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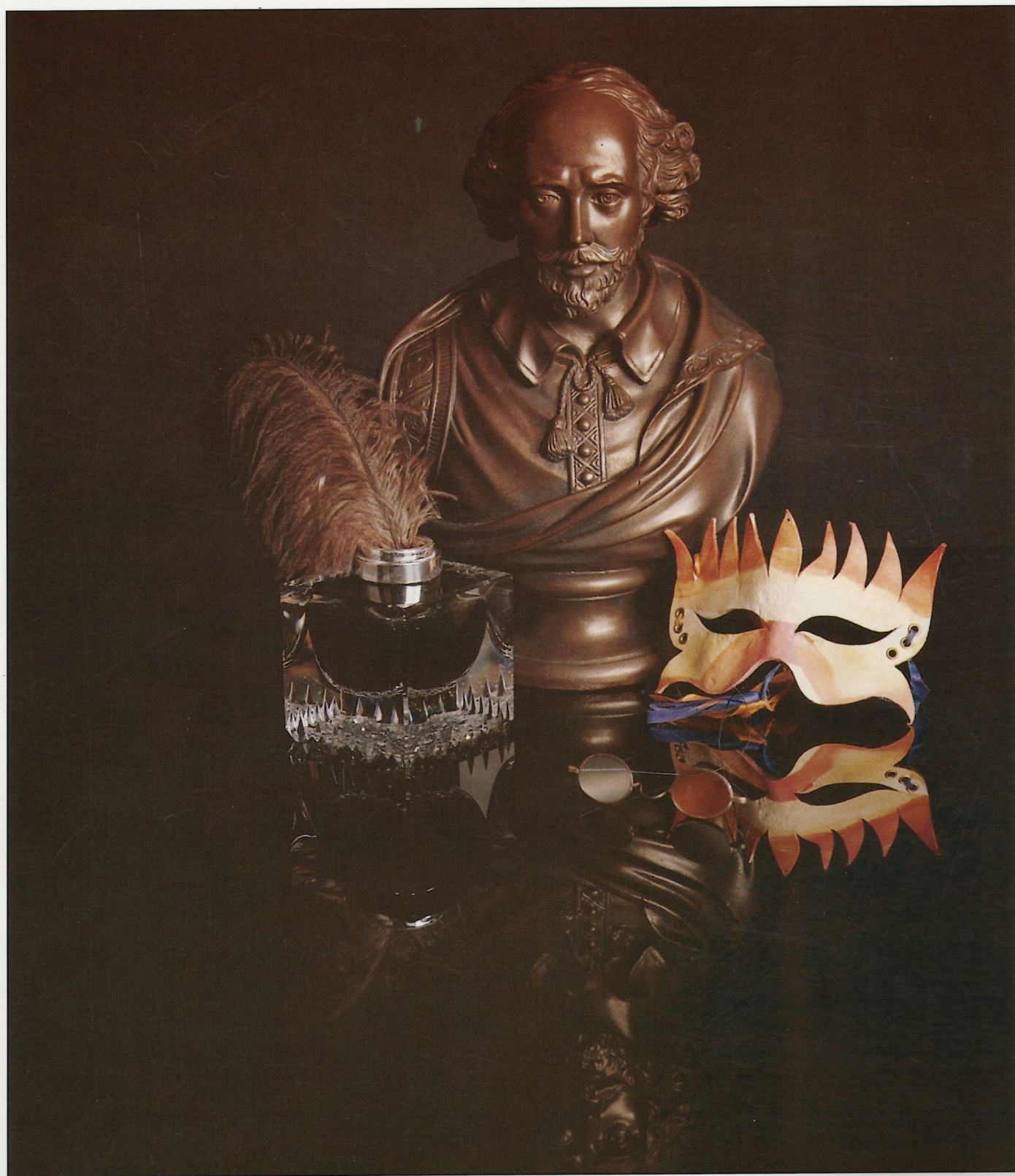
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2. Submitted artwork should be suitable for black and white reproduction. Work should be no larger than 8.5" x 14". However, photographs or slides of larger work may be submitted. Submitted artwork with a SASE will be returned.
3. We accept and enjoy formal verse, free verse, and prose poems.
4. Include a brief biographical sketch for our contributor's notes.
5. We welcome submissions on a 3.5" disk formatted for IBM or Macintosh. Please include a hard copy of your submission.
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Interview with Albert Goldbarth

by Cole Rachel

Albert Goldbarth's palatial estate in the south of France is difficult to find, hidden away as it is on the farther side of a dense row of ornamental trees sculpted to look like various canonical literary figures and well-known delicatessen sandwiches. Only a tinkle of laughter, and the light sound of splashing, gives it away—this, from the pool, where his corps of live-in assistants (his "sylphs," as he calls them) take time out from their typing duties, and indulge in a vigorous au naturel game of water polo. On this afternoon, it's the poet himself who answers my timid knock at the door; he's dressed in a red silk lounging jacket, and has the frowzy look of disrupted genius attending him. Graciously inviting me within, he.... Well, actually, it doesn't really happen like this at all, which is sad really. In truth, I called Albert Goldbarth at his home in Wichita, Kansas (itself nearly as glamorous as the south of France) and asked him to do a short interview for Westview, to which he happily complied. Having known Albert for several years now, as a reader, a student and as a good friend, I was not surprised that our Q&A exchange would take place via the good ol' postal system, his communication device of choice. The following exchange is culled from our correspondence over the past month. Not surprisingly, Albert's responses are as lively, as informed and as interesting as he himself is, and as is his work.

RACHEL:

One of the things that originally drew me to your work is the sense of "universality" inherent in most of your writing. In that, I mean that the poems (and the essays) seem to contain all of the universe at once, embracing all manner of historical and current "pop-culture." What are your feelings about popular American culture at the moment? Since I know that you refuse to touch a computer, what are your thoughts on technology? How are these things reflected in your work?

GOLDBARTH:

Reviewers are often emphasizing the place of popular culture in my poems. I'm not surprised, and I don't deny its high-profile positioning in my work. I'm someone who still makes a monthly visit to his local comic book shop. But I should add that the term "popular culture," although I yield to its common use and co-opt it for the title of one of my own books, doesn't exist in my own head as a very useful demarcation. I know some Greek mythology; I also happen to know about the Nicole Kidman/Tom Cruise divorce. I can talk a bit, in

my own layman way, about the pre-Biblical flood narrative in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and I know a bit about Roswell, New Mexico and about fuzzy dice hanging from rearview mirrors. Last week I received my copy of an anthology of essays from the University of Georgia Press in which I provide the introduction; it's a gathering of essays on the interface between the arts and the sciences, and I talk a little about C. P. Snow's well-known phrase "the two cultures," and the implications of that bifurcation. But I could hold forth just as long and at least as eloquently on the career of Carl Barks, who created the character Uncle Scrooge McDuck for the Walt Disney comic books. It's *all* part of my life, of my thinking, without particular prioritization.

Lately I've been pondering the wonderful way in which certain arenas of "popular culture" allow us to see movements between various socioeconomic levels over time, and to think about ideas of exclusion and inclusion within the culture at large. I'm thinking of the way corned beef travels from being disreputably a dish of Irish immigrants to



being an accepted staple of the culture at large, the way a name that would once have been associated with the upper crust (say, "Tiffany") becomes a common name for strippers, the way the tattoo has moved from the keeping of boxers, sailors and hookers to the bellies of our most valued celebrities and the forearms of lawyers. It's a lovely mix: a "yeasty mix," George Eliot says in her novel *Daniel Deronda*. I think my psyche's mix is an "everythingmix": for better or worse, I've invited Rocky and Bullwinkle to grab seats around the table in Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," and I've asked nerdy Clark Kent and nerdy Stephen Hawking to talk as equals about their superpowers.

But I'm not a careerist of "pop culture" in any way—any more, really, than I'm an expert on, say, Elizabethan literature—and there are vast holes in my knowledge. As you know, the entire burgeoning world of computer possibilities exists beyond my interests. Just yesterday the mail brought my advance copy of my new book of essays, *Many Circles* (which by the way makes a terrific Christmas gift or birthday present) and at the conclusion of its four pages of end notes I say "... none of these pieces was researched or composed on a computer, or was submitted to a publisher on disc." I'm talking about a 316-page book, its essays culled from twenty-one years of published prose of mine, I'm talking about four pages of end notes that credit the books, monographs, and newspaper and magazine articles that helped feed my own creations over all of that time ... and so I'm pretty serious about keeping the computer screen out of my life, and still pretty pleased with the amount of input from the universe that happily crosses the membrane into my head and heart. In any case, our headlong rush toward becoming a global computerocracy is something I witness with dismal foreboding.

I don't usually proselytize on this issue, and anyway couldn't be as soulfully eloquent on it as writers like Neil Postman and Sven Birkerts: the latter's *The Gutenberg Elegies* is, I think, one of the seminal books of the last of the twentieth century. But I will try to keep my fingertips computer-

keyboard-virginal for as long as I can, to live outside of the wired hive; and so my popular culture experience obviously doesn't include Nintendo, any more than my reading life takes place on a Palm Pilot. Go figure. I must own over a hundred toy space ships from the 1950's, but I think I've actually held a cell phone all of twice in my life.

RACHEL:

Again, as someone so obviously well-versed in all manner of historical and current popular culture, where do you find inspiration? And if you don't really watch television and can't turn on a computer, how do you feed this fascination? On a somewhat unrelated note, what do you see as the future of poetry? Given the nature of literature in the information age, is there a future for poetry?

GOLDBARTH:

I've just returned from a one-month residency at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, working with student poets in the MFA program there. Wilmington is where *Dawson's Creek* is filmed (there was also a new Travolta vehicle being shot while I was there ... the wife of the Creative Writing Department Chair is an extra in some crowd scenes), and I was certainly able to keep up with casually witty (well, semi-witty) observations on the show and its cast (it's a hobby among the MFA students to compile complete sightings of the major cast) even though I don't own a television ... in fact, have never owned a television (although, as a child in my parents' home, it was an important enough part of my development: why, *would* you like me to sing the words to *Car 54, Where Are You?*). Anyway, I'd be happy to talk with you about whether or not Jennifer Lopez should go crawling apologetically back to Puff Daddy; for that matter, thanks to a friend's long distance phone call, I can describe to you her transparent blouse at (it was just last night) the Academy Awards. Yes, as the parenthetical in your question implies, I enjoy reading the tabloids; they're merely a mild version of a sensational press that, like pornography and women's romances, have been with us in a strong steady stream of communication since printed communication first began;



and, like their proto versions that exist from before the age of printed text, they answer the questions posed by deep joys and fears in the human psyche. They're fun, they're scary, they *are* America. I mean, if you wanted me instead to try to summarize Witold Rybczynski's discussion of the domestication of interior space by the Dutch in the generation preceding Rembrandt, I could try; that, or my loose understanding of the Human Geonome Project. But I'd be just as pleased to talk about Bigfoot's latest sighting, or Mariah Carey's latest fling. It's been my experience that, if one reads with relative enthusiasm and embrace, one doesn't need a television or a PC or a ticket to the local multiscreen mall complex to get damp in the stream of popular culture issues. As to the future of my reading pleasures, if I continue to do my Bartleby shtick in the face of owning a computer . . . well, that future is difficult to see. It's possible that one day I'll visit Dripping Springs or The Big Apple, check into a motel, look for the Yellow Pages so that I can research used book stores in the area . . . and be faced only by an in-room computer terminal, beyond my use or willingness to use. No phone, no phone directory. Will the weekly issue of *The Enquirer* only be online by then? (Ditto everything else, from *Biblical Archeology* to *Playboy* . . . to *Poetry*)? I don't know: our predictive skills can no longer travel faster than the speed of change, which is why it's also impossible to answer your question about "the future of poetry." First, of course, one would have to define "poetry"—is "slam poetry" the same as "poetry" for purposes of your question and my answer? is ritual chant from an oral tribal tradition "poetry" (it's listed that way in the contents of anthologies, but it's galaxies removed, in form, in intent, in structure, from a poem by Billy Collins in *The Georgia Review*). I could natter on uninterestingly about whether "the poem of the future" will be formal or free verse, for "the people" or "the elite," privately scribbled or publicly funded . . . but the poem of the future may be something we can't even *begin* to envision now, may be something that would be as unrecognizable as "poetry" to my sensibility as

a book of mine would be to someone in a field, chanting to the rain god for the clouds to open up.

RACHEL:

What advice might you have for young poets? For example, how valuable do you feel MFA creative writing programs are for emerging writers? How much or how little do you feel that contemporary literature is influenced (or controlled) by academia?

GOLDBARTH:

About a geologic age ago—far enough in the past so that I was a student in an MFA program myself—I had the chance to ask Galway Kinnell (then a kind of poetry god: *The Book of Nightmares* had just been published) what he thought of the MFA experience; something in my phrasing or tone of voice must have indicated I had doubts about its validity. I believed then, as I do now, that the greatest poets we can still read never had an MFA and perhaps wouldn't have even understood the concept . . . Dante, Blake, Dickinson, Whitman, Donne, Goethe, the whole Crowd of Greatness perhaps extending into even the generation of people like Marianne Moore and Berryman; if anything, their greatness is indexed especially by the fact that their work speaks powerfully across vast gaps of time (or nationality or language, maybe) *without* the need to hear them rattle on in a "craft lecture" (or be interviewed by Cole Rachel); if anything, Rilke earned his poems in the heart of a devastating and glorious fire that seems to have little to do with earning three hours of academic credit. But Kinnell provided a very moving description of his own student life at Princeton, in a time where poets were not normally accepted into university life as either students or faculty, in a place where the admission of being a poet (or wanting to be, Kinnell might more modestly have said) was cause for perplexity from the world at best, derision quite possibly. He was very eloquent in addressing the loneliness he felt, being "out of it," and the necessary sense of community he thought MFA programs then provided young writers. He was very persuasive. Of course one might want to point out that, whether or not there's a connection



between that background and his growing life as a poet, Kinnell did emerge from that experience on a road that would lead him to the writing of *The Book of Nightmares*, a darkly radiant and exquisite long poem. And in any case, his small speech to me was now two (would it be approaching three?) generations of American poets ago, with many small mushroom-caps of MFA programs having sprouted up in between. The Associated Writing Programs was in its first one or two years of existence then, its regularly appearing self-congratulatory newsletter still a big dream away. Poets didn't have home pages on the Web; there was no Web. There wasn't a first book publication competition at every third small college on the Rand-McNally Atlas; Creative writers now are a very established part of the academic community, indistinguishable from their second-rate scholarly colleagues with their conference papers and resumes and letters of recommendation and career networking and favor-trading and deviating tenure-track concerns. And at the same time, the kinds of needs so genuinely described by Kinnell are now easily met in any number of ways that don't necessarily have to do with diplomas and job markets. The MFA experiment has proved an interesting one, and in some ways, for some people, I'm sure a beneficial one. (Uh, Cole . . . you're not *sorry* you studied with me for three years, are you?) But maybe it's time for a new experiment, returning the writing of poetry (and fiction) into the hands of taxi drivers and neurosurgeons and rare coin dealers and househusbands and housewives and archeologists and call girls and pool players and deacons, people who may write and publish for the passion of it, and not because the next appearance in *The Paris Review* is going to mean an annual raise. Me, I teach creative writing in a university, always have, probably always will. And I'll continue to try to do well for my students as they march through my life . . . to look at their work with some version of honesty and commitment. But one can try to do honorably within a system without giving the system itself one's full loyalty.

That the kinds of distracting and cheapening "po biz" values I've been hinting at can blight lives even outside of academia is undeniable, I know this. All you need is a local bar and any two writers. But I think it's time to reconsider what it meant to be Dickinson, meant to be Keats, as opposed to . . . well, you'll meet them readily enough at the cash bar at this year's Associated Writing Programs conference. I think it's time to remember that the deepest way to study under another poet is to *read* that poet, ferociously and empathetically, to learn from the *work*, and not to sit for three hours in that poet's classroom, watching the clock drag its load of minutes around in a circle.

RACHEL:

Would you say that you have a motto? Any guiding principle that influences not only your work, but also your life?

GOLDBARTH:

Picking a motto, as you request, is bigger labor than I'm ready for right now. But I will provide two quotes that have always seemed appropriate to my life:

"What the Boy chiefly dabbled in was natural history and fairy tales, and he just took them as they came, in a sandwichy sort of way, without making any distinctions; and really his course of reading strikes one as rather sensible."

—Kenneth Grahame

"All the world will be your enemy, oh Prince With a Thousand Enemies, and when they catch you, they will kill you. But first . . . they must catch you."

—Richard Adams

RACHEL:

How would you like to be remembered? or, more dramatically, how would you like to die? How's that for a final question?

GOLDBARTH:

As I've already said, the future is difficult to read. So far as I'm concerned, we don't know that I *am* going to die. I'd like to think not. And I believe it's rather crass of you to even imply its possibility.



By One

by Albert Goldbarth

And the opinion that every man hath his particular angel may gain some authority by the relation of St. Peter's miraculous deliverance out of prison not by many, but by one angel.

-- Izaak Walton

That's all it requires. The law of even
miracles is economy, and one
resourceful angel is all it requires:
a sudden doze upon a warden, the several
molecules of mortar disappearing
from around some stones to the height of a man.
He walked out, into this same night air
that goes at it like a scouring pad
in your lungs and mine. Harsh,
revivifying. And the night sky full
of too much to be familiar. There's a theory
UFO's are the 20th century's angels
—sighted instead of those earlier wonders,
oxidizing the same small heap of needs.
And how many unsleeping nights
has each of us prayed—or whatever version
of prayer is current—for just a single
emissary of one or the other? Not
a battalion, but just one angel, sent
for just one grief that weighs
what each of us weighs, and fills us.
And the sleet falls as if being
background is all that matters. Or
the junebugs whirr, machine-parts
down the lines of night's perspective.
There are times I've walked through darkness
thinking even the hem of an angel would do,
a hem like the northern lights
but personal—sized to my problems.
Just the hand of an angel, just one eddy
on the waters that's the print of an angel's finger.



Just one feather to fall
like snow on my tongue, to enter me like
those sugar cubes of Salk vaccine in the '50s,
small and sweet and metabolic.
Just one feather. Or whatever current
version of a feather is here. One glowing,
silver bolt off a wing. A hinge.
One wheel to steer by.

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from *Popular Culture*



An Explanation

by Albert Goldbarth

They say this really happened, in the Church of Eternal Light:
a penitent dropped to the floor wearing nothing but sweat, she
spasmed like some snake on an electrified wire, she uttered
angel eldestspeech, and then she disappeared—they mean
totally, and at once. First the entire tarpaper room gave a shudder,
and then she disappeared—at once, and totally.
Nobody understands it. Well,
maybe I understand it. Once, in 8th grade, Denton Nashbell
had an epileptic seizure. Mrs. Modderhock squatted
above where he flapped like something half a person
half a pennant, she was pressing a filthy spoon to his tongue.
I've remembered him 25 years now. And—that woman? she
was the universe's tongue the universe
swallowed. That's as good an explanation as any.
Once, in sleep, you started a dream soliloquy,
the grammar of which is snow on fire, the words are
neuron-scrawl, are words the elements sing to their molecules . . .
—I threw myself across you.
It wasn't sex this time. I just wanted to keep you
beside me, in this world.

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from *Heaven and Earth* (the University of Georgia Press)



There, Too

by Albert Goldbarth

I'm not the dapper man in the lambswool overcoat.
I'm not the woman unfolding the mail, lost
in a lozenge of light by the vase of roses and ferns.
I'm not the man with the cocky swagger
and fresh dirt under his fingernails.
I'm the triangle—that's right, I'm the triangle

that they make, the way it's made every day
in movies and cheapie self-destructo novels:
steamily, greasily, and I protest this
smutting of my self. I was there

with the square and the circle, originally,
when shape was something pure
and transcendental—long before
the border^e-smudging confusion of human affairs.

Whenever you're with another person
—even with who you think of
as *the* other person—I tell you

that the mind and the heart are too bountiful for fidelity,
and I'm there, too.

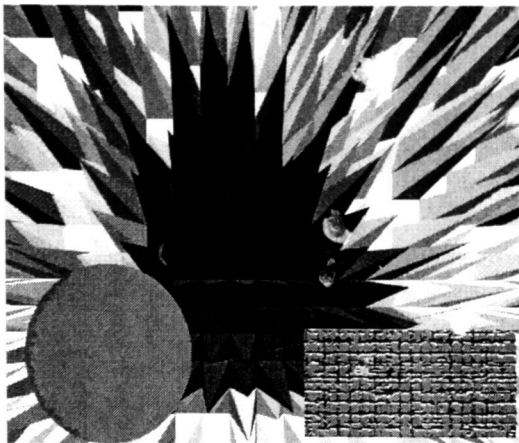


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The Talk Show

by Albert Goldbarth

. . . in 1930, The Bell Telephone Company commissioned one of their employees, Karl Jansky, to find out why the new car radios suffered from static. Jansky set up radio antennae, and heard a steady hiss coming from the direction of the Milky Way. Radio astronomy was born thirty years later.

--James Burke

A woman "heard angels." The paper says angels
sussurra'd her body, rang their praises daylong
through its reedy places, stirred her
smallest water. And elsewhere, Larry
"Dude Man" Chavez raises his #2 wrench
indifferently overhead on the C-track tightening line,
and feels something like lightning—only
there isn't lightning—beam to the wrench head,
branch down his arm, make all of his muscles
electric feathers, then exit his other arm out
its guttering candelabrum fingers and into
the frame of the Ford. It's stored

there. It happens. We all know it happens.
The cops and the hospital nightshift crew know
what a full moon means, and
if their decades of statistics don't cut diddlysquat
with you, here's someone being wheeled in
from a 3-car smashup while the universe hums
its lunar kazoo, and adrenalin everywhere dervishes.
And statistics on sunspots, and suicides.
And statistics on lines of magnetic pull,
and conception. We're the few but beautiful
units of the first day of the cosmos
densed-up over time; when the lady I love



Photo by Joel Kend



flaps suddenly in sleep like a wire discharging, it
makes sense as much as anything—bad dreams,
zinged nerves—to simply say *we're* where
the Big Bang ripples to the limits of a continuous medium,
flickers a little, kicks. I've disappointed her
sometimes; and so, myself. I've left the house then,
while she slept, and while my neighbors slept, as if
I could walk noise out of myself
through darkness, finally dialing-in
the talk show where the blood calls with its question,
and the "sky," whatever that is, whatever portion we are
of it or once were, answers. And

I've walked past where the university's planetarium
dish-ear swivels hugely for the far
starcrackle Karl Jansky more primitively
dowsed. It happens any size; that woman? picked up
cop calls on her IUD, the paper adds, in bubble-bursting
glee. Although if angels are voices beyond us
in us, everyone's umbles are singing hosannahs
under their everyday wamble and gab. I've
slipped back into bed some nights and clasped her
till I slept, then woke to her heart
in my ear, that mysterious sound,
on earth as it is in heaven.

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from *Heaven and Earth* (the University of Georgia Press)



Field

by Albert Goldbarth

"... there was always a spot which it was forbidden to touch, or to walk upon. It was dedicated to the gods—and especially evil ones—in return for their implicit agreement not to stray into provinces where they might molest mankind. The same idea obtained in parts of Scotland. Uncultivated pieces of land were left fallow, and termed the 'guid man's croft.'"

And this is that poem. Not much happens.
There are countless possibilities. I imbue
the poem with a solid man, and a hint
of woman (sometimes the reverse is true).
Not much happens. There are images,
small everyday ablutions, that are potential
strategies and symbols: he wanders
under moons and comets, his lungs full
with biological processes, fish, fruit,
or the probability of their disappearance,
the gesture of a pianist's wrist peaked
like a thoroughbred's foreleg, a dance
troupe in ritual circle (this is the female
entering the poem), the funeral, the children,
the mosque, the mask, the map, the home.
Not much happens. Anything can;
but this one I leave for tattered health,
mistallied votes, financial misfortune,
the ups and downs of sexual deprivation,
undernourishment, and overcaution:
unworked. Let this be my guid man's croft
that I will not finish or furnish or sign
with any name but my true name.
I leave it: propitiatory, begun, benign.

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from *Jan. 31* (the Doubleday & Co.)



The Very Small Things That Fall

by Becky McLaughlin

If our deepest desire . . . were able to leave a trace on the surface, then we could find it again, instead of just consigning it over to the anthropologists.

—Peter Anson, “juggling the stone”

I.

Before Bobby got to the front door, Rose saw him coming and picked up the book she had been trying to read. The pages looked unfamiliar, and she knew she would have to begin the chapter again in order to remember the plot. The book had come highly recommended, but whatever its merit, it could not compete with memories of the day at the pagoda, the train ride from Beijing to Chengdu, and the weekends in Pixian—all of which she had been thinking about in voluptuous agony. Every memory was like a tender wound, and touching each one caused a throb of pain for something lost, or for something that had never been possible in the first place. As Bobby put his key into the lock, Rose slid more deeply into her nylon sleeping bag and held the book up close to her face. She wanted him to know that his arrival was an interruption, and the only way to signal that was to appear to be doing something.

Bobby hung up his jacket and dropped into a worn-out armchair whose lace doilies attempted in their old-fashioned way to cover up the threadbare upholstery material.

“Good book?” he asked, looking as tired and wrecked as the chair he sat in.

“It’s alright.” Rose was noncommittal, still holding the book between them.

“Remind me not to read it,” said Bobby, noticing the scant number of pages pinched between her left thumb and forefinger.

Rose lowered the book. Even if she had not been reading with real focus, it irritated her that for Bobby the speed at which she consumed the book indicated its value.

“I can’t concentrate,” said Rose.

“You lack discipline,” he said.

Normally, this comment enraged her, but today she was grateful for its aggressive misdirection because it led away from something moving with such implacable force that the only way to stall it was to throw obstacles in its path.

“I lack time,” she said, correcting him agreeably.

“Everybody does.”

“We didn’t.”

“That was then,” said Bobby. “Things are different now.”

Rose hated this line. It was Bobby’s way of creating closure when things were unsettled or undecided. She slapped the book shut with more force than she meant to show, but Bobby did not seem to notice.

“What’s for supper?” he asked, dismissing the past with the speed and efficiency of one planted firmly in the here-and-now.

“I don’t know,” said Rose, shrugging to slow time down. She had eaten at the restaurant and was not hungry. Besides, she missed the sweet Chinese wine and eating with chopsticks at every meal. A fork and knife seemed too harshly metal after the gentle wood of the chopstick.

“Shit,” said Bobby.

He got up from his chair and went into the kitchen. Rose heard him open the refrigerator, move containers around, and then slam it shut with such violence that the bottles in the door rattled and banged together.

“Shit,” he said again, and Rose had a sudden image of Bobby wrapping her severed head in Saran Wrap and placing it in the refrigerator like a



piece of cut-up watermelon.

Bobby returned to the armchair's tired embrace and stared at Rose with accusing, exasperated eyes. Rose noticed that one of the doilies had fallen to the floor and come to rest beside his shoe. The fact that he was oblivious to this irritated her, and she looked hard at the doily, hoping that he would notice its absence.

"Are you listening?" asked Bobby.

"Yes, I heard you."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Well," began Rose tentatively, "we could go to the store and—"

"We?" Bobby asked. The word had never sounded nastier.

Now Rose saw that a bit of stuffing from the arm of the chair had come loose and was clinging to Bobby's shirt sleeve.

"I work all day long—"

"I work, too," she said, her eyes riveted to the bit of stuffing on Bobby's shirt sleeve.

"You call that part-time job of yours *work*?"

Rose was suddenly full of loathing for the man in the armchair.

There had been an accident on the narrow, rural road between Ya'an and the capital of Chengdu, and we were stuck in a long string of traffic that wrapped itself around the mountain. The bus driver, who was drinking jasmine tea from a glass jar and chain-smoking Tianmas, had a cassette tape of the Sichuan Opera on at full volume. To my untrained ear, the sopranos sounded like a pack of carping shrews and the cymbals, a thousand tin cans knocking together.

"How long will we be here?" I asked Xiao Liang.

"No one knows," he answered. "Someone must go and fetch the police."

"How long will that take?" Bobby asked.

Xiao Liang shrugged. "It depends. The police do not like to be hurried."

As if they knew we were in for a long wait, all the babies on the bus chose this moment to wake up and cry for food; the old men shouted conver-

sations from one end of the bus to the other; chickens on their way to market flapped their wings, clucking and crowing in frightened anticipation; and we sat three to seats meant for two as the sun beat down on the bus's metal roof and dust blew in the windows, mingling with the now-heavy cigarette smoke.

"May we get off the bus?" I asked. On either side of the road were lush fields with water buffalo pulling plows and peasants wearing broad, straw hats. "I'd like to stretch my legs."

Xiao Liang shook his head. "This is a closed area. Foreigners are not allowed."

An hour passed, and still there was no sign of movement. My throat felt dry and my ears were ringing. The heat and noise level had increased ten-fold.

"How can you stand this?" I asked Xiao Liang, feeling close to panic. "Don't the waiting and the chaos bother you?"

"Of course," said Xiao Liang serenely, "but I go away."

"You go away?" I repeated, puzzled.

"Yes," said Xiao Liang. "In a country this crowded, one must find a quiet place to retreat inside oneself, for there is no such place outside."

Rose wanted to go away, like Xiao Liang, but the intricate pattern of the doily and the rupture in the fabric of the chair's arm kept her steadfastly locked in the present.

"The doily has fallen," Rose said, motioning to the floor. "And will you please pick that bit of stuffing off your sleeve? It's bugging me."

Bobby peered at his sleeve, a look of bewilderment flickering across his face. Then he removed the yellowed cotton and carefully replaced the doily.

"You know, Rose," he said, a slight quiver entering his voice that signaled anger just barely contained, "there are things around here that bug me, too, but they're a lot bigger than a piece of lint."

Then, perhaps to keep from hitting her, he sprang up and moved again toward the kitchen. Rose struggled reluctantly out of the sleeping bag



and followed him. She knew what she wanted to say, but it never seemed possible to translate her thoughts into words. A chasm as big as China itself had opened up between them, and Rose felt helpless to cross it. Whatever the years there had meant to her, she was sure they meant something different to Bobby. And now that they were back, each was grieving in a self-styled solitude over something that could not be transported from one country to another, something they had been forced to leave behind. Or maybe they had brought something back that did not belong here, something that was creating a disturbance in their universe. This is where her thinking got fuzzy, and any hope of articulation got swallowed up in a confusion so dense it threatened to choke her.

Bobby turned the water on at the sink and began neatly stacking the dirty dishes that were scattered randomly along the counter. Rose watched his movements. She knew that he would wash the plates first, then the glasses, and finally the silverware. His order was precise and relentless.

"And what about these dishes?" he asked, smacking a plate against the sink's shallow surface of water. "Were you going to let them sit here

until doomsday?"

Rose wiped a splatter of dishwater off her face. Perhaps it was the word "dishes" or the warm water tricking down her cheek, but it released a sudden flood of words spoken in the way items might be ticked off a grocery list: "I work with dishes every day, carrying dirty plates to the kitchen, scraping half-eaten food into the garbage pail, wiping spilled ketchup off tables, emptying ashtrays of cigarettes that're still smoldering, and today Linda told me to dig through the leftovers for scraps to feed her dog."

"Quit," said Bobby as if that one small word contained the solution to all problems.

"And then what?" asked Rose.

Bobby gently placed a coffee mug in the dish drainer and looked at Rose. There was no malice in the look this time. "You're not cut out for waiting tables. You're a teacher."

"I was a teacher," said Rose. "Now I'm a waitress."

When Wang Moxi was a newly-made master of arts, he was assigned by the government to work at a small agricultural university in the provincial

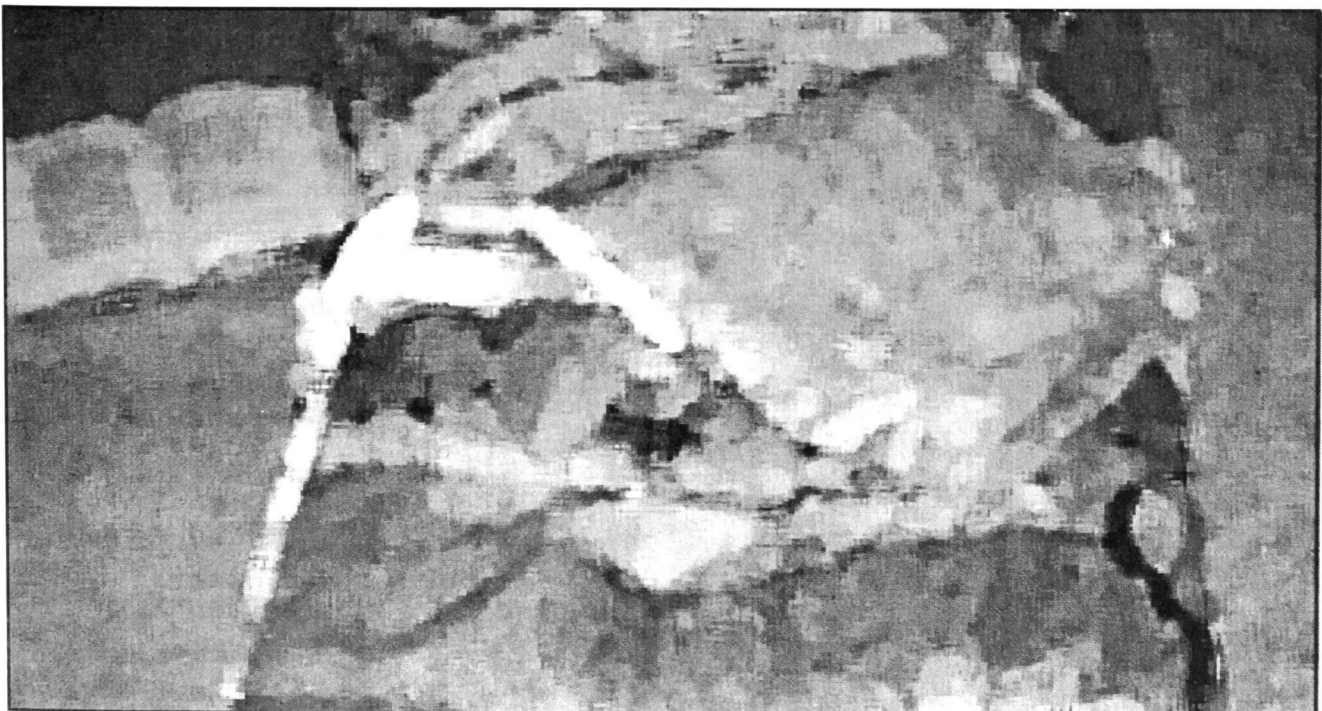


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



western basin of Sichuan. He had never been out of his own northern province, nor had he ever traveled beyond the outer limits of Beijing. And so as he journeyed by train to his teaching job in the remote southern province, he was filled with excitement and anticipation. He was to be head of the English Department, and his suitcase was full of American novels that he intended to have his students read. Upon arrival, however, he found his first official duty to be that of bird patrol.

"The blackbirds are getting out of hand," said the administrator. "We must kill them off before they pick the fields clean."

"But I'm here to teach English," protested Wang Moxi. "I know nothing about killing birds."

"It's easy," said the administrator. "All you need is a long pole and a swift blow."

After bird patrol came rat patrol. Wang Moxi did not teach a single English class that year. At night, worn out from stalking birds or rats all day long, Wang Moxi would fondle his books, too tired to read them, and weep at the indignity of his work. He knew that the Cultural Revolution was supposed to level all hierarchies; but, for him, reading a book was far more honorable than hitting a blackbird with a bamboo pole.

After a makeshift supper that didn't really satisfy either one of them, Rose crawled back into her nylon sleeping bag and picked up her book again. Bobby took a long bath and then came into the living room to towel himself off. Rose knew that she was supposed to watch with mounting desire, but she did not glance up from the pages of her book. Once Bobby was dry, he twisted the towel into a whip and made popping noises with it until Rose was forced to respond.

Knowing that she did not want to know, she asked, "What do you want?"

He smiled, full of hope that her question was really meant to be answered, and rotated his hips so that his crinkled, water-logged penis flapped back and forth between his legs. It made a soft noise as it slapped first against the left thigh and then against the right.

"I want to go to bed with you," he said, beginning to swell.

"I'm not ready to go to bed yet," she said.

Bobby dropped the towel to the floor and moved toward the couch, where he began to unzip the sleeping bag. "Come on, Rose. It's been a long time. We haven't done it once since we've been back."

She let him unzip the bag but said, "I'm not in the mood."

"You're never in the mood these days," he said, kissing her neck. "But I could get you in the mood if you'd let me."

She removed his hand from the depths of the sleeping bag and gently pushed at his face, which had moved from her neck to her mouth. His touch, the touch of her husband, was repellant to her, but she had become expert at concealing an impulse to recoil, except that lately she had developed an odd little cough which erupted every time Bobby tried to kiss her.

"I know you could, but I don't want you to." She held the novel up as a barrier between them and, thinking about Wang Moxi's blackbird pole, said, "I want to read. Don't you have a book to read?"

"Yes," he answered. "But I'd rather be doing something else. In the dark."

"Maybe later," said Rose, hoping that he would be tired before long and that she wouldn't have to turn him down again. The thought of his obvious desire filled her with rage, but she smiled at him with a tranquil face and understood that out of despair he would continue to ask and to hope.

He put on his pajamas and sat in the old armchair, a newspaper spread across his lap. Soon, he was asleep. When a small snore erupted from his mouth, Rose looked up and examined his face.

Our meals today have been somewhat unpleasant occurrences. Bobby saw a rat yesterday in the university dining hall. That put him on guard, and so last night when he woke in the middle of the night and heard what he thought was a dish clinking in the kitchen, he immediately speculated that



a rat was in there licking up tea leaves and pear peels from a bowl left out on the counter.

At breakfast this morning Bobby was very quiet. I said, "I don't think you're very happy here." And he said, "No, I'm not terribly happy here at the moment." I asked him why, and he gave a few vague answers, but when I pressed him, he told me he thought there was a rat in the house and that rats were one thing he couldn't put up with. He figured the only place the rat could be living was under the bathtub. I had a bath yesterday, but I saw nothing scurry out. Bobby said he looked at the pear core this morning, and he thought he saw that a small bite had been taken out of it. He revealed all of this information at breakfast just as I was drinking my scalded milk and eating my steamed bread with kiwi jam. Neither Bobby nor I could quite finish, as one can well imagine.

I told him that I really doubted a rat was sharing our living quarters—maybe a mouse but not a rat. There is not enough food for a rat to survive on, especially since the apartment has been vacant for the past several weeks. Nevertheless, when we returned from breakfast at the dining hall, we both went into the kitchen to examine the pear core. We had to hurry back to the apartment to arrive ahead of the little cleaning lady, who would have dumped out all evidence of a poaching rodent. Upon looking at the core, I decided that a bite had not been taken out of it and that there was no rat. I also noticed that there was a cobweb over the opening under the tub where the rat would have to enter and exit. So my detective skills say null and void on the rat business. However, as we were being shown to our offices today, Bobby saw a dead rat on the staircase leading up to our floor. Wang Moxi was with us, and when Bobby commented on the rat, Wang Moxi said that Sichuan has a lot of rats because of all the grain grown here. Unfortunately, Bobby saw this dead rat shortly before lunch, and so when we went into lunch, we again had trouble eating.

One might suppose we're being too squeamish, and probably we are, but the smells in the streets are sometimes overwhelming. Plus, everybody

hacks and spits because of all the red pepper that is consumed and the humid weather in this province. It's really disconcerting to be walking down the street and hear someone directly behind you hacking and spitting. All of these things combined with the rat scare have made us a little less than enthusiastic about eating. And then tonight at supper, Bobby's nose started bleeding.

"We have very different ways of coping with loneliness and fear," Rose thought to herself as she turned back to her book. "He bleeds."

Two hours later, Rose had shifted from a sitting position to a sleeping position on the couch, and Bobby had begun to stir. He folded up the newspaper, stood, and stretched.

"Come on, Rose. Time for bed," he said, moving toward the bathroom.

Rose heard him open the medicine cabinet and get out the toothpaste. She decided to wait until he was finished in the bathroom. Then she would get up.

Bobby appeared in the doorway. "Come and brush your teeth," he said around a mouthful of toothpaste.

The authority in his voice annoyed Rose, and she slid further down into the sleeping bag. "I'm too tired to brush my teeth," she said in her most childish voice. "Will you brush them for me?"

Bobby returned to the bathroom to spit out the toothpaste and rinse his mouth with water from the tap. Rose heard him relieve himself in a heavy stream that splashed against the toilet bowl, and then he blew his nose. She had come to hate the sound of these bedtime rituals. She remembered with a sudden prick of pain that they had eaten so much garlic in China that even their urine smelled of it.

"Is Baby sleepy?" asked Bobby, coming into the living room with Rose's toothbrush in one hand and the toothpaste in the other. Her lower lip stuck out in a pout, Rose nodded solemnly as Bobby squeezed the sea-green paste onto the bristles of the brush. This was a game they had played before, and although she continued to employ it on



occasion, she hated it because it didn't really work in the way that she wanted it to. Originally, she'd thought that being babyish would call up the usual taboos, making her unappealing enough that Bobby would go to bed and leave her alone, but the only purpose it served was to delay the inevitable request.

"Does Baby want Daddy to brush her teeth?" he asked in the voice an adult uses to speak to a child.

She nodded vigorously and opened her mouth. Bobby stuck the toothbrush in and began scrubbing away at her molars. She twisted her head this way and that, moving her tongue to one side and then the other so that Bobby could brush the insides of her teeth.

"I wish you'd be like this in bed," said Bobby. "Want to spit?" he asked, holding an empty cup to her lips.

"I swallowed it," she said, shaking her head.

"How obliging of you," Bobby muttered.

"But I want a drink of water," she said miserably, forcing the ugly game to continue.

Bobby rose from the couch and went into the kitchen to fill the cup. When he returned, he put his hand behind her neck and the cup to her lips.

"That's enough," she said after a few sips.

"Okay," said Bobby, "time for Daddy to put Baby to bed." He took her hand and placed it on the hard flesh between his legs, but Rose jerked her hand away and plunged both arms inside the sleeping bag.

"Pretend I'm a quadriplegic."

"Is Baby playing a new game?"

"I can't feel anything from the neck down," said Rose, reflecting briefly upon the occasional intersection of fiction and fact.

Bobby lifted her up and carried her to the bed, where he lowered her onto the right side. He plumped up the pillow beneath her head and then began to unzip the sleeping bag, but she stopped him.

"No, I want to stay inside the bag."

He shrugged and climbed into bed, jerking the covers irritably. "It'd be nice to sleep together

sometime," he said.

Rose didn't say anything for a moment. She was thinking about the silk comforter that they'd left behind when they returned home.

This past Monday, Bobby and I celebrated our wedding anniversary. The day got off to a bad start because we both had stomach aches. Apparently, a flu has been going around, and we were on the verge of catching it. Toward late afternoon, however, we decided to have a good anniversary despite our intestinal problems. We went downtown to have a photo made, stopping in at two different studios, one of which was not really a studio at all. The photographer strapped a little 35 mm camera around his neck and took us outside to find a scenic spot. By the time we had located what he considered the perfect place, we had collected quite a following of interested observers who wanted to watch the foreigners get their picture made. I was really annoyed because I wanted to comb my hair and smile for the camera, neither of which I felt comfortable doing with all those eyes on me. Bobby and I never dreamed that the photographer would take us outside for the entire village to gawk at. As soon as this rather arduous photography session was over, we went to another shop and had a real studio photo taken with red velveteen curtains in the background.

After having the second photo taken, we went grocery shopping. We bought packets and cans of food that had pretty drawings and exotic descriptions of the contents on the sides: curried goose, sugared dried pork, beef in hot pepper and sesame seed paste, dried fish, dace with black beans, and garlic-flavored crackers. Oh, and fried peanuts. Then we bought two wine goblets and returned home to begin the festivities. I set the table with a pretty phoenix-and-dragon tablecloth like the one I sent Mama for Christmas last year. And we lit candles to create atmosphere. Despite its rather shaky beginning, it was one of the most romantic evenings we've had here in China, partly because of the tablecloth and candles, but mostly because we were in the right mood.



Over our wine and tinned repast, we reminisced about our first meeting and our wedding, wondering where we will be on our next anniversary and how we will celebrate. After supper, we went to bed, sleeping with our silk comforters turned sideways rather than long-wise. Normally, we sleep with our comforters formed into sleeping bags — that is, we sleep separately tucked away each in our own comforter. But that night we decided to rearrange the covers so as to sleep close together. We have almost forgotten what sex is over here in this land of gray buildings and Mao jackets. Our interest has sunk to an all-time low, and we both agree that it is mostly because this society is just not a sexy society.

“We’re back,” she said, as if just noticing the silence and wishing to fill it.

“Yes, we’re back,” he echoed.

“I have to repeat it to believe it,” she said, hoping he would say something encouraging. “I’ve noticed the repetition,” he said curtly.

“How does it feel to you?”

“Bad.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I wanted to come back, but now that we’re here . . .”

“It’s hard,” he said.

“Yes,” she answered. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Something happened there—”

“Lots of things happened there,” she said.

“No, *something*. You’re not the same.” “People change as they grow older.” “I don’t mean that way,” said Bobby.

Rose knew that he wanted her to ask him to explain just how she had changed, but she did not want to hear his observations because then she would have to admit that he was right. And she would have to explain about the weekend in Pixian when they had climbed into the terraced tea fields and discovered a hut with broken shards of intricately-painted porcelain embedded in its roof. Then, like a door that refuses to stay shut and swings open at the slightest jar, Rose’s memory swung back again to the mountain road that led

down into the valley of Ya’an.

I looked out the window at the driver who was struggling to change the tire, but I could do nothing more than feel uneasy. Bobby lay with his head in my lap, having fallen ill the day before we left Chengdu for Ya’an. I stroked his hair and awkwardly patted his neck, keenly aware of the fact that the young driver, who seemed unable to complete his task, was getting soaked while my husband was lying in the dry warmth of the car, weak and vulnerable. I felt a slight twinge of scorn at the driver’s incompetence and anger at Bobby’s ill-timed ill health. At the same moment, however, I felt pity for both. The young driver somehow managed to look cheerful as he made his way back and forth from the trunk, where he searched for tools, to the right front tire. And Bobby’s feverish face looked boyish and handsome. I wondered whether his condition would prevent our making love once we arrived in Ya’an.

As the young driver began letting the car down off the jack, the uneasiness returned. I knew that had we not been American teachers, or “foreign experts,” we would certainly have been asked to get out of the car while the tire was being changed. Despite my uneasiness, however, I was glad not to have to budge. It was pleasanter to philosophize about the treatment of Westerners in Red China than to actually oblige the young driver by stepping out of the car and getting drenched along with him. He opened the trunk for what seemed the twentieth time and threw the jack in. I wondered whether our suitcases had gotten wet and whether the greasy jack was now resting beside them, perhaps smudging them. But these thoughts were swept aside when the driver opened the door and drew his wet jacket off, slinging it inside the car and throwing himself into his seat with a shiver.

“He looks consumptive,” I thought to myself as the female translator, an older woman with a nervous, fussy air, leaned over and felt the young driver’s back. She began exclaiming in Chinese, a frown on her broad, brown face, and patting at his arm with a towel that she produced from her black



vinyl suitcase. Seeing the suitcase gave me another pang of discomfort. Because of Bobby's illness, the suitcase, which had originally been resting between us on the back seat, had been transferred to the front to allow Bobby to lie with his head in my lap. Now the driver was soaking wet, and the interpreter had her knees jammed against the dash, her feet propped up on the unwieldy black suitcase. The young driver shrugged her nervous, mothering hand off his arm and waved the towel away. An unexpected and painful sympathy shot through me. Perhaps it would be an embarrassment, a loss of face, for two foreigners to witness his being nurtured or fussed over by a woman who does not have the claim on him that his own mother does.

I had little time to ponder this interaction, except to feel, along with all the other more analytical thoughts, a surge of erotic excitement. Something about the driver's pitifully wet body, wrapped in dripping clothes that clung to his torso, and head of black hair filled with gleaming water droplets reminded me of a movie I'd seen about the IRA. In nearly every scene, a young militant was out in the cold, wet Belfast weather, getting completely soaked and looking miserable and yet stoically so. But there was one scene in which he was making love to an older woman whose body was round in all the places where his was angular. The intersection of their two bodies, so different in contour but beautifully intertwined, seemed a perfect representation of the coupling of the brutal and the delicate. I found myself alternately attracted and repulsed by his pathetically thin body and dark, haunted facial features. The young Chinese driver

brought up his image, and with it came the same physical sensations of attraction and repulsion.

A small shudder sent shock waves across her body, and she was in the present again. "Do you know what tomorrow is?" she asked.

"I don't know. Thursday, I guess." He was looking at the ceiling, his arms folded across his chest.

"No, I mean the day of the month."

"Is this a trick question?" asked Bobby, still sullen.

"It's Valentine's Day," said Rose. "Did you forget?"

Bobby sat up in bed so abruptly and stared at Rose with such hostility that she was momentarily frightened.

"Valentine's Day?" he asked, incredulous, his breath coming in tight little gasps. "I can't even touch you, much less make love to you."

Is he angry enough to hit me? she wondered. How far down can I push him before . . . before what? She stopped and then finished the thought: before he'll do something that makes me desire him?

Bobby's chest had stopped heaving, and he flopped heavily back onto the bed. Rose decided it was now safe to continue.

"What do you want to do?" she asked, knowing that the question could not possibly be answered without telling about the day at the pagoda and the conversation she'd had through its barred windows, a moment in which the rattle and bang of public voices only made more apparent the tender voice of intimacy, and countless other moments that were so delicate in their content they often went unperceived by Bobby.

"About what?"

"About Valentine's Day," she said. "We ought to do something really special."

"Why, for god's sake?"

She wanted to say, perhaps to shout, "Because we're doomed to keep up the facade until we splinter under the weight of its falsity." But instead she said, "Because . . . it's the first Valentine's Day . . . you know . . . since we've been back," and the enormity



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



of the lie made her words stagger.

Bobby didn't answer. Instead, he rolled over and faced the wall, saying, "Put out the light, will you? I'm tired."

Rose was tired, too, but the source of her fatigue was a series of questions that set up a dainty little patter in her head and always culminated in a thunderous rush: how to say that bodies move through space more subtly there? that a flesh exotic in its difference lightly brushing against her own had capsized her? that she was now shipwrecked, unrecoverable?

II.

Rose woke late on Valentine's Day because it was raining and no sunshine came through the thin curtains. As she washed her face, she thought about baking something. She wanted to make a big, beautiful cake for Bobby, and she had just enough time before work to do that. She thumbed through the *Treasury of Country Cooking*, pausing to look at the recipe for Lady Baltimore Cake. Seeing the recipe reminded her of a long-ago Valentine's Day when the weather was wet and cold, just as it was today. Rose flipped past the recipe, shutting out the unpleasant memory, and stopped at the entry for Double Fudge Cake.

Maybe double fudge will bring the double happiness the Chinese speak of, she said to herself, wanting to believe in the possibility, doubled or singular, but knowing that even in the land of Taoism, Buddhist monasteries, and the *I Ching* there were no magic formulas.

She made the batter, but instead of pouring it into a cake pan, she poured it into muffin tins because someone had borrowed her cake pan and forgotten to return it. By the time she had covered the muffins with a pink glaze, she was almost late for work. She hoped that she could get home before Bobby and clean up the mess she had made. But, for now, she had to go.

On the way to work, Rose had an inspiration. As she approached the bookshop on the corner, she remembered a book of poetry that Bobby had

pointed out to her months ago. The book was expensive—a book hard to justify with a budget like theirs. But today was Valentine's Day, the perfect day for buying an extravagant gift. And, besides, the hurriedly thrown-together muffins hardly seemed adequate. Or such was Rose's reasoning. She went into the shop, walked straight to the back, and took the book off the shelf. She opened the book's front flap to look at the price. It said an even thirty dollars, but with sales tax added, the price would be one dollar and eighty cents more. Rose had no money, and so she put the book back onto the shelf and hurried to work, confident that in five hours' time she could make \$31.80.

Customers began to filter into the restaurant as Rose tied her apron and set her empty tip jar on

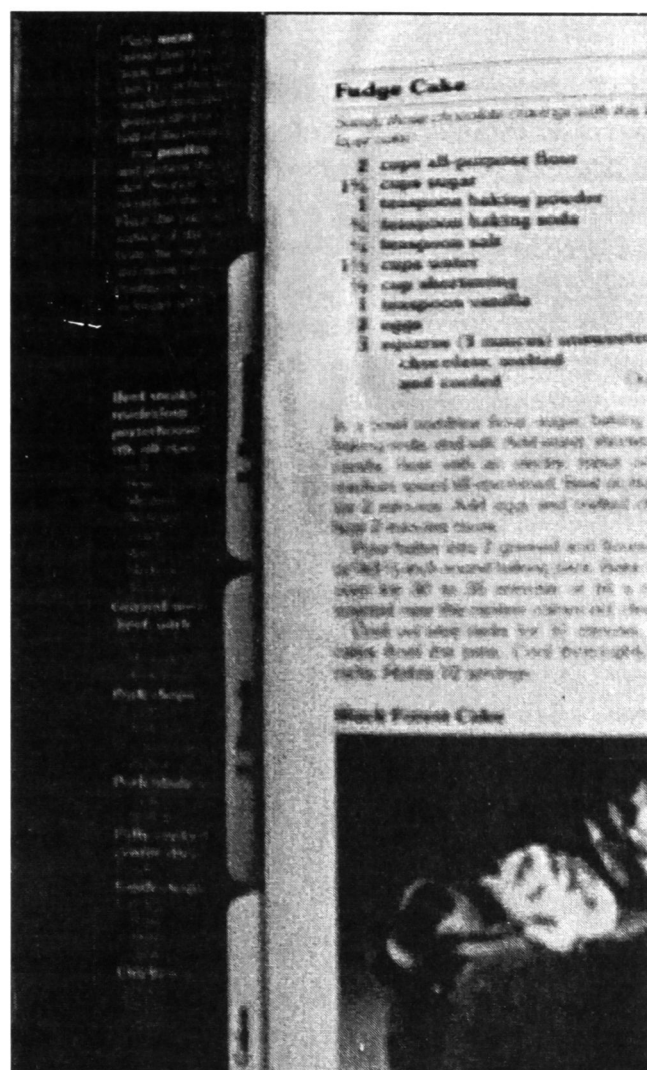


Photo by Joel Kendall



the bar. Today she had Section C, which was usually a good section, but because it was cold outside and her tables were near the door, it was the most unpopular. As she waited for a customer to sit in her section, she chatted with Hank, the bartender.

"Nice weather, eh, Rosie?" said Hank, wiping a coffee stain off the bar.

"It hardly seems right for Valentine's Day," said Rose.

"Oh, I don't know," shrugged Hank. "It probably suits that half of the world who hates the other half for having a sweetheart."

"Maybe so," said Rose. "But it doesn't suit me."

"That's because you're part of the half that has," said Hank philosophically. "How about a chocolate turtle?" He held a box of chocolates toward Rose.

"No, thanks. I lost my taste for turtles seven years ago."

"Sounds like a good story," said Hank.

"It's not."

Hank selected one of the turtles. "Tell it anyway," he coaxed.

Rose frowned but spoke. "Seven years ago today, Bobby borrowed money from me to buy chocolate turtles—"

"What, he didn't pay you back?" laughed Hank.

Rose thought for a moment. "Come to think of it, he never did. But that wasn't the bad part. It was Valentine's Day, and the weather was just like it is today, cold and wet. Bobby and I had just gotten engaged, and I had made him this Lady Baltimore Cake with thick, white icing and little red roses. . . ."

Rose paused as a customer moved into her section and sat down at a table for two. She filled a glass with ice and water and tucked a menu under her arm. "To make a long story short, Hank, the same day Bobby borrowed money to buy his 'sweetheart' chocolate turtles, he broke off our engagement," she said as she moved away from the bar.

"I can see why she don't like chocolate turtles,"

said Hank, biting into the turtle and taking a swallow of coffee.

When Rose returned to the bar, Hank had just eaten his second turtle. "You know, Rosie," he said, "you really shouldn't hold a grudge against a chocolate turtle. After all, you got the guy, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but I'm superstitious," said Rose. "Anyway, I'm not going to keep him unless I can make \$31.80 today."

"I thought Bobby was the one in the hole," said Hank, looking into Rose's empty tip jar. "What do you owe him for?"

"Nothing, but there's a book I want to buy him, and I need \$31.80 to do it."

"What, he's gonna leave you if you don't buy him the book?"

Rose laughed and moved across the restaurant to wipe a table. She did not tell Hank this, but she felt sure that Bobby would forgive her for everything if she gave him something really special for Valentine's Day. She thought to herself that the book would make up for all the days she had left the dishes undone, all the meals she had not cooked, all the groceries she had not bought, all the money she had not made, all the games she had played, and, most importantly, all the nights she had not been in the mood. The book would make up for everything she had done wrong. Or not done right.

Throughout the rest of the afternoon, Rose felt tense. The rain was keeping people in their homes and out of the restaurants. And her labor of love was feeling more and more doomed. For the fourth time that day, Rose poured her money out onto the bar to count it. Hank counted the change, while Rose counted the bills.

"You got five dollars' worth of quarters here," said Hank, stacking quarter on top of quarter, "and ten dimes here."

"I count eighteen greenbacks," said Rose, smoothing out the bills. "Eighteen plus six is twenty-four."

Hank looked at the clock. "Well, Rosie, you've got one hour to make eight dollars—"

"And not a customer in sight," said Rose. The



restaurant was completely empty now. She put the coins and the bills back into the jar and sat down on a bar stool.

Hank lit a cigarette. "I always thought the way to a man's heart was through his stomach." He blew smoke toward the ceiling. "Why don't you fix him a big candlelight dinner and forget the book?"

Rose thought about the mess she had made in the kitchen. "I baked two dozen double fudge muffins for him this morning."

"I'd take a double fudge muffin over a book any day," said Hank. "Especially if you baked 'em, Rosie." He jabbed his thumb into his chest. "Me? I don't have nobody to make muffins for my poor old hide."

The door of the restaurant opened suddenly, and four young people came in shaking the rain off their umbrellas. They glanced around for a moment as though sizing up the place; and then, without warning, they retraced their footsteps.

"There goes a good tip," said Rose, viewing their departure as a personal rejection. "It's going to take a miracle now."

"Ain't no such thing as a miracle, Rosie," said Hank, stubbing out his cigarette. "Just good luck or bad."

The door of the restaurant opened again, and the same four people re-entered, taking off their wet raincoats and closing their umbrellas. They sat at a big, round table for ten and talked excitedly. Rose took glasses of water and menus over to their table.

"There'll be four more of us," they said, holding up four fingers as though they were children telling Rose their ages.

She took their drink orders and returned to the bar. "Who said there's no such thing as a miracle?"

"What's the story, Rosie? Are they big spenders?"

"It's a wedding party," said Rose. "Their old dad's getting remarried."

When the wedding party had finished eating, they asked Rose to take a snapshot of them. As she focused the camera and told the men on the ends to lean in, she thought of the waiter in New Or-

leans who had photographed Bobby and her on their honeymoon. The picture had turned out so dark and fuzzy that it was difficult to tell who or what was in the picture. And Rose was superstitious when it came to pictures. In her view, if an event could not be captured on camera, then it hadn't really happened. That's how she felt about their trip to New Orleans and their honeymoon celebration at the restaurant in the French Quarter: it had never really happened.

"Say 'cheese,' everyone," shouted Rose, hoping this photo would turn out well. She did not want to be remembered as the waitress who botched the wedding picture and cancelled out a lifetime of marital bliss.

After the snapshot had been taken, the wedding party left, and Rose began cleaning off the table. As she sorted through the debris, she found bills hidden beneath napkins, pressed under water glasses, tucked between the salt and pepper shakers. She was like a child on an Easter egg hunt, hardly able to suppress cries of joy at the discovery of each new bill.

Hank was waiting for her at the bar. "Did you hit the jackpot?"

She waved ten dollar bills in the air. "Is this a miracle, or is this good luck?"

"Maybe a little of both," said Hank. "But just to be sure, I'd genuflect to the big man upstairs and courtsey to the little boy with the bow and arrow."

Rose took off her apron. "Mind if I shove off early, Hank? I want to get to the bookshop before it closes."

"Go ahead," said Hank, surveying the empty restaurant. "I think I can handle a crowd of this size."

She smiled and leaned across the bar to give Hank a kiss on the cheek. "Happy Valentine's Day!" she said as she pulled on her coat.

"Want a turtle for the road?" asked Hank, holding out the box of chocolates again.

"Nope," said Rose. "I don't want to jinx things now."

"Take my advice, Rosie. Forget the book and fix the man a good meal," said Hank.



"I know Bobby, and he likes poetry," argued Rose as she moved toward the door.

"Well, I can't say as I know Bobby, but I know men. Any one of 'em worth his weight in salt has an appetite. Ain't there poetry in a good appetite?" He waved as Rose disappeared through the restaurant door, and then he carefully plucked another turtle from the box.

Bobby was washing dishes when Rose got home from work with the gift-wrapped book under her arm. She rushed into the kitchen, wishing that she could wave a magic wand and make the mess disappear.

"I meant to get home before you did—" she began.

"So that you could clean up your mess before Daddy saw it?" he asked, turning away from the sink to look at Rose coldly. The fact that he was already playing the game bothered her. It was a bedtime game not meant for daylight hours, one that she usually initiated.

"Well, yeah," said Rose, putting the book down

on the kitchen table. "I wanted to get everything cleaned up before you got home so that we could have a nice, tidy Valentine's Day."

Bobby laughed, but there was no joy in the laugh. "A nice, tidy Valentine's Day. Sounds like a real good time, to me."

Rose picked up one of the chocolate muffins that Bobby had stacked onto a platter. It suddenly occurred to her as she studied the muffin that there was something wrong with its size. Each muffin was like a little droplet of love rather than a passionate torrent. Muffins are love fragmented, she thought to herself. It should have been a cake.

She put the muffin back on the platter with its eleven mates, all of which seemed to stare at her in accusation through the hard, pink icing. "The cake pan . . . it never got returned," she said by way of explanation. She seemed to be addressing the muffins rather than Bobby.

He turned to look at her briefly and then continued washing the dishes.

"Did you try one?" she asked.



Photograph (detail) by Joel Kendall

"I don't have much appetite for cupcakes," said Bobby. "I'm not a kid, and this is no party."

Rose sat down at the kitchen table and watched as Bobby scrubbed hardened chocolate batter off the mixing bowl. "Want me to finish that?" asked Rose.

"You've been working with dishes all day long," said Bobby, rinsing the bowl under the hot water. "Isn't that your usual line?"

Things were not going as Rose had hoped. She began absently picking the glaze off one of the muffins but then remembered the book. "I bought you something for Valentine's Day," she said, suddenly realizing that the book was not really for Bobby but for herself. The more barriers between them the better.

He pulled the stopper out of the drain and wiped his hands on a yellow dish towel.

"It's that book you've been wanting," said Rose, forcing herself to continue at a hearty clip. "I made just enough money at work to buy it. Hank thought it was good luck, but I think it was a miracle."

Bobby laughed that strange joyless laugh again but did not say anything.

"I bought it to make up for last night . . . I thought it would be something really special," she said, faltering.

Rose pushed the gift-wrapped book toward Bobby and began nervously fingering another muffin. Bobby looked at the book, but instead of picking it up, he pushed it aside and took the muffin from her hand. Once he had gotten the muffin from her, he did not seem to know what to do with it. Rose thought of a course of action that could be taken.

"Open up," says Bobby, gripping her chin and holding the muffin up to her mouth.

She shakes her head in refusal. "I don't want it."

He presses the muffin to her lips, and when she tries to turn away, he grips her chin more firmly. "Open up," he says again, but this time in the voice of an adult talking to a recalcitrant child. "It's something really special. I think you ought to try it."

He pries her lips apart and smashes the muffin against her closed teeth, smearing her chin and upper lip with pink glaze. "If you don't open up, I'm going to knock your teeth out," he says.

She opens her mouth, and he sticks his fingers, which have bits of chocolate clinging to them, inside. "Lick them, Rose. This is something really special." He forces muffin after muffin into her mouth, oblivious to what falls on the floor and what gets swallowed. By the time half a dozen of the muffins have disappeared, Bobby is covered with sweat and she with chocolate crumbs and pink glaze.

Bobby staggers out of the kitchen, and she sits blankly at the kitchen table. Some small thinking part of her is glad that Bobby is finally spending the rage that builds up in a humiliated man.

"What will he do next?" she wonders, feeling for the first time the stirrings of desire.

He returns a moment later with toothbrush and toothpaste. "Time to brush your teeth," he says, his voice hoarse. His hands are shaking as he squirts the sea-green paste onto the bristles. He stabs into her mouth with the brush, causing her to wince in pain as the hard plastic knocks against her gums.

"You're hurting me, Bobby," she tries to say, but it comes out in a distorted gurgle.

He twists the toothbrush this way and that, ramming it against the roof of her mouth and her tonsils, making her gag.

"Wanna spit?" he says at last, removing the brush.

She nods. Then he pulls her from her chair and forces her to her knees.

"It's hard," he said.

"It is?" she asked, her eyes falling to his still-zipped pants.

"Being back," he said, absently putting the muffin down on the table beside the platter.

"Oh," she said, disappointed. "Yes." A piece of chipped-off pink glaze fell to the floor, and Rose wondered why, oh, why Bobby never noticed the very small things that fall.



Out to Pasture

by Gale A. Riffle

Native grasses dusted white—
just enough to notice.
Brittle twigs break as I pass,
falling into dry crevices and cracks.

Cold wind swirls, needles
tattooing my skin.
Squinting into the fading light,
I ball my fists deeper into pockets.

As the rancher's truck reaches the fence,
Calves trot with mothers and aunts.
Overhead, a honking "V" of geese
turns compass-heading south.

The smell of dampened earth
is pushed ahead of the storm,
as I turn my face toward the clouds
to taste another falling flake.

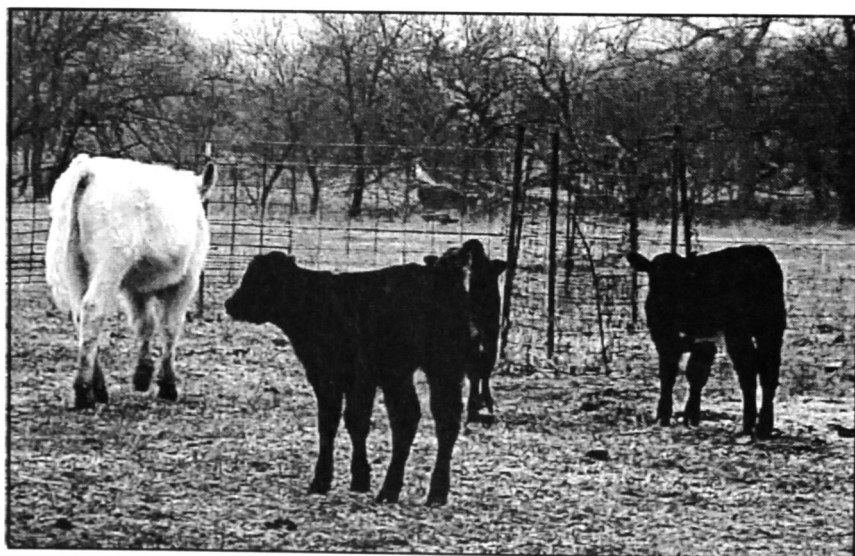


Photo by Joel Kendall



The Angel of Baseball

by Walt McDonald

Not much, a book of brittle pictures. My wife said, *Walt, it's yours*. Framed paintings were gone as if the walls were hostage. She showed me the silence, the bird cage empty since my sister sent the last canary away. My first week home from Saigon, I saw their names, my mother's chiseled in granite beside my father's, weathered a darker pink. We drove to the lake and abandoned acres, the rusted tractor and hay rake. The house was echo and bedrooms hollow as halls. My sister and brother said we could take it all,

whatever remained—mahogany piano with loose keys, dogs carved out of rocks, wild pewter geese, a thousand alabaster dolls. She said *Take these, take all of these*—junk souvenirs of baseball teams my father bought—glass paperweights and pewter mugs, one gawky angel of baseball with addled eyes and one arm longer than her legs. Our children took the paperweights and baseball cards, some odd ceramics, who knows why, and moved away. Dusty, stacked on a rafter in the barn,

the angel with goofy eyes guards jays that pecked her paint—beggars her glazed grin forgave. Barn owls and swallows no taller than the doll adopt her. I've found them crouched beside her, blinking. They bring her bones of mice and boluses like balls. She spreads bird-spattered wings above us all, blue eyes that seem to follow, not even blinking when we buck the hay. We hoist our grandson up on our shoulders to rub her wings for luck, hoping he will own it when we're gone.



Adaptation

by Carol Hamilton

Poachers leave wise flesh
intact, go elsewhere.
Elephants no longer grow tusks,
or rarely. How can a body
learn survival? Mine is slow.
I must instruct with switches
and a dunce's cap. And how,
I ask, can those lumbering
beasts, with their baggy knees,
teach their genes to such good effect,
all the while touching bark and leaf
with that moist inner flesh,
then wrap about nourishment,
draw what is needed close?
Maybe my very language teaches me ignorance.
My progeny's flesh bears the same
vulnerable pulse points as mine.
We perish together, holding hands.
Or maybe I am such a fool
that I still hold my ivory too dear.



Still Hanging

by David Galef

Daddy said he slept on the living room floor because he liked it there, but I knew he wasn't long for our fourth home in five years, not the way those crescent eyes of his would swivel past the furniture and out the window, down the driveway, toward Route 98 and the chug-chugging of trucks and beer. Breakfasts around the kitchen table were like a poker session, Daddy hungover but bluffing behind his newspaper, Momma upping the ante with a platter of fried eggs and grits, and the kids ready to fold any minute.

At school, people would tell us where they'd seen our daddy: In a borrowed Cutlass Supreme, barreling down a dirt road with a bottle attached to his right arm. Staggering about the lanes at Kiamie's, bowling gutter balls as often as he scored strikes (he'd been the league champion before he'd been our dad). Or just coming out of Doc's Eat Place at noontime, wiping his hands on those grease-stained overalls, staring down the alley and licking his lips at Sheryl's Live XXX Girls before heading back to his job at the bodyworks. Or not heading back at all.

"Son," he told me in one of his rare in-between moods, halfway between the loose grin and the flinty silence, "you take my advice. Get out when there's still time."

"Where?" I asked him. I angled my head toward the pine-fringed horizon, but he was mostly

blocking my view.

"Shit." He turned and spat in a wide arc that boomeranged against the wind. "If I knew, I'd tell you."

He finally lit out when I was twelve, leaving in the middle of the night when he thought everyone was sleeping. He packed most of his clothes in a cardboard suitcase but left his greasy overalls to dangle on the wash line like a headless daddy scarecrow. Weeks later, Momma cut them down with a pinking shears. Six months afterwards, Roy moved in. He was decent, just not sparky—the kind of guy who'd give you a pen set for your birthday. We never saw Daddy again, except in shadows from the basement and a sometime-ghost in the closet. My sister Angie got a job at Beulah's Beauty Supplies, but I stuck out school until I graduated, then left for Chicago. Moved four times in five years while passing through six jobs and lost touch with almost everyone. Now I work the graveyard shift at a printing plant.

When Momma died last month, I got a much-rerouted letter from Roy too late to attend the funeral. The letter also said that he was sifting through her old stuff and found some clothes that might've belonged to my father. I hear Angie lives way to hell-and-gone in Pasadena, but I might swing by.

I want those overalls back.



The Second Law

by Charles Edward Brooks

*Won't there be a fatigue
Of things,
Of all things,
Like that of the legs or an arm?
--Fernando Pessoa*

"He's thirty years old: born the very same day as Earl Junior. Has a master's degree from up North. He'll teach physics and chemistry. That's all I know about him, Mattie Belle."

"But who are his *people*. Fran? There's Gibbs and there's Gibbs, if you see what I mean."

"He didn't just go to school up North. He's *from* the North."

"Oh!" Mattie Belle Street let the question drop. In her ethnography, northerners formed a single homogeneous mass. It was futile to apply Southern notions of family to them at all.

A black woman stepped onto the screen porch with a silver tea tray.

"Thank you, Maida Vale," said Frances Willingdon. "It's cooled off pretty good now. You can go on home."

"Yes'm."

Even after the cooling off, the late afternoon remained torrid. But mid-August heat notwithstanding, the two ladies were taking hot tea. The hostess maintained certain rules, and whoever partook of her hospitality had to observe them. After filling the china cups, she spooned stiff whipped cream into both of them.

Mattie Belle dabbed daintily at her forehead with a lace handkerchief "What do Earl Junior and Sarah Frances think of you taking a roomer?"

"They've been after me to do it ever since their father died. They don't like the idea of me bein' here by myself at night."

"Couldn't Maida Vale sleep in? I mean, there's plenty of room in the basement."

"No, her family wouldn't like it."

"Oh!" Mattie Belle relinquished her line of thought. Blacks, too, formed a homogenous mass to which the concept of family did not apply. From time to time, an individual stepped out of the mass just long enough to weed her rose garden or clean her hardwood floors.

"Good afternoon, ladies," boomed a male voice from the sidewalk.

The two women answered in unison: "Good afternoon, Rector." Both between fifty and sixty years of age, in juxtaposition they created a mildly comic impression, for the hostess was as willowy as her guest was tubby. For long minutes they sipped their tea without talking.

A sudden chuckle from Mattie Belle revived the conversation. "Well, Yankee or not, it's been ever so long since anybody new came to Witness Hill. Maybe he'll shake things up a little bit."

Frances set down her teacup and frowned. "Mattie Belle Street: I never heard of such a thing! Being shaken up is one thing we *don't* need around here."

*

Mattie Belle Street cleared her throat. "The August meeting of the St. Perpetua Society, Frances Willingdon Chapter, will come to order." Twenty-four ageing belles closed their mouths on the instant. "Madam Secretary, will you read the minutes of the July meeting?"

The summer heat had reached its zenith. As the secretary's voice droned through the grand living room of the Willingdon mansion, the other women worked palm leaf fans and lace handkerchiefs busily to keep from falling asleep. In the kitchen, Maida Vale and another maid labored on



the spread that would follow the business session.

Frances had established the St. Perpetua Society twenty years earlier, after she and Earl Senior moved to Witness Hill and struck it rich with their Cadillac-Oldsmobile agency. The Frances Willingdon Chapter was the body's only chapter, the membership having adopted the name over the founder's gentle protests.

Just as mystics have characterized God by what He is *not*, Frances Willingdon, too, was defined by a negation: She was *not* a member of the St. Cecilia Society of Charleston, South Carolina.

Nor could she ever have been, even if she had belonged to one of The Families and had an education, for the members of said society are males. But she remained in ignorance of that fact to her dying day.

And no invitation to join was extended to her husband, a young filling station owner with neither family nor education. It was the lack of acceptance by the august St. Cecilians, among other things, that had prompted the move to Witness Hill—as far from Charleston as the couple could go without leaving the state altogether. Afterwards, Frances told all and sundry that she had been asked and had refused the honor. This Great Lie had dominated her life ever since.

The Episcopal rector in the new community had supplied her with the name of St. Perpetua, like St. Cecilia an early martyr to the cause of Christ. That Perpetua was pictured with a wild cow instead of an organ pleased the society's founder; the attribute bespoke rebellion and independence. According to its by-laws, the new society—whose membership was exclusively female—delved not only into music, but also into history, literature, the graphic arts, and even science. Religion and politics were officially banned from its agenda, allegiance to high church Episcopalianism and the Republican platform being taken as self-evident.

Following a long paper on the carpetbagger era in the Pee Dee region, the president closed the meeting. Maida Vale and her cohort glided into the room with trays of refreshments. "Ooh!" and "Ahh!" sounded dutifully from all sides as the la-

dies laid into the delicacies.

The rector's wife, secretary of the society, took a bite of Maida Vale's renowned lime chiffon pie. "Fran, I hear you're gon' take in a roomer."

Frances bristled ever so slightly. "Well, yes, I am. Mr. Gibbs, the new chemistry and physics teacher at the high school. Let me tell you: There're members of the You-Know-What Society in Charleston that take payin' guests. If *they* can do it, I reckon *I* can."

"He sounds like a real refined young man, even if he is from the North," Mattie Belle hastened to add. "I can't wait to meet him."

"A little fresh blood does a town good from time to time," Frances went on. "After all, didn't Earl and I move to Witness Hill from outside?"

And *that* argument said everything.

*

Maida Vale set down a silver coffee service before her mistress and waddled out of the dining room.

"Science is even in our by-laws, Mr. Gibbs, but we've never had anybody qualified to give a talk on it. I'm sure our members will be real interested."

The smooth young man at the other end of the table parted his lips slightly, as close as he ever came to smiling. At the high school they complained that he never laughed at all. "And what would you like me to talk about specifically, Mrs. Willingdon?"

"Oh, somethin' modern, don't you know." Frances lit a cigarette and poured thick black coffee into demi-tasse cups. "Somethin' our ladies won't have heard of before."

"Suppose I make a few remarks on cosmology: current theories about the origin of the universe and its ultimate fate? That's a subject one doesn't read about every day."

The woman smiled vaguely. "Oh, that sounds fine, Mr. Gibbs. I might even ask Earl Junior and Sarah Frances to join us for the meetin'. My children. They'd enjoy it."

The young man's unblinking gaze seemed to intimidate his landlady. As they talked she focused her eyes on a point over his head.



"I might explore a few implications, say, of the Second Law of Thermodynamics," Mr. Gibbs continued.

"The . . . ah . . . second law of . . .?"

"Thermodynamics. It states that a decrease of entropy in an isolated system is impossible."

"Oh!" Frances rang a crystal bell. "Maida Vale, bring us some fresh coffee, please."

"And things like proton decay. That's an intriguing concept, to scientists and laymen alike."

"Pro-tone decay? I declare, I don't believe I've run into that before. And then, that other: in-tro—"

"Entropy. It's a measure of the extent to which a system's thermal energy is unavailable for conversion into mechanical work—a measure of the disorder in a system."

Maida Vale set a pot of coffee on the table.

Frances lifted a bedimmed finger and giggled. "Well, I had right much science at the College of Charleston, but I don't believe we ever got into that." A sudden reddening of the fine complexion was not unrelated to the fact that she had never set foot in that institution of higher learning—or any other.

And then the Great Lie, which she could not resist articulating, in one variation or another, again and again: "That's one reason why I didn't want to join the St. Cecilia Society. They don't put enough weight on science."

Mr. Gibbs did not respond to her statement. Instead, he began to sketch out his address to the October gathering of the St. Perpetua Society. Almost everything he said sailed far over his landlady's head.

When he finished, Frances lit another cigarette. "The last time the bishop was here, he preached a real comfortin' sermon on that very thing."

"On cosmology?"

"No, not exactly. What he said was that there's no real conflict between science and religion."

Mr. Gibbs set his cup in its saucer with a clank. "Oh, but there is, Mrs. Willingdon. *There is.*"

In the kitchen, Maida Vale squeezed an ear against the swinging door to the dining room. As she listened, she pressed one hand tightly over her mouth, as though forcing back a scream.

The Willingdon mansion occupied a spacious lot next to St. Thomas's Protestant Episcopal Church. The church had formed part of life at Witness Hill long before the Willingdons had, and its name antedated their advent to the community by many years. The newcomers' attempts to have its name changed came to nothing.

For of all the saints recognized by Canterbury, St. Thomas was the one least congenial to Frances Willingdon, and she had persuaded her late husband to share her antipathy. Thomas was a *doubter*, and God's church had the duty to dispel doubt. The saint was a painful reminder of something that had no right to be.

In the dark Victorian living room of the rectory, on the other side of the church, Frances leaned back in a lady's chair and puffed on a cigarette. Through the bay window she gazed at a dainty Chinese maple tree whose leaves were already going scarlet.

The rector squirmed in his gentleman's chair. "But Fran, we have to interpret these things. Translate them into terms that speak to the modern mind—"

"Rector, the creed's as clear as can be. It's plain English. You don't have to interpret anything. *He will come again to judge the living and the dead*"

"But—"

"Rector, Earl and I put our money on that. We counted on it. Nobody else in this town has ever done as much for St. Thomas's as we have."

"Of course we're grateful for—"

"And then, what about chapter 19 of the Book of Revelation, where it says that Jesus is gon' come on a white horse with eyes like a flame of fire and a mouth like a sharp sword to smite the nations?"

"That's—"

"I'm askin' you flat out, Rector: *Where* is Jesus gon' ride that white horse?"

"*Where?*"

"Is it gon' be somewhere in that mess of dead stars and ashes? The universe is expandin', Rector. And runnin' down at the same time. We know that from the Second Law of Thermodynamics."

"From *what?*"

"Not to mention proton decay. Matter's last



gasp. There'll just be a few sputterin's of energy left. The temperature's gon' flutter around absolute zero."

"Fran, you—

"The dyin' universe, cadavers of stars and things, are just gon' crowd out heaven. There's no room for any white horse, Rector. No room for Jesus. And no room for the New Jerusalem."

Frances jabbed her cigarette in the ashtray and stared at the maple tree, magnificent in the September sunlight. The clergyman sat stockstill in his gentleman's chair. On the other side of the door to the dining room, the rector's wife shook her head in bewilderment.

*

Mattie Belle Street banged her president's gavel: "The October meeting of the St. Perpetua Society, Frances Willingdon Chapter, is hereby closed. Mr. Gibbs, I hope you'll join us for refreshments."

The smooth young man with the expressionless face nodded curtly. The rector's wife, hostess for the occasion, rushed into the kitchen. The remaining members and the three guests—the rector and Frances Willingdon's son and daughter—sat in stunned silence. None of them had ever been confronted with the thoughts just presented by the chemistry and physics teacher from up North. None of them had wholly understood them, either, but all had sensed a hideous fatality clotting over their heads as the guest speaker unrolled his vision of the end of time.

The appearance of the rector's maid, accompanied by Maida Vale, broke the spell. Everyone in the room, except for Frances Willingdon, started to talk at once. About anything and everything except the sidereal horrors unfolded before them only moments earlier. That the universe, being unbounded, would go on expanding. That all the stars would die. It was like learning the fact of mortality all over again, but this time on a truly metaphysical scale.

Aided by Maida Vale's lime chiffon pie, spirals in the dark room gradually rose to something like their normal level. And after a few of the rector's harmless jokes, at which everyone but Mr.

Gibbs and Frances Willingdon laughed uproariously, cheer prevailed in the gathering.

During the address, Frances had repeated the word *entropy* after the speaker from time to time. Otherwise, she had said nothing the whole afternoon. Now, waving away the plate which Maida Vale held out to her, she spoke in a hollow voice: "It's the Last Days."

The rector leapt into the breach of silence that succeeded her ominous words. "Fran, I heard a little story that I know you'll like—"

"Seven seals will be opened, seven trumpets blown, seven bowls poured out."

"A little girl was at church for the first time, and—"

"He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead I believe in the resurrection of the body, and his kingdom will have no end."

Earl Junior and Sarah Frances rose and approached their mother's chair. Mattie Belle Street exchanged a look of alarm with the rector and grabbed her old friend's sleeve. "Fran! Snap out of it!"

"Oh, I'd always hoped to see you in the flesh. In the resurrected body. I knew that old law couldn't get to *you*."

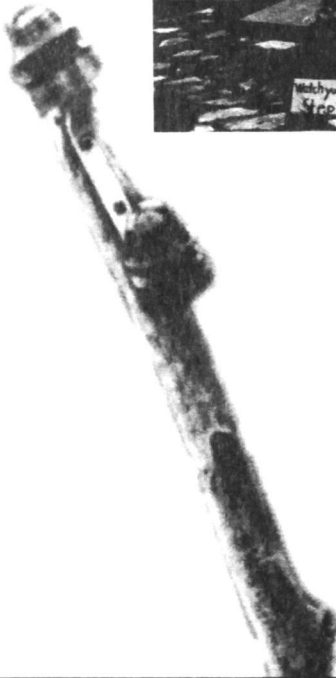
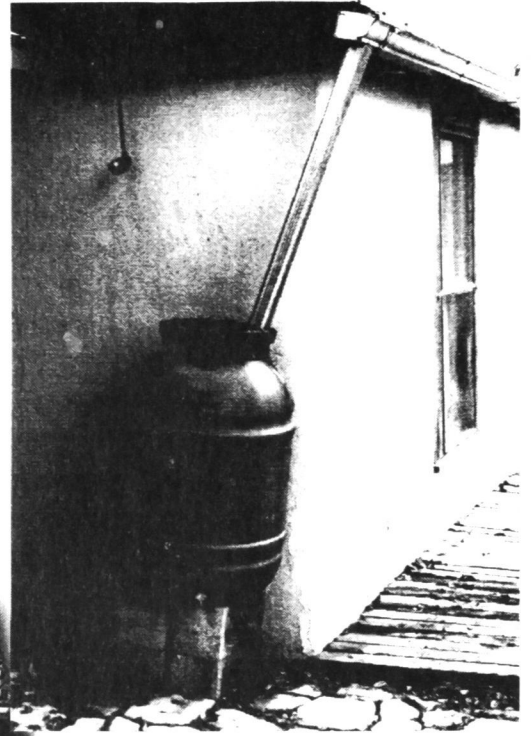
"Fran!" Mattie Belle squealed. "Don't you know me?"

The other woman turned her head sideways and looked at the tubby president out of the corners of her eyes. "I reckon it's St. Cecilia."

The membership, the rector, and the two maids followed in a procession as the son and daughter led their mother outside and down the flagstone walk to Earl Junior's shiny Fleetwood sedan. "I'll meet you in the emergency room," whispered the rector to Sarah Frances and trotted up the driveway toward his own car. The rest of the assembly stood motionless on the lawn, drenched in the golden sunshine of late October, as the Cadillac and the rector's Oldsmobile drove off.

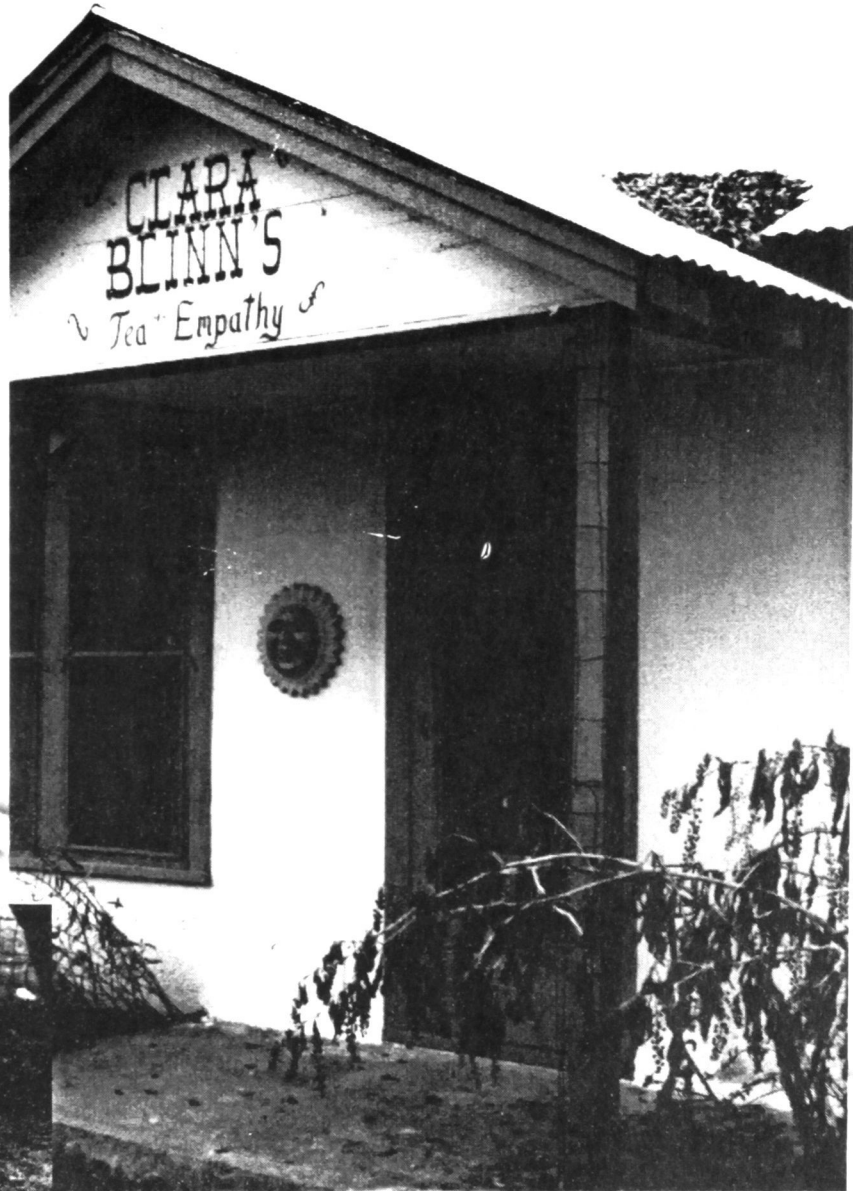
Alone in the Victorian living room, Mr. Gibbs rocked back and forth in soundless laughter.







*Photos by
J. Stoffers*



This poem was intentionally removed upon request.

SWOSU Digital Commons Administrator

3/9/2023

After Muriel Rukeyser's "Islands"

by Katherine McCord

But water surrounds.
It's not as if you can
climb down.
Boat to boat, you're asking,
swim? sail?
After all, swimming is all
luck. We have no gills,
and islands are all light.
Escape that.
Blue is
someone else's in.
Even the moon, round and perfect,
and born of dark,
lies
on water
because it has nowhere
else to go.

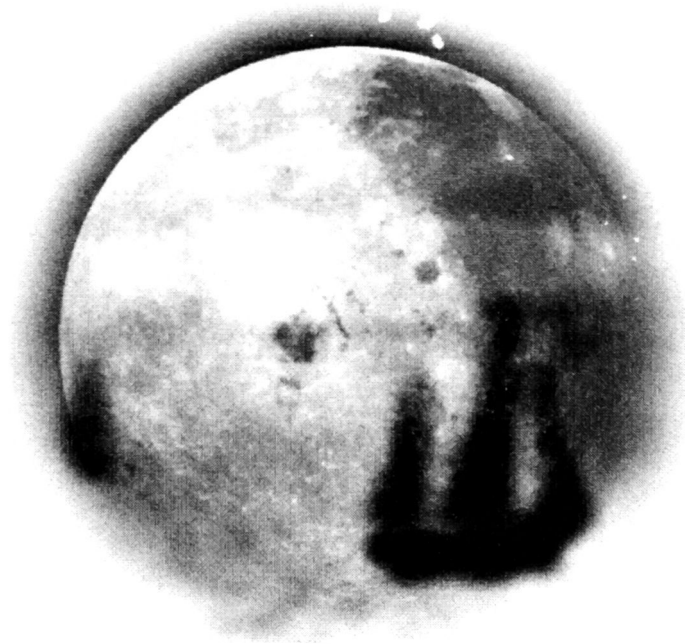


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



Down Comes the Night

by Kelley L. Logan

There is a hole in my front yard.
I don't know how it got there or when.
Covered by tenacious leaves, it hid and grew,
A self-sufficient

Sandy place, a slight-of-hand shadow, a small
Depression, cupping a stone and furled bits of leaf—
Easily overlooked, legged over on the way out.

Until one day turning, key in hand, day set,
A canyon yawned between the front step and the car—
Now no business will get me across.

Most days I sit on the bottom step
And swing my legs into space,
Listening to the wind blow.
Sometimes I lean over and drop a stone.



Knucklehead Anthem #73: Heart, You're a Hospital Now

by Jarret Keene

Nothing is worse than a dying patient,
Except the surgeon, who gives your life lease,
Cuts you open, removes a sick piece,
Stitches you up, and grows impatient
Of your bloated face. No wonder he dons
A mask, gloves. His scalpel is a scepter.
He's a priest to whom God must pray. Better
To chew prescriptions than become pain's pawn.

Darkness congeals like a forgotten bruise.
Tonight you will salvage narcotic bliss.
Each tablet, capsule, injection and dose
Is an angel kissing you with scarred lips.
Nurses read your chart over and again.
Nothing? No more pain? Then close the curtain.



Lost Keys

by Pamela Reitman

My father's sixty-four and brain-damaged. He arrived from Paris last summer with a briefcase of important papers and one large suitcase containing all of his possessions. I found him a place to live nearby where he could be on his own. He lasted less than a year.

Most of his later life he had been an actor. The last five years he had tutored French students in the English language. Now he's in the grip of paranoid hallucinations.

It's 1984 and I should feel lucky to have just secured a place for my father in one of the few existing Alzheimer's special care units. But I can't help feeling how awful it's going to be for him there. During my morning visit I saw patients lying rigid in contorted positions on Naugahyde recliners. Others swayed from heel to toe, endlessly spitting the same phrases into the air. All have substantially less mental capacity than my father does. This is what worries me: Dad having to live among the horrific forms of his own impending demise.

I have to pack him up for the move. His seventy-two hours in the emergency psychiatric unit run out tomorrow. At the end of Lyon Street, stone steps lead up to the three-story, turn-of-the-century mansion, which has been converted into a board-and-care for a handful of independent elders. The front lawn, long, rectangular, and bordered by a sidewalk all around, is a hefty piece of real estate in its own right. The grass, mowed short and watered to an intoxicating green, contrasts with the adjacent woods, the eastern edge of San Francisco's Presidio Park. The pungent smell of eucalyptus floats in the April breeze and mixes in the treetops with salty air blown in from the ocean.

My father's two small rooms on the ground floor, formerly servant's quarters, have always been quiet. Today they're tomb-like, filled with his absence. Everything appears to be in order, except for the unmade bed, abandoned in fear, the night before last. I imagine him tossing the covers, bolt-

ing out, oblivious to the hour, midnight, and his bare feet. My mind's eye still sees him, clad in his blue-and-white striped pajamas, gray hair spiked out in all directions, banging at my door in the dark of night. He thought he had come to save me from "them," people in his house who he was sure were out to kill me.

I pull his suitcase out from under the bed and spread it open on top.

When the emergency room doctor asked Dad if he could go home, he yelled, "No," with such vehemence it seemed the pressure of his voice would split the midline seam of his chest wide open. It was best for him to stay in the psychiatric ward, I keep telling myself. I couldn't have managed him in that state.

I take his good gray suit from the closet. Where he's going, he won't need this.

I found the special care unit in less than forty-eight hours. It's all happened so fast. One day Dad's independent. The next he's paranoid and psychotic. Now, the doctors have determined that he can no longer live on his own.

It's a handsome suit, the one he wore to our joint birthday dinner. Maybe he'll wear it again someday.

I pull a shirt from a hanger. It's wrinkled and exudes an unpleasant odor. The same is true for all the shirts. I open his drawers. The underwear is soiled. I'm disgusted. And panicky. He was always so fastidious. What was going on here? The balls of socks are separated by color. I unroll a pair and smell. Ugh. I go to the closet and spot the laundry bag in the darkest corner of the floor, empty. Why didn't the house staff tell me that Dad hadn't had any laundry to do? How come I didn't detect it?

I take the suit out of the suitcase and start to throw all the dirty clothes into it. At the bottom of the sock drawer, there's a glint of silver. It's a key. I hold it up, go to his front door, and try it out. It fits.



I remember telling him, the first time he lost his key, "Keep this one in a safe place, Dad." He must have taken pains to hide it. After all, his freedom to come and go was at stake.

Being here is as though I'm inside his brain the way it was these last few months. I'm so shocked that I momentarily become him: keep the key safe, she said. Here's safe, under the sock pile. No one will see. Ah.

Holding the shirt in hand, I imagine him thinking: where does this go? Am I getting dressed? Or, undressed? Here are other shirts on hangers and one free hanger, so, ah, this must be it. I'll hang it up. Yes. Maybe.

The mind source of this thought stream is a place that emits little bubbles of fear in a constant, steady stream. I imagine that in every waking moment, he fears the loss of memory, fears so profoundly that the fear itself may blot out the brain's remaining capacity to retain the event that has already happened. Then, in the absence of memory, the fear remains, unhampered by the mind's attempts to grasp at the past. It becomes a fear in, and therefore of, the present, fear of reality, of experiences that are not really happening because they're not making a neural impression that can be reconstructed.

Sometime later he wants his key. He doesn't rummage through drawers, because he doesn't recall having hidden it. The key has mysteriously disappeared. Or, perhaps, someone has taken it. And if that can happen, all reality is unpredictable. It's not difficult to see how a person would become crazed.

I'm troubled by how much I haven't understood, how happy I was to accept his eager smiles as meaning that all was well. Perhaps I should have been more willing to penetrate his privacy. Perhaps he took pains to make sure I wouldn't, to protect me. I'll never know. What hovers here is more than the stale body odor of an elderly man. Still stifling the air, it's the noxious fume of fear in all its forms, from shy timidity, through honest panic, to bald terror. It's an acrid smell, the bioeffluvium of paralysis, as my father stood motionless, shirt in hand, unsure of what to do.

There are other finds, two more keys and blue aerograms from Camille, the woman he'd been living with in Paris before he became ill. I gave him

the letters to keep, after reading them aloud, hoping her handwriting or the stamp might evoke a pleasant recall. Here's also a letter he attempted in return. Only one sentence, painfully scrawled, an introductory remark on the weather, followed by an unfinished phrase, "These days I've been . . ." How many hours did he sit with pen in hand? Why did he save it? So that someday she might know he had tried?

There's a page from his sketchpad, a small exercise. Short strokes, mainly yellows and oranges, pinks and greens — all light, bright, and airy. I would cry, if I could, over such delicacy and sweetness buried deep in this dark drawer. Both the letter and the drawing are remnants of abilities now entirely gone. I ache for the rest of the letter, the fully realized pastel.

I haul the suitcase and boxes to my car and head over the hill to see him. Knowing that life inside him flowed in the direction of love and art gives me some small courage.

When I arrive at the psychiatric ward, Dad appears from a doorway, as if someone pointed him in my direction and gave him a little push. He's heavily slumped in the shoulders. He looks down at the floor in front of him. Each step is labor. His slow motion peters out to a stop before he reaches me.

I walk over to greet him. His face is shrunken and wan. His dull eyes remain cast down. Little gray and white bristly hairs protrude from his skin, which has lost some elasticity and its high color. I want to believe he's playing the role of a senile man and doing a stupendous job of it. But his days in the theater are over. He's on the stage of his real life. Heavily



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



medicated, rendered too subdued to go mad again, he stares at the floor as if that's where he'll find his lost mind. I realize he hasn't been outside for two days.

"I'm taking him for a walk," I explain to the duty nurse. I lead Dad back to his room, pull his charcoal-gray cardigan, which has become shapeless and pilled, onto his limp body.

On the street, I'm not sure where to go. This isn't a pretty neighborhood. Dad may only just make it around the block, so that's what it's going to have to be. Maybe the fresh air will revive him. Instead, he recoils against a late afternoon gust of cool air, which has blown in strong from the ocean, preceding the fog. He puts an arm around me, not in his accustomed manner, but holding tightly and leaning his weight on my much smaller frame. I wrap both my arms around his waist to give him the support he needs. We walk this way, clinging to each other, shuffling forward slowly. Overnight, he's become old-man frail. Whipped by the wind, it feels as though he might perish in my embrace.

We walk to the end of the block, alongside the dreary walls of medical buildings, and round the corner. He has few words.

"I forgot to tell you . . ."

"Tell me now, Dad." Silence. We walk on and there's nothing of interest to point out. Not a flower, nor a tree. The noise of the commuter traffic assaults us.

"The way it is . . ."

"Yes? Tell me how it is, Dad." He only blinks, to moisten his eyes, dried out by the air. We're at the end of the block. Across the street is a small city park with a grassy field. He hasn't enough energy to make it there and back. Besides, it's a wide-open space, with no shelter from the weather. We continue around the block.

"Even so . . ." His words are severed from thought and blown away on misty wisps of fog into the colorless sky.

Back on the ward, I sit next to him on his bed and rub his back.

"I found a new place for you." He might not understand, but I feel obliged to tell him anyway. I speak slowly and pause between each sentence. "It's a nursing home. But it's a special place for people who have

Alzheimer's. You'll get good care there."

He nods slightly, but I can't tell whether it's a real response or an empty gesture.

"Tomorrow you'll go there. Tomorrow. I'll come get you."

His face is blank. I take it in my hands, hold my palms against his scruffy cheeks, still cold from the outdoors but with a faint warmth underneath. I kiss his forehead. No response. I bend his head down toward me and kiss the top of his head, pressing my lips gently.

"It's me," I whisper, "your daughter."

I move my lips slowly over the top of his head from one side to the other, covering the whole expanse of his bald crown with soft kisses.

"I'm here."

I tilt his head up and kiss the bridge of his nose between his brows. My lips barely land on each eyelid, then on his cheeks, nose, jaws, and chin, my kisses defining his face. I hold mine squarely in front of his, a few inches away, and reach down with my eyes into his vacant ones.

"I love you dearly."

There's a little quickening from the dark netherworld and the smallest rise of flesh on the top of his cheekbones.

"I'll come for you tomorrow, Dad. In the morning."

Back at home I sit on the couch, while the washing machine churns its first load. The fog piles up against the back door to the garden. From out in the bay the foghorn moans. My thoughts are scattered by a tear in formation, not in my eye, but in a crevice of my chest. Water molecules coalesce there into one large, pear-shaped drop. It hangs, as in a well, cradled against my heart, awaiting a force of emotion to press upon it and energize an upward flow.

Sorrow is slow, seepy slow. It washes back against the cleaved heart. The low groan of the foghorn invokes the might and power of the teardrop. But it continues to cling to the inside, afraid of its own release. Even as I sit here, the neurons in my father's brain sputter and fizzle. I feel abandoned. I seek to be free from loss. Bring him back, my heart calls. But there's no answer. Only the fog's lament. And unwept tears.



Backroading the Chutes for the Pinkasaurus

by Michael Catherwood

The blood of those days was effortless and bright,
and after a breakfast of beer and eggs,
we jumped into the Jeep armed with fishing
poles and stink-bait. Joe ground those gears to nub
and wound through flat rolling hills to the chutes
where we casted for Falstaff and beef jerky—
an occasional carp or gar tugged at our lines.

The country hit a flat spot: no odd jobs
besides the occasional janitor
placement— my own, a gynecologist's
office where paperweights doubled as anatomy.
Basically, enough change to buy beer
and the prized Chili-Brick from Safeway. Joe
and I were easy to please, his wife was not.
The nutritional value of Chili-
Brick escaped her. "It's cheap," he would counter.
The door swinging shut with a loud "Damn!"
"How can you stick a woman who hates brick?"
And after she left for work, we stared
into the years ahead where we had no
women and plenty of blame between us.
The fact was, we didn't care. We knew life
would finally drag us down, stick us in warehouses
and dead-end jobs where we would pull the days
and years and decades off the wall like shit paper.
So we drank beer and simulated a great
philosophy of selfishness— still
they are the only days I miss. The wind
and dust scrubbed us clean in a top-down
Jeep four payments due, and we slid into
the Forget Store lot and picked up a case
then lost the whole mess behind us
as if it could never catch us, and I'm
not sure it ever has really found us.
All that dust behind me still hasn't settled.



Moving On

by John Grey

Even with the clothes long packed
I'm still squeezing stuff inside
this suitcase. Maybe it's the view
from here. Maybe it's the names
of neighbors, the taste of coffee
with friends.

How many times have I introduced
myself, announced, "And this
is my wife, Gale." How many places
have seemed as temporary as
maps sketched on a black-board.

My stomach's cramping up though
it should be used to this by now.
Once every year or two we move.
We follow the job like it's the
alpha bird on a migration.

We hope we leave something of
ourselves behind each time
though we don't know that.
We write letters, we telephone
at first, but then we meet
new people we will someday
write to or call.



Width of a State

by Melissa Stephenson

On the way home I drove through
small towns where football is the only
school activity. Driving always gives me
time to think, weigh everything twice,
the darkness, the impending miles,
the conversations with you
that occurred only in my mind, the slow
trucks with heavy loads of hay.
I lit a cigarette and cracked
the window to avoid filling the car
with my loneliness. I felt
I had traveled for hours retracing
the same tired path.
I drove until the darkness eased
into a notion that dawn would come.
On that long October night
I circled wide of my sorrows
through the weathered hush.



West Texas Encounter

by Gerald Wheeler

I eyed a tattered Star dancing above a TRADING POST sign propped by 2 X 4's on a rusty tin roof of a dirt-colored barn on a desert horizon. A few minutes later, I parked my pickup between a Studebaker with a missing windshield and spring seats, and a bullet-riddled Ford like driven by Bonnie & Clyde. I scanned a school bus that crashed before I was born, a fleet of tractors used in the dust bowl, skeletons of Harleys and Schwinn's. I negotiated a patch of hubcaps thick as weeds and an obstacle course of spare tires, then came upon an altar of gleaming insulators surrounding statues of Jesus and Mary. I tripped over a half-buried wagon wheel, bumped into oil drums the size of boulders and a wheel barrel pouring horseshoes and bolts. But, when I saw a Texas long-horn skull charging over a bead-curtain door, I couldn't resist.

Suddenly, I gazed at walls of trumpets, clarinets, trombones and cellos, stacks of dusty band

uniforms, a wardrobe of granny dresses, rows of porcelain dolls, shelves of silverware, antique bottles and rusty tools. Looking for a pocketknife, I wandered into a room packed with machetes, picks and shovels. Soon I came upon a bearded man in a corner. He was crouched in a trance over a Radio Shack TRS-80 computer. He was wrapped in an Indian blanket, smoking Bull Durham, wore a weathered Stetson, faded jeans and scarred Tony Lamas.

When I tapped him on the shoulder and told him what I wanted, he blinked his steel eyes, retrieved a paper from a printer, stood and said, "Sorry. Outta pocketknives, but I'll sell y'all mine if y'all sign this petition to git Amtrak ear." Then he pointed the stub of his index finger out the window at a red caboose next to a mountain of railroad ties. Said, "My name's George Black. I live over thar. I'm the president of the chamber of commerce."



Photo by J. Stoffers



Cooking Lesson

by Pamela Stinson

Florence Potts didn't need to watch the time. The ticking of the small mantle clock could be heard in all five rooms of their house. It was enough to keep her in rhythm as she prepared the midday meal for Raymond's first visit back home. He would be there with the girls at a quarter to twelve, three hours away still, and she would use every minute of it to prepare a meal fit to serve at exactly noon, the same time as they always ate.

Already, she had laid out the roast when she awoke at five o'clock that morning. She had tended the garden, nursing the drying plants to steal one more growth from them before the August heat shriveled their efforts. She had cut up chunks of carrots and big hunks of onion to keep the roast company. It was ready to slide in the oven. Later, she would slice the last okra from their garden, dip it in flour, salt and pepper, and fry it up nice and crisp the way Raymond and Riley liked it. Joseph, her first born, liked his okra softer, but "pay day ain't every day," she thought. Joseph still had his wife. The okra would be crisp.

She had also decided she would make a cake from scratch, the only kind worth eating, something that woman of Raymond's, with her boxed mixes and city, liberal church ways, never learned. Flo's mother had taught her how to make a cake more than fifty years ago, back when women recognized their God-given place and could make that

place a home. As soon as Flo had been old enough to pull up a stool and reach the kitchen counter, her mother had shown her how to sift the flour. Mother would scoop it up from the bin and turn the handle on the sifter with the small red knob, while Flo watched the flour float down into the glass bowl. It reminded her of the snow falling in the water globes Johnson Mercantile displayed each Christmas. Mother had made everything graceful and polished, and she had spent a lifetime of afternoons teaching Flo the art of being a wife and mother.

Shortly after the November when Flo turned eight, Mother had taught her how to quilt. The quilt frame hung suspended from the ceiling in Mother's bedroom. Each winter evening, Mother would loosen the rags holding up the frame corners and then lower the frame over the bed she shared with Papa. Then she and Flo would kneel at the frame as though in prayer, stitching for hours, their hands moving in tiny, lilting stitches. Time and again, Flo would study her mother's soft hands, memorizing the movements and distance between the needle's sinking into the calico fabric and rising again through the cotton. Nothing felt better than to hear Mother brag about how small Flo's stitches were.

The women from the Eastern Star organization sold quilts every Saturday in the town square. Once a month, Flo and her mother would walk by them on the way to the store for dried goods. The quilts were bold, with yellow flower appliques and bright blue log cabins pouncing on the viewer. Flo had paused in front of them once, almost admiring the colors until Mother had stopped her, quietly pointing out the long stitches. "They're large enough to hook a toe under," Mother had whispered, and Flo had giggled and walked on. Mother wouldn't even stop to look at the quilts that had been knotted instead. "There's someone who has

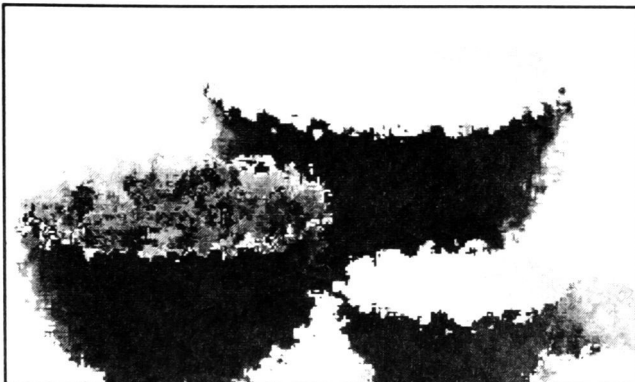


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



no pride in her work," Mother said, and Flo had silently nodded agreement.

In the summer time, Flo had helped with the garden and canning while her five older brothers went out in the fields to pick cotton. Mother had showed her how to pickle cucumbers, keeping them as crisp as when they were first pulled from the vine. She taught her how to strain berries, capturing the seeds in a cheese cloth the fruit stained a bright purple. And she taught her how to make bread, kneading the dough just the right amount of time so that it rose to a feathery height. All of this her mother had passed down to her, sharing the wealth of countless generations of mothers, of farmers' wives, of Christian women.

Men didn't appreciate this learning and they weren't supposed to. Riley might grunt his approval when he bit into his morning biscuits, though he would never ask how she made them so light and fluffy. Mother had said a woman's recipes were part of her mystery, like the delicate curves she hid beneath her apron strings. They could be uncovered when properly bidden, but should never be flaunted. It was enough to see Riley clear his plate, sopping up the last bit of butter and honey with the remaining crumbs. Then she could feel quiet pride in a job well done.

Flo had intended to pass all of this knowledge on to her own daughter, but it never happened. Joseph had come, then Raymond. Then the winter she no longer talked about, when the daughter she should have had quit growing, died inside of her.

She had told Riley something was wrong, she couldn't feel the baby moving any more. He had smiled and said she "always fretted like ol' Blackie did over a new heifer." Pretty soon, she'd be stomping at the ground. When she had shown her hurt,

he had tried to soften it by adding that, "All women worried. Wait until the doctor's visit. See if everything ain't just fine."

"No," she had said. "It's different this time. I can tell." Then Riley had grown impatient and had looked at her the same way he did when she asked him to check a noise in the night, and he knew it was going to be the shed door come unlatched and banging in the wind. Nothing else. He refused to talk about it any more.

So she had waited, and when the bleeding started two days later, she told herself it was God's



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

will. She was meant to serve men, only men, and she would dedicate herself to doing it well. And to the best of her memory, Flo thought, she always had, even during her season of Job, when God had tested her.

The wooden spoon beat the cake batter wildly against the glass bowl as Flo remembered that winter. She forced her hand to slow down, smoothly blending the cake batter. Little movements were better.

Raymond deserved good food. Raymond deserved a good woman who would fix it for him. Raymond deserved more than that woman had ever given him. That woman, that Salomé, that . . . Flo would say worse if she weren't herself a Christian woman.

Regina had sunk her claws into Raymond like a wild animal, and Raymond hadn't known how to shake her off so he said he loved her. But that woman didn't know what love was. Animals cared for their young'ns better than she had. They had seen more mothering from the sheep than that woman ever gave, and her running off proved it.

Flo had known her kind from the start. Regina'd come waltzing in their house every Christmas, face painted like a two-dollar floozie, and she'd plop down her fancy, crystal serving dish like the Lord God, Almighty, had lent a hand in making Jello with her. It was all show. A gawdy red dessert, forced into a mold so's you wouldn't know it was no more than colored sugar water. Regina's face had crumbled as fast as that Jello when Flo had stirred it up into her plain serving bowl and set it on the table. But Regina needed to be taught. Men were supposed to have their stomachs filled with more than fluffy desserts. And they were supposed to have sons to carry on their names even if it meant their wives couldn't fit into their skin-tight jeans. Men needed more than a woman like Regina.

Raymond had been too good to her. He was a smart boy, but soft, much too soft, always had been. As a child, he was the son who flinched when the cattle had to be branded, and once, when a deformed lamb was born, he had hidden away all

day, tucked away in the tree line, far enough from the house so he wouldn't hear the bleating when what had to be done was done.

"He's too soft for his own good," she had told Riley, and Riley had agreed, and when their gentle mare, the one they'd had since Joseph was a baby, broke his leg in the brambles of the back forty acres, Riley took Raymond and a rifle and they took care of it. And when, many years later, Regina had threatened to leave Raymond if he wouldn't relent, wouldn't let her leave the babies at home to get a paralegal job that paid next to nothing anyway, Flo had whispered to Riley again, and Riley had pointed out to Raymond that Joseph's wife Amanda had given up her career for her family. Amanda knew what was important, and any woman should be able to learn that. It was only a matter of time after that. A matter of time and gentle, small movements.

"Them girls need a woman around," she had told Riley, after Regina had left. And because Riley had agreed with her, he talked to Raymond, and the boy had listened, but he still had them claws in him. So Flo had waited until the right moment, until the first idea had settled in, and then she had told Riley, "Joseph's working too hard. He needs some help at that store." And Riley had nodded again and done the talking, and now Raymond had a job. It was planting seeds, that was all. The men could go out in the fields with their tillers or their noisy combines and they could stir up the ground for all to see. She was happy to put in the small seeds and then know she'd taken a part in the growing.

The girls would be there soon. "Best get the cake in the oven now," Flo thought. Later, she would mix another one. She would make the girls watch, and she would teach them her trick about eggs. She'd show them how you could crack eggs in a measuring cup and swirl it around so that your shortening didn't stick to the sides when you measured it. Mother had shown her that so many years ago.

It was a good trick. Knowing how to make things turn loose.



A Little Liaison

by H. Bruce McEver

A failing moon rises between the twin spires
of a ghostly Cologne cathedral
that loom over the old Roman city on the Rhine
like great spaceships that never got home.

I meet the wife of an old friend
at a nearby cafe.
She is with a date
who's brought her flowers
and an obsequious grin.

She tells me her husband's
enterprise struggles in the east.
He spends too much time there.
She tennises at ten,
there's a new apartment in Nice,
a new Mercedes, and yes . . . her new friend.

I remember their wedding day in Paris
and the incredibly handsome pair;
also, their first child pinned in a blue blanket
to contain him while daddy
ran a smelter in Tennessee.

I excuse myself early
and walk a damp stone-inlaid street
of antique dealers
who sell without sin the freshly unearthed
shards of their Roman past.

Like little European affairs
and those twin gothic spires
that took six hundred years to build,
we blacken
with our burning of coal.



Belongings

by Edward Locke

I don't know how to come to terms
With this bird's death.
The manner, cause, impertinent —
The swallow lies beneath
Bold silver maple leaves, confined
With shine enough
For any trill that dulls its owner,

For iridescent fluff
That flunks live wit and irony:
Wingless with worms.

How swallows view my limbs or ears,
I plead ignorance.
They may, as I hike near their flights
Toward barns, thumb beaks at chance
And perch within my space—people
Show less than wind
Or rafters, figuring what counts;

No swallows would rescind
My death (if fit to intervene)
As I would theirs

Unless a choice arose—my good
In opposition
To creatures. Even should I find
An altruistic vision,
I'm stuck, I'd still at the fork's tale
Sprinkle my species
With preference, walk human-centered.

Yet, given profound reaches,
Would birds save us, but first all birds?
Who thinks they would?



What If Emily

by Thomas David Lisk

had had to work, to get up at 6:30
every morning, make her own breakfast,
and her father's and brother's and sister's
breakfasts, and wash the dishes in time to be
at the office by 8:00, where she slaved all day
at a job she often convinced herself she enjoyed,
though maybe all she enjoyed was the feeling of virtue,
of having accepted the responsibilities of a family,
which kept her from a gloomy leisure
in which she might, almost frantic with despair, endite,
"There's a certain Slant of light"



The Escape Artist

by Ryan G. Van Cleave

After the raving success of such feats as Houdini's Water Torture, The Crush, and The Hanging Box—which involved eighty-eight gallons of canola oil, an old-fashioned one ton safe, and a naked Amazon who wore nothing but a grass skirt and splinter of bone through her nose, though this show-stopper was usually shut down after the first night by local officials, claiming it was a “health hazard” while refusing to say exactly why—no one expected something like this. The Zircarelli Circus psychologist (Bilbo the Bush-Pygmy, actually, and though he never received a degree per se, he did take a section on abnormal psychology twice when he was at Rutgers in the 60s) spoke with him at great length and even resulted to prodding him with Ma Kettle's Sippin' Bourbon, the best squaw south of Ottuma, Iowa. But it was all to no avail: Erik the Escape Artist had become claustrophobic.

His fiancée, an Egyptian sword-swallower named Nephthys, was out-and-out pissed. Their combined incomes kept them in luxury, far surpassing the squalid life in the ragbags and gillys where they'd perfected their talents. Now all Erik did was sit on the blue vinyl loveseat in their double-wide, watching taped episodes of *Jerry Springer* and *Sally Jessy Raphael* he'd traded Al the Strongman their old Atari 2600 system for, including all the games she still liked. Dig Dug. Robotron. Everything.

“Something about being cooped up—it just makes my skin crawl,” he confessed over a third helping of Fruity Pebbles. On their 27” console TV, a five hundred pound black woman was pummeling a white grandpa with her purse, claiming he slipped a roofie into her strawberry spritzer and commenced to steal her virginity at a Sig Ep party twenty-three years back.

Nephthys hurried into her gold-colored armbands, brass bustier, and leather skirt covered

with tiny ianthine ankhs. She stood in the doorway of their trailer, letting August Alabama air steam into the room, the sunlight slanting across her dark body in a way that made her more squat, emphasizing the curve of her twice-tucked love handles.



Photo by J. Stoffers

“Someone's got to make a living around here,” she hissed.

Erik put down the plastic cereal bowl to sidle over and fast-forward a ginko-biloba infomercial. There'd been a remote, but no one'd seen it since that tequila party where Bilbo bet he could sing the entire score to *Brigadoon* from inside the freezer. He was right, though he later confessed it took a week to stop pissing slush.

The trailer door slammed. One of the plastic McDonald's Happy Meal toys—Ariel the pencil sharpener—shook off the knick-knack shelf. It cracked like an egg upon striking the floor. Erik pressed an almost-empty glass of iced tea to his forehead, letting the drops of condensation run unchecked down his face as he wondered just how the hell things got to be this way.

Erik was a born escape artist. He burst from the Goat-Faced Lady's womb in a flail of arms and



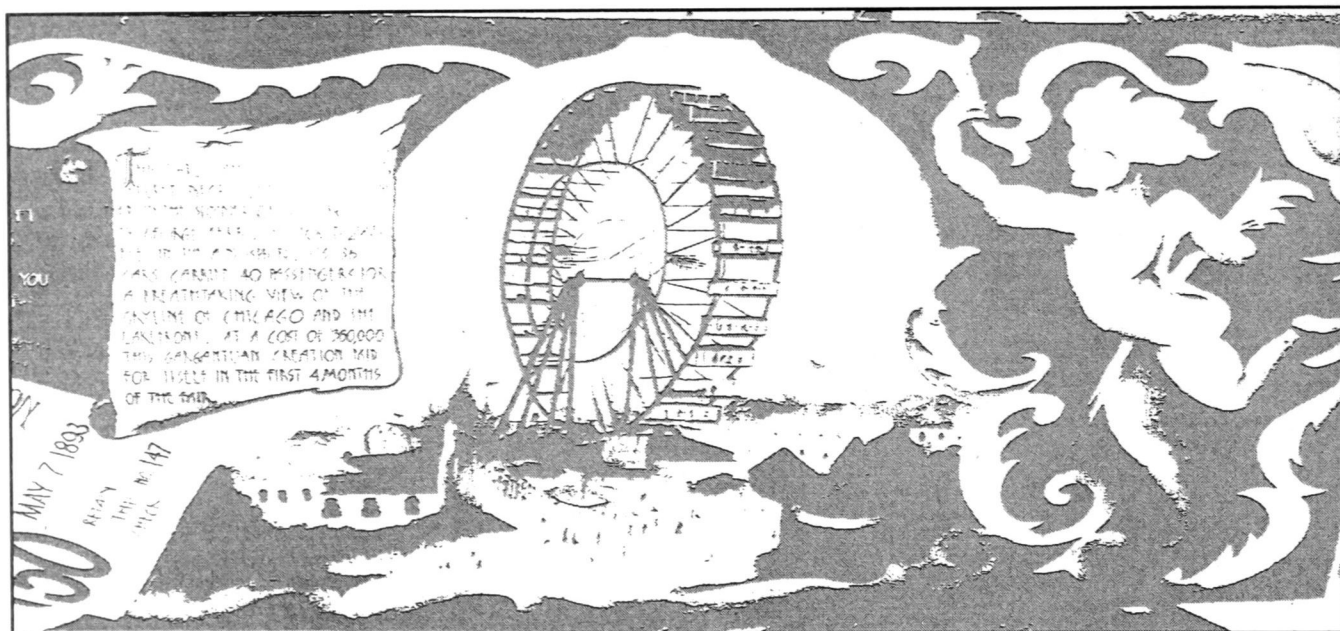


Photo (detail) by J. Stoffers

legs that took only eighteen seconds flat. No plastic carousel mobile distracted him enough not to slip through the PVC poles of the crib his father had built into the back walls of the ten-in-one, a freak show tent. Even unscalable mesh walls of the playpen were no match for his teeth. And the T-strap of a child seat? Erik was loose in nine seconds.

"Erk?"

Rufus Zingarelli stood just inside the doorway, silhouetted by the afternoon bright. Despite Hilfiger clothes and forty-two dollar haircuts, Rufus was a phenomenally ugly man. He had the face of a stillborn piglet. Still, he was Erik's uncle.

"Come in. Just catching some shows," Erik said, leaning forward to freeze the black woman mid-snort as Jerry told her "I'm not a doctor or anything, but it seems to me you're addressing the symptoms instead of the problems. What we're talking about here is self-esteem, right?" The crowd roared.

Rufus didn't come in. The silence grew oppressive. Weakly Rufus lifted his hand, then let it fall. He was sweating passionately.

"Is this it?"

"My body's pretty much given up a year back. Bound to happen, Rufus." On wet nights, he had trouble breathing. His collarbone had cracked

twice, a femur once, and all but three fingers had been snapped more times than he cared to remember. Dislocations? He stopped keeping track long ago—it was part of who he was. Escaping from a metal box or straight-jacket and set of half-inch chains didn't always go right. By his own reckoning, he was dead twice over.

"What's this really about?" Rufus asked.

For the briefest of moments, Erik thought he meant the talk show. Outside, the pipe-organ music frolicked along well enough without either of them. Like a songbird that would not surrender. He pulled up the Harley t-shirt he was wearing and blotted his face.

"I'm through."

Rufus' jaws bunched and shifted. "You can't leave me in a lurch like this. What would Dina say?"

"Don't talk about her."

"She's *my* sister."

Erik's body tensed. "You run off like her and you give it all up. Everything. For all I care, she's dead."

Leaning against the corner where the hide-a-bed popped free was the coffin, seven feet of reinforced stainless steel. Even in the motley decor of faded parchment circus ads, 70s shag carpeting, and rainbow string of Christmas lights that

swooped from the nest of stuffed monkeys atop the fridge to the sliding bathroom door, the coffin did not fit. It seemed to suck all sound right from the room. Its front reflected the dots of rainbow light like the Mississippi's face during Mardi Gras. Or like looking through a Coke bottle at stars.

Rufus followed Erik's eyes to it.

"You owe me something, Erik. You owe this circus something."

"To hell with you."

"Jesus," Rufus said but left it at that. Moments later, he left in a self-conscious shuffle.

Erik refused to watch his uncle leave. Finally, he rose, turned off the TV, and ambled to the port-hole-shaped window. Even through the heavy chintz curtain, he could feel the press of bodies outside, one up against the other, all that oily flesh rammed together in the narrow labyrinth of alleys that snaked between rides. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't remember not feeling this way. And to squeeze into a coffin?

But he was alongside it, looking at his face looking back at him from somewhere within those billions of molecules that somehow held that steel together, locked it into a shape so firmly that it was immutable. Erik didn't think he looked scared. At least his reflection didn't. But appearances only counted for so much. A fresh, well-polished poison apple would still kill you.

He shuddered and dumped out the ice tea, then refilled with a double Gibson. Extra onion. And a Granny Smith wedge.

With an Orioles cap and purple muscle shirt, Erik slid through the crowd like a shadow. Every brush of another body against his caused him to recoil, all the muscles and tendons within him to tighten and pull in as if in defense. He almost ducked into the alcove behind an elephant ear grab-stand to catch his breath, regain his nerve, but he had to see her. In the years they'd been together, he'd not once seen Nephthys' act. Erik needed to see those shafts of death-hard metal disappear into her mouth, all those swords be devoured between dark lips he knew as well as his cadence of his breath.

There was a good crowd. Twenty or thirty encircled the painted cheese barrel platform where she stood, making sinewy movements with her arms and waist. Starlight winked off her costume and more than half the guys there wouldn't have been able to say what color her hair was, Erik realized with a start. Exotics was an understatement.

The rapier with the sharkskin pommel went in smoothly, slowly and showily to milk the ooh's and holy-shit-would-you-look-at-that's. When the top of the pommel rested fully upon her lips, the skeptics beside Erik began even as the next blade began its slow descent.

"Retractable blade. Gotta be."

"Maybe she's got some tube down her throat. She just lines the blade up inside it and lets it slide down. Like a sheath."

"Mirrors. A smoke and mirrors job."

"Nah. Retractable blade."

Idiots, all of them. Each night when she returned, Erik was the one who helped load up the cotton swatches with iodine and that gelatinous goo from the medicine cabinet. He was the one who attached it to a dowel rod and eased it between her lips, past the gap where tonsils should've been but had been removed with tin snips years back, when the circus was too far from any hospital and her tonsils were the size of sausages. He was the one who coated the scratches and slices in her throat with dark, sewage-stinking ooze, raising and lowering the rod as he turned it, like he was dusting a curtain. Or painting a pole.

And the way she shuddered with each pass of the swatch—eyes pinched shut, fingers crooked into her palms, a small grunt from deep in her chest as if in orgasm. These were the times he loved her most.

He needed to see the reason he was able to do this to her each night. He needed to see what caused this.

"It's a god-damn scam. She's faking," said some wise-ass high school jock to his girl, a blonde who looked about eleven.

Erik couldn't take another minute. He ran back to his trailer, his mind working with unexpected



clarity. That jock had it right: whether she swallowed those swords or not, it *was* all fake. Every bit of it.

Lynda came by just after eleven, prime-time to rope in the last round of suckers. Tinny music leaked in with a flash of ash-gray moonlight as she eased the door shut.

"I've only got fifteen minutes. This'll have to be quick," she said while fixing herself a drink. "Want one?"

Erik shrugged from where he sat on the floor, doing deep breathing exercises he'd read about in *Reader's Digest* to combat anxiety. Perspiration bled into his eyes and stung.

"Suit yourself. I was just talking to . . . God! It's like an icebox in here." She went over to the thermostat and kicked it up a few degrees.

He switched to pushups, doing them one-armed like in his brief stint with the marines. Thinking back that far made him dizzy, as if the weight of all those years was heaped on his back like fifty pound bags of popcorn seed.

Lynda shed her gauzy shirt and black silk trousers, then took a drink and peeled off her undergarments. Every move was a flirtation, an invitation. The thing that'd first drawn him was her eyes, like a splinter of dusk that roiled with latent energy. He wasn't even sure what color they were, though he'd stared into them long enough that he should've known, but somehow they called to him as the distant splash of ocean water. Like most carnies, he'd never learned to swim.

"I've been thinking that we should take a vacation together. Maybe Puerto Vallarta," she said, then paused to knock back the tail end of a second Mary Pickford. "Boy, am I cooked."

Just like that, she said it: cooked. And Erik knew what it meant. He was getting to know her despite himself. He redoubled the pace of the pushups and tried to ignore the growing feeling of refrigeration in the room.

Erik felt fingers on his back, wet with oil maybe, or maybe just his own sweat, but they were



Photo (detail) by J. Stoffers

rubbing, kneading thick stress-knots from his flesh with a strength he couldn't have imagined in such small, well-formed hands. With the knuckles of one hand, Lynda traced the line of his jaw, then opened her fingers to caress his throat.

Rain ticked steadily against the curved metal roof as she doused the bedside lamp and they clung together, their bodies tainted gold by a flash of lightning. The air was tainted with ozone, her lips with vodka. He did not feel safe but he succumbed anyway.

Alone in the king-sized bed, he'd dozed and jerked awake, sometimes to the thunk of a coffin lid shutting. The windows were cracked open and still he was baking. He fumbled a half-empty cup of water off the bedside shelf and drank.

Nephthys materialized at his side and cooed, "Miss me?"

"You bet."

She pressed up close. "You sat in here tonight, all by your lonesome?"

Indeed, he didn't think about Lynda. Try as he might, he couldn't recall what had happened earlier that night. It was as he'd slept, or been in some kind of daze.

She snuggled up to his back, her arm draped over him when he noticed it. A stink. A cloying, moldering smell like in a graveyard. No, it was a feeling, the crawling of a hundred caterpillars down

his throat and across his genitals. No, it was everything at once, closing in. The entire circus was collapsing atop him. Somewhere, Rufus was screaming, stabbing a finger at Erik's picture and damning him. Suddenly, he remembered.

Erik scrambled for the door.

Everything was dark and wet, though the rain had long ago stopped. The cotton candy kiosks, the elephant ear grab-stand, all the hanky-panks and other games, the Tilt-A-Whirl, the four story Ferris Wheel, the thick power cables connecting everything like a huge umbilical cord. A watchguard had to be cruising the grounds, but he was nowhere in sight. It was just Erik and the gaudy glamour of a darkened, dripping carnival lit intermittently by security floodlights.

"What the hell are you doing? It's cold out here!" Nephthys said, hugging her robe tight as she sloshed towards him.

The ground stank of urine and fungus, over-ridden only by the unsavory pine disinfectant the food vendors used to scrub down grab-stands. Rain had done nothing to wash away all the unpleasantness.

Sirens wailed in the distance, grew louder, then louder, but died away with a moan that became an unconscionable silence. Erik couldn't stand quiet so absolute that he could hear his own breath as he could now. It flooded him with guilt, made him think of the rancid apple smell of Nephthys' throat ointment.

"What's going on?"

"Shah." Erik was not clairvoyant as Lynda was,

but he felt images, impressions that were vague and confusing. It began the night of his new trick, simply called The Casket. That was also the night the claustrophobia struck. They'd locked on the manacles, then blindfolded and placed him into the steel coffin just like they'd rehearsed. But when the locks snapped into place, shutting out the world from the inside of the coffin, it became too much. A kaleidoscope of every bleak mood, each innocence-extinguishing childhood fear, all the nightmares that'd ever stolen hours of sleep were wedged into that moment. One teeth-grinding scream and that show was over.

This night, though, Erik's nerves were assaulted, like dragging barbed wire across exposed veins. He stared into the plenitude of stars and thought about the immensity of space, which made him feel lonelier than ever. Some things you simply could not escape, he realized.

"We need to do it."

"Huh?"

"The Casket. Right here. I'm going to do it," he said, nodding as if hearing those words was furthering his resolve.

"Now?" Nephthys asked.

"Yes. Now." He could breathe again.

Together they lugged the seventy pound coffin out of their trailer and laid it in the mud. No one came out to What-the-hell's-going-on as Nephthys snaked the chain through his linked arms, around his chest, then over and over until looked like a ridiculous parody of the Tin Man.

Nephthys gave him a strange look. For the briefest of moments, he thought she might ram one



Photo (detail) by J. Stoffers

of her swords down his throat. He wouldn't have tried to stop her.

"Don't do this for me. If you're not ready," she said, letting the unspoken part hang between them like a thick, darkening fog.

He inched over to the casket and frowning, she pulled the eyeless executioner's mask over his head and helped ease him into the velvet-lined box that had been tailored to fit him snugly. Just like that, he was inside.

The casket top shut with a snick. Then came the muffled clicks of the locks that clamped the lid down. A current of fear sizzled up Erik's spine and his concentration slipped. *The third time's the charm.* one part of his mind hissed. *The third death counts.* He felt the hollow part within him deepen.

An "Oh, God" slipped from his lips.

He was in a casket. His nose only two inches from the top. The outside of each arm touched a wall. No room to move. No room. No.

Like in those lousy Disney movies he watched as a kid where the years would pass as a hand reached down and tore pages off a calendar, his own life was peeled away, bit by bit, as if the fear constricting his chest was a knife removing layer after layer of an onion until there was nothing left. All the knowledge he'd ever had about escaping, about breaking loose of confinement had vanished into the nothingness that was slowly grinding him down. It was a cancer metastasizing in his lungs and stomach.

Out of this growing sense of purposelessness, of helplessness, he found definition. His voice. It'd been incessant since the top shut, but it was only now that he heard it.

"C'mon, Erik. C'mon, c'mon."

It calmed him. Reminded him who he was. What he was. Erik the Escape Artist of the Zingarelli Brothers outfit. Erik the Great. Erik the Conqueror. Erik, He-Who-Can't-Be-Held. Erik, who had purpose.

And then the hood was yanked off through a clever manipulation of teeth, lips, and jaw muscles. Then Erik shed the chains with tiny shiftings of joints and muscles, worming the links slowly to-

wards his ankles where they bunched like a dead metal snake. It took longer than it should've, but there was no rush.

Erik took his time locating the hidden catch that popped the side panel open and he eased out, unable to keep from laughing as he slid headfirst into the mud (where the curtain would've hidden him from view, had this been on stage).

"You did it. You're back," Nephthys said, arms akimbo as she regarded him hungrily. Without her constant tugging, the robe folded open, revealing her dark skin that was the contour of a deep starless night.

Erik held her face in his hands and planted a kiss with as much tongue as he could muster. She pushed him off. Hard.

"Jesus! What's that for?"

For the first time in recent memory, Erik smiled. "For the star attraction."

"Where the hell are you going? You just licked your problem."

"Only the symptom, Nep."

And before she could figure out just what the hell he was talking about, he retrieved a paper bag stuffed with talk show videos, then headed to the giant maple where he'd parked his steel-colored Volvo. He didn't even look back as he got in and roared the engine to life.

On the gravel road atop the hill to the north, Erik stood like a statue of himself, casting his stone glance at the Zingarelli Circus that spread below him like a well-lit junkyard, the only faithful part of his life for twenty-one years. Somehow it all looked smaller, like children's toys spilled from a storage chest. The type of mess that'd have to be cleaned up before supertime, once it was noticed.

He eased back into his Volvo, popped the clutch, and let it roll down the hill, the festival of lights and dark skeletal frameworks of the rides slowly vanished beyond his rearview mirror. He opened the windows and gave the Volvo a whole lot of gas. His body was asking for anything except calm.



The Squad Car

by Rynn Williams

A forty-nine Dodge with squishy balloon tires,
black and white and solid as a milking cow,
with an engine that tore the heart out of anyone
wrong-side-up this side of the line.

Saturdays, once around the loop—no candy
fingerprints, no scuffmarks, no giggling.
Battered-metal headset taped up in black,
the alien intellect of dials and knobs.

How the gears shifted—gently
easing
into full throttle, rousing like an animal
or maybe a ripe flower falling open, petals
dropping away one by one, revealing its crux.

He'd drive me careful past the bank,
the five-and-dime, speed up down the stretch
and back by the old road. Lulled and regular,
all the Saturday town-people standing

in their Saturday places, slightly in awe
on the far side of our glass.
I needed the safety of the car,
the way it circled the plaza like a planet

orbiting the sun, the continuity,
quick lemon-wax clean, rounded
chrome hubs and fenders a force field.
Something too, of the moon: light and dark.

And the word itself: squad. How it implied a unit,
a posse of two. Oh that coal blue uniform,
pressed till it shined, with the badge,
like the north star, there on his chest.



Driven to Distraction

by Jane McClellan

That snaggle-bald, gray-haired
toad of a driver, one arm propped
out the window of his rusted
pickup, flicking the ash off
his cigarette and looking everywhere
but straight ahead, can't be doing
more than 30 in this 55 mph zone.
He's slack as a back-alley hound
nosing for garbage, slow as payday—

hard to believe he was ever young
with a waxed and detailed pickup
high-assed on oversized tires,
a shock of sideburned hair, 20-20
eyes focused dead ahead as he fintailed
between lanes, going 55 in a 30 mph zone,
blowing dust off hoods and trunks
as long as the fuzz buster held
its peace. More sense than a pup,
but a brain that must have grown
down instead of up.



You Have To Go Through Bowlegs

by Ken Robertson

“You have to go through Bowlegs to get to Maud.”
Salesmen joking in dim hotel lobbies
would tell the tale and laugh boisterously
while killing time and swigging bootleg booze.

Tiny towns in southern Oklahoma
with names made legend by a rutted road
that traced a Chickasaw trail between the two.

A wizened desk clerk grinned: “Life’s like that—
you have to go through Bowlegs to get to Maud.”

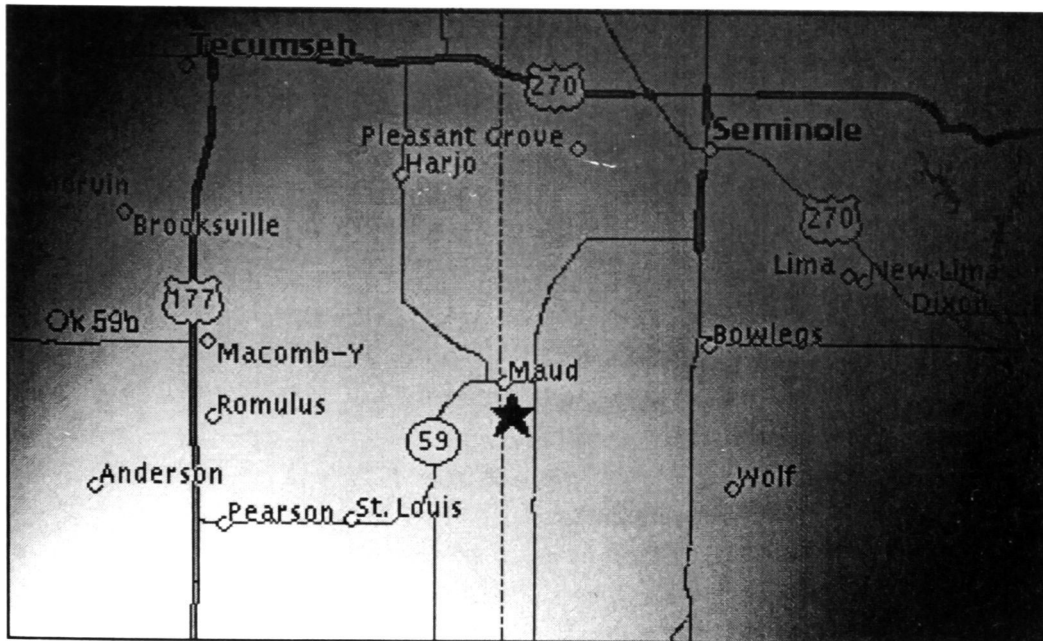


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



John Sprockett Lies Dying in a Livery Stable

by Robert Cooperman

Dear God, it hurts,
the little bastard too blind
for a merciful heart shot,
too stupid to see I'd goaded him
with slaps so he'd ambush me.
I didn't mind being a cur
so long as I didn't know a woman
like Sophie was in this world.
But she left for her puny, green England.

This sod-buster stands laughing,
my whole damn life useless murdering
'til I met Sophie, and could spout
the songs and poems I'd been saving—
ashamed in front of whores, who shied away
because I got my face ripped by a grizzly.
Dime novelists made it a hero's battle.
I lay crapping my trousers
while he raked me for curiosity,
then ambled off, bored at my lack of fight.

"Finish a bad job well, you fool!"
But he won't, marveling
at my writhing like a trapped fox.
He'll swing, and I'll laugh a welcome
to the eternal furnace brigade.

Once, when I sang to Sophie,
her eyes went dream-shut,
tears like wet diamonds
glittered her face.
I wiped them with a finger,
everything melting into angels.

That grizzly's squatting on my chest again.
Sophie, say a prayer to drift down to Hell
and bring tears to my eye
that'll burn sharper than these claws,
hotter than Satan's Bessemer fumes—
to help me remember I was loved. . .



An Account of the Death of John Sprockett, As Told by Sid Collier, in the Saloon in Gold Creek

by Robert Cooperman

Me and Sprockett was sharing a bottle
when Kid Leeson and his gang stomped in.
“It’s the English whore’s lap-dog!” Leeson roared.
Whores, trappers, miners dove for cover.
Sprockett smashed the bottle
and scoured one face bloody-clean.
I got another in the gut; he’d take hours to die.
Two bullets tore John’s chest,
but he put a third eye in a forehead.
We fired together, two more buzzards fell,
teeth shattering on the saw-dusted floor.

Now, it was just him and Leeson,
shit-stained scared, facing Sprockett alone,
even with blood soaking John’s shirt.
Leeson bided, Sprockett crumbled
slow as an avalanche so far away
it looks like sifting flour.
Leeson smiled, but I blasted
the cheating weasel’s jaw off;
he exploded like a stick of dynamite
was wedged between his teeth.
“Thanks, Sid,” Sprockett gasped and died.

What you mean my hand’s too fluttery
to hold a gun? You want to step outside?
Then buy me a drink and shut up!
That’s my best friend’s blood on this floor,
the greatest gunfighter I ever heard of,
and free with his money, unlike some,
tight as skunks with everything but their stink.



Sylvia Williams, Boarding House Proprietor, Hears of the Death of John Sprockett

by Robert Cooperman

When folks in the territory shouted,
"Burn the darkie witch!"
John dared them harm a hair on my head,
not that I needed his help
so long as I had them in my sights.
Fires in the night I dreaded,
bad as slave-catchers—
ice-eyed haints that went after Samson
and got too rough, because he swore
he'd die before stooping for cotton again,
his back bent like limbs on a hanging tree,
eating slops worse than those tossed to hogs
and what I'd pass him from my kitchen:
Missus worried 'bout her looks, not accounts,
sobbing into her mirror over crow's-feet
and Master down in the quarters,
peevied the catchers had killed Samson,
and me grieving, but little I could do
short of poisoning that fat, white devil.

I headed west, eluded dogs and guns
'til I climbed the Colorado mountains.
There, exhausted, I stumbled on John Sprockett;
he fed me up, made me listen to him recite poems
like Jeremiah used to whisper the prayers
Master'd beat him for reading,
so he memorized them and gave us hope.
I fell asleep, John lickety-splitting
from rhyme to rhyme like sawing logs.
He set me up in business
and I paid him back regular as blossoms,
knowing he needed the cash for the drink
I never grudged him, elsewhere.



He was the one white man—murderer, whiskey,
scars and all—I would've let fall for me,
to help me forget, for a minute, Samson.
We never had children; I used to thank Jesus
and all the gods of Africa for that:
no more slaves for Master to sell like mules,
beat like hounds, turn into bed-wenches.
Now, I want something of his good black seed,
his face fading after all this time,
and John gone too,
his curses and bear-trap sense of honor
driving out dainty trade on many a night,
not that I ever bothered to complain.

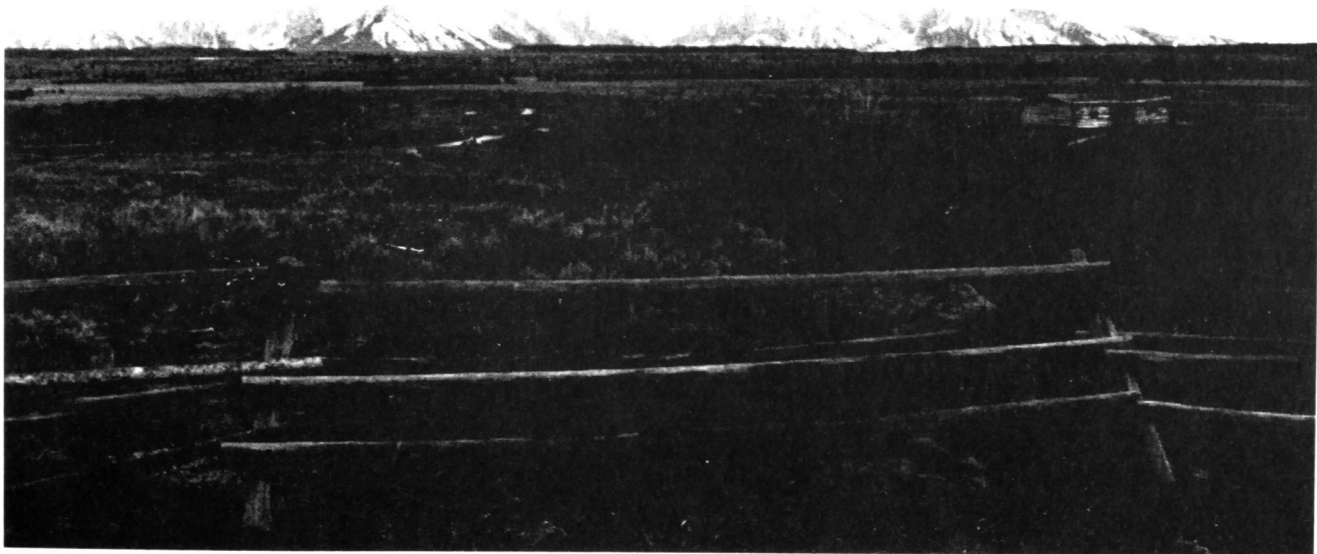


Photo by Gerald Wheeler



Letter, Richard Lovell to Sophia Starling Bennett, London, on the Death of John Sprockett

by Robert Cooperman

My Dear Madam,
I fear to bear sad tidings,
but rather than have you shocked
by unscrupulous scribes of the press
or the fabrications of dime novelists,
my wife and I declared it our duty
to inform you of the untimely,
if not wholly unexpected, death
of your late guide, John Sprockett.
After an altercation in a saloon,
he was waylaid in a stable,
not, I'm sure, the conclusion
he would have chosen for his career.

I won't soon forget Mr. Sprockett:
our mountain cottage trembled
when his boots stamped onto our porch;
our barn shook as if a battle were raging
within its walls for his tainted soul,
and I feared my wife might succumb
at the sight of the Luciferian scars
he bore like medals from our beloved Majesty.

Again, I apologize for any inconvenience
this news may have occasioned you,
though the birth of your first child
will more than offset any passing flutter
you may have felt for Mr. Sprockett's demise.
When I feared my own Emily would be lost,
I took solace in the girl she gave me
with what seemed her last strength.
But the climate proved salubrious
not only to myself, but to Emily as well.

I remain, Madam, your faithful servant.
Should you ever travel the Rockies again,
we would be honoured to once more receive you,
the society of Englishmen denied us,
fear of my consumptive relapse
confining us to this magnificent prison.



From "The Death of a Badman," a New Dime Novel by Percy Gilmore

by Robert Cooperman

"John Sprockett squinted into the late sun.
'I must be getting old,' he muttered,
'letting Kid Leeson maneuver me into the glare.'
Not that Sprockett feared dying,
his life over when Miss Sophia Starling had boarded
the east-bound out of Denver.
Still, pride was at stake: not to go easy
as a crippled fawn in a puma's claws.
He'd already faced down one grizzly,
his face scarred like cracks in ice;
and he would make The Kid pay
for insulting Miss Starling's virtue.

"'Make your play,' Sprockett sneered,
saw the rifleman on the whore house roof too late.
'Those girls never did shine to me,'
he laughed in the instant before he fired.
From the moan, he knew he'd finished Leeson,
but an ambush rifle slug caught him like a cougar
biting deep into his collarbone.
He stooped and fired at the roof,
switched hands, and fired again.
As the gunman toppled from his coward's perch,
Sprockett fell, blood pumping from his chest.

"Sheriff Casey and the whores gathered.
'A glass of your finest,' Sprockett rasped,
'to toast Miss Sophia Starling,
the one pure woman on this evil earth.'
Lola sobbed, 'If someone'd said that of me,
I wouldn't've ended trading clap with shaft rats.'
She kissed the good side of his face,
then leapt back as if he'd spring:
a gut-shot grizzly, one lunge left in its claws.
He lay still, deviltry and poems fluttering away—
smoke from a campfire rising to badman's paradise."

To be continued in future issues.

The poems that comprise *The Badman and the Lady* are part of *IN THE COLORADO GOLD FEVER MOUNTAINS*.
Purchase information may be obtained from Western Reflections Inc., P.O. Box 410, Ouray, CO 81427.



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Robert Cooperman's second collection, *The Badman and the Lady*, is part of *In the Colorado Gold Fever Mountains* from Western Reflections, Inc., P.O. Box 410, Ouray, CO 81427. 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.

David Galef teaches at the University of Mississippi. His fiction writing has been published in the *old British Punch*, *The Prague Revue*, *The Canadian Prism International*, *Shenandoah*, and *The Gettysburg Review*. The University Press of Mississippi has accepted his short-story collection to be published in the year 2002. Galef is currently working on his third novel.

Albert Goldbarth is the author of numerous books of poetry, including *Heaven and Earth*; a cosmology, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award; *Jan. 31*, which was nominated for the National Book Award; and *Across the Layers: Poems Old and New*. He has also published several volumes of personal essays. This May, Ohio State University Press will publish *Saving Lives*, a new book of poems, and Graywolf Press

will publish *Many Circles, New and Selected Essays*.

John Grey's work has appeared in *Whetstone*, *South Carolina Review*, and the *English Journal*. His work is also set to appear in *Osiris* and *Weber Studies*. Mr. Grey lives in Providence, Rhode Island.

Carol Hamilton is a writer, storyteller, and professor in the Creative Studies Division of the University of Central Oklahoma. She became Poet Laureate of Oklahoma in 1995 and received the Oklahoma Book Award for her chapbook of poetry, *Once the Dust*. In 1988 she received a Southwest Book Award for a children's novel, *The Dawn Seekers*. Hamilton has published stories, articles, and poetry in magazines including *Commonweal*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *New York Quarterly*, *Greensboro Review*, *Cape Rock*, *Roanoke Review*, *Skylark*, *Defined Providence*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Arkansas Review*, *Onionhead*, *Arizona Quarterly*, *Aura*, *Hawaii Review*, *Lucid Stone*, *Midwest Quarterly Review*, *Windsor Review*, *Revista Interamericana*, *Horizontes*, *Amelia*, *Potpourri*, *Abbey*, *Chariton Review*, *Oklahoma Today*, and others.

Jarret Keene teaches at Florida State University, where he also serves as editor of *Sundog: The Southeast Review*. His Pushcart-nominated stories, essays, and verse have appeared in over 50 literary journals, including recent issues of *ACM*, *Chelsea*, *The Laurel Review*, *The South Carolina Review*, and *River City*.

Thomas David Lisk has had his fiction, poems, and essays appear in many little magazines and newspapers. His most recent work has been or is forthcoming in *Arts and Letters*, *The Literary Review*, *Boulevard*, and *Painted Bride Quarterly*. A collection of his poems, *A Short History of Pens Since the French Revolution*, was published by Apalachee Press. Lisk lives in Raleigh, North Carolina and serves as Head of the Department of English at North Carolina State.

Edward Locke is a retired librarian who has worked in public libraries in the eastern U.S. He has an MA in English and an MS in Library Service. He has read his poetry in the Boston area and other places. His work has appeared in many magazines, including *Poetry*, *Georgia Review*, *Yale Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Dalhousie Review*, etc. His latest book is *Telling the Voices from the Echoes* (Harlequinade Press, 1999).

Kelley L. Logan is an English professor at Southwestern Oklahoma State University in Weatherford whose interests tend to run toward the edges of things. This has nothing to do with the fine professors of English at Florida State University, where she



did her graduate work, who though often agast never despaired of her. Her last poem "Pestis In Pace" appeared in *Poetry Motel*. Other poems and short stories are circling the world looking for homes.

Jane McClellan is a retired teacher/professor of English with a doctorate from the Florida State University. Her poems have recently appeared in *Fox Cry*, *RE:AL*, *The West Wind Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Callaloo*, and *Poet Lore*.

Katherine McCord was chosen by Grace Schulman and Phillis Levin as a semi-finalist for the 1999 "Discovery"/*The Nation* Poetry Contest. Most recently she won a fellowship to the Great River Arts Institute's Spirit & the Letter Conference in Patzcuaro, Mexico, and had poems published in *Nightspun* and *Poet Lore*. She has other poems forthcoming in *American Poets & Poetry*, *American Writing*, *Orange Willow Review*, and *Timber Creek Review*. A review she wrote is in the February 2000 issue of *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*. In 1998 she was a finalist for the Joaquin Miller Cabin Reading Series based in Washington, D.C. A long poem of hers was published in *Poet Lore*, Winter 1996-97. She has also had poems published in *Puerto del Sol*, *Antietam Review*, *Chaminade*, *Aura Literary/Arts Review*, and other journals. Her poem, "In the Emergency Room," was chosen by John Drury, Marie Ponsot, and Diane Wakoski to be included in the Chester H. Jones Foundation's 1996 volume of national poetry competition winners. Another was a finalist in the *Poet Lore* Long Narrative Poem Contest, 1997. She has an MFA from Warren Wilson College and an MA in English, emphasis Creative Writing, from New Mexico State University. As an undergraduate, she won the Homer Pittard Creative Writing Scholarship. She is currently teaching Creative Writing/Poetry at New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology.

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 1,600 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.

H. Bruce McEver's poetry has been published in *Ploughshares*, *Berkshire Review*, and *Connecticut River Review*.

He has taken poetry workshops at Sarah Lawrence College with Tom Lux and Kevin Pilkington and in New York City with Brooks Haxton, J.D. McClatchy, Kathia Pollit, and Pearl London. During the day, McEver is the president of an investment-banking firm, and he and his wife live on a farm in Salisbury, Connecticut.

Becky McLaughlin is an assistant professor of English at the University of South Alabama, where she teaches poetry and psychoanalysis, among other things. She is currently putting together a collection of essays, written at the intersection of autobiography and theory, which explore how academic institutions and/or spaces shape (and are shaped by) our sexual identity and practices. She is also working on a collection of short stories called *The Insistence of P*.

T. 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 alumni, he now makes his home in New York City.

Pamela Reitman's poem, "Lost Keys," won Second Place (Nonfiction Category) in the 1999 Iowa Literary Awards. Also, she was a semifinalist in the New Millennium Writings Awards VIII contest. She acted as the sole family caregiver to her father with Alzheimer's Disease for seven years. From diagnosis to death, she managed his legal and financial affairs, oversaw medical and custodial care, provided for his personal needs, and included him in family life. During the same period she juggled this caregiving regime with the demands of contemporary family life and career. She works as a volunteer for the Alzheimer's Association, assisting families in crisis on their Helpline, facilitating a caregiver's support group, and speaking about caregiver's grief and difficult emotions. She has a master's degree from the University of California's School of Public Health at Berkeley and has written a full-length memoir about her caregiving experiences. She lives in San Francisco and is currently writing a novel from the point of view of a woman diagnosed with early Alzheimer's.

Gale A. Riffle is a non-traditional English major (creative writing track) attending Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma, where she lives with her husband, Dan, and son, Joel. She works full-time as a graphic artist for a software company in Lawton. Originally from Southern California, Riffle settled in Oklahoma after falling in love with the wide-open spaces and clean air she experienced while stationed at Fort Sill many years ago.

Ken Robertson grew up in Blaine County, Oklahoma. His poetry has appeared in *Hard Row to Hoe*, *The Oblong Page*, *Light*, and *images*. He has degrees from Purdue and Illinois State and lives in Decatur, Illinois.



Melissa Stephenson's most recent publication was in Naomi Shihab Nye's anthology, *What Have You Lost?*, which was published in February 1999.

Pam Stinson has written poetry and short stories for more than a decade, but only recently gathered enough courage to submit for publication and let cackles land where they may. Last fall, Rogers State University's literary journal, *Cooweescoowee*, published two of her poems ("Small Town, America" and "The Black Mesa Sphinx"). She has a Ph.D. in English from Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma, and has taught English at community colleges for the past four years. A husband and four children make noise and laundry in her home.

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). This fall he will be the Anastasia C. Hoffman Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Institute for Creative Writing.

Gerald R. Wheeler was born in Columbus, Ohio. He lives in Katy, Texas. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. His fiction, photography and poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in *Pivot*, *Potomac Review*, *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), *The Writer*, *Kaleidoscope*, *descant*, *Old Crow Review*, *Re:al*, *Onthebus*, *Pudding Plainsongs*, *Chiron Review*, *Whole Notes*, *Yemassee*, *Small Pond*, *Aethlon*, *Poetry Depth Quarterly* and elsewhere. His collection *Tracers* is forthcoming from Black Bear Publications.

Rynn Williams is a poet and freelance writer/editor. Born in New York City, he has lived there his whole life, with the exception of one year spent in an Ecuadorian cloud forest, where he lived without electricity or indoor plumbing, one hour's walk from the nearest road. He is currently building a house in the same cloud forest, with the hope of living there a portion of every year. He received his master's degree in creative writing from New York University, and he has published poems in *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Bellingham Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Confrontation*, *Crazyhorse*, *Greensboro Review*, *Gulf Stream Magazine*, *High Plains Literary Review*, *Manoa*, *Nassau Review*, *The Nanon*, *New Orleans Review*, *Permafrost*, *Poem*, *Prairie Schooner*, *So To Speak*, *Southern Poetry Journal*, *The South Carolina Review*, *The South Dakota Review*, *Spoon River Quarterly*, *Tampa Review*, and *Wisconsin Review*, among other publications.

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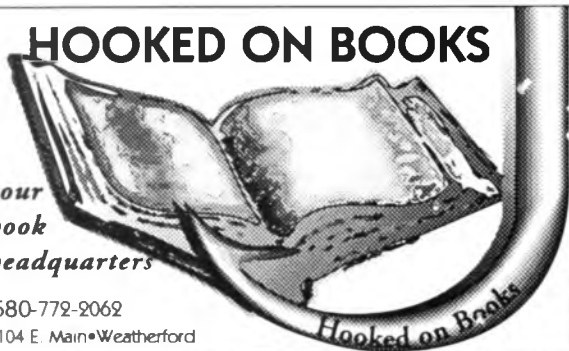
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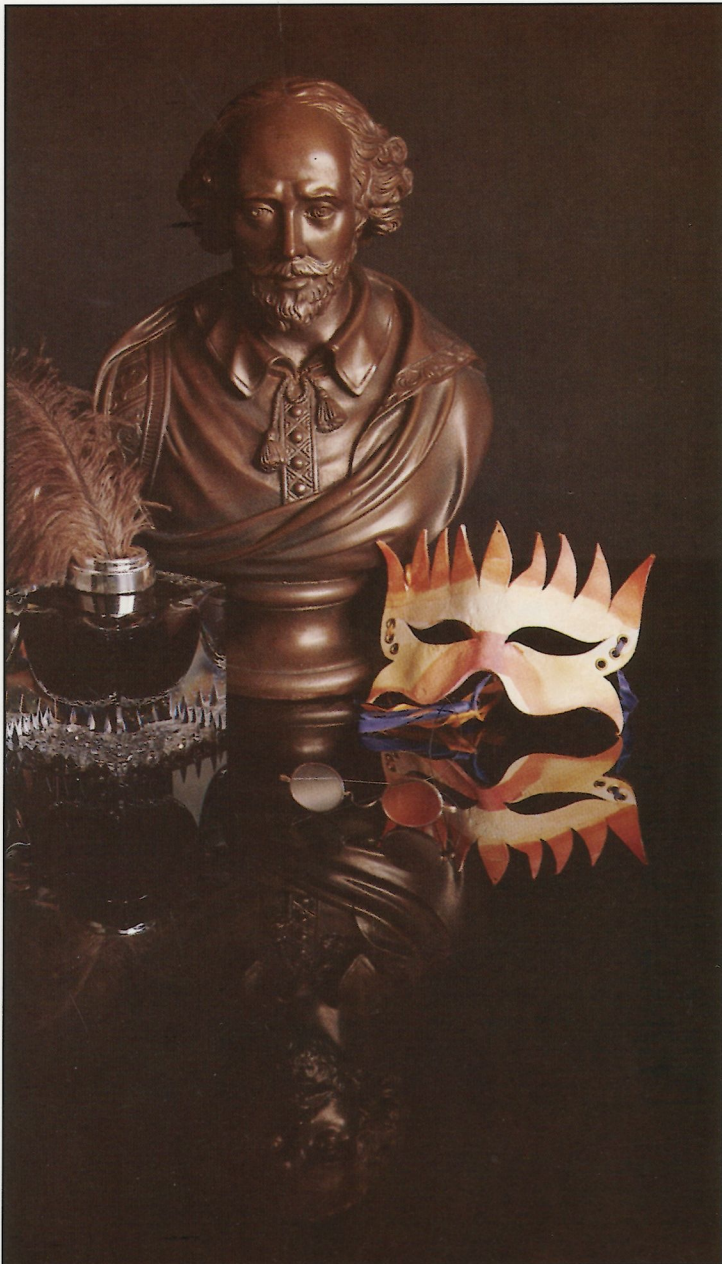
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