from his lovely Vee, away from warmth, and light, and beauty, he thought, fleetingly, of Sirvinus, and began even then to wonder what he had *really* seen that night in Nantucket. It might have been a trick of the light, an illusion after all.

Veronica built rooms upon rooms. Adding to their stone house all through the months, and then the years of the war: a second story of bedrooms, including rooms for the children they had planned, and a room for their books, and a playroom. Downstairs she added a mudroom with space for seedling trays. She increased the size of the kitchen, adding a parlor on one side and a smoking room on the other. James had taken up cigars, or so he had intimated in the uncensored portion of one of his letters. Then he had fallen ominously silent.

Veronica knew that James was alive. She continued to write, but he did not reply. Then she received a telegram. James Lake had been badly wounded, it said. He was hospitalized in France.

He sent one letter:

Vee,

Don't come. They say I will survive.

James

Enclosed with this cold and cryptic note was a letter from his doctor. James was suffering, the doctor wrote, from severe battle fatigue in addition to his extensive bodily injuries. It would be

best if she were to wait for her husband at home.

And so Veronica waited.

When James returned, his shorn hair was completely white. The doctors had rebuilt him as best they could, but for James, everything he had known, had loved, and had planned to love, was destroyed as his body had been destroyed. Things he had seen and that had been done to him, and worst of all, things that he had had to do, had altered him. He had been made a shell by a shell.

Veronica met James at the train station in the village. When she saw him stepping down from the compartment, gingerly with a cane, his hair a shock of white, his dear face scarred, she lunged for him. She flung her arms around his neck. James raised his free hand, patted her gently on the back, absently, like a distant uncle. He gazed out the window on the drive home, never speaking.

Veronica was numb.

They talked briefly, that first evening, sitting in the parlor.

"Won't you come into the garden, James? It's so beautiful now."

He responded as if he had not heard what she said: "I can never give you the children you wanted, Vee." His voice was flat. His once-gentle eyes, blank and empty.

"It *doesn't* matter, James. I have you."

"Then, after all, you have nothing. I won't be a bother to you, Vee. Or I'll go away if you prefer."

There was more to it, though not much more. Veronica raged and cried out, but realized that there was no battle James would fight except the one raging inside; his war was not over.

He took up silent residence in the smoking room. He never commented on the house. He never ventured up the stairs, never again into her parlor, and never into the garden. James shopped, once a week, in the village. That was his intercourse with the world. Otherwise, he read books about war. All the wars that had ever been fought. He bashed his head against them, and smoked his cigars to ash.

Veronica too, retreated from the world. She prepared meals, but she and James took them separately, or if together, then in a silence that was not companionable, but blank, and empty like his eyes. Her life had been her house and garden all the time James was gone. It had remained her life from that time to this, with James orbiting like a near planet, caught indifferently in her field of gravity.

Iris wept. All that Mrs. Lake conjured was clearly visible to her, and the child felt the pain of it and the feeling of dread. She squeezed Amanda's hand.

An especially bright light stopped near the bare feet of Veronica Lake. It reflected madly in the moving water of the stream. Mrs. Lake stopped brushing her hair.

"I am ill, Sirvinus," she said.

Iris caught her breath.

"We know," said a small voice.

Amanda squeaked. Iris clapped a hand over her friend's mouth.

The voice had come from the light, and had made it flicker like a colored flame. And now, the little girls made out a form within that flame! Arms and legs, a handsome, impish face, and wings that beat so swiftly they were a blur! Other lights drew near.

"I don't know what to do," said Mrs. Lake. "If James doesn't remember, if he doesn't release me, I won't be able to go home."

Veronica Lake raised her hands and began to separate her hair into sections, preparing to weave the strands into a French braid.

"The children will help you," said Sirvinus from the light.

Now, Iris made a sound.

"The children?" Mrs. Lake turned her head toward the stand of fern that shielded the girls from view.

"These two!" said a chorus of small voices.

Iris and Amanda realized that golden lights had surrounded them, and each light had a visible being within it, like a scarab inside an amber bead.



They could hear the thrum of their faery wings. The louder the thrum, the brighter the light.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Lake, her expression brightening. "Is it Iris? Iris and Amanda?"

"Come out," said the Faeries, pinching gently at the girls, plucking at their hair. "You *are* Iris and Amanda? We know you are!"

The girls stood up on trembling legs. They emerged from behind the fern, herded forward in their long robes to stand with hot faces before Mrs. Lake.

"You know me?"

Mrs. Lake smiled. "Yes, since you first moved in. I've been watching you, and Amanda too."

"You have?"

"It seemed fair, since you were watching me."

Iris blushed to the roots of her hair.

"I'm sorry, I . . . we . . ."

"Don't be sorry," said Mrs. Lake, waving her hand to encompass her garden. "Any child who could resist this, I shouldn't care to know."

"Are you, are you very ill, Mrs. Lake?"

"Yes." Mrs. Lake began to braid her hair again. "Of course people have always said that I was, but for some time now it has been true."

It was strange. Iris could feel no sadness from her about the illness, but there was something else, and it was weighing upon Mrs. Lake.

"My heart is weak. It jumps at me all the time."

As if to emphasize the point, Mrs. Lake's hands dropped into her lap.

"May I braid your hair for you? I've watched how you do it."

"Would you, Iris? My Grandmother Irene used to do my hair, and then I would do hers. It was so much softer than mine, so fine."

Veronica felt completely relaxed with the little girls. She had been aware of Iris from the moment she had first peeked out from behind her bedroom curtains. When Iris had come over the wall, that first time, Veronica had known she was there, crouching behind the berried bush, her breath huffing out in clouds. She had hoped that they

would meet but it was difficult to reach out somehow, even for her. The only human contact she had had in years had been with young Byron Wilkes from the Nursery in the Village, and with the shadow of her husband, James.

"It's silly really. The littlest things tire me. If it weren't for my dear Devas, the garden would have gone to seed and weed by now."

"You do too much," said Sirvinus, and yellow and blue flames burst out around him.

Iris sat on the steps behind Mrs. Lake, and tentatively touched her hair, human, heavy, and thick. It smelled of jasmine, and of citrus. Iris began to braid it.

Mrs. Lake patted the step beside her. Amanda sat down.

"What can we do to help you, Mrs. Lake?" asked Amanda.

"Call me Veronica, or Vee if you like." She closed her eyes as Iris worked on the braid. "How can they help, Sirvinus?"

Sirvinus darted up a little, and back, then said, "They will help us take care of the garden. You must take care of James Lake."

"He doesn't want me to," said Veronica, opening her eyes. "He's forgotten everything."

"He will remember now, if you cultivate him exclusively."

"Tell us what to do, Veronica," said Iris, savoring the name as she finished the braid. Veronica handed her a piece of dried grass to secure the end.

"Yes, please," said Amanda. "We're prepared to do anything."

"Better hurry home for now." Veronica stood and took hold of Iris' hands. "The mockingbird is quiet so it must be very late. Come tomorrow after school." She kissed Iris' forehead and then Amanda's. "Sirvinus will light your way to the wall."

That spring was unusually long in Veronica Lake's garden. It was as if the Faeries and the little girls were staving off summer, then autumn, and then cold winter.



Iris went to Veronica the next day and every day after school. They spent an hour or so in close discussion in the parlor, drawing the many beds of the garden, planning the planting, the pruning, weeding and seeding, feeding and mulching and watering.

Iris met the Devas, the greater and the lesser ones. She learned the beautiful Latin names, *Lavandula Angustifolia*, *Jasminum Officinale*, of the plants they attended, and which offerings were proper to each. Some preferred sweet, and some preferred bitter or salt. Some blew in your ear, and others hid in your hair. Some liked to pinch, and some took bold postures that reminded Iris of Tinkerbell angry with Peter Pan. Others were shy, especially the Orchid Deva who peeped out from behind leaves and a blossom, blinking his long-lashed eyes, wings thrumming like mad.

Iris brought her rosewood box into Veronica's parlor. They read the Tarot and tossed the Chinese coins. They drew hexagrams in the small black book, then referred to the gray text to help them sort out hard questions about the future.

Amanda was often there. The girls learned that the debris of the garden, along with hairs from the silver hairbrush, the kitchen parings, and eggshells, even the tea and coffee grounds, all went into a compost heap. They turned it periodically, with large pitchforks. Beneficent insects inhabited the heap, transforming it into an earthy, sweet-smelling substance that the girls used by the bucket-full and the barrow-full.

Byron Wilkes was 16. He had not breached the wall, but had come knocking at Veronica's gate with deliveries from the Nursery. His father said it was nonsense, but Byron had been bagging and selling the excess compost to certain people, returning the profits to Veronica, since he was 10.

"There's no other compost like it in all of New England," said Byron to Iris. "But, I guess you know that," he said. He smiled at her as shyly as the Orchid Deva. It made something flutter inside

Iris, and when she told Veronica, Veronica smiled and said that if it wasn't indigestion then it might be the beginnings of love.

Iris spied James Lake more than once, looking out from his smoking room, or from the kitchen window. It was not, as she had thought, that he was never around. It was that he holed up in his designated area. If he was surprised at the sudden arrival, and continued presence, of the little girls, he did not feel compelled to let them know of it, or, for that matter, to let them know of anything that concerned himself. His door was always closed when they were inside the house. He was never in evidence except for the lingering scent of his cigars.

Veronica stayed inside more and more. James noted this change to his gathering discomfort. He sensed that something significant was happening, but could not put his finger on what it might be. Vee did not draw attention to herself. Though now, the girl called Iris cooked the meals, left his in the warming oven, and Vee always ate separately with the girl.

Vee had rarely spoken to James through the years, but now she no longer spoke to him at all. She left notes for him, listing the things she needed from the market or from the Wilkes Nursery. Her silence was strangely loud to him. Gradually louder it grew, until it was as clear as the cry of a wounded comrade, but James Lake did not know how to answer.

In the evenings, Vee sat with her long legs up on the couch, a plump pillow behind her back. More than once, glancing toward the parlor from the kitchen, James saw tears slipping silently down her face. He did not want to think about it, as he had ceased to think about everything except senseless death, and hideous death, living death, and ultimate death since his time in the war.

Vee was waiting for something, waiting for something from him. Yet she never asked him for anything, all through that spring and into autumn. Until late one evening, that is. When the air was



abruptly cooler and the trees in her garden were finally bare, and brazenly showing their skeletons to the full moon.

"James?" called Veronica from her sofa in the parlor. "James? Please, will you help me?"

James realized how long it had been since he had heard Vee say his name. It hurt him to hear it. It squeaked in his ear, like an unlubricated hinge.

He limped to the parlor door. He stood at the threshold.

"What is it?" he said, more bluntly even than he had intended.

Vee's hair was loose. James could not remember the last time he had seen it that way. The last time he had brushed it for her, years and years ago, before the gray had crept into it. Everything between them had happened long ago.

"I'm afraid I can't get upstairs tonight without your help, James. I'm sorry to be a bother."

"Are you ill, Vee?"

"Will you help me?"

"Yes," James said, although he did not feel that "yes" in his body, so he moved awkwardly into the room. He had entered the parlor only once before, that first evening, when he had returned home from the war, a lifetime ago.

James stood beside the sofa, looking down rather stupidly at Vee.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I am sorry, James." Veronica looked directly at her husband with her still quite lovely eyes. He noticed that his name had a greater lubricity as he watched Vee's mouth move to form it. "Please, will you lift me and carry me up?"

"Yes. All right. I'll try."

James bent down. His weak leg pained him, but he slipped one hand behind her knees, and the other behind her back. He straightened, lifting her. He felt the warmth, and the weight of her hair. Her scent of jasmine and citrus surrounded him familiarly, twining like a cat around his head. She was light, thin, and long, almost breakable in his arms. It shocked him; then, strangely, it hurt him, and in

a different part of his soul than the part that had been raging all this while. He so clearly remembered, all at once, the first time he had embraced Vee, when they had been young, and absurdly, naively alive. They had kissed, and he had lifted her off her feet. She had been long and light then too, but strong as a bundle of supple reeds. What a beauty she had been in Irene's garden, that lush place, rioting with color and scent. There had been no garden to rival it until Vee and he had transplanted Irene's garden into their own—Vee's own—here, in their home—Vee's home. He had barely had time to appreciate it before he had gone away. James had loved Vee, and the children that they were going to have, but then, never did. And now, Vee was brittle, light in his arms, exactly the way her grandmother, Irene, had been when he had carried her into her Nantucket garden for the very last time . . .

Then, James knew.

He understood.

He looked at Vee's face and saw his wife.

She was smiling. "You remember, James?" She whispered, "My love."

"Yesss." His voice wavered so that the word was barely audible, but for the hiss. Tears spilled from his eyes. They coursed down his face, tracing the livid scar on his cheek. Remembrance, having started, now would never stop. It was sweet, and it was bitter. The husband knew his wife, and that she was bound to him.

"Take me into our garden then?"

"Yes, Vee."

James moved toward the French doors and, opening them, looked out at the garden. The scent of it assaulted him, the moistness, even on this cold autumn night. It was as if there had been a wall inside him, all this time. One over which he might have climbed as easily as the little girls had. He had been in the dark and now he saw the lights. Zipping through the air, they were, wings thrumming, drawing him into the garden, moving toward the hidden gazebo.



There had been a faint memory, half-believed, barely visible to him all these lonely years. Now James remembered the way they had come, legions of them, on the night Irene had died and Veronica had released her, "with love."

"Is it Sirvinus?" James asked, gazing again at his wife's face, remembering.

He had punished himself for the things he had seen and endured. For the things he had done, and had not done, the blood spilled, lives stolen, wasted, but now he knew that he had punished his only love, his wife. He had senselessly punished his Vee and there was only one thing he could do to make up for that, and now it would be so hard to do. So hard that he was faint with pain of knowing it.

"Yes, Sirvinus is here, James. They're all here, and Iris and Amanda and Byron. Will you take me to them, by the stream?"

James and Veronica entered their garden. Something like a song filled the air.

Iris and Amanda never forgot Veronica Lake. Even during college they visited the garden on holidays, and helped James. He lived on for many years, learning joy again in the care of Vee's garden.

Byron Wilkes inherited his father's Nursery. He helped James in the garden and the New Wilkes Nursery contained rare and exquisite flowers, plants renowned for their hardiness and beauty, all thanks to Veronica Lake. His business expanded brilliantly. Iris looked forward to seeing him whenever she was home because it had not been, after all, indigestion.

Amanda married after college and moved to California, but she and Iris were in constant contact, blood-sisters forever.

When James passed away, he left the house and garden to Iris Lessing. She moved into the stone house and was as comfortable in it as if she had lived there her whole life. She married Byron Wilkes soon after, and they had two sons. The rooms Veronica had built for her children were inhabited at last.

Iris and Byron's first granddaughter was named Veronica, and at seven she received, from her grandmother, an extraordinary rosewood box redolent of sandalwood and cedar.

Veronica Wilkes is looking forward to the day when she will have a friend like Amanda Reese, and further into the future, when she will have a seven-year-old granddaughter. Meanwhile she treasures the amber jewelry. She listens to the peacock music box, imitates the three monkeys, and wonders at the Oriental woman commanding the water to rise. She plays with the cedar tea set, and has never lost a piece. She once asked her grandmother to light the least edge of the smudge stick so that she could smell the pleasing odor. She is learning to toss the coins, and tally them, to read I Ching and Tarot.

More than all the rest, Veronica's favorite thing is to loosen the blue corded ribbon, and unroll the handmade parchment while she sits in her grandmother's lap. She admires the leaves and flowers, artfully arranged, and the wording, especially the "blood-crimson" part, while Iris tells her the story yet again. She examines the signatures. The thumbprints that are clear but rust-colored with age. Then, always, and for a very long time, she gazes at the photograph that her grandmother secreted inside the scroll.

It is a photograph, black and white, of her grandmother's garden, taken from a distance, at night. You can see the white gazebo clearly. The stream glitters madly in moonlight and the air glitters too, as if strewn with diamonds.

A white-haired man stands near the stream holding a woman in his arms. Her long hair is loose. It flows over his arm like heavy silk. He is looking at her with love in his goodbye eyes. She is looking back at him, but her eyes are closing, as if she is falling asleep. Small lights, like fireflies, surround them. Thousands of lights, that are streaming up into the night sky trailing a golden thread. It seems to issue from between the faintly smiling, parted lips of the woman.



New Orleans Dreamer

by Maura Gage

Grisgris bags in your pockets,
a copy of Poe's "The Raven" in your hand,
you touch iron gates as you pass
haunted buildings steeped
in plush red wallpapers, velvety soft,
their imprinted textures mesmerizing,
the stairwells covered
in ruby carpeting.

You kiss a photo of Marie Laveau
kept in a locket, delicate antique silver,
as intricate as lace, frost on leaves,
poisonous oleander leaves underfoot,
and read from "The Raven,"
"Nevermore."

Daylight, but it graywashes
the theater of your soul,
celebrates its dramatic delivery,
and you're free to be any player
you long to be; oh, bright star,
city theaters reach for you,
the graceful curve of your cheek
turning quickly its "role" call.

As you paint the sets of your dreams
and bow to Beauty's dancing,
inhale the heaven you charm,
and breathe those dreams into being.



Trying to Explain Who I Am

by Fredrick Zydek

Up among the cross beams and rafters,
families and tribes live out their lives
without us. Barn owls and spiders,
swallows, hives of bees, beam-strolling
mice, tree squirrels and occasional lizards

pursue the meaning of their existence
with no more interest in what we do below
than tree nesters show for the busy lives
of wolves, rabbits, and bears who journey
far below the safety of their airy abodes.

Perhaps we are to them what lobsters
are to dolphins: bottom creatures not worth
much notice in the grand total of things.
We conduct the carryings-on of the world
they seldom view with even vague curiosity.

We are ants tending our cows and little
green gardens, creatures who stir up dust
and flies, dry grass savers, manure pushers,
hoarders of corn and silage, a civilization
of creatures that can grow neither fur

nor feathers. Sometimes I sing to them.
I want those who enjoy loft-living to know
there is music in our speech as well.
Once in a while I give long speeches explaining
who I am. All the creatures but one ignore

me. I might as well be a Jehovah's Witness
trying to account for the rash of earthquakes
the world has seen in the last ten years.
Only the owl refuses to snub me. He doubts
what I claim and continues to ask, "Who?"



suspension of disbelief

by Cole Rachel

it's exhausting pretending these dinosaurs are real, accepting
that volcanoes can happen in our back yards, watching bruce willis throw
himself out of skyscraper windows and allowing him to live. it's tiring
believing in the possibility of identical cousins and bionic women
with perfectly feathered hair, but we must do it

it's a skill best learned early in life, whether it's on the wooden pew
of a country church or in front of a rabbit-eared zenith, sometimes
you have to let yourself be duped, feigning belief
without actually believing, pretending

that they actually will call you tomorrow, that things can't really get any worse,
that the tedium of daily life is more than a carefully orchestrated dance,
designed, choreographed, and computer enhanced to distract us
from the ground we stand on, from the few things in life we think are real

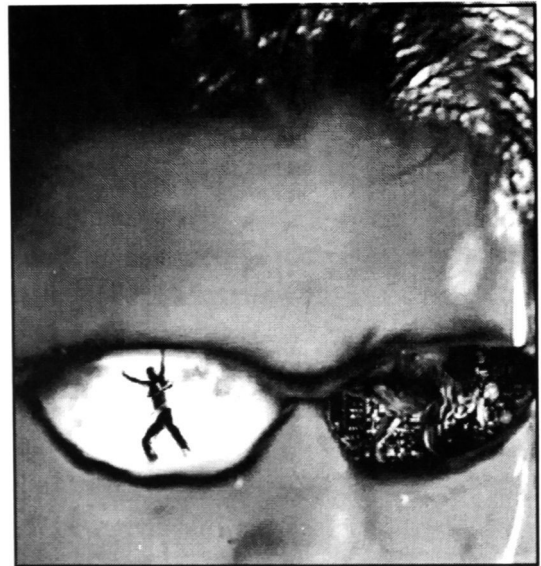


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

Sweet Opium

by Rosary O'Neill

A month after the divorce, my parents shipped me from New Orleans, Louisiana, that pulsating American city, to a remote villa in Pass Christian, Mississippi. For a nineteen-year-old girl with fiery hormones, moving to the country was a quick sort of burial. It was twenty years ago, but every facet of my grandmother's house resounds in my memory—the grand staircase silenced with sapphire and red Orientals, the cold rooms with high ceilings, and the gallery with its windows onto the gray Gulf of Mexico. I still recall the tearoom with its sweet-smelling camellias that made me yearn for sex, and the sounds of the grand piano, with their tinny promise of elegant evenings and attractive men holding me in their arms. Whenever I drive by the house, it beckons me. I want to enter like one who lives there, nonchalantly opening the door to a whiff of cool air, hearing the laughter, the clicking of crystal, and having my charming young uncle beside me.

That day the Greek Revival house, which Grandma'd named Serenity, the antithesis of our family experience, loomed over the drive like a mausoleum. Its inner steel construction defied hurricanes that appeared, wolf-like, in August. Grandma wouldn't let this home blow down like the beach house had in 1969. That collapsed into the waves like a great white cake. Still, how could I survive cocooned here in grandeur with a witch?

The Cadillac stopped and I got out, leaving Greta, my white German Shepherd, in her coffin-like carrier on the back seat. I followed the chauffeur, Clifford, his navy-blue suit offsetting his dark skin, past the police dogs lounging on the gallery. We passed brick walls a foot thick; rockers creaked in the breeze, and windows reflected uneasy trees. For a moment, I thought I spotted my mother in the glass. Mama had said good-bye on this gallery, peremptory against a timeless gray sea. She hugged me, told me we would be together soon, if

only I could visit her in Paris.

Clifford heaved back the steel-reinforced door, which creaked and moaned, then spilled out icy air. He led me to the morning room, aloof in its great swags of dreary green fabric and silk cord. Clifford flicked on an organ lamp, a white globe on a silver stand, and the room's inlaid tables and paintings glowed. As always, the portrait of my mother startled me. She'd just left with her second husband but she seemed lifetimes away.

Now she looked down with soft, doe eyes as if to say hello, girlhood lending a sweetness to her smile. It was a brooding smile, but it carried an edge, something deeper, hidden that I couldn't reach. Her hair, soft and sweet with its hint of magnolias, tumbled against her cheek.

Her hands, decoratively useless, rested on a white puffy-sleeved gown. In the silence she was close, and I could hear her breathing.

I turned, and climbed the cushioned stairs as if Mom were shooing me up, one hand on my shoulder, her voice teasing me. It'd taken her twenty years to rip off that portrait satin and toss her diamonds in a utensil drawer. How long would it take me?

On the hot verandah, I took in the horizon: the grim alley of oaks, their somber limbs forbidding approach. Behind them was the lone highway, and sallow beaches of the Gulf of Mexico.

Clifford released Greta, and the white shepherd lunged about in the garden below, tearing into lilies and decapitating roses before he chained her and took her away. I smoked. I'd started at eleven with Ma's Virginia Slims, imitating her elegant exhaling gestures, some echo of old Bette Davis movies, and wearing her pink lipstick (she'd said red lipstick was for whores). It was hard to think of her and Dad doing it, especially now when they weren't doing it. Once when I'd returned home unexpectedly on holiday, she'd answered the door



completely nude. The confrontation had at least called for red lipstick.

Two cigarettes later, the delicate scent of Chanel invaded the smell of tobacco. I got to my feet, stooped under a parasol to peck my grandmother's cheek, while holding my cigarette back. She was a petite woman with red hair, and the sunlight made it redder. She dipped the parasol against the sun, which caused fine lines to appear on her brow.

"God, it's hot," Irene said, resting on a hip.

"The breeze is nice," I said.

"Breeze? Bah. Beastly weather boils the flesh!"

"As I recall, Uncle Roo bakes in the sun." The parasol shifted ominously, holding back the elements.

I smoked quickly, my lips warming at the thought of seeing Roo. It was good we were related. It effectively stifled my imaginings, my fantasies of a sexual explosion between us. Kissing underwater, or a serial rendezvous at midnight in the guest bedroom. Incest in the South existed against mysteries and mad, sultry landscapes, and the fact that my mother was adopted and I was no blood relation to Uncle Roo didn't stop the guilt. If I didn't meet some young men, I feared I'd take myself to the first gardener I could find. Put down that spade. Spade me, spade me. Even Our Lady, whom the nuns claimed was a virgin, had had Joseph, a carpenter in some way at fifteen. I wanted a boyfriend so bad, I could taste my sweat in the air.

Irene lowered her voice. "We won't discuss this thing."

"What?"

"Thing. The divorce," she whispered. "I don't like that word."

"Divorce happens, Grandma."

"And it's Irene. Call me Irene." Penetrating eyes burned under too-red hair.

I cringed. I hated first-naming someone so old. It felt disrespectful, like a funeral director nicknaming a corpse. If I nicknamed her, it wouldn't

be Irene.

"I don't like the term 'grandmother,'" she continued, straightening her Majorca pearls, which had slid sideways. "But then I don't like 'Bunky' either. Why not call yourself Barbara?"

Bunky was short for Barbara Eunice Legere. I flicked my cigarette at the wide floor planks. "Cute girls always have nicknames, Mama said. She's Kitty, you're Mimi, then there's Aunt Bitsy, Cousin Peaches, Tootsie, Pudding, Patches."

"Well, you're Barbara to me, and I'm Irene, not Mimi." Irene smiled over locked teeth. "Besides, your mother was adopted. Even though she was only one year old, there was always that difference. Adoptees even from birth have a missing . . . link."

I curled my toes in my sneakers. Did I feel I had to be on good terms with Irene, devious as it sounds, because I needed her to get Mom back?

The salt sea air prickled my skin, and I looked out at the Gulf. The wind had picked up and choppy waves rolled toward the beach. My eyes tracked them. For a moment, I was a little girl packing sand into a castle, squishing the crumbs into cone, watching Mama sunbathing on a chaise lounge. Last summer, I'd sat by her and tried to make a sandcastle. "You're too old for such foolishness," she'd said as I scooped out a moat. She'd waved a Tolstoy novel against the breeze and beckoned me to lie by her. Was she lonely then? Had she already given up on Dad?

Later on that day, when Dad came strolling to us, I'd hopped off his beach chair. Dad didn't touch us, just stood for a few seconds before saying he'd be at some woman's house, then he'd walked down the beach. I supposed I could go the rest of my life without talking to my dad. Millions do. Still, sometimes I missed his face. The pale blue eyes that shone through you, the lighthearted laugh, the way he'd pat you on the shoulder and make you feel everything would be fine. Touch was needed. It rattled the heart, filling one with self-worth. I missed the touch.



Irene's skin turned an oily eggshell white. She fussed with the parasol. "I've the schedule for the yacht club dinners, the regattas, and the—"

"I don't know anyone."

"Your uncle wants to take you the first time, Barbara."

My heart quickened. Roo was an artist who preferred linen and champagne to jeans and pretzels. He'd studied at the Philadelphia School of Art and then shocked the family by having a nervous breakdown, refusing to go to architecture school, and painting nudes in the New Orleans French Quarter. I was anxious about being alone with him. This man, whose brush strokes and flourishes captured breasts and thighs. This man, who made sculptures of the women in his paintings so

he could touch every curve in their bodies before he captured their torsos in oil.

Irene glided past me, nodding as Clifford washed the Cadillac. He paused respectfully, the dripping hose loose and familiar in his hand. A Camel cigarette drooped on his lip.

"Cadillacs suit any occasion, wouldn't you say, dear? Weddings, funerals, divorces. What did your mother drive?"

I blinked away sweat. "A yellow sports van."

"A banana truck. Well, now that she's honeymooning all over Paris, she has no need of a car." Irene lifted her nose. She and Mama both had high cheekbones, that was about it. Irene's momentum came through the thinning blood of her ancestors, while insights from her new-age philosophy classes drove my mother. From 4:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m., she'd rise and read Teilhard de Chardin and the metaphysical philosophers, except on Saturday mornings when she'd join Dad and they'd lock his bedroom door. Was it a titular nod to the gods of flesh, or did she repress her appetites all week for that attack? First I thought the locked door meant a business meeting about Dad's investments. He liked to trap us in a room and rant about his successes and failures, his blue eyes flashing. If no one cared about his projects, he'd implode and sit there glum-faced, mumbling or shuffling his contracts like Tarot cards for business success. But Saturdays were different. When I knocked on the door there was a silence, a muffled laugh, and Mama's "Come back later." After several Saturdays, when the pattern continued, I connected the dots. Metaphysical philosophy and the realm of pure form had evolved into simple sweat and rut, the forms entwining across my own rutting mind. How would I know its addictive nature if I never had sex myself?



Photo by Gerald Wheeler

Irene cleared her throat and spoke loudly. "Far be it from me to judge a woman who abandons her husband, daughter, and widowed mother. And your uncle's unreliable. It's good I'm the glue, isn't it?"

"Unreliable?" Did she mean Roo would or wouldn't be coming over?

Irene poked her waist, loosening the brace that constricted her upper torso. Her car had once slammed into a pothole. She'd raced down a bad road for some shady real estate deal. Her back had paid the price. She handed me a card from the French Riviera. "Wish you were here. Love, Mama," it read.

I looked at the emerald-blue water on the card. Did Mama and her new husband stretch out on that beach while she read Ronsard to him? "*Rose elle a vecu comme les roses, l'espace d'un matin.*" Or were they walking hand in hand through some park, smelling but not touching the roses? Mama loved roses. When she'd get a bouquet from Dad after some transgression, she'd smell them all to find the one with the sweetest scent. It would occupy a vase behind the locked bedroom door. Sometimes it would perfume the air for eight days, perched sweetly on a dresser for two Saturdays in a row. Should wives have sex when they feel betrayed? How many times had Mama done it when she was angry? I doubt even she knew. "*Rose elle a vecu comme les roses, l'espace d'un matin.*"

Irene's shrill voice interrupted my thoughts. "Your mother called last night from a Casino. Completely ditty. Thought she'd find you here."

"She did?" My breath raced. "Did she leave a number?"

"No, she and that man are off to London to visit the birth place of the Romantic poets." Her voice faded into the heat.

The Romantic poets. Byron, Shelley, Keats. I thought about that. Better in a pinch than Ronsard. The triumvirate of the period, lighting bonfires in Greece—like that counted. Like that counted any more than Irene's jabbing umbrella.

My eyes lifted to a clump of clouds bumping over the Gulf. Mom had fallen in love with literature when she went back to college, three years ago. She used to recite Byron, Shelley, and Keats at sunset on the beach. She'd hand me a chilled Hershey bar, and always end with her favorite poem about the unfortunate Richard Cory. "Whenever Richard Cory came to town / We people on the pavement smiled at him. / He was dressed from head to crown / Clean shaven and imperially slim And Richard Cory one calm summer night went home and put a bullet through his head."* The bullet passed through Cory's head as the sun went down. It was a ritual for mother and me: end of a life, end of a day. My mother was depressed then, but Grandma had called it "exhaustion," and Uncle Roo and I thought she'd improve if we left her alone.

Does anything improve if you leave it alone? Plants dry up. Animals die. Food rots. If someone's fragile and you confront them, odds are they'll shrivel and not toughen up. Perhaps with touch, just a communing touch, not confrontation, spirits could heal. Back then I had no experience of my words mattering, but I was beginning to feel it important they mattered.

I tossed my cigarette in the gravel. Irene looked at the lighter sagging inside my pocket. The surgeon general had claimed cigarettes cause cancer, but Irene discounted the findings.

"Incidentally," she said, "I think girls look smart with tobacco in their hands, if dressed correctly." She poked her French twist and scrutinized me. "Smoke if you want, but do something about those shredded jeans. You look like the yard boy." Her fist tightened, parasol ready.

We sat on the wrought-iron furniture, me slouching down, she tugging at the brace under her armpit, metal unpleasantly on metal. Her eyes watered over as if she'd remembered a time when girls suffered to look pretty, squeezing into waist cinchers, girdles, and strapless bras for boys in navy blazers and striped silk ties, their privates hung in

*"Richard Cory" by Edwin Arlington Robinson





Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

comfort behind expansive linen and only occasionally contained by a jock strap.

She peered at my t-shirt, damp at the cleavage. “Barbara, aren’t you going to change? Bluebloods dress for dinner. And must you insist on being the ugly duckling?”

I looked away at the sky.

“Duck, duck, gray duck,” she said. “You’ve nice skin, a smooth complexion, and that hair could be attractive if you pinned it up.”

For what? To attract a man and ultimately repress anger under his lunging body, like Mama did? I rose to make a phone call, desperate to talk to someone, anyone, beyond the clumping clouds.

“You’re not calling those Amazons who visited last summer, are you—The ones with the chains and tattoos? Freaks, girls from disturbed families who threw them out?”

A breeze lifted her parasol, and she yanked it down. “None of those young women sent a thank-you. And one of them smoked marijuana. Where did you meet them? In a bar?”

“On the beach. They were nice—”

“Bet they’ve never been inside a place like this.”

“Grandma.”

“It’s Irene! Please. Dear God, don’t refer to me as ‘Grandmother.’ Nor Mimi. You need to make new friends with substantial backgrounds. Plenty of proper girls vacation on the Coast. Attorneys’

and surgeons’ daughters with mothers in the Junior League.”

“Rich girls with nothing to say?”

“Rich girls have rich brothers.” She shut the umbrella with a cunning snap. “Your uncle’s living proof of that. What’s the new girl’s name, ah—”

My pulse tripped. Did Roo have a girlfriend he was serious about? I watched his beguiling paintbrush curly-cue across her breast, white and soft on coarse canvas.

“Be careful whom you associate with, Barbara. You have to be cutthroat. You’re looking for a mate.”

I threw my hands up and left.

In the kitchen, I poured a glass of fruity dinner wine and gulped it, hardly catching the cool sensation in my throat. I knew what Uncle Roo would have done: He would have gone into the bathroom, drowned his feelings under splashes of cold water, and hijacked Irene’s Cadillac to New Orleans.

The scent of crabmeat, pepper, and lemon drifted over, sickening me. I watched as Andrew stirred a pot of gumbo, a thick soup of shrimp and crabmeat. He nodded at the door. “Your grandma been lonely-mean since the old man passed. She mad at your grandpa for dying, at your mama for marrying, and at your dad for losin’ his money.”

Andrew’s wife, Ruthy Mae, a woman of sturdy build, squeezed my upper arm and made a deep-

throated sound. "You done gained weight," she smiled, her eyes falling to my breasts, which had doubled in size that year. "What your uncle going to say about them boobs?"

At 1:00 p.m., Irene and I dined, the only sound the rasp of my ivory-handled fork across the 1813 salad plate. She didn't look me in the eye, but snatched up her napkin and dabbed at her mouth. This cold treatment never bothered Mom, but it made me crazy stupid. Once when Irene brooded, Mom went on for twenty minutes about how to repot a plant. But wasn't silly talk the easy way out? I bit my lip. I've a friend who refused to eat when her mom left. She died of starvation at fourteen. The stuff of Romantic poets.

My eyes fell on Mom's initialed napkin ring. It smelled like lemon silver polish. I couldn't look at it without remembering Mom nervously toying with it, her eyes flitting to her husband, Jamie Ellis, beside her. Irene had given him Dad's monogrammed napkin ring, and when Irene called it to Jamie's attention apologetically, he moved the ring away from his plate. My face went hot. I wanted to say the man's not blind, he's a professor, even though I hated his smart-alecky self, but I said nothing for fear she'd really cut into him.

Irene's eyes watched as I submitted to a teaspoon from each of the sizzling platters Ruthy Mae served: filet mignon, collard greens, stir-fried tomatoes, and buttery corn on the cob. To Irene, eating was an important, a spiritual act. She cut up her steak in cubes, examining, then eating each one thoughtfully. She gave the same care to her tomatoes, rice and corn, adding two more pats of butter to the cob before stabbing in the silver holders. No amount of tension stifled her rapture in butter. In an unpleasant way it was erotic, and it repelled me.

Finally she lined up her knife and fork on the side of the slick plate and pierced her napkin through its large baroque holder. Her eyes were hard over her smile. "We won't discuss your rudeness, my dear. I promised Roo I'd start sweet. And we'll not discuss your refusal to live with your

mother. I don't care for her husband myself. But the," she stammered, her face reddening till she exploded the phrase, "'F' report card! From Grand Coteau! It's disgraced the family." She frowned, communing over cutlery, artifacts of pomp. "I hid it in my file drawer of volunteer activities under F."

A piece of steak caught in my throat, the pepper making me gag. Why had they sent that report here? I told them to send it to Dad. I was fighting for air. I was thirteen years old, being tutored and hugged by Mama, then I'm waiting up for her while she studied at the library, watching out for her as she lumbered up the dark gallery with all her books, making sure a mugger didn't pounce on her scattered self. Pepper teared my eyes. Again I felt Mom's hand on my shoulder and her lilting voice. "You should be in bed. Did you do your homework?" Yes, I'd lied. It made her feel better. "Any papers for me to sign?" she asked. I said no because I'd already forged her signature. Nights I couldn't sleep, worrying about Mom and sensing her misery. She managed to dodge Dad's biting comments, which intensified like a Gulf downpour. I kept inviting her to come read with me in my room like the old days. "I have to study at the library," she'd say while running off. "Come with me. If you get tired, I'll find a friend to drive you home." My stomach clenched. I didn't want to be passed back and forth between students like some useless appendage. Why did I feel this need to get to know Mom, at a time when most adolescents sealed themselves off? Was it her philosophy, her melancholy or her beauty? Those doe eyes and that quivering smile, the high cheekbones that enticed conversation and long looks that made me think of locked doors?

I chewed on the spicy steak, grinding it to shreds.

In class, I kept dozing off and picking seats closer and closer to the back. I and this other girl, whose mother had died of cancer and whose dad had run off, developed a closeness in our side-by-



side chairs pressed into the cement wall. We'd poke each other when the teacher neared and pass answers on gum wrappers, answers invariably wrong. I cut off more steak, chewing at memory's gristle.

How Mama groaned when she got my F report card last year. She had taken me to counselors and therapists and bought me a thousand-dollar desk and a cushioned chair. I wished I could have told Mama about how much TV I really watched, but then she might have taken the remote-control color TV out of my room, and I counted on those late-late shows to put me to sleep. Fade out to the toe-tapping of Ginger Rogers, or the comedic antics of Lombard. The old stories promised satisfying endings and safe topics. A husband pined for his lost wife and neighbors and relatives rushed to his side. When someone died, men wore black armbands and women clad themselves in black for months. People were valued and missed. Irene flicked the report card like a fan. The musty smell of stale air conditioner came over me. My ears flashed hot red, and my stomach crunched as I cautiously took the report card from her. I walked to a window. Outside a palm tree wafted on trailing ragged edges, lush green in the distance. I wanted it to enfold me against its brown gray bark and hide my report card.

F in every subject but comportment—in that I got a C. At least I was polite.

"I don't care about school," I said. "Uptight bitches. I HATE the stuff we got to do."

Irene waited for me to get control, then led me downstairs, her heels striking the polished blonde floor. "This is hard exercise," she said mildly. "I've no muscles in these calves. But I'm not using that elevator Roo made me install. Box myself up like King Tut. The heart specialist's a quack."

As we entered my new quarters, I was assaulted by the smell of camphor and dried roses. Blinds drawn, Mom's room had an early-evening dark so I could barely see the silk bedspread and drapes. I bit skin off my nail. The air smelled of her presence, like Diorissimo perfume and rose powder.

Her colognes and creams were still on the dresser alongside a tray of beach jewelry. The room had been repainted, but a coat of latex couldn't cover up Mom's warm, sometimes cloying, sweet scent. It was like a spoor and I could track her. She'd left quietly in a limousine after that distasteful dinner that began with the napkin ring episode and ended with Irene addressing Jamie by Dad's name. The maid who packed Mom's bags said she looked peaceful, as if the idea of leaving had come suddenly and without much regret. That would figure. Shelley all the way. She wore a lemon-yellow suit and left me a note with a rose, a red beauty, tied in blue, damp with dew, and sweet-smelling, not unlike the "Apology" flowers Dad had sent. "Need some time with my new husband. Hope you understand."

I looked about. "Mom's old room used to be sky-blue," I said.

Irene raised her hand with its butterball diamond. "Blue's the color of distance."

I searched the closet for Mom's straw beach hat with the black streamers that would fall to her waist, and her peach lingerie—beautiful, serene gowns that flattered her long legs.

"Where are her clothes? You didn't throw them out?"

Irene frowned. She didn't say anything.

"Why?" I wanted something to hit. I wanted to die. "Oh my God. I can't believe you did that. She's coming back. You threw her stuff out deliberately to—"

Irene's violet eyes turned murky, like she was hurt. "I suppose I can have my house the way I want it," she said.

I spun about the room, checking the drawers.

"Your mother didn't need all this—"

Crazy bitch. I glared at her. I wanted to kill her. I darted ahead to the dressing room. I felt like the watchdog for Mama, the way my white shepherd watched out for me. I was guarding her stuff. Making sure it wasn't thrown out. The lovely pink nook with French provincial furniture that was



Mom's dressing room had been filled with a Chesterfield sofa from Grandpa's office, ponderous drapes, and a bearskin rug. My heart was beating so fast I could see tiny white specks before my eyes.

"I had to put his stuff somewhere," Irene excused. "Maybe Roo will want it."

"But why? Why in here? Why did you put it in here!"

She took my elbow and smiled with her small white teeth as she gestured to a wall. "Look what I retrieved from the attic. Diplomas stretching back a century. My mother's, grandmother's, and mine. All valedictorians at Ursuline." She squeezed my upper arm like Ruthy Mae did, but without the warmth. "It's because of me they kept you at Ursuline—did you know that? And now I can't set foot at that school. But people don't offer me condolences. Like they're embarrassed you're my niece." (She wouldn't use the word grandchild.)

"I'm sorry," I said, imploding around my driving blood, diminishing myself and my righteous anger as I saw what was coming. She was staring at those diplomas. I tried to look away.

"Do you know the sacrifice involved for those grades? Fifteen minutes of recreation after school. Not one missed day of classes. Even when I had the mumps and one hundred and four degrees of fever, Mama smothered my face with powder and sent me to school."

"She was insane," I said, seeing myself alone in my parents' house, watching Lucille Ball stuff down chocolates from a conveyer belt.

"She was ambitious."

I didn't want to stand there and hear Irene berate me. I turned to go, but she clutched my shoulder, steering me to the wall where a tube light flashed on the *summa cum laude* on her Newcomb College diploma. Irene nodded toward a shadow box of tarnished gold medals. We viewed it in silence like visitors at a casket. "Read the inscriptions," she said. "First place, highest honors, distinction. You come from a line of scholars. Why

can't you succeed, are you a moron?"

I felt like I wasn't in my body as I looked down. "I try," I said gnawing on the words, "but I can't figure what the teachers want." I was standing there and the shame of being a loser hit me hard, so I started out.

"Don't leave when I'm talking to you," she said.

I stood. I didn't tell Irene I didn't read most assignments and for me reading was hard work. Since I stopped reading three years ago, it'd become harder and harder to open a book. I was going to school on time till they cancelled it. Mama started driving car pools, getting to school late, and quickly succumbed to buying me a blue Cherokee jeep for my sixteenth birthday. Then she never knew what time I got to school. I never made trouble so the teachers went along with my excuses, or they tried to call Dad at work (I left his number because I knew he never came to the phone).

"Don't worry," Irene said, her face flushed. She stood, boney and old. "I've a trip for coming."

A tutor. I don't think so. I started to tell her don't do that, but my head was spinning. I hated myself for being dumb, when actually I was smart. I'd figured out how to get by with the least amount of effort. "I'm on vacation," I said, turning for the door.

"There's no vacation till you're head of the class." She pulled down her back brace. "I've enrolled you in Saint Joseph's Academy here on the coast and withdrawn you from Ursuline."

"What? No. I'm not changing schools." My eyes went red. The walls banged in on me. She'd destroyed my life without consulting me. My head burned, my chest caving in. I liked Ursuline, even though I rarely opened a book. I'd been there since I failed out of Newman School, then Sacred Heart. The dimly lit halls of the oldest Catholic girls' school comforted me. The Ursulines had spoken French, been dedicated to saving girls, and their august order needed local recruits. Two of the five remaining nuns were in wheelchairs, one was on a



cane. Teachers indulged me, allowing me to sleep in class and slip off to the infirmary whenever I wanted, since I was so polite.

"I'm going to learn," I said. "I'll catch up. Don't make me switch."

The hand was blue-veined and tired. "Get a hold of yourself. I'm not through with you."

Panic. I had to get out of there. I'd been through with Irene since I first saw she was a lonely mean bitch, long before Andrew said it. I felt like crying, but I didn't want her to see me as weak. Mama said when you feel yourself breaking, leave. Go outside, get away from the pressure, whatever it was. Some people can suffocate you. Get out, smell the breeze. Inhale the sky, taste the heavy humid air. My head was throbbing as I ducked outside. Fantail pigeons scattered dust and feathers. A peacock squawked, clawed at the earth on curling toes, then trotted off. Nobody needed me or wanted me. I was some trophy child to fill up an afternoon's conversation. Who are the icons of America? Marilyn Monroe? Jackie Kennedy? But wasn't it Jackie's pink suit, the pillbox hat, and her thick hair that we admired, more than her degree in art? I wasn't dumb. I just didn't see the point of studying. Uncle Roo didn't either. I mean, did he go to

architecture school or did he start painting in the Quarter?

I hurried by the oak tree where Irene said every valedictorian had stood down the century. I could see them, parasoled and diplomaed and smug. My head was churning. I felt ashamed. My mind sought escape from Mom and Dad. Mom so disappointed with those report cards, getting me tested for reading disorders, stupidly believing that I was trying. Dad kicking Greta's white haunches when Mom accused him of two-timing her. What had he done to Mama behind those Saturday morning doors? Taken her innermost self and found it insufficient, or used his knowledge of her to procure wilder pleasures with women from his office?

I passed the crusted statue of Venus guarding the reflecting pool. It was Roo, not the futility of study, that pushed aside Mom and Dad. I'd once spotted Roo swimming there naked. It was months before I could get the sight of his body from my mind. What would it be like to draw that torso down over me, and run my fingers down that back? I told myself not to enjoy the fiery sensation. I felt down my arms whenever I thought of him. I put a hand over an eye to hold back the dryness in my throat. Still the thoughts of touching his skin

wouldn't leave. Nights, my sheets were sweet with the shadow of him in bed with me, his imagined body now real, then the darkness that overcame me and the musty smell of ripened camellias whenever I imagined him by me. Sometimes I'd have to lock my knees together and take one of Irene's sleeping pills to throw off the fantasy. God, he was eleven years older than I, so experienced, and my uncle in name if not by kin. Branches snatched at me as I squeezed by oleander bushes, drooping elephant ears, and azaleas expos-



Photo by Chad Martin



ing their purple blossoms to the sun. What could I do to stop the trembling inside me whenever I thought about him? To make this feeling of ecstatic lovingness pass? I broke through pathways drooping with camellias, their soft skins slipping to the ground, and the delicate sweet roses of summer. Wisteria vines trembled.

The lapping of waves got louder. Roo loved the water too. He said it talked to him while he painted and said different things at different times of the day. Some mornings it said, "Tell me how warm you wish the tide to be?" Afternoons, "Now the sun's going to burn you, but remember it'll only

be that way for a little while." Nights, it said, "Don't forget how cool I feel when you close your eyes." Roo felt the primary sense for a painter was touch. Did he ever think about touching me, my face, my body? Had he noticed my long legs growing or the size of my breasts? Would his paintbrush ever find them? I crept over haphazard paths made slippery by the moss and ducked under waxy magnolias, their leaves shining like patent leather, forming an umbrella against the sky. I told myself it was okay to think about sex with Roo as long as I remained completely celibate. Once I'd found his T-shirt in the washer and I was so happy to wash it by hand,

but not before I had smelled it, explored it. I let it dry in my closet, and looked at it for two weeks.

A wet breeze hit my cheeks when I reached the family pier, which stretched one hundred feet into the depths. I slung back the fan gate, and stepped onto the slick walkway. Gulls lining the railings screeched and fluttered off into the first darkening of sky. The pungent smell of a storm was there. No one was about. Only a shrimp boat tossed on the water a ways out.

Mom pushed her way back in, and I imagined her on her Sunfish, sailing alone in the deep, spongy, greenish-brown water. Wind splayed through her hair and curled up her neck. Mom liked to sail in the moonlight. Once she told me all the babies that are to be born are represented in the moon as little stars. The moon has a menstrual cycle, and the stars are moon blood.

Waves crashed, churned, and pounded the pilings. In the firmament were convulsing images of Mama in Paris, of Daddy screwing a red-lipped whore. Then Mama was deep in the



Photo (detail) by Carlos Gauna

sea like an angel floating down, down, and I couldn't see far enough. I was dizzy with these wild voices in the crashing sea. I needed to jump, the voices said. Go somewhere where I'd never have to come back, they said. Waves roared, and the water sucked and slashed, a gray foaming all around. I spread my arms for a swan dive. I wasn't hearing anything then, not the rattling of the pier or the shriek of the gulls, I was just calling out Mama! Mama!

Clifford reached my side and yanked me with a thud onto the pier. His strong brown fingers clawed my arm. I tried to break free but he held me firm. Clifford was tall and weighed two hundred pounds. I found him disrespectful in his old shirt and dungarees. Chauffeurs were to be respectful. Why was he interfering? My pulse raced.

"Go away," I hollered, hunching my shoulders forward.

He touched my forehead, his hand smelling of fresh-cut grass. He put his hand on my shoulder. I jerked away.

"What were you doing," he said. "Huh?"

"Killing myself." I broke free, breathing quick. He caught up with me.

"Killing yourself, what you want to do that for?"

My head was spinning hotter and hotter.

"Talk to me," Clifford said, "when that bad feeling hits. Don't do no fool thing like killing yourself."

My stomach squeezed. I couldn't keep dealing with so many stifling people. I looked into the waves pounding below. Mama was deep and gone.

"Nobody gets the life he wants," Clifford shouted over the rising wind. Again my stomach churned. My head went fuzzy. I was sick and disgusted. Weren't people supposed to make sense? Were demands the only love to be had with family?

"Don't pay your grandma no mind. A few months and your mom be back." Gulls peeled and circled, stark white against black clouds. "Won't

be bad," Cliff said, heading me to the pier house, his hand like a warm pad on my shoulder. "Plenty girls like to live here. Go to the show, get their hair fixed." Clifford slipped me a Camel. My hand shook. "Your grandma expect a lot. You the only grandchild."

"Less Mama and Jamie have a boy?" I inhaled, letting the sour tobacco warm my mouth.

"Don't upset yourself." He tugged out a radio from his dungarees. A gospel music station played a song about Jesus' angels. We paused by the railing a moment, and Clifford began to sing. "And he will raise you up," Cliff sang, "on angel's wings." His rough voice rolled into the wind, rhythms blending with the salt sea breeze. I always felt I loved black people more than white ones, because they'd suffered so much their souls were finer.

My breathing slowed and I took in a translucent cloud. As in all the lonely summers on the Gulf, Clifford comforted me. He said Irene sent gumbo to his mom every day that last year she'd had cancer, and no one would watch out for me as Irene would. "She take care of a lot of us," he said.

"How?" I was in control now, holding back sea and sky.

Clifford pulled at his shirt. "She paying for my daughter Clotille's veterinary school at Mississippi State. Up in Starkville. She'll help me go to Loyola's School for Ministry soon as Clotille graduates." He pulled a frayed book out his pocket. "I'm learning a page each week of this here dictionary, to prepare myself. So far I'm up to 'dent—a bend in an object.' Want to see?"

We sat on the pier, going over new words. I settled around common words, noting how they echoed and flattened on the wind. I felt good about myself when I was with him. A seagull beat overhead. A tang of fish, then I nestled into the wooden bench. I looked back. Beyond me, Serenity dissolved into an endless stretch of shells, oaks, and pine trees. Further on were more beach houses, and beyond them, a pregnant gray sky.



The Uses of Enchantment

by Bruce McCandless III

In December you finally get the divorce.
The world is gray, maybe fifty degrees,
not a single leaf to be found on the trees—
a stone tableau of your own bland remorse.
Through armored doors and an electronic screen
you make your way to Judge Covington's court:
today she'll preside over those of your sort.
You worry mostly that you'll cause a scene.
The judge asks questions. Who knows what they are.
Your last several answers are meaningless sounds.
The court reporter, embarrassed, looks down.
The good judge offers to call you a car.
There's really no way to soft-pedal the case
or to wish yourself anywhere else but this place.



Found on Kodiak

by Ken Waldman

Atop a Middle Bay ridge,
violet twilight, west peaks
no longer shiny—time
I decided. Some options: North
to shore, a haven of sand
and rock by bay; further north
to town, lights, a ferry
due tomorrow; west
to campsite that promises
fire, food, a tentative partner-
ship with birds; further west
to mountains, now haloed
by wisps. Tired, hungry,
I knew I no longer knew—
and would never know—where
I stood. I only knew this:
surrender. What relief
to know deliverance neared
no matter what direction
next. I unzipped my pack,
found the water, drank
the last. Recapping
the bottle, I watched
clouds crown darkening peaks
far west. I began hiking
that way, happy, alive
having chosen for the night.
Sometime soon I'll reach camp.
When flames catch I'll sing.

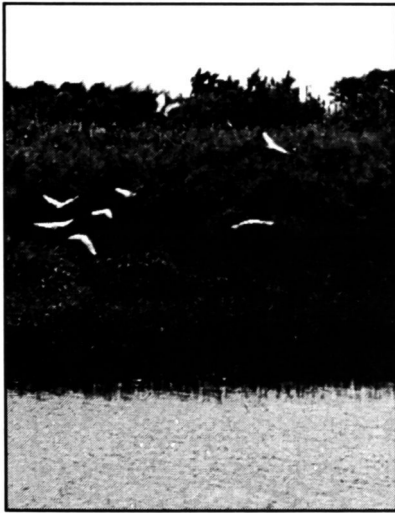


Photo by Alanna Bradley



Alone in the Universe

by Dan MacLean

It sounded innocent enough: "A lecture on the Origin of the Universe," the brochure said. It was to be given by a professor from the Department of Astronomy at the University of Chicago. I'd always wondered where the universe came from, so I signed up.

The hall was a third full when I arrived, and I instinctively sat in the back to avoid being called on. I didn't want to appear ignorant about a place I'd been living all my life. As I sat there watching the room fill to capacity, I noticed that the seats filled in mainly from the back forward. It appeared I wasn't the only one who wanted to avoid embarrassment.

Despite this, I could sense an air of anticipation and excitement in the room. We were at last going to learn one of the mysteries of our existence: Where did we come from? And more importantly: Were we alone?

The occasion moved me to write a few lines of verse on the back of my program, a commemoration of sorts. I entitled it: The Universe.

Where did we all come from?
Where are we all going?
It really doesn't matter
If the winds of time are blowing.
Or we leave here in a limousine,
Mercedes, Ford or hearse.
The answer's here for all of us
The U - N - I - V - Erse

At the final stroke of my pen, the house lights dimmed and the professor began his talk. He was my age, fiftyish, with a style that simultaneously exuded tremendous confidence and massive insecurity in the same breath. And no wonder; here was a person who had spent his entire professional life studying the first one one-thousandth of a second after the big bang.

On one hand, how can anyone know anything about the first one one-thousandth of a second of

anything, especially something that happened before your great-grandparents were out of diapers? And, if you did know something, who's going to argue with you?

On the other hand, maybe it wasn't so hard to know everything about such a tiny speck of eternity. Maybe there was some trick to it like one of those brainteasers where you wrack yourself for hours only to find the answer right in front of your nose. Maybe the insecurity came from him not wanting us to find out he'd staked his career on a trick.

Sensing, I'm sure, the same questions in all of us, the professor began by explaining exactly how you do study such things. There were no shortcuts, no mind games. This stuff was mega-difficult. At first, I got the drift of what he was saying, but soon my brain began to access fading screens from high school chemistry and physics: How do particles interact? Can I feel the solar wind? What are the properties of boron anyway? It was stuff I thought I'd never need, and now found myself try-



Photo by Joel Kendall



ing to call up, like some rich uncle I hadn't spoken to in years, and asking for a loan.

Aha! I thought, suddenly lifted from the mire of the periodic table. There is something I understand. His visuals. His visual aids were spectacular, not the computer-generated ones, the charts and tables that told us he was an old friend with his mouse and keyboard, but rather the ones he had drawn by hand. He'd used a wide range of colors to create planetary and cosmic formations on transparencies and flip charts. The colors, combined with his artwork, gave each visual the impact of a comic-book cover. I was mega-impressed.

I wanted to know where he got his markers. I knew from years of my own business presentations that most markers don't stick to transparencies, and those that do tend to be in a limited range of four or five colors. The professor was using dozens. I had to know his source.

At the end of his talk, the professor invited questions from the audience. I raised my hand and waited patiently until the professor turned in my direction. I assumed it was my turn, although a boy of about twelve stood in front of me. I'd guessed that he was with one of the adults and didn't figure he'd have a question. The professor thought otherwise. "Yes, son," he said, "was there something on your mind?" There was.

"I've been thinking a lot about the origin of the universe myself," he said.

Oh really, I thought. I looked at the boy more closely. He was wearing a white shirt and horn-rimmed glasses. He was overweight. There didn't appear to be a pencil-protector in his shirt pocket, but there should have been. He was a replica of the kid who sat in front of me in eighth-grade science; the kid who kept his mouth shut until he could utter something really smart; something that sounded as if it had been written for him by an adult. "... and I've been developing my own origin theory over the past several years," he said, arms folded across his chest, eyes narrowing in deep concentration.

For the past several years, I thought. That would place the origin of this kid's origin theory somewhere around kindergarten, a time when I was trying to develop a theory to explain who painted that big circle on the floor.

"And I'd like to know what you think," he went on, not the least constrained by the possibility he was about to attack the life's work of a man five times his age, with a brain that had yet to deal with the problem of how to get a date for the junior prom.

"My theory holds that the origin of the universe has more to do with the singularity of black holes and their propensity to warp both time and space amid conditions approaching a vacuum at absolute zero . . . blah, blah, blah, blah . . ."

He continued, but my brain blew a fuel cell on "singularity," and I was stuck on the launching pad as the kid's discourse disappeared into lunar orbit.

Where'd he come up with this stuff? I asked myself. Then a more troubling question arose. What am I going to say when the kid is done? Am I supposed to follow up on the "singularity of black holes," or "warp time," or "a vacuum at absolute zero," with "Where did you get your markers?"

I considered passing. I could say the kid asked the question I was going to ask, but dismissed that idea because it could invite further questions of me. I panicked. The kid was done. The professor had practically guaranteed him a scholarship to the University of Chicago, and there I stood with the only question that made any sense to me, about to reveal the vacuum in my head in front of this kid and everyone else. I imagined the laughter echoing off Pluto.

The professor turned to me. "Yes," he said. I stood there feeling like a refugee from a place where they put all the planets nobody wants. I was praying for a black hole to warp time and space and get me out of there.

One thing I'd learned for sure. In this universe, I was completely alone.



These Hands

by Joann Gardner

That's what it comes down to
at the end of the day, at the end
of my arms—these hands,
this particular collection of wrinkles
and pads, a map of my beginning
and my end.

No matter where I take them,
into my lap, like cones, or into my
pockets, the burden of twin stones,
feeling the heft there, the rounded
granite peaks.

Not my father's giant hands
that learned the power of gentleness,
nor my mother's married hands,
calm, but for the twitch and flick
at invisible crumbs,

but the long brittle fingers
and delicate veins of my grandmother
who wept, not remembering, then
remembering her loss. These hands
haunt me, make me anxious for work,

to reach into the heart of things,
to touch what matters, before bracing
and then learning to let go.



Shallow River

by Jack Rickard

slides three fingers deep
past fence post armies,
shelter belt encampments,
and the Union soldier on Walnut Hill,

bronze rifle at the ready,
marching towards Chickamauga.
Ebbs by spotted cows
standing udder deep
in cool water respite,

past the flour mill,
pigeons frozen in flight
over the broken truck
sitting idle on the drive,
still waiting for harvest.

Drifts by Harry Floyd's house,
home from the war,
where they took away his gun,
gave him a shovel
when they saw the color of his skin.

Bubbles around the court house
where in the basement, Blind Dan,
tuner of pianos, sits
with his embroidery,
stitching detail he will never see.

Slips by Sheriff Hawkins' house,
where upstairs behind closed blinds,
his daughter stands before the mirror,
feeling for new elevations.

Glides past Cat-tails blowing
puffs of seeds into the current,
to be reborn downstream
alongside cottonwood Sivas,

arms praying for rain.
Carries tired promises
on paper boats, far out to sea.

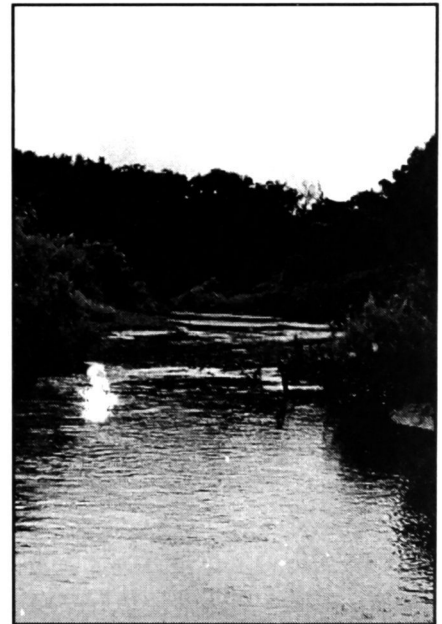


Photo by Chad Martin



Cowboy Etiquette

by Richard Hathcock

"A real cowhand don't look like no daisy, an' if you sidled up to him after he's spent a day in the heat and the dust brandin' cattle, his hide soakin' up the smoke from the irons, the stench of burnin' hair and the blood of the calves' ears, he's likely to git considerably whiffy on the lee side."

Old Shorty . . . that's the only name he was knowed by at the RAIL X Ranch near Patagonia, Arizona, was fillin' me in on range life as he had lived it for three-score-and-some years since he was a orphan kid back in Pawnee, Oklahoma.

I was at the ranch filming a roundup movie for the TV show *I Search For Adventure*.

"Jist follow him around for a day or two an' you'll know he ain't attendin' no ladies' finishin' school," he added.

We sat in the shade in the big corral, smokin' 'ready-mades' of moldy Bull Durham which he carried in a little sack in his shirt pocket.

The Arizona sun was a white-hot beacon overhead an' we were takin' "five" to recoup from the mornin's butt-bustin' activities.

A couple of other old wranglers strolled over and eased their weary bones down beside us. These gents were pushin' sixty, sixty—five, an' they, too, had been in the 'cattle business' all their lives.

Lefty was born and raised in Salina, Kansas, an' "T.R." hailed from a farm down near McAlister, Oklahoma.

Neither one of them was knowed by a last name.

"Social pedigree don't carry no weight with cattle tramps," Lefty explained casually.

"An', if you been wonderin', we DO dress up ever now an' then," Shorty interjected. "'Course we don't git all duded up in fancy riggin' like most of the stall-fed tenderfoots who come here to the ranch on vacation.

"They's one dude here now . . . saw him yesterday, dressed up in them heavy, hairy chaps that

made him walk like a man with a new set of wool underwear. He strutted around like he thought he was Gary Cooper. I dang near died laughin'!"

Shorty cut in: "My old man, who spent some time on the old cattle trails, used to tell me all 'bout the dudes he met on the drives . . . put their wages on their backs.

"After payday, by the time they got through addin' fancy doodads to their wardrobe, they could count their coins without takin' 'em from their pockets.

'Course when one of them dudes got all spraddled out in his low-necked clothes and went swallow-forkin' to town, y'u can jes bet his fancy trimmin' wasn't all that he was thinkin' 'bout."

"Yeah," Lefty nodded, "One of the things he was thinkin' 'bout was rattlin' his hocks for a barber shop where he could soak his bones in a tub of hot water with some sweet smellin' soap.

"For a couple months on the trail ever time he found a water hole he took a cold plunge without soap 'n towels, an' he let his underriggin' dry on a creasote bush while he was splashin' 'round.

He jest kept as clean as conditions allowed."

Out on the range, haircuts didn't bother old—time punchers much, T.R. added. "They jes' let her grow till they got to town.

'Course, if his hair started to grow down his back, or clogged up his ears, he got some other cowboy to haul out the shears an' gather his wool crop."

The "Indian haircut" was the only one the old puncher was shy about, T.R. laughed.

This called for a certain amount of "raw hide," and "no cowboy wanted to think about his hair hangin' from an Indian's belt."

That wasn't the kind of "barbarin'" he was interested in.

"They let their whiskers grow to protect their face from the wind an' the sun . . . except if they





Photo by Gerald Wheeler

was goin' somewhere to see some "nester" filly, or goin' to a stomp. On those occasions, a cowboy'd dig up the outfit's dull razor, strop it on a latigo strap an' make a lather out'a laundry soap and Gyp water."

Lefty snorted: "Divorcin' them bristles was 'bout as refreshin' as being burned at the stake, an' when he was through he looked like he'd crawled through a barbed-wire fence."

On roundup, cowboys didn't pack much more'n 'nough extry clothes to dust a fiddle, but these he did try to keep clean.

Ever'time the work slowed a bit he'd boil out his underriggin', his shirts an' his socks, and hang 'em out to dry.

"Them old bronc-bustin, Bull Durham-smokin' cattle hands was creatures of habit," Shorty offered. "First thing he reached for on gittin' up in the mornin' was his hat. After that came his pants an'

boots . . . then he reached for his Bull Durham. After a few drags on a cigarette he hoofed it over to the wash basin.

"That done, he pawed over a towel . . . which judgin' from its complexion, had already been pop'lar."

Shorty talked 'bout his old man who had worked the trail herds goin' up from Texas to Dodge City.

"Pa said range cowpokes seldom wore a coat . . . interfered with ropin' . . . he needed freedom of motion. Always had a vest, though, 'cause it was a storage place for matches, a plug of tobacco an' his sack of makin's, an' that little Bull Durham tag was always a-hangin' outside a pocket, like a cop's badge."

Oh, on the colder ranges the cowhand wore an overcoat in the winter, knee-length, made of heavy canvas, light brown in color an' fleece or blanket lined.

"One other thing the old cowboys insisted on," Lefty told us, "was good gloves. Some cowtown merchant might git by with sellin' him shoddy clothes at big prices, but he'd know better'n to show him anything but the best in gloves.

"If the merchant tried to sell him sheepskin or anything else but genuine buckskin, he'd be called names that's not in your Sunday School books, besides gittin' some free advertisin' that wasn't to his advantage."

A cowboy needed gloves that was not injured by gittin' 'em wet, 'cause stiff gloves interfered with ropin' an' didn't make it any easier to git the right hold mountin' a plugin' hoss.

The ranch cook interrupted our late afternoon soliloquy with the clanging of the dinner bell.

Lefty ambled over to me.

"I hope later to tell y'u about other riggin' cowboys wear, but jes remember when y'u see a workin' cowhand an' he looks like he needs dippin' worse'n his cattle, he enjoys the opportunity of slickin' up an' bein' clean whenever he gits the chance."



Mark's View

by Barry Ballard

Just understanding Twain was difficult
(and it shouldn't have been), but the man seems
at ease in this water, in this routine
sea of shipwrecks wrecking others. He balks
at those porous islands floating like sponges
that soak up the bodies and the rotted
plank, warning me not to read the dead
biographies cast at our feet. He says,

"a man cannot be written," or condoned,
or excused, that we swim in our own deep
waters; and that a soul may or may not
be like the wind, but it's more than what's owned,
more than those buttons and overcoats that speak
in complex meanings all tied up in knots.



H.D.T.: The Holy Man of Walden

by Raymond Farr

Worshipping plainness,
his church his own human nature,
he simplified life,
reduced it to its essential spontaneity,
and tending it, made the most of it.
At night, marking a train's dark passage,
he would pause,
noting also the steel track of his thoughts
which he journaled,
illuminated only by his own mortality
and the reverberations a man's past makes
on his future. And knowing how
"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,"
he counted himself a lucky man,
clearing, planting, writing,
having worked adversity to his own advantage.

His journals hinge on details—
the glint of a flower's physiognomy,
the botany of his own peculiar introspection;
his one subject, his only subject:
our quiet place in the order of things.
For intimate depictions flourished in him,
his Yankee neighbors' *"nutshell of civility"*;
the borrowed axe of his beginning at Walden:
"I returned it sharper than I received it."
If he retreated from them
he also revealed himself to us:
*"I went to the woods because I wished
to live deliberately,
to front the essential facts of life."*
In his nature's curious dishevelment,
he must have walked head down,
aware as anyone.



Tagged and Tamed

by Chad Prevost

The great black wings of condors hover
in hot air pockets above the Colorado River,
isolated scavengers that rise and circle above their prey,

haven't stirred our hearts like eagles.
Not that it's helped the eagles, condensed as they are now
to Eagle Island, offshore Alaska, 30,000 of them,

nor has it helped the white-furred, polar seals
with the curious brown eyes,
poster-children for endangered species,

nor the thinned salmon swimming 1,000 miles upstream
on the Colorado, nor the spotted owls hooting
in the once-dark forests of the Northwest,

nor the big-horned moose in the Northeast,
driven down on the highways by the hundreds each year,
as they push their way further and further north.

Most birds can't help it; they still fly south
out of pure, dumb instinct, thousands of them to Big Bend—
wide open desert and mountain landscape

with the small colorful birds hidden in shrubs.
We tag and tame our twenty condors.
The only way to save them now,

the way we've reduced every wild thing we can get our hands on,
or wrap our arms around, the way our own lives are marked,
while the ghosts of bison still shudder on greasy grass.



There is no end to what we will call progress.
Anything the people are capable of, they will do.
The condors and their great black wings

are flying away, they who have been here 50 million years,
circling higher and higher, out of sight,
far above the omniscient, high-density sodium streetlights

that no one can see above, blotting out the unnecessary stars.
They are waving their slow, dark wings
but not to say goodbye. Circling as they do before a kill

to signal the others for a meal, now they gather to disappear.



Our Place

by John Graves Morris

for Larry Shanahan

Birds with a memory of ports south
squawk as they sit on telephone lines;
we pull into a small Oklahoma town

& joke that the downtown street
will have a four-way blinking
stoplight well past the millennium.

We are driving this afternoon
between two larger cities,
dreaming of a better life.

Something there is has gashed
holes here in the sidewalks & curbs.
In front of a string of faded shops,

fresh leaves on the trees
someone planted in a civic fit
shimmer in afternoon sunlight,

nearly throttled by the Christmas lights
that are left up year-round,
half of which are currently blinking.



Photo (detail) by C. Michael McKinney



We have had a long day of searching
for better landscape, but have found
this highlight reel of the mundane:

the postmaster turning the key
just as the First Baptist churchbell
tolls a stentorian five,

the plastic sign in front of Bill's
advertizing the *third-pound burger*
with two cars in front, one with a flat,

oversize pickups lolling at the Horseshoe Tavern,
where the longneck beer is always cold
& every hour is happy hour,

music leaking out the tavern door
as a man in coveralls walks by, shaking
his head at the young man staggering out.

This year rain enough has fallen
for the farmer to imagine a bumper crop;
he glares at the raucous birds

and, running his practiced eyes
over the foreign make of our car,
judiciously takes our measure.

We have driven past lush wheat fields
on a depression-era road with no shoulders
only to find our place among the stars.



Love Repossessed

by Ray Johnson

She was not the most important girl in my youth, but she was definitely the first. Her name was Sandra Dawkins and she was spending the summer with my grandmother, who was ill. She was helping out on my grandfather's farm, in Madison County, Arkansas, doing the chores my grandmother normally did. It was my first trip to Arkansas and the first time I had ever seen my grandfather and grandmother, from my father's side. I had seen photos and heard stories, but that was all. It was the summer between the eighth grade and my freshman year in high school.

The farm was far larger than I imagined and the cows and pigs smelled different than they did at the Los Angeles County Fair. We lived in Orange County, but my father took us to the Los Angeles County Fair every year and made a point of touring the animal barns. Horses, pigs, cows, goats, we saw them all. I guess he was preparing my brother and me for that day when we would eventually visit the farm where he grew up.

My grandfather's farm was interesting, but nowhere near as interesting as Sandra. She was sixteen and the only time I had ever been with an older woman was in my dreams. I was mystified by her blossoming bosom and she had a million questions about California.

"Have you ever seen a real movie star?" Just talking about movie stars caused her eyes to grow big.

Obviously I lied. "Sure, lots of times—when we go to Hollywood."

We were only going to be at the farm for three days and time was zipping by like waiting for a root canal appointment with a bad-breath dentist. I didn't know anything about slipping away because I had never had anyone to slip away with. But Sandra seemed to know everything and we ended up in the hayloft. The hay on the barn floor left a lot to be desired, but the hay in the loft smelled

fresh and sweet. I was certain I had died and gone to Heaven.

"You're sure you've seen a real movie star?" she asked as she coyly fingered a button on her blouse.

I told her what she wanted to hear and she taught me what I needed to know. I wasn't exactly sure what we had done, but I knew it was magnificent and I wanted to do it again. I planned on marrying her right then, but my mother stormed up the ladder and caught us before I could ask her. My mother dragged me by the ear to my father, who went through the motions of being furious. We left that very afternoon, headed back to California. I'm sure it was my mother's idea to leave early. My last vision of Sandra was my grandmother swatting at her behind with a broom.

I was a junior in high school when I fell in love again. Her name was Shirley Pharris and her father had the strangest job in town. He traveled throughout the West dismantling old buildings. He would number every board and then haul them back to Knott's Berry Farm. Once there, he would reassemble the buildings. That way every building in the Ghost Town was authentic. In those days Knott's was still a berry farm and not an amusement park. Shirley's father was a tough one and would have tried to kill me if he had ever caught us.

She was more than pretty. She had brown hair and brown eyes and liked to wear beige skirts, the kind with lots of crinoline slips. She would have to hold her slips down when we were riding in my Pontiac or they would rise as high as the dashboard. After a dance or a football game we would go out to Steen's Reservoir to park. Those slips were always a problem. Charley Haas and Jill Foster parked there also, both friends of ours, but we never double dated, for obvious reasons.

"You really do love me, don't you?"



At the moment I actually did love her. As yet I had not connected love with children or mortgages or responsibilities, so I heaved a resounding "Yes."

I had a Pontiac convertible, a black one, with five coats of lacquer. The back seat was not as comfortable as the hay in the loft, but the upholstery didn't stick you or cling to our clothes. It was actually Shirley's younger brother who caught us and related every lurid detail to her mother. He and some of his rat friends were at the reservoir, peeking in car windows. Rather than tell Shirley's father and get me murdered, her mother pointed to the curb and told me to never darken her door again. That was a common admonition in those days, normally reserved for young men with no principles or vacuum cleaner salesmen. I was heartbroken, certain that I would soon die a tragic death.

Fortunately I lived until my senior year. LaVonne Foss was a cheerleader, which gave me some added status. Usually only football players went with cheerleaders and I played basketball. She was the first blond in my life, at least as a girlfriend. She had a famous relative, a governor I think, in any case everyone said he was important. And this would make me important, too, because I was definitely going to marry her.

She had long blond hair and beautiful cheerleader legs, the kind that can kick high after a touch-down. Her family was well off financially and my family's situation seemed to be one of her major concerns. We usually parked on Old Eucalyptus Road after a basketball game or a movie. In the wintertime the windows would get all steamed up and we couldn't even see the towering eucalyptus trees, but we could smell them. The scent reminded me of those amber-colored cough drops that taste so horrible, but work pretty good. Our conversations always seemed to circle around to financial matters.

"You're certain that your parents have money?"

I always lied. "Sure. My father makes me drive this car instead of a Corvette to fool people. He doesn't want me to get kidnapped by some bad

guys who'd hold him up for a big ransom." The story worked and the windows continued to fog.

I thought I was in love before, but this time it was real. I was going to marry LaVonne and get a job as a bag boy at Safeway. By then she'd be in love too and wouldn't care that I wasn't rich, like her dad and uncles.

I devised this flawless plan where we could spend Saturday night together, I mean all night. I asked my father if I could go to the mountains with LaVonne and her parents. They had a cabin at Lake Arrowhead. Her parents were Lutherans and mine were Baptists, but my father agreed anyway.

"What the heck, son, Lutherans are almost Christians. Sure, go ahead."

Now came the slick part. LaVonne asked her parents if she could spend Saturday night with me and my parents at our cabin. Obviously we didn't have a cabin, but who knew. Her father agreed without much of a protest.

"What could possibly go wrong? Those Baptists don't even dance. Sure, go ahead, darling. Just don't let them try to convert you."

We decided to stay in her folk's cabin rather than mine. I convinced her that my father was having our cabin fumigated, for mice. She turned up her nose at the thought of a furry little mouse scurrying across her toes and we went to her parents' cabin. The real estate agent told her parents that their cabin had a marvelous view of the lake. It did, sort of. All we had to do was stand on one of the deck chairs and we could see the far shoreline.

What a night. This time I really was in Heaven. Paradise came to an early end on Sunday morning because we promised our parents that we would be back in time for church. I knew that my brief, but happy, life was over when we pulled up in front of her house. My father's car was waiting for us. I tried to run away, but LaVonne made me go inside with her.

You can imagine the scene. LaVonne's mother was holding back her father, who was menacingly waving a crowbar in my direction. My mother was





Photo (detail) by Chad Martin

screaming at me, something about eternal damnation. My father was shouting about me being on restriction for twelve years, maybe more. Even her dog, a golden retriever named Tad, who was normally rather friendly, was barking at me.

I just barely escaped that nasty crowbar. My mother and LaVonne's mother were shouting at each other and the two fathers were getting ready to fight. I drove away faster than the Lone Ranger chasing an outlaw.

My restriction only lasted four weeks. I think my father shortened it because LaVonne's parents were Lutherans. Love had escaped me again. But I recaptured the little rascal before I graduated.

By now I was becoming more cautious. I met the most beautiful Mexican girl in the entire world, well, at least Orange County, which was my world. It was too dangerous to go into downtown Los Angeles because they shot at people from Orange County. The City of Angels was not named because the residents *act* like angels. It got its name because they *send* people to be with the angels.

Back to Gloria. Her name was Gloria Puentes. Her father was huge, a picking foreman for a big orange packing house, navels in the winter and Valencias in the summer. He ate roofing nails for breakfast and bent horseshoes to calm his nerves. The only thing he hated more than White boys were pickers who tried to claim more boxes than they actually picked. If you picked fourteen boxes and turned in a chit for sixteen, he would smash you twice in the face. If you tried to tell him you picked twenty-two boxes and you only picked nineteen, he would smash you three times in the mouth. One smash for every lie. He refused to learn English, fearing he might actually make a White friend.

Enough about her grumpy father. Gloria was so beautiful that my teeth hurt whenever I thought about her. She had long raven hair, haunting eyes and skin the color of sage honey. This time it was love eternal. We had to be careful because in those days masturbation, interracial dating and bank robbery were all tossed into the same rowboat—hopefully to sink.

We would park up on top of Cowan Heights,

where no one could find us. The view was incredible, if you liked lots of colored lights. Dinah Washington was singing at a Saturday night school dance and I took Gloria. Actually we didn't go inside because Miss Attleburger would have had us arrested, but we did stand outside the back door so we could hear the music. Anyway, after a trip to Cowan Heights I took Gloria home and then went to my house.

Bad news. The preacher's car was parked in front of our place. Maybe somebody died. I went in through the front door, expecting the worst. Things were graver than I thought. Reverend Hawes and his wife were on their knees, along with my father and mother, all praying about some disaster. My brother must have crashed his Ford and finally killed himself. His Ford was chopped, sectioned, channeled and had eleven coats of candy-apple red lacquer, but the brakes were bad. I got down on my knees, sorry that I had not paid him back the five dollars I borrowed last week.

Reverend Hawes looked at me as if he knew about the five dollars and then began praying again. "Lord, forgive this sinner who has flaunted the unnatural."

Naturally I assumed my brother had either died while drinking or dancing, both of which Reverend Hawes considered mortal sins and therefore unnatural.

"Forgive him for disgracing his family and fellow church members by . . ." he paused and again glared at me.

I never thought the five dollars would cause such a ruckus. Sure, I bought beer with it, but how would the preacher know?

"By disobeying your commandments and . . ." again the pause and another withering glower.

The silence was deafening.

"And going steady with a Mexican girl—a Catholic at that, Lord."

Now everyone stared at me. I was trapped like a rat on a sinking ship, with nowhere to hide. My mother began telling me that I was doomed to a

life of tacos and enchiladas, both of which were greasy and fattening. My father began painting graphic pictures of the rundown duplex I'd have to live in because no self-respecting banker would ever allow an interracial couple to purchase a home. To make matters worse, the tumble-down duplex would be south of the railroad tracks, where decent people only went if they wanted to buy oranges by the box.

My father violated my parole and I was again out on restriction, to serve out the remainder of the twelve-year sentence for the LaVonne fiasco. I would have died on restriction if my mother had not talked my father into sending me off to California Baptist College, where everything was illegal. Goodbye Orange County, hello Riverside.

Mothers rarely make mistakes, but mine had made a whopper. California Baptist College did not have their own basketball gymnasium and we had to practice at the local YMCA, which was located in a somewhat suspect area of town, south of the railroad tracks. I noticed there were lots of duplexes in the area that were in serious need of repairs. Anyway, that's where I met Pam.

Pam Henderson was Black and she lived with her grandmother in one of those duplexes near the YMCA. One day her car had a flat and I stopped and put on the spare tire for her. Well, one thing led to another and the next thing I knew I was in love. This time it was real love. She was so beautiful that I stopped dreaming about movie stars and dreamed about her instead. Her skin was the color of hot chocolate and she had a smile that would stop a Spanish fighting bull.

Obviously I couldn't take her to my room in the dorm. California Baptist was so strict that they wouldn't even let us have *National Geographic* magazines in our rooms, for fear of us seeing pictures of nude women in Borneo. Nipples ranked right next to blasphemy and high treason in their eyes. But the Gods of Youthful Liaisons blessed us. Pam's grandmother worked at Riverside County



eyes. But the Gods of Youthful Liaisons blessed us. Pam's grandmother worked at Riverside County Hospital, on swing shift.

Now, curfew was 7 p.m. in the dorms, unless you signed out to go to church. I became the most church-going guy in the whole college. Monday night, Bible study. Tuesday night, choir practice. Wednesday night, mid-week service. Every night I was signed out to some church. I didn't feel guilty about lying on the sign-out sheet because I was in love, true love. Obviously the services I was attending were held at Pam's grandmother's. I was the pastor and she was the choir director. No one could hit a high "C" like she could.

I wasn't as slick as I thought because the dorm master got suspicious when he saw all those church services I was attending and then discovered I was a pre-law major. He nodded slowly and muttered to his weasel assistant, "Somethin's fishy here, Jim Bob. Lawyers never go to church. We best check this out."

Well, we were caught in the act, or close to it anyway. The dean arrived in the college van, along with Pam's grandmother; both shared the same views on interracial marriages. The basketball coach and the college chaplain came in separate cars. It looked like a SWAT team converging on two bank robbers. They probably would have brought the Riverside SWAT team to arrest us if they hadn't been afraid of the adverse publicity, bad for soliciting those precious endowments.

Pam's grandmother shipped her off to Texas, to live with a maiden aunt, and I was restricted to the dorm until I could demonstrate that the sexual demon had been purged from my soul. I moved up to number one on the prayer list, passing R.W. McWorter, who had been caught playing with himself while reading a copy of *National Geographic*, and Chester Dabney, who wrote a term paper questioning original sin.

It took me two years to get off that damn prayer list, at least out of the top ten. That was when I met Hilda. Hilda McCarty. She never so much as spoke

to me until I dropped out of the top ten on the prayer list. She would look at me when we passed in the hallways, but she never said anything. She was the student body vice-president and it was sort of an unwritten rule that class officers couldn't cavort with list sinners. But on Friday, when the top ten list came out and I wasn't on it, her whole attitude changed. Her smile was as coy as a used car salesman trying to unload a lemon.

Being on the prayer list didn't mean that I couldn't play basketball, so that part of my life went on pretty much normal. Hilda suddenly took an interest in basketball. I think she saw me as a fallen sinner, in need of womanly salvation. She was one of those women who feel their mission in life is to save the backslider, to rescue some poor soul and bring him back into the fold, even if he's screaming that he doesn't want to come.

This time I wasn't certain if it was true love or not. But when she asked me to drive her home to Niland Acres to meet her parents, I thought this might be the real thing. Her father owned a service station—in those days they actually serviced your car at the gas station—and was a down-to-earth fellow. He filled up my car with gas and began calling me "son."

Her parents were going to a revival in Ventura and wanted us to go with them, but Hilda told them that we had to study for a big test that was coming up in Old Testament history. The subject was too important to leave unstudied so they agreed to go without us. This left us alone on a Saturday night, a mistake only religious parents would make.

Well, it was magnificent. I had captured true love at last. Afterwards we were sitting in bed, with the lights off because Hilda thought it would be a sin if I actually saw her nude before we were married.

"Darling, our life will be wonderful." She sighed, obviously content.

I couldn't have agreed more.

"I'm so happy that we saved ourselves for each other. Aren't you?"



I wasn't sure exactly what I should say. I was trying to figure out my answer when she pressed the issue, rather vigorously.

"You *did* save yourself for me, right?" The loving tone of her voice had changed a tad.

That was when I made my big mistake. "Well, precious, there *have* been a couple of blips on the radar screen of life." I was certain she would understand, what with me being the captain of the basketball team.

Boy, was I wrong. The dean never actually acknowledged why I was at the top of the prayer list, but rumor had it that I had taken a drink of beer, during an unnatural fit of backsliding. Since I was on shaky ground already, I did nothing to deter that thinking. Well, Hilda could forgive a teensy sip of alcohol, but never the mortal sin.

"Couple?" she blurted, clutching the sheet to her bosom.

I thought she was going to sniffle a little and then forgive me, so I told the truth. "Actually, there were five."

"Five!" She screamed so loud that her dog started barking, a mongrel that was half-collie and

half-St. Bernard. He was a hairy one and snarled like he hadn't bitten anyone all week.

Well, I had a better chance of teaching that dog to speak Spanish than I did of calming her down. She leaped from the bed and ran into the bathroom. The next thing I heard was the shower, going full force.

Obviously she couldn't tell her parents what had happened, so instead she told her dad that I had tried to drink a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer while they were away. You would have thought I'd been accused of white slavery. Her dad stopped calling me "son" and started calling me "you." He informed me that a drunkard could not spend the night under his roof and that I owed him \$4.17 for the gas. Needless to say, it was a lonely trip back to the dorm.

That did it. I swore off looking for love forever. Forever ended when I was stationed at Ft. Stewart, Georgia. I was a second lieutenant in the army. That was when I met Kham, Kham Sivongxay. Her father was a colonel in the Royal Laotian Army and he was attending the torture school at Ft. Stewart. She was the most beautiful girl in Georgia, probably in Laos too.

Her black hair hung clear to her waist and she had almond eyes that could make a Laotian rebel drop his AK-47.

We had to be careful because her father had Americans, especially second lieutenants. He was in charge of interrogating Communist prisoners in Vientiane and would have stuck bamboo slivers under my toenails if he suspected foul play. I thought we were as wary as possible, but I was wrong.

This major, a guy named Wild Bill Grimm, cornered me in the tank motor pool. He was assigned to ASA, Army Security, and I knew I was in big trouble.

"Listen, Lieutenant, I know all

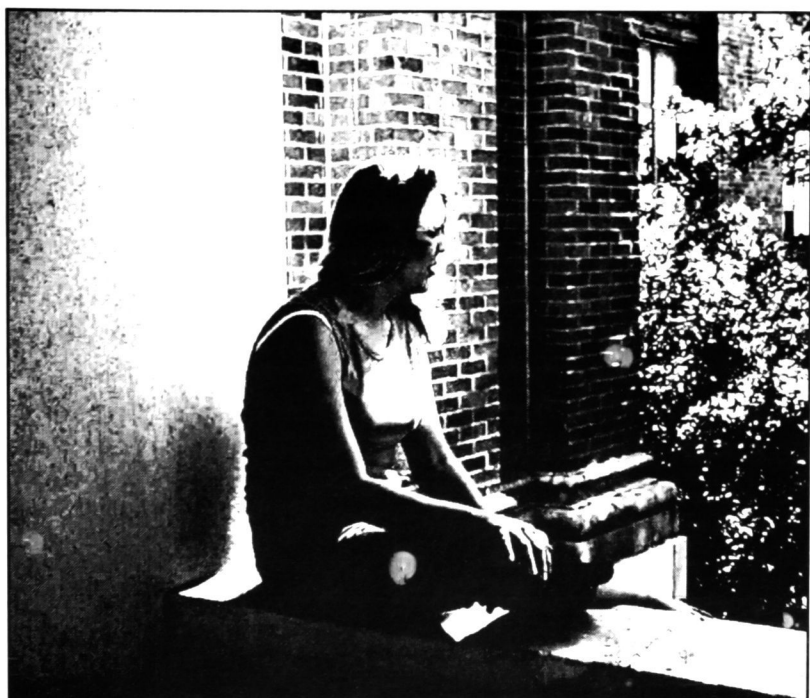


Photo by Alanna Bradley



about your little Viet Cong girlfriend." He blew cigar smoke in my face. Probably a trick he learned at the torture school, which was euphemistically called IIRT, Involuntary Information Retrieval Training.

I respectfully explained that Kham was Laotian, not Vietnamese.

"Hell, son, what difference does that make. Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodian, they all look the same to a Republican congressman. Jesus H. Christ, for all we know she might hate all round-eyes and have a frag grenade in her purse."

Ah . . . sir, her father is a colonel in the RLA. Legally I could take her to the Officer's Club."

"Good God Almighty, son. All you'd have to do is put her in black pajamas and give her one of those goofy saw hats and she'd look just like a VC guerrilla. The wives at the "O" club would be afraid to go to the ladies potty for fear of stepping on a claymore mine or running into a punji stick."

"Sir, she's a loyal . . ."

"Let me put this another way, Lieutenant. If you *don't* stop seeing your commie girlfriend, I'll have your butt shipped off to Korea. You'll be spending your nights up on the DMZ, looking down the barrels of NK regulars. One misstep and you'll find yourself in a Pyongyang prison, eating fish heads and starchy rice."

I knew he was serious because the North Koreans planted Blue Rose rice instead of long grain and it was always starchy. Anyway, the pushy major contacted Kham's father and told him about us. I guess her father almost had a stroke. I found out later that they shipped him back to Laos before he could complete the bomb. They found a diagram of the bachelor officers quarters in his house with a big red "X" marking my room. There were some Laotian words scrawled next to the "X" and I was certain they weren't an Amway order.

My life was devastated. Love had abandoned me and left me with ill fortune as my only companion. I left the army, heartbroken. I planned on joining the

Foreign Legion, to forget, like in those old movies, but I had to give up the idea because I couldn't speak French. Instead I joined law enforcement, perhaps hoping to get shot by a jilted lover.

That was when romance came to my rescue. I was working the San Juan Capistrano car, I had returned to the days of my youth in Orange County, when I met her. Her name was Bola Stanfield and she was the most beautiful woman in Capistrano. She was the reason the swallows came back every year. Her mother was a Mission Indian, with a checkered past, and her father was a German drug dealer. She had the best of both worlds, not the drug dealing part, but appearance-wise. She had dark skin and haunting hazel eyes that bored deep into your soul. By then mine had been bored quite a bit.

I met her while she was double-parked in front of the Father Serra Liquor Store. Rather than write her a ticket, I told her to follow me to the nearest open parking space. How was I to know that her husband was inside the liquor store, holding a gun on the clerks? Anyway, while I was getting to know Bola, this guy comes running out of the liquor store. He's holding a paper bag full of something and looking around frantically, like someone had stolen his car. I could hear him screaming and wildly waving his arms, but I just assumed that he had got some out of date beer and the clerks wouldn't give him a refund.

Well, both clerks came charging out of the liquor store and beat this guy to a pulp. He tried to shoot them, but all he accomplished was getting water in one of the clerk's eyes. Apparently it was a low-budget robbery and he used a water pistol. It was a messy scene. I had my hands full with a double-parker and a bumbling robber. Obviously I had to arrest the husband, who at the time I thought was just some common thug. He kept screaming at Bola in Spanish and threatening to kill me in English. Since he knew her name, she meekly confessed that he was a distant cousin, twice removed. Her explanation caused him to scream even louder.



I didn't find out about the husband bit until the court appearance. You know how crowded the courts are, a case can take forever to get in front of a judge. In the meantime, Bola had moved in with me and I was going to be true to her forever. This was real love at last, passionate, eternal. My plans for everlasting bliss were shattered on the day of the trial.

What a morning. The husband, whose name was Ruhulio, told the judge that I was part of his gang and we had planned the robbery together. Some jail-house snitch had told him that Bola was living with me and he threatened to castrate me as soon as he got out. I guess he changed his mind and accused me of planning the robbery instead. What a mess. Nobody knew what to believe. The judge called Bola to the stand, trying to find out if she was also part of the newly infamous Ruhulio Gang.

"Your Honor, I really don't know either one of the guys too well. My mother was dying of the clap and made me promise to marry Ruhulio—on her deathbed. We never actually lived together."

"What . . . what about the deputy? You were certainly living with him."

Bola looked beautiful. She was wearing this innocent-looking white dress and had a frilly ribbon in her hair. She answered demurely, "Not exactly. I didn't have any money and no place to live and . . ." she paused and sniffled.

The judge ordered gruffly, "Go on."

"He said I could stay with him if I would . . ." she sniffled again, as if ready to burst into tears.

The judge was leaning forward, looking anxious. Everyone in the courtroom cocked their heads toward Bola, waiting for the juicy details.

"Go on. What did he force you to do?"

She whimpered, "He . . . he made me . . ." You could have heard a pin drop. "He made me clean his house—and even do windows."

"No?" The judge was stunned.

"Yes," she nodded convincingly, "even after I told him that I didn't do windows."

Well, it took a team of high-priced lawyers to keep me out of jail. Naturally I had to leave law enforcement. Bola's husband was sent to Folsom Prison for five years and the judge sicced the IRS on me for having a housekeeper and not paying her Social Security tax. Cal OSHA arrived at my door with a search warrant. They wanted to check to see if it was dangerous to stand on a footstool to clean my windows. I tried to explain that the only thing that Bola ever cleaned out was my bank account, but they wouldn't listen.

Sure, there were others. There was Tippy, the topless dancer, but she ran off with the plastic surgeon from Beverly Hills. Then there was Pearl. We met at an AA meeting and went for a drink afterwards. But she left me for that TV evangelist from Mississippi, the one who later got arrested for DWI. I guess the last one was Wanda. She was a barmaid at the Red Dog Saloon, a beer bar on the wrong side of San Bernardino. Things were going great. We used to stop at this donut shop after the bar closed, a place called Donut Delicious. She loved those donut holes, the crumb ones. Anyway, she found out that the Cambodian guy who owned the donut shop was single. She left me faster than a Tijuana taxi speeding through an unmarked intersection.

So here I am in the old folks home. Oh, they call it a fancy name, Rolling Hills Retirement Center, even though the nearest hill is fifteen miles away, but it's still an old folks home. My life is ruined. Love evaded me at every turn and I have nothing left to live for. Here comes that young receptionist. What could she possibly want?

"There's a new lady who just checked in, a widow. Actually she's pretty attractive and very nice. I was wondering if you'd like to show her around?" She motioned toward a woman who was standing in the hallway.

Hmm, she looks pretty good from here, unless my glasses are dirty again. No, she looks real good.



On Karl's Last Day at the GM Plant: A Christmas Gift from the WTO

by John Bradshaw

Winter laughs in his face with biting breath
As slate gray clouds press down upon his shoulders.
His boots crunch through the crust of winter's coldest snow
As his gloved hands slash the air in a struggle for simple balance.

At the bus stop he waits for the welcomed diesel roar
That won't come for a thousand (year-long) heartbeats.
His mouth, a modest steam vent, issues plumes of vapor
That are stolen away by a thirty-knot howl of cold despair.

On *this last day*, he stands shivering in lake-effect misery,
Lost in numb remembering—warm and noisy factory floor,
The hardy raucous laughter borne of deadlines and delays,
Of friends whose bonds of labor stretch across the misting years.

The bus arrives with a squeal of brakes and a woosh of doors,
The driver's voice, wrapped in an old Christmas muffler, whispers "Hi'ya Karl,"
With all the practice of a lifetime of graveside condolences.
Karl nods and finds a seat near another pink-slipped zombie.

And all that Karl can think about, in his last ride to work, is that somewhere in Mexico
Some tired worker will be building *his* cars, using *his* tools,
Wearing *his* GM cap, sweating *his* sweat—
All for a lousy two dollars an hour.



The Badman John Sprockett Explains His Chivalry to Women and His Love of Books: Gold Creek, Colorado Territory, 1871

by Robert Cooperman

In her few free minutes,
Mama'd read me poems,
rhymes sweet as a sugar-tit.
The last time, me fifteen
and strong as railroad ties,
Pa spat she was Devil-spawn,
and laid into her
like a centurion with a whip,

shoved her into the table,
dinner crashing against the walls,
ripped her book's pages
like decks of blushing cards,
then threw it into the hearth,
Mama begging, "God loves beauty."

"Beauty's a sin!" he bellowed,
slapped her so hard she fell
like a galloping mount caught
by a gaping gopher hole.

That's when I hit him
with his Bible, heavy as an anvil:
hit him and hit him and hit him,
till he didn't move.

That night she was fever-took.
She breathed easier to hear me
recite poems like birdsong.
I'm thankful she passed peaceful,
the finest woman to walk this earth.

After I buried her,
left him for the hogs and buzzards,
I saddled his favorite horse
and rode off slow and mean.



The Reverend Thomas Burden Considers His Calling

by Robert Cooperman

As a boy I was called by the Lord
to cry out against all evil nesting
like cottonmouths in a river.
My sermons made grown men weep,
women screech and speak in tongues.
Everyone said I had the power
of the Lord in my voice and eyes.

Now, a viper stings my vitals,
but I can't tell Lavinia
that Mary LaFrance's white breasts
beckon like snow-capped peaks,
promising the sight of God
and all His dancing angels.

Mary longs for San Francisco,
but if we sneak off like Jonah—
swallowed by the whale
of his disobedience—
I'll end up blaming Mary
for my sliding into sin;
she'll grow bitter as Lavinia:
my barren wife spinning webs
of gall beside our unhappy hearth.

No, I'll see Mary when I can,
offer her my hand
if something befalls Lavinia,
though it's a sin even to hope
for her untimely, accidental death.



John Sprockett Recalls a Horrifying Incident from His Years with Raiders in Bloody Kansas

by Robert Cooperman

The farmhouse and barn burned
yellow as Hell-flames.
The farmer and his sons lay dead,
their women staked spread-eagle,
like we was marauding Apaches
and not proud Rebel raiders.

Colonel let the men take turns
on the mother and daughter;
their shrieks for mercy
cut me like broken whiskey bottles.

“Sprockett!” Quantrill spoke sharp
as a flywheel honing swords,
“you gonna try your luck,
or afraid even these two’ll object
to your grizzly-ripped face?”

“Mister,” the older one begged,
both their legs blood-smeared,
“if you ever loved your mama,
kill us quick.” The other sobbed,
young enough to hope we’d let her live.

A bullet apiece,
and they were in Heaven
with Mama, praying for me,
I hope. That was the end
of my raiding days,
though I had to ride hard
to put miles between me
and the Colonel’s balked pleasure.



The Reverend Thomas Burden Thinks of Jesus

by Robert Cooperman

I used to believe Him
too good-natured about whores,
before I was blessed
with knowing Miss Mary LaFrance.
Lavinia wouldn't understand
our affection; no need to tell her.
I can see her measuring my flock
of rough miners against her daddy's
congregation of Boston bigwigs;
believing themselves higher
than God and my rough preaching,
her wishing in her silent heart
to be back with her Daddy.

He's dead, her aunt wrote,
the old raven flying down to Hell
after him: couldn't wait
to take up with him in the next life,
his housekeeper in this one
after his wife died;
the two biddies'll cat-claw
each other's eyes out in Perdition.

I'm all Mary's got in this world,
and tell her Jesus is the road
to her salvation in the next.
The trusting child believes me
with eyes dewy as the pure dawn,
while Lavinia smiles at my sermons
as if she's holy as God's Mother:
her way of saying my testifying's
nothing but chimney smoke.



Lavinia Burden Reflects on Why She Married the Reverend Thomas Burden

by Robert Cooperman

Father—himself a minister
I would no more think of disobeying
than I would of running off with gypsies—
was awed by Reverend Burden's sermons:
celebrated in our Boston
as if Mr. Keane performing Othello.

I too was tranced by his magnetism.

Only Aunt—who raised me
after Mother perished pushing me
into this world—saw Mr. Burden
for an Italian poisoner of rich brides.

She tried every argument,
though we knew I had as little choice
against Father's wishes
as virgins sacrificed to Baal.
Her final, desperate effort:
"You obey your father only because
it galls him you aren't a son."

I've accompanied my husband
to the most sordid of the gold camps,
rescuing souls snared by the demon-ore.
His sermons flicker with holy flames,
but his eyes burn at the temptations
Satan heaps upon these mountains.

To be continued in future issues

These poems begin a new collection entitled *The Widow's Burden*.

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Contributors

Barry Ballard has a strong preference for writing contemporary sonnets and has enjoyed publication in a number of journals including *The American Literary Review*, *New Delta Review*, *Chariton Review*, *Florida Review*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *New Millennium Review*, *Oxford Magazine*, *Paris/Atlantic*, *Pennsylvania English*, *Weber Studies*, *Whiskey Island Magazine*, and *Quarterly West*. His first collection titled *Green Tombs to Jupiter* won the Snail's Pace Press Poetry Award for 2000 from Siena College in New York.

John Bradshaw was born in Colorado and raised in California. He is the son of a sailor and the grandson of a farmer, so by heredity he is simultaneously grounded in the soil and out to sea. He has lived in such diverse places as the Florida panhandle and the Aleutian Islands, though he has spent the largest portion of his adult life in the South and Midwest. He earned degrees in Louisiana and Iowa and has studied philosophy in Oklahoma. Currently, he teaches at Southwestern Oklahoma State University.

Robert Cooperman's second collection, *The Badman and the Lady*, is part of *In the Colorado Gold Fever Mountains* from Western Reflections Publishing Co., P.O. Box 1647, Montrose, CO 81402-1647. His work has appeared in *The Centennial Review*, *Cimarron Review*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*. His first book, *In the Household of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, was published by the University Press of Florida.

Raymond Farr attended Florida State University and now lives in Ocala, Florida. His poems have been accepted by *SLANT*, *Cider Press Review*, *Concho River Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Comstock Review*, and *Caveat Lector*.

Maura Gage edits *The Louisiana Review*, has recently been published by *Far River Poetry*, has a poem forthcoming from *Louisiana Literature*, and expects a book from Mount Olive College Press.

Joann Gardner, a native of Maine, now lives in Tallahassee where she is an associate professor of English at The Florida State University. She is the director of Runaway with Words, a poetry workshop for runaway and homeless youths in Florida's youth shelters. She has published in *Jeopardy*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Madison Review*, *Small Press Magazine*, *Seneca Review*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Sun Dog: The Southeast Review*, and *The Tampa Review*. She recently published an interview of Grace Paley in *The American Poetry Review*.

Richard Hathcock, a native Oklahoman, was raised in Pryor, Catoosa, and Tulsa. He worked as a correspondent for the

Tulsa Daily World for several years before putting in twenty-six years with Hearst and ABC-TV News all over the world. Mr. Hathcock has been to 102 countries, but he has never forgotten Oklahoma. He even discussed Oklahoma with Sir Winston Churchill many years ago in an interview.

Leigh Holmes is professor of English at Cameron University and an editorial advisor for the *Oklahoma Review*. He has presented or published over 30 academic papers and enjoys writing aesthetic nonfiction prose.

Ray Johnson has had two novels published, *The In Vitro Madonna*, and *Spanish Moss*, and one screenplay, *Texas Tall Man*. He has also had six short stories published: "I Never Really Liked Hemingway," "Taxi," "Wordsworth Loved Ronrico," "Last Name, Please," "Bang," and "Afrakati Ascending."

Dan MacLean published his first piece of poetry at the age of nine. For the past several years, he has participated in a writer's workshop in Chicago, run by Enid Powell. His work is forthcoming in *Karamu* and *The South Carolina Review*. He is a communications consultant teaching business people how to improve their written and oral communication skills.

Wendell Mayo has been published in over seventy magazines and anthologies, such as *Westview*, *Chicago Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Yale Review*, *Manoa*, *Literary Review*, and *Missouri Review*. He has also published three fiction books: *Centaur*, *the North*, 1997 winner of the Aztlan Prize, *In Lithuanian Wood*, and *B. Horner and Other Stories*. He has received a Chemical Engineering degree from Ohio State, a M.F.A. from Vermont College, and a Ph.D. in 20th Century literature from Ohio University. Currently, he directs the Creative Writing Program at Bowling Green State University.

Bruce McCandless III, a freelance writer and editor living in Austin Texas, has published fiction, poetry, and essays in a variety of venues, including *The Asia Wall Street Journal*, *Louisiana Literature*, the *Texas Observer*, and the *Austin American-Statesman*. His poem, "The Death of a Liquor Board Agent," appeared in *Westview*.

Walt McDonald's latest book is *Counting Survivors* (University of Massachusetts Press). Two other books are *After the Noise of Saigon* (University of Massachusetts Press) and *Night Landings* (HarperCollins). He has published fifteen collections of poems and one book of fiction for presses such as University of Pittsburgh Press, University of North Texas Press, University of Massachusetts Press, Ohio State University Press, Spoon River Poetry Press, and Texas Tech University Press. He



has published more than 1,700 poems in journals and collections, including *American Poetry Review*, *The American Scholar*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Nation*, *New England Review*, *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Shenandoah*, *The Southern Review*, *Southwest Review*, and *Westview*. His awards include three National Cowboy Hall of Fame's Western Heritage Awards, two National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowships, and four Texas Institute of Letters Awards.

John Graves Morris is a professor of English at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma. He has had poems published in *None of the Above*, *Upriver*, and *The Wisconsin Review*.

Rosary O'Neill is a native New Orleanian and has had her nonfiction works published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, and Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich. Her work is forthcoming or has appeared in *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *So To Speak*, *Wellspring*, *Half Tones To Jubilee*, *Orange Willow Review*, *Potpourri*, and *Xavier Review*. Along with being a writer, Ms. O'Neill is a stage, film, and television actress, a writer in residence at Tulane University, and the founding director of Southern Rep, a State Theater of Louisiana. She has also won a Fulbright and received many fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Ford Foundation and the French, German, and Russian Ministries of Culture.

Chad Prevost is currently completing his creative writing poetry thesis for his M.A. at Georgia State University. His work has been published in *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *Sundog: The Southeast Review*, *Timber Creek Review*, *American Poets and Poetry*, *Poetry Motel*, and *Alembic*.

Cole Rachel is a poet and freelance writer whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Ontario Review*, *Westview*, *Sierra Nevada College Review*, and *Illumination*. A native Oklahoman and SWOSU alumnus, he now makes his home in New York City.

Jack Rickard, a former teacher of American and World History, has received a Distinguished Teacher award from the American Association of College of Teacher Education, a Presidential Citation for environmental work in the Grand Canyon in conjunction with the National Parks Service, and is a recipient of the Pablo Neruda prize for poetry from *Nimrod International Journal*. He is the author of three collections of poetry for which he also designed the covers. He is an artist of the Southwest, noted for his paintings using a thousand-year-old marbling paper technique and has had major art exhibitions depicting the myths and folk tales of Japanese Kabuki drama.

Penny Susan Rose has edited *The Citadel*, a literary magazine connected with Los Angeles City College, and her work has appeared in *Lumina*. Currently Ms. Rose is employed as a Senior Purchasing Manager for a cosmetics manufacturer.

Virgil Suarez was born in Havana, Cuba in 1962. Since 1974 he has lived in the United States. His poetry, stories, translations, and essays continue to be published in journals and reviews such as *TriQuarterly*, *Field*, *Cimarron*, *Meridian*, *The Caribbean Writer*, *Callaloo*, *The Ohio Review*, *Salmagundi*, *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Mississippi Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and many others in the United States. His work has been published in Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, England, France, Germany, India, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, and Spain. His poetry and fiction have been nominated for over twenty-five Pushcart Prizes, and he received one this year. He's also been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize twice. He is a recipient of an NEA and a Florida Individual Artist Grant. He is a professor of English and Creative Writing at The Florida State University.

Ryan G. Van Cleave is a freelance photojournalist originally from Chicago, whose writing has appeared in recent issues of *Shenandoah*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Quarterly West*, and *American Literary Review*; new work is forthcoming in *TriQuarterly*, *The Journal*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. His most recent books are *Say Hello* (Pecan Grove Press, 2000) and the anthology *American Diaspora: Poetry of Exile* (University of Iowa Press, 2001). He is the Anastasia C. Hoffman Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Institute for Creative Writing.

Ken Waldman is a fifteen-year resident of Alaska, and now lives in Alaska's major city, Anchorage. He has a M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, and for three years taught writing full-time at the University of Alaska campuses in Nome and Sitka. Over 350 of his poems have been published in national journals, including *Yankee*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *Beloit Poetry Journal*, and in March of 2000, West End Press, of Albuquerque, published a full-length collection of his rural Alaska poems, which includes a section about his March 2, 1996 plane wreck near Nome. Mr. Waldman is also an accomplished old-time fiddler, playing in an archaic, traditional Appalachian-style that works in tandem with the poetry and informal storytelling that make up a performance. He also has a CD, *A Week in Eek*, a collaboration with Vancouver banjoist and flute player, Andrea Cooper.

Donald Mace Williams is a writer and editor with a background in journalism and university teaching. He has a Ph.D. in English from the University of Texas-Austin. His poetry has been featured in *Western Humanities Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Orbis* (UK), and others have been accepted recently by



Iron Horse Literary Review, Concho River Review, and Candela-brum (UK).

J. Greg Young lives with his wife Beth and two children in Abilene, Texas. He is a pharmacist for a large hospital and is a 1988 graduate of SWOSU. His poems have appeared in a number of publications, including *Owen Wister Review* and *Lilliput Review*. He has work forthcoming in *Windhover*.

Fredrick Zydek taught creative writing at UNO and later at the College of Saint Mary, before deciding to write fulltime.

His work has appeared in the *The Antioch Review, Cimmaron Review, The Hollins Critic, New England Review, Nimrod, Poetry, Prairie Schooner, Poetry Northwest, Yankee*, and others. Mr. Zydek has over 800 publishing credits, including personal essays, fiction, academic articles, plays, poems, and an occasional review. A collection of poetry, *Ending the Fast*, contained the quartet "Songs from the Quinault Valley," which was awarded the Sarah Foley O'Loughlen Award. His fourth collection of poetry, *The Conception Abbey Poems*, has just gone into a second expanded edition. Mr. Zydek is currently the editor of Lone Willow Press and the director of a reading series at the Unity Center for Oneness.

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