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A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA

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A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA
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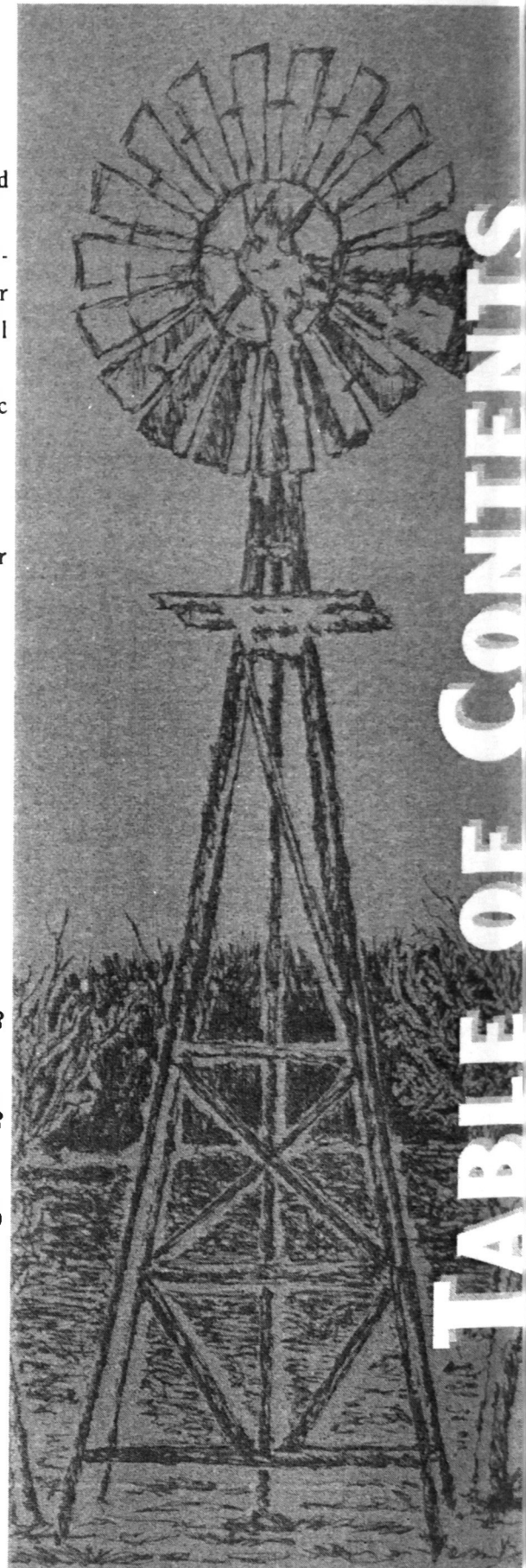
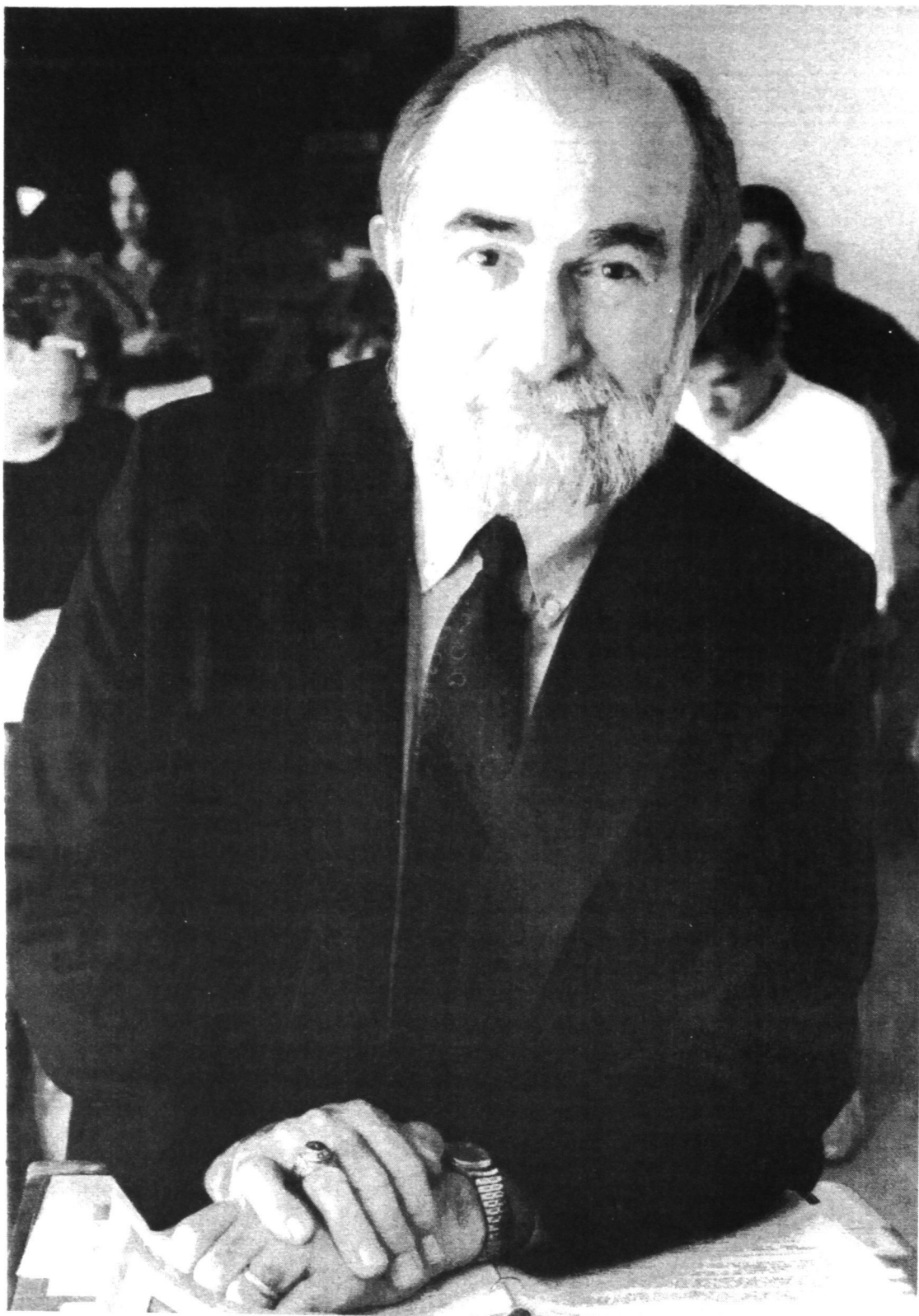


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Interview with Walter McDonald

August 1997

by Fred Alsberg

Walter McDonald is currently the Paul Whitfield Horn Professor of English at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, where he also serves as poet in residence and director of creative writing. A U.S. Air Force pilot, he previously taught at the Air Force Academy and served in Vietnam. McDonald has been the recipient of three National Cowboy Hall of Fame Western Heritage Awards, two National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowships, and four Texas Institute of Letters Awards. He is widely published (see contributor's notes) and has read his work at museums such as the Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh and the Smithsonian in Washington. Reprints of poems included with this interview are from *Ariel*, *London Review of Books*, and *Poetry*.

Alsberg: How have your experiences in Vietnam affected your writing?

McDonald: Flying, and a war I went to briefly, are two of about five regions that I keep prowling; they're my background, part of what I am. I came to poetry late, as a middle-aged Air Force pilot. After some of my friends went off to Vietnam, and one was shot down, then another, I felt a need to say something to them, or about them. I was writing fiction in those years, and I turned to poems when nothing else worked; my first stumbling attempts were like letters to the dead, or to someone unable to hear, like a poem I wrote for my little daughter, when I got my own orders to Vietnam.

Since 1970, I have never set out to write a flying poem, though, or a West Texas poem. I take whatever comes and then try to see if with hard work it can someday become a poem. I agree with the truism that the poems we *want* to write are already there, inside us--the regions we own, or which own us.

A friend told me he can't stop writing about the war and wishes he could--but war poems keep coming. I never went through what he did, but I can't squeeze off the flow, either--although I *never* intend to write about Vietnam or the guilt of surviving. Since coming back, I have never intended to write poems about a locale, a person, or an experience of any kind.

I'm open to anything, when I'm trying to find a poem--an image, a phrase, a word. Usually, a trickle of words will come that intrigue me, and I plunk them into the keyboard as fast as my fingers can go. All poems are little fictions, and most often they take hours of hard work; but sometimes one comes suddenly, like a gift. Happy poems--upbeat, affirmative--have come during times of crisis; and haunted poems, the darker glimpses, have come some days when I was giddy or even just staying alive, when nothing particularly good or ill was happening to me.

I don't write with an idea or a plot in mind. I simply don't write that way. I never know if I'll be writing about hunting or holding a grandchild high overhead until I'm into a first draft. I never know what will come of those first words, or if anything will. If a first draft surprises me, I'll work on it again and again, through dozens of drafts. But after Vietnam, that's the way every poem I've published has begun.

Alsberg: What are the advantages of narrative poetry? Any disadvantages?

McDonald: Skills that I applaud in poems are a grasp of the vivid, a sense of timing, and the ways the poet urges herself toward discoveries that make poems worth a reader's time. I suppose the appeal of narrative poems is summed up in the old saying, "Tell me a story, Daddy." For me, whatever a poem's about, unless it has some discovery and a sense of wonder, it misfires. "No surprise in the writer," Frost said, "no surprise in the reader."

One of the best ways to share excitement and discover insights is through narrative, a cumulative story. What draws me into a poem is more than story, though; it's *juxtaposition* of details and delightful sounds in a compelling rhythm.



"I got a million of 'em," singers say. There must be that many definitions of poetry; here's one more: A poem is a little fiction that unfolds through language both hauntingly pleasurable and disturbing. It delights and reassures through shared emotions and familiar insights newly told, and shocks or provokes into rich awareness by earned but stunning closure.

A rhymed lyric poem is vulnerable to simple sing-song rhythm and rhyme, and the flab of abstractions included just to keep the meter or to match the rhyme. A good lyric poem is more than a catalog of claims. The best poems yoke images together in unusual, unexpected ways--flints struck together to make fire. Such discoveries are the delights that a poem can give--a resonance that lingers, and that--in the best poems--takes our breath away.

A good narrative poet resists the impulse to tell us too much stuff about the story, waxing wordy with decorative digressions, like daily conversations. Story is important, and rhythm, and clanging or soothing sounds--but most of all, in a few syllables we need more than catalogs, more than facts; we need to be stunned. The power of any poem is in images and sounds and a rhythm that feels different from prose, without being either tedious or a simple sing-song rhythm and rhyme.

Alsberg: How do you choose diction for a particular poem?

McDonald: At the start, I don't worry about the taste of words or the feel of rhythm. Writing is a wild adventure, and I'm just trying to spook up a poem, trying to lasso something curious and gripping to drag kicking and screaming back to save on the screen. Later is time enough to trade and whittle words, trying to find the "right word, not its second cousin." Revision is more a matter of feel and taste than intellect: Does this word feel right, here? Is there something clunky about it, some misleading connotation? Does the language excite me--or is it merely filler? Hemingway said writers need built-in, shock-proof detectors, to help them know when something's not quite right. Lacking that, I labor a lot. Revision is exciting work--much more than half the fun of writing.

In a real sense, I write to find something to rewrite. Often, that means dismantling the scaffolding, discovering which words or stanzas I can delete. Rewriting is also like tinkering with an old outboard motor that won't start, or coughs and sputters; sometimes, I take whole stanzas apart and put them back in the poem, tugging the cord until at last it starts.

In a way, writing a poem is simply taking something you know--something everyone knows--and singing about it in your own different, hopefully interesting way. By "singing" I mean such things as surprising combinations of words and images, sounds and rhythm--an emotional experience different from the familiar monotone of clichés. Poetry is contact with others who value the heart's good notions, and who say "Yes" to the thrill of words which jump through hoops.

Some poems make every word count; the images are stunning, vivid and sensuous. We *see* and believe the lines. The poem is an intense experience; it doesn't merely tell us about something. There's a difference between language that is utilitarian--merely for information--and language that tries to pack the maximum pleasure in the words.

Utilitarian language is *explosive*, useful but going outward and gone, like a puff of smoke (e.g., yesterday's newspaper, or instructions for assembling a toy). Emotional language is *implosive* (e.g., poetry, fiction, and powerful non-fiction prose). Emotional language doubles back on itself, or implodes, for maximum pleasure--sounds, rhythms, images that conjure our deepest emotions. The best writers do that several times a season, like good batters in the major leagues.

Here are some other common-sense reminders I tell myself:



Poetry is nouns and verbs; adjectives and adverbs usually make poetry into prose. Another secret of poetry is rhythm; rhythm separates the men from the boys. Another is that you must compress. Poetry is a compact, compressed language. A poem is as powerful for what it doesn't say, as for what it says. Every word should earn its own way; think of Michelangelo chipping away all the marble which *wasn't* David. I pretend I have to pay \$715 per word, and pretend I'm on a tight budget. If you're lucky and don't need them, crutches slow you down. Nine times out of ten, adjectives and adverbs are crutches.

I have to work hard and often on compression and rhythm, -and intensity. My first drafts often have too many easy words, too many adjectives, too many prose-like explanations or editorial comments. That's a necessary thing to do, in early drafts; but I try to delete the talky words, so that lines will bristle with tension. Alchemy--turning base abstractions into better metal--not only *works*, in writing; it's essential. I tell myself to squeeze out the unnecessary words, for the last drop of power. I try hard not to *talk* at all. That's a goal I never fully reach, but to do less is to aim too low.

I choose simple words and try to let what I'm saying sound natural. Words of many syllables are weak, like swinging at a baseball with a willow switch. I like a poem that uses a baseball bat for more impact--strong, simple words, a clear poem, with a more direct way of saying. The power of language is in the single-syllable words, and vivid specific images-not in vague, intellectualized abstractions.

Writing is not a natural act, but has to be learned and learned. I remind myself to appeal to the senses. Poems with too many abstractions and not enough specifics usually tell us *about* something, but don't move us as much as they could. General and abstract statements are easy to say, and usually flat. They don't show; they tell.

Imagine friends stepping out into the hall and *seeing* something vivid and specific, then coming back into your room and summarizing all the specific, sensuous details they saw in abstract, general statements: "He was a distinguished-looking man." "She looked angry." "He had a strange way of fixing his hair."

I *understand* these claims--but I don't *feel* them as richly as I wish I could. I urge myself to reach, to work hard--not to sit like a couch potato, comfortable with the easy abstractions of my mind's first draft. Abstractions and generalizations are like chunks of lead tossed on a pond of water-- "the art of sinking in poetry." Abstractions are hired assassins; they're paid to hold you hostage, to keep you bound to your couch, in house arrest. They don't want you to travel, to see the vivid images of other regions; they hope you won't discover what you're missing.

Of course, it's easier to tell someone what we mean than to grapple with language for images, for what Eliot called the "objective correlative." The emotional equivalent of feelings and ideas is a goal we probably can't ever reach; but intentionally to do less is too easy.

Louis Simpson said the goal of poetry "is to make words disappear. "Usually, we look *through* the glass of a window to see through the glass, not to focus on the spots or streaks. It would be easy to say "I'm awed by the majesty of the universe. " But Whitman found a detail that says that--without *saying* that--in "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer":

Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Looked up in perfect silence at the stars.

When Pound wrote, "Go in fear of abstractions," he said nothing new, laid down no new law, but spoke only the old advice, the obvious. No one I know says "Don't *ever* use abstractions," but simply "Go in fear of abstractions. "To make chili, I don't drop a three pound round steak in the pot; my wife and I grind round steak into chunks of chili meat; in like manner, I like a line of poetry that has details that move me, not abstractions I merely ponder.

Most general statements and abstractions are jailers. They are stiff-necked impostors on guard duty in our writing rooms. They are cynics, failures of the imagination; they envy our successes; they want us to fail. They hope writing won't delight us, that we won't discover wonderful and exciting images and details that will delight our readers. They know Robert Frost was right: "No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader. "Abstractions don't *want* us to move our readers. Abstractions are our captors, and they work without pay, because they hate poems. They hope we'll lose faith in ourselves; they want us to quit writing, and let them sleep.

Vivid details are keys to freedom. I try to trust sensuous details to release first drafts from the traps of easy clichés and vague and flabby writing. What excites me about rewriting is trying to muscle-up early drafts of poems with combinations of details that surprise me.

Plain old *indulgence* is always a temptation: that is, lowering my standards, my goals--being easy on myself, winking at mediocre lines, thinking *That's good enough*. I try to slam abstractions down and stomp them; kick, stab them to death, and gouge out their eyes. If they still crawl up my legs and bless me like the air I breathe, then I let them stay. I do the same for awkward line breaks, easy adverbs and neutral nouns; I try to roll up my sleeves and pound a five-pound axe down into hardwood. I yearn to make it blaze. I hold up a poem to the fire and try to burn away all chaff, all that isn't poem.

Alsberg: When did you first become interested in writing, and why?

McDonald: A few years ago, my wife and I bumped into an old friend from the Air Force. He asked me why I started writing poems. We had been talking about years ago when we flew together--the dog fights in the sky, night flights under stars and in bad weather, the thunderstorms we had flown around, and through. I said well, maybe a little of all of that turned me to poems--or probably all of it.

I came to poetry late. Before Vietnam, I had tried nothing but fiction. In the 1960's when I studied fiction writing under R.V. Cassill and Vance Bourjaily at Iowa, I didn't have sense enough to even want to take the poetry workshop, so I'm always playing catch-up.

In 1977, after a sixth attempt at writing novels, I turned to poems with the energy I once poured into fiction--stumbling apprentice work, but finding a few poems before 1983 which made me think someday, maybe. I had published only a couple hundred poems by then, so almost all of my poems--more than 1,600 published ones--have come in the last fifteen years.

When did writing first interest me? I think back to my earliest memories of language, my earliest thrills over words. I must have been three or four, no more than five: I was allowed to visit my grandmother--Granny, we called her--no more than once a day. She lay in bed, propped up, and read to me from a big book the most amazing stories--Samson; Daniel in the lions' den; and a boy named David who grew up to be king--and I was hooked on language a year before I knew she was lying there dying of cancer.

Then, in the first grade, Miss Crump brought a man to class--a man in buckskin, in moccasins without socks, a huge feather-headdress that fell all the way to the floor. That man began telling stories, and I had never heard such things. Magic! Like all the others in that winter classroom, I sat there hearing the most amazing tales, thrilled out of my mind, believing every word. I don't even know his name. But I'll never forget the splendor of it all.

I started college as an agriculture major, but all I really wanted to do was fly. I liked to read and kept taking literature courses until I had enough for an English major. I took a master's degree while waiting for my assignment to pilot training in the Air Force. As a young pilot, when I applied to teach English at the Air Force Academy, all I wanted to do was hang around some of the best-used language in the world, some of



the most moving, exciting words I'd ever heard--and to share them with others. I started writing stories, and the Air Force sent me to the University of Iowa for a doctorate, the best of two worlds—reading and writing all week, and flying on weekends.

It seems like such a short time since I propped on my elbows and listened to my Granny reading verses like magic, in words I barely understood. It seems so few days since I sat spellbound and heard a Chief tell stories so exciting that my classmates and I screamed and clapped until our hands stung.

I feel lucky that for a little while, before the golden bowl breaks and the silver cord snaps, I get to hang around words and see what happens--my students' words, and words that spin off my own fingertips. What writer doesn't want to move us to tears or chills or hugs or laughter? Who doesn't want to pass along a thrill like that?

Alsberg: Which writers have influenced you most?

McDonald: James Dickey, Richard Hugo, James Wright, Theodore Roethke--and other poets with strong imagery and stories and sense of driving rhythm and powerful, compelling sounds. Earlier writers I admired even before trying to write poems were Frost & Whitman; Hemingway and Faulkner; Tennyson (especially "Ulysses") and Robert Browning; John Donne and Yeats; Joseph Heller and Thomas Wolfe. In the last two decades, I've discovered with wonder hundreds of other amazing poets. What a rich time to be alive and reading. I served as poetry editor for the Texas Tech University for twenty years and read voraciously, and loved every month.

Decades ago, in college, someone told me that T.S. Eliot was *the* poet; so when I began trying to write poems, I assumed that was the way it was done, and struggled along under a yoke of literary allusion. My crude understanding of the art was to blame. Reading widely in contemporary poetry gave me the excitement by the mid-1970's to get started toward how I write, now.

Alsberg: Does your geographical location affect your poetry in any way?

McDonald: Yes, yes. A wonderful question. I discover poems from the regions I own--or which own me. I think a writer finds at least one *region* to keep coming back to. It may be a place--Robert Frost's New England, for example, or James Wright's Ohio, or Eudora Welty's Mississippi; or in my case, Texas. A poet keeps prowling a certain region until he or she begins to settle it, homestead and live on it, and eventually own it.

By "region" I don't mean simply *geography*--but regions of the mind, a cluster of images or obsessions that a writer draws on over and over, for poems. When writers accept their regions, they can discover a mother-lode of images. Every poem is a metaphor of how it feels to someone to be alive at that time, at that place. I didn't write many poems before I came back from Vietnam, so I may be wrong; but I think that's what poems become.

Accepting my native region into my poems has been the best thing for me, as a writer. When my first book was published--mainly those early poems about Vietnam--Donald Justice asked, "Where's Texas in your poems, Walt?" I didn't know; I had never thought about it. But I started looking around and, sure enough, I began to feel the call of that wild, semi-arid West Texas which I knew better than I knew our adopted states of Iowa and Colorado, better than Vietnam.

I discovered that it's okay to write about native soil. Poems could be more than what I *needed* to say. For years, I had not considered this world to be my home. But I let down my bucket in a plains region doomed to dry up and found all sorts of water, all sorts of poems, even if I could live to write for forty years in this suddenly fabulous desert.



What keeps me going back to the keyboard day after day is a simple faith that words will show me the way. For a while, I feel totally ignorant; I have no idea what's coming. I like that silence: I can feel hair rise on my neck when I type a phrase that intrigues me--a sense of immediate complicity, as if the words and I are up to something. For me, writing is act of radical faith, like witching for water, and work is the dowser's twig. I called an early book *Witching on Hardscrabble*. After Vietnam, finding images like water in this suddenly fabulous desert where I live thrills and sustains me. Every day is grace.

I'm not drawn to travelogues or history lessons in poetry as fiercely as I am to poems and stories about matters a writer has roamed, homesteaded, and owns: Frost's New England, for instance, or Ted Kooser's and Bill Kloefkom's Nebraska, Andrew Hudgins' South, the intense glimpses into Emily Dickinson's predicaments, and Tim O'Brien's soldiers and the things they carried.

What we see is part of what we become. I never worry about finding subjects or running out of poems. The subjects come; it's just that simple. If I rejected a draft simply because I had written about West Texas before, or Vietnam, then I would never have kept blundering on in blissful ignorance and faith until I discovered--and revised time and again--the poems in my latest book *Counting Survivors* and the hundreds I've written since then.

For example: I called my twelfth collection *The Digs in Escondido Canyon*--but "Escondido Canyon" is a place only in the sense that it's a region in my mind, and in some of my poems. There may well be one or more actual canyons by that name, but none that I've written about.

Poems are little fictions, as freely invented as short stories are--at least the way I write, they are--and Escondido is one of dozens of places I've made up, adapted from dozens of canyons I've seen and imagined. I don't remember when I first tinkered with the phrase, but probably I liked the sound, the taste of the sounds in the context of a poem; also, I liked the meaning, "hidden" canyon, something that has to be looked for, on the plains.

It's part of the imagined landscape (rooted of course in my native West Texas) that I keep prowling for images. The canyon I have in mind is on no map, other than one which changes from poem to poem; I couldn't drive you to a spot and say 'There's the hidden canyon I wrote about.'

I've never thought of myself as a chronicler. I'm open to the facts of my lifetime and the areas I know, but I don't set out to chronicle them. The way I write precludes that--a poem at a time, discovering the game of the poem as I go along, finding whatever intrigues me. After writing for a few years, some things Frost said in "The Figure a Poem Makes" made a great deal of sense to me: "Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting." And "It finds its own name as it goes." And "Step by step the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing. "

Except for a few fumbling attempts before I went overseas, I have never set out to record a time and place--not in a single poem. Even in those early elegies about friends killed or missing in action, I intuitively invented, and so even those are poems, not biographies. I never expect to write about family or any events I've witnessed. Only later, looking back at poems about West Texas or Colorado or wherever they've been set, I've nodded in recognition of something in the poems similar to things I've done or places and events I've known--but always with liberty, license, wild abandon to invent whatever I'm writing.

A friend taught me to claim my *own* regions, which are all I'll ever have of God's plenty on this earth. There's an old saying: "If Texas is your region, it's your region. "So I write about what I know, about what intrigues me--family, and my native region, flying, the Rocky Mountains where we lived for years, and still, sometimes, a war. Accepting Texas into my poems has been the best thing for me, as a writer. This way of writing works for me, and so I'll ride it the way I would ride an only, ugly horse--as far as it will take me.



When we write stories and poems from *our* own regions, I think we find what we really want to say. If you're like me, you'll look back from time to time and admit gladly that you've been prowling your best regions--sometimes your deepest obsessions and desires, sometimes the most haunting memories of your life.

Alsberg: To what extent is your work autobiographical?

McDonald: I like how the dictionary defines a poem--"a made thing" (think of that: a *made-up* thing). Always, I'm writing poems, not autobiography. In the sense that poems expose some of my interests, obsessions, the regions of the mind I keep prowling, sure. But almost *only* in that sense. Some details are closer to the facts of my life than others, and biographical criticism assumes a mirror between art and life. But it isn't so. The details, not even the highs and lows of my life, aren't there in the poems, except coincidentally. I do not feel that poetry--or fiction--is a way of conveying my own facts to a reader so that he or she will say "Wow, you mean you actually did that?" Experience is valuable for what it is; then the writing takes over. I'm not there, frank and undisguised, in a poem or a short story. The persona is there, but not the actual person I was, or what I did--not the actual pilot, or a real boy leaping from trees ("Summer Nights," in *Witching on Hardscrabble*).

I write to find something I didn't know I would find. A friend asked me not long ago if all those uncles in my poems are really my uncles. He grinned, aware it was like the naive query, "Is that a real poem or did you just make it up?" Half wisecrack, the way friends talk, I said, "Yes, every one of them--and I can't wait to invent some more. Any similarity between my poems and any part of my past or present is strictly coincidental, freely exaggerated, and factually unreliable.

The temptation is to take someone's poem as a diary entry. I write about flying and Texas, Colorado, family, and a war, for those are what stock my pantry with images. But my scraps of paper don't add up to a life. Poems are games, invented, and I play them the best I can--and that license in itself leads me away from autobiography. The fun is in the discovery. If the words work, if others say 'yes' to bleak faith, or to the joy of a child winning a race, what a thrill that is for me, what a good feeling.

I believe in the possibilities of the imagination, and I'm amazed by what can be *made up*, or *discovered*. Poetry is not autobiography, but art; not merely facts of our actual lives, but invention; not confession, but creation. Creative writing means *discovery* of poems we wouldn't have found if we hadn't begun to write. If we rely only on facts that "really happened," we're limiting ourselves, writing only with "the left brain. "We *might* come up with a poem, but it's like trying to drill for oil with a cork screw, like trying to dig for gold with a plastic spoon, like searching for Noah's lost ark or the wreckage of Amelia Ehrhart's plane by reading essays about them.

There's a surprising difference between writing accurately about facts and events that "really happened" vs. imaginative or creative writing. I believe in the possibilities of discovery, the rich and undiscovered oil fields and gold mines of the imagination--that reservoir of all we've ever experienced, heard about, or read, seen in movies, or glimpsed, all of it jumbled together and waiting to be found. Down there--buried inside us--are regions we haven't touched for years or decades, or ever, except in hopes or dreams or nightmares. Those are the bits and remnants of all we've taken in--the lost cities of Atlantis, the elephants' graveyard, the forgotten playgrounds and bone yards of our lives. Down there under the pressure and heat of living are the images we need for making poems--some of them already diamonds, most of them coal waiting to stoke the furnace--and gushers of oil that would drive our imaginations' engines longer than we could write.

I try as much as I can to make every poem an experience to *feel*. If it's about flying, I try to open the experience so that people who read it can nod their heads and say, "Yes! I see. I've been there. "Many of the first poems I remember liking early on were persona poems or dramatic monologues: Tennyson's



"Ulysses," several by Robert Browning, Eliot's Prufrock; later on, James Dickey's "The Lifeguard." When I began--what else?--I aped my betters. But even from the start, I never *planned* to write a persona poem. Sometimes in the process, I found that the voice wasn't Walt's, but Caliban's, or Goliath's, or a soldier's I called "Fawkes" ("Interview with a Guy Named Fawkes, U.S. Army," in *Caliban in Blue*).

Over time, I began to realize that *every* poem is an invention, a made (and made-up) thing. That's the wonder of writing poems, for me: every poem is personal, yes--but every poem is also a *persona* poem, a little fiction. When I ran across what James Dickey said about the possibilities of invention and metaphor and voice, I felt liberated, thrilled that what I had been doing on my own seemed somehow extremely valid. As far as I'm concerned, Dickey was right, and his insights about these aspects are brilliant.

When the *persona* is there in a poem, and the mask is in place, the lyric and narrative can work; but the actual person I am is not there in the poem, or what I *did*. Nothing could matter less. My task as a writer is to try writing so vividly that readers will feel it was this way, *had* to be this way, it was sure enough this way for *them*, when they read the poem. I think the duty of a writer is to be interesting and clear, and in that sense to build a bridge--but it's a bridge between a poem that feels real and the reader, not between the poet's real life and the reader. I check a writer's bio. notes (if they, too, aren't fiction) for that.

I remember my father's old spurs and a pair of chaps so stiff the leather was brittle as old parchment. I was born hearing about cowboys and cattle, sandstorms and blue northers that drove the livestock to barbed wire fences where they froze. When my mother married my father, he was a working cowboy with five borrowed dollars in his pocket, and he took her in a borrowed buggy out to the ranch to a shack near the bunkhouse, and the foreman's wife was her only female friend for years.

A cowboy who had eaten more trail dust than I had walked on, my daddy despised dime novels that prattled and paraded cowboys as heroes, gunslingers, with nifty codes of honor like King Arthur's knights. Even though my daddy's middle name was Arthur, he told me why he disliked fiction--so fake, nothing at all like the cowboys he bunked with, the foremen he worked for. Over the years, I challenged and pushed him with questions about the old days; and he told me, grudgingly, without venom, about hard work and boredom and little pay. I was relieved to hear about the squalor and boredom, of course, for I envied his years of freedom on horseback, and secretly feared that his stories would be even more heroic than novels which I devoured, trapped in a dusty town called Lubbock on the plains.

Without the influence of cowboys, without my father's brittle chaps and my own first pair of spurs, I would never have found hundreds of the poems I've come to. The pervasive influence of the cowboy is a concept I never heard until I was twenty, but it was in my bones from the start like calcium from Mother's milk. Born to this culture, who hasn't been touched by the myth of the cowboy?

Only yesterday, it seems, my daddy (who has been dead for more than twenty years) drove us back through barren ranch land where the magic for our family had all begun. I remember those rocks and cactus, those purple mesas. I grew up in Texas during World War II, and cowboys and pilots were my heroes. I ran across a thousand acres of ranch land pocked with prairie-dog holes, flying models of P-51 Mustangs and British Spitfires. I left Texas and became a pilot, and years later I turned to poems.

Now, cowboys and flying combine in my poems no one would ever call "cowboy poetry." But without the pervasive influence of the cowboy, of growing up broke in West Texas, of marrying the darling of my life and adopting three babies we adore, I doubt that I would have done more than that first, stumbling book of war poems. Now, memories of cowboys and wings keep coming back--sometimes when I least expect them. And when I write, memories enter--but warped and set free by imagination, and sometimes I get a poem that says what I didn't even know I needed to say.



Alsberg: Should poetry be rich in figurative language? Do figures of speech ever become excessive? If so, how and when?

McDonald: Figurative language is fun, in and of itself--and that's the pitfall. It's easy to fall in love with a metaphor and ride it until you go offstage and outside the theater, far beyond the modest stage of a poem. (See what I mean?) If I didn't like hanging around words to see what might happen, I wouldn't give up so much time, writing. Sometimes, a simile or hyperbole or metaphor is so much fun I play with it too long; one duty of revision is to hunt it down and kill it, if it doesn't work in the poem but is little more than indulgence. When I don't root it out, when it comes back from a friend or editor--or, worse, if it gets published--I'm embarrassed.

I like a poem with invented details and unexpectedly appropriate figures of speech that show us how it feels to be in this experience. In a poem, I don't like to be told about a condition, or hear that a person is enduring hardships or joy; rather, I respond to rich details that make me *feel* whatever the writer is up to. A merely decorative figure usually detracts, so I admire a writer who intensifies every line so that reading the poem is a breathless, vivid experience. Sometimes, a figure of speech starts to upstage the poem, like a precocious kid at a wedding. A poem isn't the place for self-indulgence. Spotting one of these merely decorative images is one of the hardest proofreading chores that I know.

Writing a first draft is like going out into the wilds with a net and flinging it over anything wild, dragging it kicking and screaming back into captivity. In second and tenth and later drafts, I try to tame the beast--or, better, groom it, let it become the best beast it can be. I try to find the right word, not its second cousin. I cull and toss out whatever's not the beast. I want it to jump rope and sing, to jump through hoops, sprout wings and fly. There, I've done it again; it's easy to get carried away by the fun of a figure of speech.

But good poetry takes risks, is always in danger of excess. Poetry is hyperbole, exaggeration--extravagant claims said persuasively. The evidence for those claims is images packed tightly in language that manipulates us--driving, compelling rhythms crammed with images to bombard the senses, and sounds that repeat and surprise and induce trust in us like music, wild and exactly right insights at the end of stanzas and at the close of poems, to surprise and delight us, to make us as wise as we want to be.

Whitman, for example, claiming:

"What I assume, you shall assume.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch."

["Song of Myself"]

"The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream," Wallace Stevens insisted.

["The Emperor of Ice-cream"]

John Donne made this extravagant appeal to God:

"Take me to You, imprison me, for I,
Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me."

["Holy Sonnet 14"]

And Father Hopkins declared,

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil."

["God's Grandeur"]

Alsberg: How important is the first word in a line of poetry?

McDonald: The common wisdom is that every word is crucial, and of course that's so. But in almost every line, *some* spring-loaded word or phrase needs to jolt us with unexpected emotion. It may be the first word or phrase, but I think it usually comes later in the line.



I believe the first word in a line of poetry is not as important as the first important word; we'll stress or emphasize the first important word, automatically. Even the first noun or verb won't necessarily be crucial. What makes hair rise on the back of the neck may be the third or eighth word. What matters in a line is that *something* in it insists, tugs us along, pleasures us then and there while promising that more awaits--so we keep reading.

The first word or phrase of a line is like the lead-off batter in baseball. The punch comes in the ideal poem or ballgame when the clean-up hitter delivers power with a grand slam in the ninth. For example: the end of "When I Heard the Leam'd Astronomer" touched me in high school and still does, decades later--not because of the first words of the closing lines, but what they lead to:

Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Looked up in perfect silence at the stars.

We could ruin even a good poem with one deft flick of the pen--like this, for instance: "Looked up in perfect silence at the firmament. "[or ". . . in perfect silence at the magnificent secrets of the universe. "The worst thing a reader could say at the end of a poem would be, "Okay; next." Ah, but Whitman ended the line, and the poem, "in perfect silence *at the stars*." That's where the ball goes sailing 400' out of the park.

Father Hopkins would probably contend for the theological importance of the word "Because" that starts the next-to-last line in his wonderful poem "God's Grandeur":

And though the last lights off the black West went,
Oh, morning at the brown brink eastward, springs--
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

I wouldn't disagree with his theology; but, for me, the final impact of the poem--the emotional power of the sonnet--comes later in each line and especially at the end of the poem's closure. All roads lead to Rome, they used to say. In a good poem, all rhymes, line breaks, first words of lines, and all images work like a first-place team in October; all of them lead and build to the last few words, the last couple of sounds. When that works, a poem is as much fun for me as any crack of the bat in the ninth.

Alsberg:

To what extent do you employ meter in your poetry?

McDonald:

Another good question, and my answer has varied, over the decades. As a reader, I respond more to a lean, hard-driving or compelling rhythm that's almost accentual (Hopkins' "spring rhythm" is an extreme example) than to a dull use of traditional accentual-syllabic meters, laden with abstractions as filler and with forced or tired rhymes. But ah, when English prosody works, what a wonder.

I began in traditional meter, then spent years trying to muscle-up the kinds of free verse I liked to read. In recent years, I've worked about half and half on rhyme and unrhymed poems. In rhymed poems, I'm trying to keep much of the strength and ease of free-verse rhythms, although I work often with traditional forms, also, learning the craft from the beginning, in a sense. I'm still tinkering with meter, adapting, working hard for hours with rhythm.

I'm sometimes asked, "Do poems in *forms* have to pay as much attention to line breaks and diction as 'free-verse' poems do?" In other words, "What standards do you hold formal poems to--in terms of line breaks, compression, and intensity of language?" Well, the answers are simple: the same high standards, the same impossible goals, in terms of rhythm; sounds; the compact, incantatory power of language; vivid and appropriate imagery; clarity, and resonance. To aim for less is too easy.



A villanelle already presumes that what it repeats, in a narrow, limited range, is worthwhile. Every new sonnet promises it'll be worth our time, a new thing, new wine in old wineskins. A long poem (whether meditative, narrative, or experimental, like "The Waste Land," "Howl," or "Middle Passage")--already presumes a great deal on a reader's time, attention span, and effort. If anything, a formal poem, or a long poem, should be *more* intense, *better* crafted, than a poem of ten irregular lines that don't rhyme.

What would we say to someone who justifies an awkward line break by protesting, "But this is a *sonnet*!" Pound said, "A poem should be at least as well written as good prose. " Yes, and I think a sonnet should be at least as well written as good free verse. How would we respond to someone who refuses to pay his taxes because he's buying a Rolex; or robs a convenience store or mugs a little old lady, and protests, "But I need the money for a parking meter" or "to enter the good-citizen contest"? There comes a time when the end doesn't justify the means. Beer in a mug or a thermos tastes flat if you cut it with water. Accountability: that's the key. Keats told Shelley: "Load every rift with ore."

I'm drawn to form, the "sound and sense" of any made thing. Haven't we all read tons of bad poems in the form of sonnets and sestinas and blank verse, and tons of bad prose chopped up to look like poems? Isn't there a thrill when we read a poem so well made that simple words explode?

Writing any new poem is exciting and daunting and demands enormous ignorance and faith. What keeps me going back to the keyboard day after day is a simple faith that words will show me the way. For a while, I feel totally ignorant; I have no idea what's coming. I like that silence: I can feel hair rise on my neck when I type a phrase that intrigues me--a sense of immediate complicity, as if the words and I are up to something.

The last two years have been especially invigorating, for I've often left familiar ways to launch out into forms. I'm aware of risks, but surprisingly excited. Now, of about 300 poems in circulation, about half are rhymed. I still respond to the vigor of good free verse rhythms, but it's also exciting for an old dog to be going back where I began, and learning how all over again.

Walter McDonald will be the featured writer at the Seventeenth Annual *Westview* Writers' Festival, October 22, 1998 at 4:00 p.m. at the Southwestern Oklahoma State University Conference Center, Weatherford, Oklahoma.

Westview subscribers and their friends are especially welcome.

Admission is free.

For more information please call Fred Alsbury at (580) 774-3168





Wishing for More than Thunder

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Mirages hover like angels fanning the fields.
We see them in summer, a shimmer of wings.
Our stubborn steers ignore them, wading dry acres.
They hook their horns in invisible robes,

shaking their heads to graze. For them
the sky is falling, the grass is manna.
Having lost all hope when they entered
the round corral as calves, they stuff themselves

even in drought, as if all pastures
on the plains are theirs. They never wonder
if God's in His heaven. Stubble is fodder enough,
alfalfa paradise. Watching steers graze

in a lake of shimmering light, seeing angels
fanning themselves, we wonder if even they
could make it rain, how many spin on a windmill,
how many squeezed would make a decent cloud.

by Walter McDonald

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY BRANDON WEBSTER

A Woman Acquainted with the Night

My wife is not afraid of dark.
She uses lights like handholds,
climbing down caverns she accepts as found.
She's as comfortable as blossoms

when the sun goes down.
Forests we've camped in at night
are forests, to her, clear-eyed,
seeing no visions she can't

blink away. In sudden dark,
she goes on mending clothes by feel
while I sweat and rage
to make the spare fuse fit.

When she was six a fat man
digging a storm cellar
shut her and a friend inside,
stood on the black steel door

and stomped like thunder.
Frozen, too frightened to reach
for Becky screaming in her ears,
she felt nothing could ever

be that dark again. In time
the door clanged open and light
baptized her with perhaps
too deep a trust in saviors.

She lies down now in darkness
with no human hand but mine
to cling to, nothing but faith
in the moment to let her sleep.

When storms short out
the relay stations, she knows
how far to reach to touch me,
to make romance of failure,

knows how many steps
to the candles so if our children
wake and cry for light,
there will be light.

by Walter McDonald



Cabin

If we build here
all sorts of things are possible:
dawn earlier, fog curled at our feet,
the spring far enough downhill
for exercise, buckets of water
balanced for the cool climb home.

Here's where from down below
we've seen elk silhouetted,
here we'll be level with hawks
perched high in the piñon,
look, one's watching us, swaying,
its dark eyes blinking.

Up here, the breeze will be
always strong, the chimney will draw,
the roof swirled free of snow,
and in spring we'll dust,
shake blankets fresh outside,
and beat the rugs.

by Walter McDonald



ILLUSTRATION BY EDGARDO GEORGE

Uncle Earl's Wind River Ranch

It's salt, not rain, fat elk cows need. Uncle Earl
hauls salt blocks up from town and dumps them, wedged
by boulders licking tongues can't tumble.
Elk wander down to graze his slope. Wild elk
never nod, big bellies swaying, calves on their way,
most snow melted that far down in gusty winds
that wild. Uncle Earl looks up maybe once a day,
takes elk for granted and boulders about him,
a million years of rocky mountain balanced
except stones that tumbled, an avalanche of chance.

Like that one massive as his barn, a stone
he built his wide corral around. Look at those
up there, a thousand boulders propped on slate
and sand that slides, erodes, steep ledges cracked
and tilted where cougars make their homes,
scratching gravel to widen cracks for caves,
arching their long big-muscled backs.

by Walter McDonald

All the Old Songs

I never knew them all, just hummed
and thrummed my fingers with the radio,
driving five hundred miles to Austin.
Her arms held all the songs I needed.
Our boots kept time with fiddles
and the charming sobs of blondes,

the whine of steel guitars
sliding us down in deer-hide chairs
when jukebox music was over.
Sad music's on my mind tonight
in a jet high over Dallas, earphones
on channel five. A lonely singer,

dead, comes back to beg me,
swearing in my ears she's mine,
rhymes set to music which make her lies
seem true. She's gone
and others like her, leaving their songs
to haunt us. I count the years

I never believed we'd make it—
the hours of skinned knees and pleading,
diapers and teenage rage and fever
in the middle of the night,
and parents dying, and Saigon,
the endless guilt of surviving.

Letting down tonight through clouds
I know who I'll find waiting at the gate,
the same girl faithful to my arms
as she was those nights in Austin
when the world seemed like a jukebox,
our boots able to dance forever,
our pockets full of coins.

by Walter McDonald

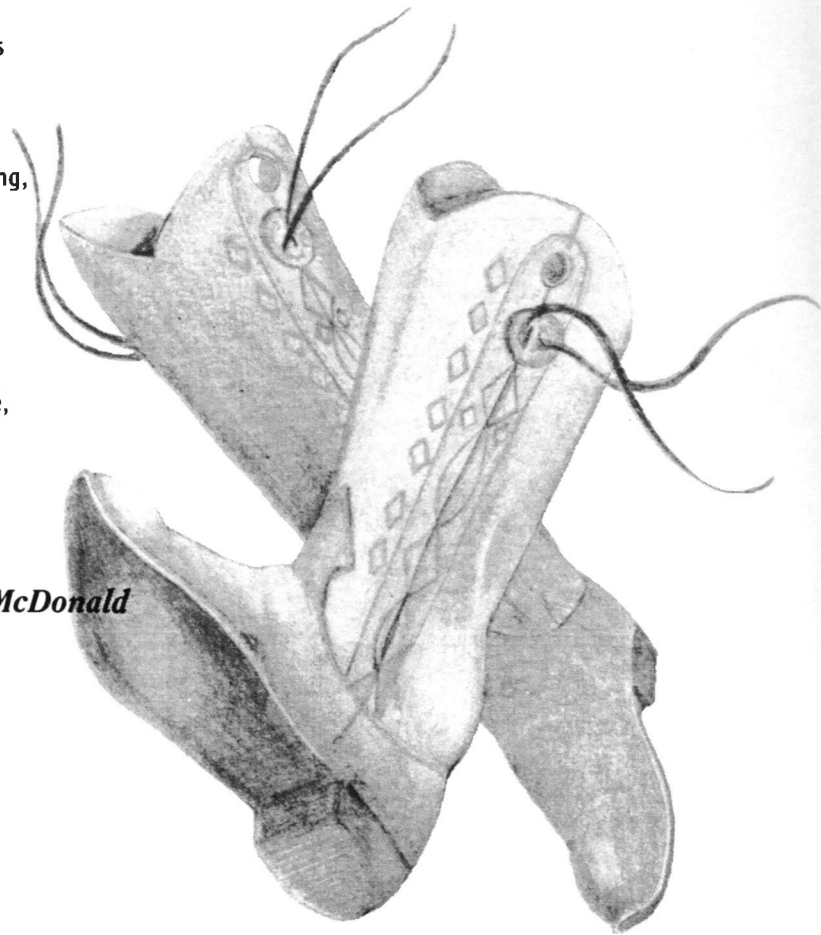


ILLUSTRATION BY PHILLIP SCHROEDER

Harvest

In silence he sits, staring at the walls
of an empty room.
His cane is perched on the chair—
Waiting.
Still, he stares,
It is not walls he sees,
But tractors, dust and wheat.
He remembers a different world
Of fourteen-hour workdays
Spent behind a John Deere,
With dust rising from broken ground
Before settling again.
The green would break through
Eventually,
In neat, even rows that slowly covered the ground,
Growing...
Dying as golden, knee-high stalks with grainy tips
Which the combine would collect.
Another year of his life cut away.
Daybreak to dusk
And all that's left
Are seeds in a gnarled fist.

Maria Shockley Erman



ILLUSTRATION BY AMANDA PRICE



Jack-o'-lantern Moon

The day we laid the grass to rest was the worst. It was the end of summer and the russet cusp of fall, and we said goodbye to barefoot and katydids, and Granddad stopped baiting our hooks for us. From now until next June we'd have to rely only on our own proficiency with fishing rods and pocketknives. Granddad was as much a piece of summer as the long rushes of wheat and the oiled insides of catchers' mitts; he did his best and finest in the sunny months, and hibernated for all the rest.

But he was only one of many of us that summer. And behind some secret place of wood and venerable tobacco juice, I bet he cried just the same as the rest. Yeah, even though his eye was never seen but to sparkle and appraise and maybe flare hot at some worldly injustice, for that one lost time he must have cried. The day we buried haylofts and swimming holes, we all did.

1980. My eighth year as a living, breathing, sunburning individual. Country music was still country then, and nobody was driving faster or loving harder than Burt Reynolds. His spirit had infected us boys in the manner that I'm sure affected boys in every state of the Union; bicycles became things of engines and rebellion, cowboy hats were cool again, and officers of the law were, as a rule, ignoramuses. My older brother Wayne dreamed of driving a Kenworth for a living, making his home nowhere but in the truck's double-wide sleeper, hauling beer and machine parts from Denver to the Mason-Dixon line for pay. As far as dreams went, I thought it was fine.

Mine was NASCAR, and even at eight I could tell you the names of all the most able drivers and whether they drove a Chevy or a Ford, and who their major sponsor was. I played

out these fires of the oval track in the mud escarpments behind our house. I owned somewhere near fourteen-thousand Hot Wheels cars, and knew of the lot of them which performed the best in dirt, which one in gravel.

Our house was twelve miles from Dacoma, Oklahoma, but we didn't go there often. Aside from Granddad's house--which Wayne could almost hit with an arrow with the wind at his back--the nearest place was the Troutmans', and a little bit fur-

ther on was Jim Corbell and his four daughters. Our families worked and barbecued together, and between our houses were acres of bread basket and backwoods. If it wasn't gold and planted there by us, then it was God's doing alone. In those trees and wormy soil I spent forever.



Jack showed up on a day I was in the barn, hunting for Bell's kittens in the straw. I knew she'd sequestered her litter somewhere in the soft tangles and shadows, so I was looking about for them as best I could--having climbed down from my chair I was now prowling the barn. It was around three in the afternoon, and my cousin Trey was snoozing behind the house in that hammock that only swung in summer. Wayne was cleaning out the junk shed with Granddad, and probably bitching about it the whole time. My older cousin, David, was out with Dad, toiling in the soil that seemed so much of everything. David was bronze and seventeen and could buck bales like something of a fledgling god. I envied him mightily, but never let on.

I was crawling forward in my usual salamander way, legs dragging fecklessly behind me, intent upon the cats. I could hear them mewling somewhere in the yellow mountain of straw, but they were hidden well. I was just beginning to drag myself deeper into the pile when I heard the bike.



Bicycles have and always will make a distinctive sound. It involves a ratcheting and elemental tremor, a hoofbeat sound of feet on ready pedals, flying spokes. The bike sound was one that I knew and adored, even though I'd never sat astride a Huffy or Schwinn myself. The sound of a skyrocketing wheelchair just isn't the same.

Now who could that be? I wondered, thinking about Wayne shucking work in the junk shed, and Trey having awakened from his tomcat slumber. Neither possibility was very likely, as Granddad brooked no shirking when there were spades and hay-hooks to be sorted, and Trey always thought it too hot to ride before dusk.

So who then?

I listened there for awhile, half eaten by a haybank, Bell and her still-wet kittens just over the next rise. The world smelled of moistness and hot winds, and the sky in the barn was dark and tasted of old apples. And from just outside in the cloudless day, I heard it for the first time--

"Hey, ya'll! "

--a strapping, soldier's voice. A voice that sounded ready to work a plow or disc all day and catch crawdads and fireflies all night.

I poked my head up.

"Anybody home?" the voice called.

From the sounds of him, he was a stranger, and anything strange to give a new spark to the days was a welcome repast. I bulldogged back to my chair and vaulted up, then wheeled it as righteously as possible outside.

The boy I saw was maybe fourteen, hair the color of the hay still left strung around my shoulders, sitting easy in the saddle of his bike, and hollering.

"Hullo, hullo! Is anybody he--"

He stopped, painted a horseshoe smile on his face, and said when he saw me, "Hey, friend. Are you with the white men or the Injuns?"

At that moment I knew that I loved him.

I grinned. "I'm an Apache scout, and I've got scalps. What about you?"

"Me? Oh, I'm a half-Dakota, half-white settler, bobcat-wrasslin' mountain man. Not much use for either Injuns or white folk." He smiled that sloppy grin again. "What's your name, scalp-taker?"

I told him my name and he told me his. It was Jack, and I thought it a name I would have given him myself if he hadn't had one already.

"My old man is on vacation with his girlfriend out in California," he explained. "And he left me with Gerald Troutman while he's gone. You know ol' Gerald?"

"All my life."

"Really? That long?" Jack shook his head. "Well, then you know what a first-class bore that Troutman place can be. I tell



you, there's not a river or mountain or coal mine in sight."

"Coal mine?" I asked.

"Yeah, you got one here nearby?"

"We got a creek," I said, ennobled by the thought, "and a forest, too."

"A creek? No shit?" Jack saluted me on the vast breadth of my domain. "I guess I came to the right place, then."

"I guess so," I told him, then rolled up beside him and shook his hand like a man. "Want me to show you around?"

"That would be fine," Jack said, and meant it.

I spent the next three hours going over every homemade foxhole and race course I had at my disposal, and watched as Jack tried each one on for size, and listened as he called them the best of such geographical wonders that he'd seen in all his days. And never once since the moment he first saw me did Jack Klast ever comment on my wheelchair, and I noticed that most of all.

The thing with the watermelons happened on a Tuesday.



By now Jack Klast was ensconced amongst us, having tasted his share of Mama's raspberry pies and listened in unaccounted awe at Granddad's stories of betting railyard hobos on who could spit in a tin saucer from the greatest distance. But unlike the rest of us, Jack always seemed to have some remark on the silver quality of these tales, and always asked Granddad for more.

One dusky evening Granddad asked him, "What could a boy of your age possibly want with all these old yams? Don't you have better things to do than listen to an old man ramble on about soda fountains and Dust Bowls and Indian head pennies?"

"Why, nossir," Jack said. "I mean, I could be naked in the pond, I guess, but what kind of crazy fool would want to be skinny dipping when he could be fighting the krauts or shining shoes in Kansas City or making snow angels in Canada in December. Or meeting Satchel Paige in '34 when he was still just small-time and not a legend, and *shaking his hand*. Maybe one day it'll be *me* in a spitting contest with a vagrant named Cub Caboose, and I'll want to make sure I know about trajectory and wind speed so that I won't lose by boots or harmonica to the bum. That make sense, or am I just rambling?"

"No, son." Granddad gave a furtive smile. "I hear you loud and clear."

And about a week after Jack had first shown up, the whole family was in the watermelon patch, the site of the holiest ritual march and congregation of the summer.

Dad and Mama grew things behind the house: yellow squash (which I adore), tomatoes (which I do not), and most of all, fat watermelons. Granddad had bequeathed to his son a habit for nursing his vegetables early in the season, and Dad did it like Merlin. Dad's watermelons were the size of the atom bombs dropped from the belly of the *Enola Gay*, green rinds hiding pink treasures inside. The meat of the melon was like a geode in that bitter-tasting shell. I for one knew of the nastiness of rind-eating, being someone who was prone to sampling this and all varieties of non-edibles, like orange peelings, apples seeds, and that gummy wand that's left after all the corn on the cob is gone. On days like that, when the family gathered shin-deep in the pungent vines that scrabbled across the ground like jungle-growth, I was always wheeled out by Wayne, who labored

over the rough going when my wheels sank in the dirt. Wayne got me out there, sweating, cursing, and vowing never to trouble with me again, and I looked around for Jack.

He was over with Aunt Zoe talking about sweet-potato pie, gesturing widely and often.

Dad and Granddad poked at the melons, passing their grimy hands between the vines, discussing texture, ripeness, and probably mosquitos, as there seemed to be an inordinate number of them strafing our small gathering.

It was nearing six o'clock. Work had been quit early today, including my own. Dad and David had left the glimmering fields; I had left off play. Now the nine of us drew in upon the melon patch, nearer than usual to both each other and the earth.

Mama and Aunt Zoe stood together, Jack hovering akimbo nearby. A stalk of something white and feathery poked out from the corner of his mouth.

As soon as I was conveyed to the melon patch, Wayne left me, going over to stand with the men. Dad and David and Granddad held counsel there, their foreheads weathered and wise beneath their sooty ball caps. My cousin Trey hung beside me, whispering, slapping at mosquitos when they came for his blood.

Mama's dress flowered around her in the breeze.

"I guess we're here again," Dad finally said, surveying his small nation. "Some things never change."

No one spoke. Eyes either panned the hot skies or roamed the watermelons. Aunt Zoe cooled herself with one of my dead great-grandma's Oriental fans.

And without further preamble, Dad pulled off his hat and prayed.

"Dear Lord, we'd like to come before You again and give thanks for that which You have given to us. . ."

I lowered my head enough so that my bangs drooped in front of my face, concealing my peeping eyes. I watched Wayne stand there just like Dad, hands folded in front of him, and I saw David nod in reverence when he heard some bit of gospel truth that moved him. The women were like nuns, and even



Trey behaved himself. And then I glanced over and saw Jack staring straight into my soul, and I didn't know whether to return his rakish grin or be ashamed by it.

I settled for grinning back.

"... that every year we come here at this humble altar and are able to feel among us the peace that passeth understanding. We pray for our harvest, Lord, and thank You for the gift of the furrowed field, as well as the right to turn and work it. . . "

I felt warm then and also electric. Though I couldn't say why. But I tasted lightning, even though the nearest storm clouds were as far away as Texas.

And Jack, he tasted it, too.

"... that we are able to bow our heads before Your grace, and be free."

"Amen," said Granddad.

"Amen," said the family.

Dad and the others re-fixed their hats and commenced hunting for the first melon of the season.

But it was Jack who found it.

With ozone bristling the fine hairs in my nose, I watched as Jack all-of-a-sudden marched forward, right to the center of the patch. We all stared at him as he searched around his ankles, the knees of his jeans stained the same color as the melons he sought. It was normally Granddad who first stepped into that place that Jack now walked with quicksilver impunity, and one day without a word that duty would be my father's. And some time a million years from now it would be Wayne out amongst that sea of growing things, holding his mouth the same way Dad held his. But now suddenly it was Jack in the nucleus of our heirloom, Jack looking away from one specimen that was still too small or one that was still too green, Jack with his tennis shoes grungy and brown.

Jack.

I smiled tremendously and almost fell out of my chair.

And eventually---all in the face of those silent stares and questioning glances--Jack Klast knelt down in the vinework like a poet at the foot of a muse, and slipped his quick fingers inside.

I knew my wheelchair was--at that moment--a lightning rod.

And as we all watched, Jack gathered the perfect watermelon into his hands and lifted it. It was wrapped in a swaddling of leaves and earth-stuff, and Jack blew them away like the fires from a candle-heavy cake. He rose to his feet with this awesome gift in his arms, and then, before the bravest of us could even breathe--

--he dropped it.

He watched it all the way to the ground, now more like a bomb than ever, straight to his feet and the hard planet beneath.

The melon burst quite ignominiously. I think I half expected fireworks and shrapnel.

Dad started. Mama and Aunt Zoe gasped and covered their mouths. I think Wayne winced and maybe swore, but I'm not sure. Granddad, like an ancient oak with roots so deep and a bole so wide as to be immortal, only stood there and gazed out through misty eyes at this boy and this melon and this great, terrible, unexplained thing that he'd done.

I only bit my lip and waited.

With the transient flutter of a smile flying fast over his lips, Jack reached down and retrieved half of the demolished melon. The marrow inside glowed red and full of juices in the sun. And watching Granddad and all the rest of us, Jack brought that watermelon to his lips like a jeweled chalice, and sipped long of its nectar.

Then he wiped his mouth on his arm and went to Dad.

Dad could only stand there, big hands flexing at his sides, now knowing what was expected of him.

Jack offered up the cup.

Slowly, Dad took the melon in both hands. And with everyone eyeballing him, waiting for his lead, and standing there in the sight of God and the mosquitos, Dad tipped back that sweet melon decanter and drank of it, deep and fine.

His mouth came away wet.



He looked at Jack and read the smile and lines of his lips and handed the melon to Wayne with a look that said, "*Here, drink. I don't know why, but drink.*"

Wayne drank.

The melon went like that, from Wayne to Mama, from Mama to Zoe, and I was sure that by the time it got around to David there couldn't have been a damned drop of melon-water left behind to wet the throat, but there was. I'd already taken my fill and loved it, laughing inside myself as I drank, wondering if the others could smell the smoke of lightning as completely as did I.

The melon went at last to Granddad. He held it in hands that had been holding melons for sixty years, and just when I thought he wasn't going to partake but rather cast the proffered up into the dust, he cracked his split lips and said to Jack, "Son, I was nine years old when a friend of my papa's took me by the hand and out toward the melons. He used a blacksmith's hammer to break one open, not a knife or a saw, but just busted it in no right fashion at all. And then he tilted a melon half to my mouth and said, 'Here, boy. Take your first gulp of water-melon wine.' Told me it would make me live forever, as long as I gargled some of that special elixir once every summer. And I never drank any since." He fixed Jack with a puzzling stare. "You ever hear that story?"

Our eyes all went to Jack.

"I've heard'em all, Gramps," Jack said. "I've heard'em all."

Granddad nodded, and sipped his wine.

That's how things went with Jack Klast.

For the rest of the summer he lived like that. He sat beside me on the bank, ably fixing a hook to his line, while I watched my bobber and wished I could swim. And what do you know? Not two hours later but I was.

It was Jack's idea.

The words were hardly out of my mouth when he stood up and started stripping.

"Jack, what the heck are you doing?"

"Getting naked."

"Yeah, but *why*?" I looked around, as if someone might be lurking in the forest, watching me watch Jack undress. I blushed something horrible.

"Don't expect me to swim with my clothes on, do you? How the hell can I possibly teach you to swim if I'm too busy drowning myself? Clothes just weigh a man down, and it's a damn shame we have to wear them on dry land, much less in the water."

The only part of this I heard, of course, were those few syllables about me swimming.

"I can't swim!" I protested.

But by that time Jack's white and willowy body was already wrestling me out of my chair. "Come on, now. You can't hope to catch any fish unless you can think like one. Gotta get yourself under the water and get a good gillful of creek in your system. Then, by God, you'll be a fisher without peer."

Before I knew it I was down to my underwear, and then Jack dragged me in.

Those first few seconds were frantic. I'd been in the creek before, to be sure, but never up to my neck with someone who



was determined to either teach me to swim or kill me in the process. I struggled and beat the water enormously and took in a lot of muddy water, but when Jack got his feet beneath him and held me like he'd held that melon, things got easier. I started paddling like I'd seen dogs do a hundred times. Two days and several lessons later I was swimming.

Sort of. It was more of a desperate spanking of the water, but at the very least I could deliver myself from one side of the creek to the other, and soon I badgered Wayne into coming out and watching me at my Mark Spitz best.

Wayne stood there rather dumbly during my performance, and Jack sat on a fallen log and ate a Granny Smith apple in toothy satisfaction.

It was the best day of my life.

July came and went and Jack held on. He stayed with Gerald Troutman when he had to, slept upstairs in my room if he could manage it. He worked when there was work to be done and taught me about dowsing rods and tree-house building, even though I'd never climbed a tree. One day I went looking for him at sundown with dinner getting cold behind me, and I found him in the field, building.

We had wheat field in most every direction around our house, and the combines had just labored home for the season. The bushels had been brought in, and now what was left in the field were stalks of gristle that in the coming weeks would be ploughed under. Jack stood out amidst the slumbering barrens, hammering nails and two-by-fours, as indecipherable and blonde as ever.

I approached, and when I reached the edge of the field and knew that my chair could carry me no farther, I slipped down and drug myself forward on my hands.

Jack looked up only briefly, then went on sweating and constructing.

When I reached him, my palms were black and my pants a mess. I twisted into a sitting position and watched him work. Somewhere behind us both, mashed potatoes and baked beans grew mothy and cold.

The sun went down behind my back. Finally Jack propped his wooden creation into a deep hole he'd dug, then quietly filled it up.

I craned my neck and beheld the crucifix.

Jack went on working. He'd acquired a pair of frayed bib overalls from somebody's closet and was now stuffing them with great fistfuls of straw.

"What is it?" I presently asked.

"Just a cross, for right now," Jack explained. "Not good for a whole lot except maybe hanging scarecrows."

"Scarecrows?" I'd heard of them, of course, but never had I had one built and breathed into right in front of me.

But that's what Jack did, lined that scarecrow's limbs and torso with straw he'd purloined from the barn, tied its wrists and ankles shut with bailing wire and nailed it up. He splayed its arms over the crossbar and fastened it tight, then shoved a few more hands of straw in its chest, for dignity's sake.

"Wouldn't do to have a scarecrow with a scrawny chest," he said, adding more and more. "What kind of crow would be afraid of a weakling thing like that? What we need out here is Hercules, all puffed up and just ready to squash any crows sorry enough to get close."

I agreed, and before long the scarecrow was complete.

Except for its head, which Jack said would have to wait till October with the ripening of the pumpkins.

"Ain't no scarecrow of mine going to have a head of anything less than genuine jack-o'-lantern. Anything else just wouldn't be right."

And so our headless scarecrow stood vigil in the field until November, when the first vast flurries of the season finally shucked it free and buried it in snow.

But that evening, Jack and I sat in the dirt and watched the scarecrow's shadow grow longer and longer still, until everything was dark.

And then Jack died.

It was August 31st when he passed away, a Friday. School was to begin the following Monday, and the sun had already started to slip a little in the sky. It was bone cancer, the doctors said, after he was gone. Gerald Troutman told Dad that Jack had been diagnosed back in March and was supposed to have been in a bad way by September. I guess that Gerald was keeping Jack because Jack's dad had gotten drunk the night he learned the truth, and had driven off the road and killed himself.

We buried him on a Sunday, not a bad day for funerals, in the little cemetery south of Roandike where the stones were small and the sparrows plenty. Wayne wheeled me up the grass and near the box, and even though the rest of them were all in suits and clip-on ties, I wasn't faking. I had come before this boy in blue jeans and canvas shoes, as I knew he would have, had it been him still taking air and me going back to the



ground. I cried a lot, and I'm sure Zoe and David and everyone else did, too. It wasn't much later that the leaves cindered orange and nectarine red, and summer went away.

A month later I went out to hunt a head for the scarecrow. The pumpkins and squash were thick and round by then, the garden a cornucopia of harvest scents and autumn breezes. When no one else was around, I slithered into the thick of the barbed vines until I found the penultimate pumpkin. It was masterfully shaped and unblemished and would have made a fair head for any scarecrow. Then there remained the task of getting back. Pulling myself through that undergrowth was hard enough. With the pumpkin as my passenger, it was brutal. I wore gloves to do what I could to protect my hands, but my wrists and elbows were soon chafed and sour. I'd drag a few feet, reach back, haul my pumpkin treasure forward. Then more lizardwalking, more pumpkin-grabbing, and by then the sun was striking off the metal of my chair like sudden starlight. Still I forced myself through the foliage, guiding my pumpkin ever closer.

For half an hour I labored with my find, wrestling it back to the wheelchair and thinking how I'd carve it to make it look like I envisioned. I wanted it so that its eyes gleamed like can-

dlelight when the sun was right, and so that it smiled and sneered at the same time. I was deliberating over the details that I would tool upon my pumpkin; all this while I struggled that last leg of my journey. I grabbed the armrests of the chair and heaved myself up and in. Then I sat there and just breathed.

At last I reached down for my golden trophy, but even as I was hauling it into my lap, I tasted the lightning. It was still out there, more distant now the passing of summer, but all power and victories just the same.

With a jack-o'-lantern grin I dropped that pumpkin to the ground.

It split open with a terrific sound.

I leaned down and gathered up the largest portion of it and held it there in my hands for the longest time. And then, with the sun in my eyes and a certain sense of July in my bones, I tilted back my head and drank ripe mouthfuls of that pumpkin wine. ~



Donna, Donna

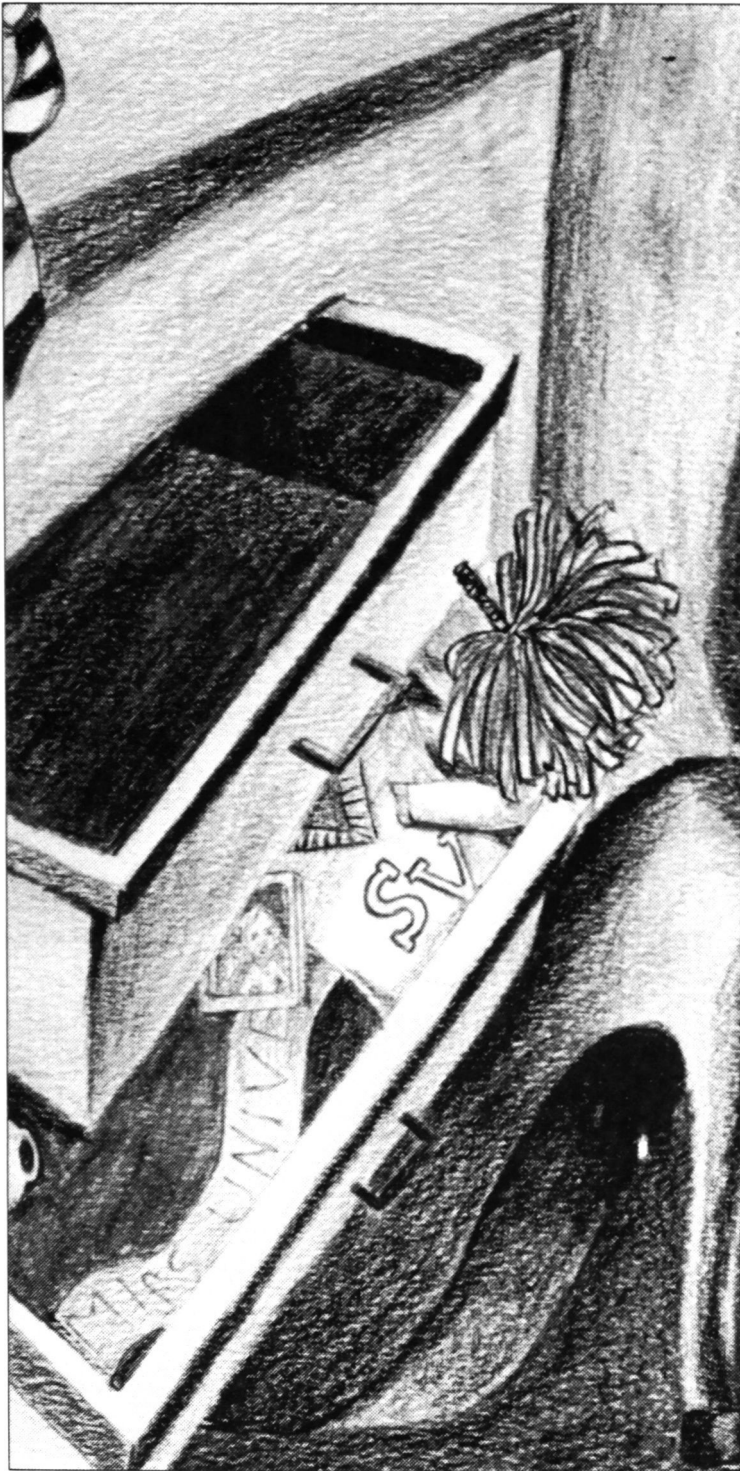


ILLUSTRATION BY EDGARDO GEORGE

The stone-rounding cold chastens
 skin's edge, re-sets the calendar. And here,
 at the heart of storm, wind,
 that had died a little, picks for its own
 the dry materials of world,
 through clutches of men, in work and out,
 picks its way down blocks
 adorned with jukeboxes and daughters.
 While vendors cry
 their barbed complaints, while lights flash red
 then dark, the starlings
 seem in time, blown off charred skies
 and back around the power stacks,
 and the convulsing gutter drums, the steps
 of men blown in, each
 to his cupped storm, each with that look
 of wave-grey logs,
 tossed here by waves revisiting a shoreline.
The meteors that were her hands,
the comets that were her fingers,
part the hanging beads, tally the colors
like carried zeroes in striptease.
 Taboo throbs at the heart of their critiques.
 And in the courtships
 she constructs, *there*, in waves,
 and, *there*, in the faces of boys
 she orphans now by her unbuttoning,
 and orphans now
 in the gold of her farewells. Leaving
 the men their afternoons,
 grateful as lifetime piece-workers
 for day-labor, as she,
 with her apple breath, and breath of origins,
 crumples the dawn news,
 speaking their names like exercise
 and attitudes toward spices,
 the weather weakening, this cousin
 from the sticks
 who taught herself the dancing,
 bearing the thunder still,
 over the autumn-yellowed, winter-flattened grasses
 of the play-yard. Statue-straight
 in rain, like the *honeycomb* love was,
 absorbing intenser blue,
 she whispers the names of kids
 and of the gardens set on fire,
 stone by, stars by stone and stars
 re-made, in the light rain come
 like a revision of the lightning,
 acquainted as these with tasks
 and with the revelling
 after tasks.

Robert Lietz

With Apologies for Yet Another Icarus Poem

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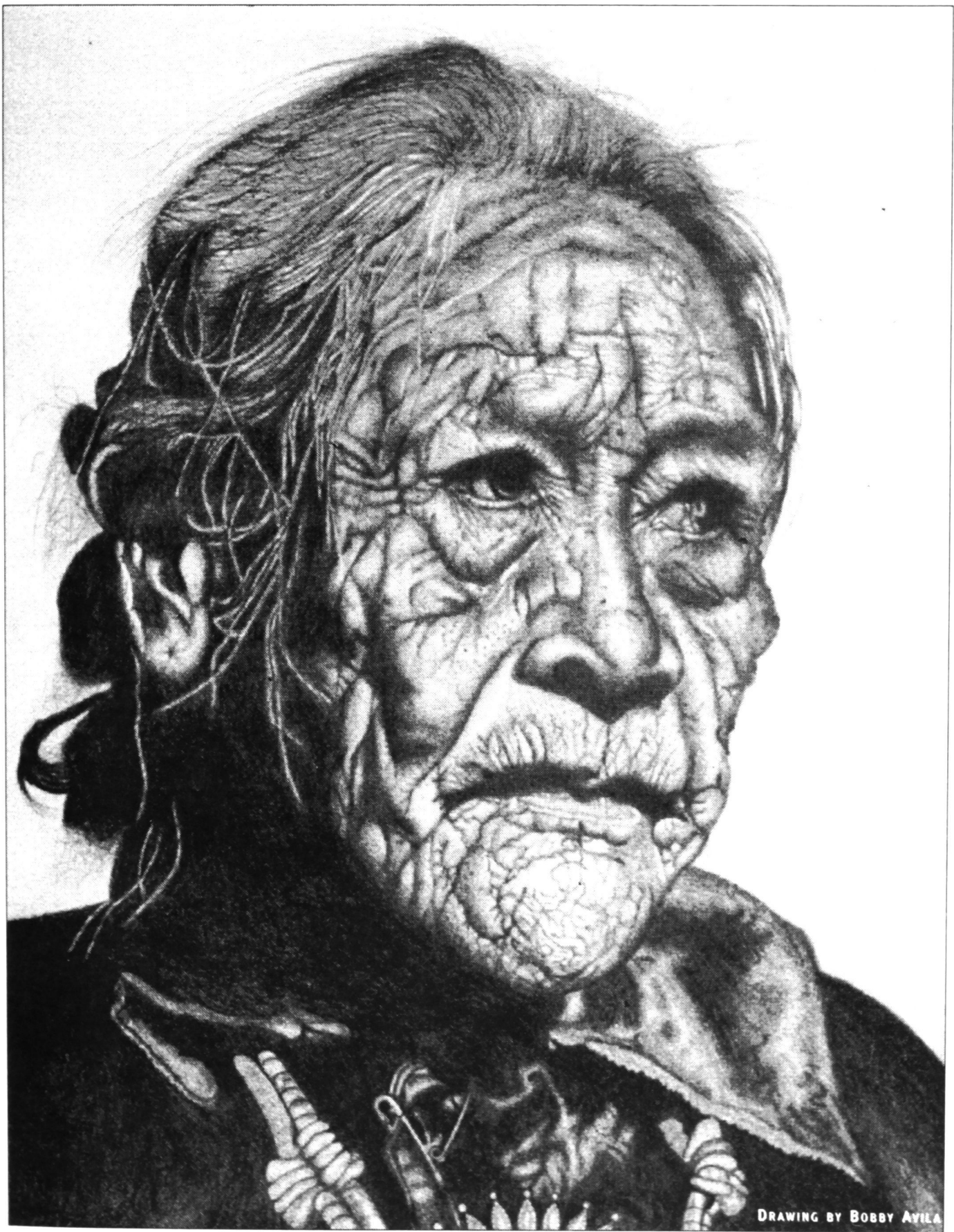


ILLUSTRATION BY BRENT JOHNSON

At North High School,
I first heard Mr. Goodwin
tell the story of Icarus,
and being sixteen, in love
with thoughts of daring,
escape, freedom,
I found Icarus heroic,
an ancient Evil Knieval
following his own star,
consequences be damned.

Time, though, has a way
of shifting ideas like beads
in a kaleidoscope bringing
a different view into focus,
so that now, as I watch
my teenage son fashion
his own Icarus wings
from daring's tallow,
I catch myself gazing up,
praying praying for rain.

Ann A. Boger



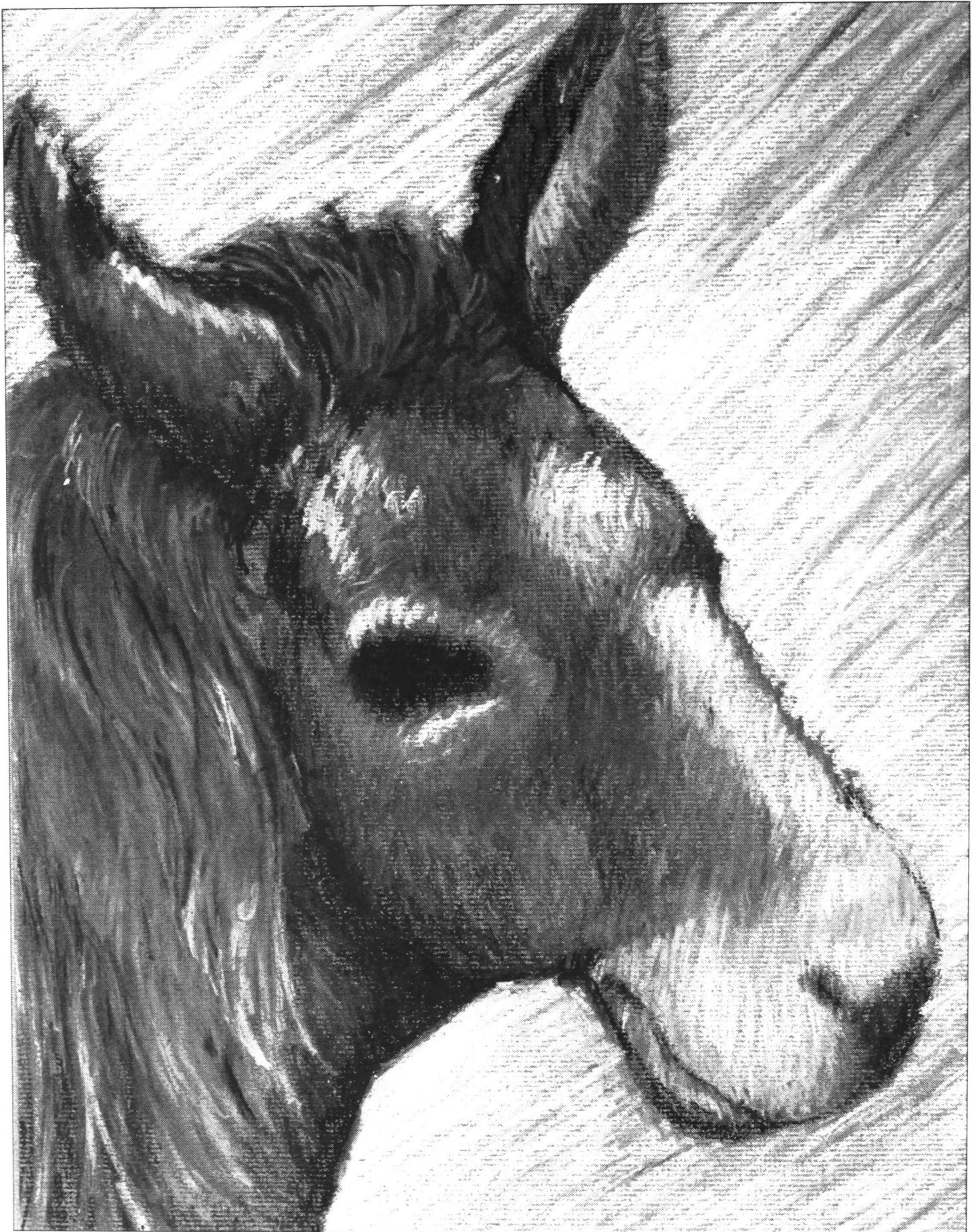


ILLUSTRATION BY BRENT JOHNSON



The Red Mule

Thomas Dobbs

The old Chevy pickup came barreling down the gravel driveway crunching and snorting. As it rolled to a stop in front of the sagging porch of the faded white farmhouse, the driver laid on the horn until the little boy sitting in the passenger seat thought that the sputtering, coughing sound was going to die for lack of breath.

The driver, who was the boy's grandfather, rolled down the truck's window and hollered, "Hey, Okie." The man of the house, followed by a hesitant wife and flock of children, emerged through the rickety screen door.

"Hey, Roy," the farmer said warily. The man's hands were on his hips. "Been awhile." The children were lined up along the porch beside their father, the smallest on her knees with her head between the rails.



Roy got out of the truck, hung his thumbs from his suspenders, and strode on over to the porch to greet the farmer with an enthusiastic handshake. Shane got out of the truck too and stood silently next to his grandfather.

The air was hot and damp, a usual summer day if such a thing existed. The weather in Oklahoma defies all prediction. Being in the exact middle of the country makes Oklahoma a transition zone for every weather known to man. Electrical storms rip the land apart by its seams and tornados sweep up the mess. The seasons overlap each other in a whirling cat fight. Many times Shane had heard stories about the weather's fickle nature.

According to one yarn, a farmer was plowing with a team of mules in summer time when one of the mules overheated and died. Before the farmer could remove the harnesses, the

wind shifted and the other mule froze to death. The most reliable feature of Oklahoma's weather, though, is the incessant wind. If a man loses his hat, he is advised not to chase it as he can grab the next one blowing by.

The unpredictability of the weather made farming a risky business at best. Drought and flood alternated in maddening fashion. To worsen matters, the thin topsoil that covered most of Oklahoma had been used up by the excessive cotton farming or blown away in the Dust Bowl. Most of the farms that the boy saw on the trips with his muletrader grandfather were small and unprofitable. They grew alfalfa mainly, or corn to feed the cattle.

Some of the farmers still used mules to plow their fields, even in 1954. The best bottom land was controlled by big companies with modern equipment, but the family farmer in the isolated hills of eastern Oklahoma couldn't squeeze the payments for a tractor out of the land. The few fingers of fertile soil turned quickly into rocky hills, forested by equally marginal timber.

After exchanging pleasantries with the wife, Roy got right to the point. "What's your price for that red mule, John?"

Shane remembered his grandfather telling him to always ask the other man to give a price.

The suspicious farmer raised a hand off his hip to pinch his chin. "That's a mighty fine mule. I was just fixing to break him in. Barely three years old, and more spirited than a drunken sailor. Ain't never owned a mule lik'm."

Roy, his rounded belly pushing against his denim overalls, just kept smiling in the same manner he had since they drove up.

The farmer was right about the mule. It was beautiful and wild. No harness marks marred its unusual red color. Having never been shorn, its mane was so long that it had curled over to one side nearly touching its foreleg. Both the mane and the bushy tail were covered with stickery cockleburs, the tail so much so that it swung like a beehive back and forth.



Curious, the big red mule trotted over to the edge of the pasture fence and pricked up its ears so it could hear the negotiations.

The farmer nodded his head slowly, still pinching his chin. "I'd take a hundred fifty dollars."

"He's unbroken, but I'll give you forty," Roy said.

Shane, only four-years-old, listened to the haggling in amazement. In the truck on the way to the farm, his grandfather had tried to impart to the boy some of the wisdom of mule trading. "Now Shane," he had told him as though he was a grown man, "I've traded mules in this territory since I was nearly your size. At some time or other, I've took every farmer in these parts. Picked'm clean. May not remember when, but I know I have."

The boy, who had sunk deep into the mountainous bench seat of the pickup, had watched his grandfather, mesmerized. His white hair was the color of sheep after a rainless September, and a sly grin lay just underneath everything his grandfather said. Even when angry, he linked his sentences together with smiles.

"But that's to my advantage, cause I know they're trying to get even. Revenge don't pay in mule trading, son."

The two men bantered back and forth, the farmer slow and guarded, while the cagey trader became increasingly jolly and alive. Finally, the farmer looked Shane's grandfather square in the eye and said, "Roy, I'll make you a deal, but it's got to have a condition. I'll take forty dollars now, but you only got one week to get the mule out of the pasture before it belongs to me again."

With his head cocked slightly and one eye almost squeezed shut, the farmer had made the unusual proposition as a challenge.

"Sold," Roy barked loudly with a nod and simultaneous bend forward at the waist. Extracting his large leather wallet, the old muletrader paid the farmer with as much ceremony as two twenty-dollar bills could muster.

Upon receiving his money, the farmer looked up from his clenched fists and let loose a spirited yell. "Whoopee! Roy, you son of a bitch, I got you this time."

The farmer danced around the truck, rooting and hollering like a prospector who'd struck gold. When he finished his jig around the Chevy, the farmer slapped his hands on both knees and said, "Roy, three cowboys got tore all to hell trying to catch that red mule. Every time they come within ropin' distance it just high tails it into the brush. That mesquite's like razor blades. I may never catch that mule, 'cept maybe this winter, and I know you ain't gonna rope him in a week. Three ruined cowboys will tell you the same."

And then with a triumphant wink the farmer added, "But I thank you kindly for the forty dollars."

The little boy, expecting his grandfather to be angry, was surprised to see that his crocodile grin had grown even bigger.

"Go on and get in the truck, Shane," he ordered. "We'll be back after supper tomorrow, John. I ain't chasing no wild mule on an empty stomach."

As the truck backed out of the dusty drive, Roy stuck his head out the window and hollered. "Bye, Okie." Shane was sunk too low in the springy seat to be seen.

The next day, after supper, Shane followed his grandfather into the barn that sat behind the main house. Like most barns in the area, it was made of rough cut lumber, the paint long ago



weathered away. Shaped like a triangle on top of a box, the boy thought it overwhelmingly large. Inside the cavernous structure, the air was filled with the thick aromas of heavy smells that were overpowering on even the coldest winter days, and now it was stifling hot. Above their heads a mountain of hay lay piled in the loft. On either side of the barn were stalls, occupied mostly with mules, although a few plow horses were mixed in.

Roy walked over to a corner of the barn, and with a huff, bent over to rummage through a heap of leather and rope lying on the straw laden dirt floor.

The old man moaned as he pushed off his knee to straighten his torso. "Take this." He handed Shane a heavy rope halter that was difficult for the boy to carry. The rope was thick, too big for the boy's fist to close around, and it was prickly. The stickery new rope felt like a thousand tiny needles being stuck into his bare arms.

Shane made a face and the old man laughed. "Green hemp halter from Mexico. H'ain't been used. Go put it in the truck."

Shane did as he was told. Tramping out of the barn with his unpleasant load, he struggled into the open air trailer which had been hitched to the old truck and gratefully dumped the rope with a thud on the plank floor. As he was climbing out of the trailer, his grandfather emerged from the barn leading Nelly, the same mare that his grandfather had used when he taught Shane how to ride.

The swayback mare clopped slowly behind the muletrader, but then stopped dead in her tracks at the back of the trailer and refused to move. Just when the boy thought that they were going to have to push the old nag into the trailer, though, she made the short jump, her stiff front legs pounding on the wood planks like two hammers.

During the whole ride to the farmer's place, Shane wondered how his grandfather was planning on roping the wild mule. If three cowboys couldn't catch that red devil, how was one old man going to do any better? Even though Shane had the utmost confidence in his grandfather, he also knew about mesquite filled thickets. If the steel-like web of branches didn't get you, the chiggers and snakes would. Countless times his grandfather had warned him not to go into the mesquite underbrush, and Shane had been tempted to disobey him.

The most confusing part, though, was why his grandfather had chosen Nelly as a mount. Even on their best stallion, the old man didn't stand much chance of roping the red mule. Once into the tangled cover of mesquite, Nelly and his grandfather would be no match for the unmounted beast which had the extra advantage of being half donkey.

"Papa," Shane said in a worried voice, "shouldn't we bring Buck along to help us catch the mule?"

Buck was the boy's uncle. Though grown, he still lived at home. A huge, strapping man, Buck played games with Shane for hours and hours, and the boy loved him.

"Naw. No need to go and rile Buck over just one mule. You can help me."

The boy's face crinkled with worry. He couldn't possibly see how he was going to be much help. The red mule had looked very wild.

This time, when they drove down the farmer's driveway his grandfather didn't honk the horn. Instead, he eased the rig on up to the pasture gate and turned to the boy. "Go on and open the gate, Shane."

Shane climbed down from the truck. The three-board fence rose well over his head, but the latch was the same kind they had on their fence at home. Shane pulled the bolt out of the ground, and lifting the edge of the sagging boards up off the gravel with all his strength, he slowly swung the gate aside with heavy steps. His grandfather eased the truck through the gate, then drove the rig in a big half circle until the front of the truck was once again facing the fence, and the back of the trailer opened up to the pasture.

The red mule watched the entire proceedings, but having associated trailers with cowboys long ago, it moved away from the farmhouse and positioned itself within a short gallop of the mesquite. Shane stared at the mule with admiration. Unlike the plow mules he was accustomed to seeing, this mule was as wild and proud as an unbroken racehorse. Its head rose high into the air, and its erect ears were pricked to rigid points. He sensed an intelligence in the red mule that he didn't sense in Buck's razorbacks, or in the goats his grandfather kept to keep down the grass that the rattle snakes liked to hide in, or even in their hound dogs. A mule like that wasn't going to be easily roped.

The farmer, who had been working in his barn when their truck arrived, walked over to the fence and leaned against a rail. He was chewing on a piece of straw and trying, without success, to hide his amusement.



"Hey, Okie," the farmer called out with a smug nod of his head. Then he looked around, perplexed. "Where are your cowboys, Roy?"

"Only brought one," the muletrader replied, his face unreadable behind the crocodile grin. "Shane. He'll do the ropin'."

The farmer's look of disbelief was almost as big as Shane's. Just shaking his head, the farmer settled against the fence, eagerly awaiting the spectacle of Roy Smart finally making a fool of himself.

"Shane, let down the back of the trailer."

Nervous and a little scared, Shane unlatched the trailer gate, lowering it to the ground. Nelly stood motionless and disinterested, except for her tail half-heartedly switching flies. Her head was buried in a bag of oats, while her rump faced directly out into the pasture in the direction of the red mule. Shane waited for his grandfather to give him another instruction, but the old man just stood next to the fence, waiting.

The mule, which had been watching the trailer intently from his position of safety, whinnied curiously. After a moment of undecided hesitation, the mule began to slowly walk toward the trailer, its ears pointed forward and its nose close to the ground, like a hound dog locked onto a scent.

The mule came closer and closer.

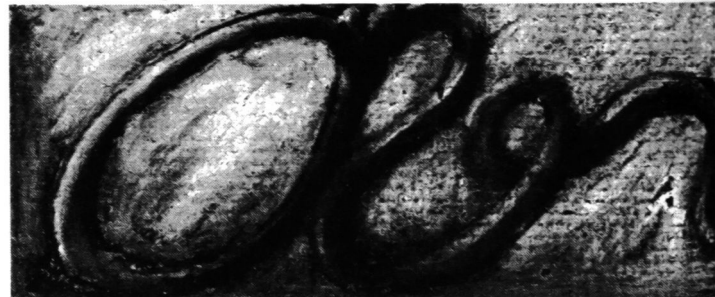
Shane made a move away from the trailer but his grandfather stopped him with an outstretched hand. Shane watched in amazement as the wild mule with the long unshorn mane hopped up into the trailer, whinnied loudly, then real friendly-like leaned into Nelly. The mule kept shoving its head into Nelly's until their heads, bobbing in and out of each other, resembled two snakes jockeying for position.

"I've seen a mule hop a six-foot fence to get to a mare in heat," Roy said. "It's a shame their gun's got no bullets."

The farmer looked devastated. His jaw dropped to his chest, the piece of straw dangling from his lower lip.

Roy reached down from the tailgate and latched it back in place. "Shane, get that rope halter out'a the back of the truck and put it on the mule."

Shane retrieved the stickery halter, but then stood helplessly next to the truck. His grandfather walked over, and picking the boy up, held him above the front wall of the trailer. The mule was still nuzzling Nelly, who had gone back to eating out of her bag of oats. Shane easily slipped the halter over the



I'm Never Sure What to Expect From a Marriage



ILLUSTRATION BY BOBBY AVILA

I want to be cherished. Reassured.
I want to prefer sex to sleep.
I want words
for an aggressive man: one
right out there on the line
telling me what he wants
and needs. But my husband
likes quiet.

I'm relentless, he says,
parading endless comment or
question – *What do you think?*
How do you feel? I need
a hysterectomy. Let's talk about
David, sex, the business...
We need couples therapy.... But
he has nothing to say.

Silence
frightens me. Behind it some
outrage or wound smolders
too hot to form words.
My mother's taught me that.
And silence indicts: it says
it is my fault.

So I fill this marriage
with words that cover the silence:
warm safe blankets that keep it
from rising up on me,
accusing.

But tonight his silence
muzzles me. Words scurry
in frenzied circles inside
my throat. Louder and louder,
they repeat themselves.
To me.

Joan Cusack Handler

Afternoon at Chloe's

Number six paintbrushes, wooden-handled:
well-water blue, a green like dying grass,
white streaked with red.

We listen as she talks:

depth of stroke, bounce light,
suggested figures, the broken glass
of her studio's windows.

The faint smell of acrylics, turpentine,
flowers, the city outside.

...all fading as I stare,
when she has finished talking,
not at Chloe's painting
but at curls of hair over wide forehead,
white arms in sleeveless shirt,
cheeks and lips now poised,
illuminating, privately,
nothing in particular.

Roger Soffer

The Country

Come with me to the shadowy riverbottoms,
Where no eyes will see—except my soul's.

Flickering candles speak in the darkness
Of our wood-paneled sanctuary.

Dance through the tiny green blades,
But be careful not to disturb the caterpillars.

Climb every other tree until nothing
Below can be seen—and we branch out.

Backs to moist soil, arm looped in arm,
We read the starmap of our hearts.

Dawn creeps over your child face
And reminds me—we are nature.

Kristopher Standley

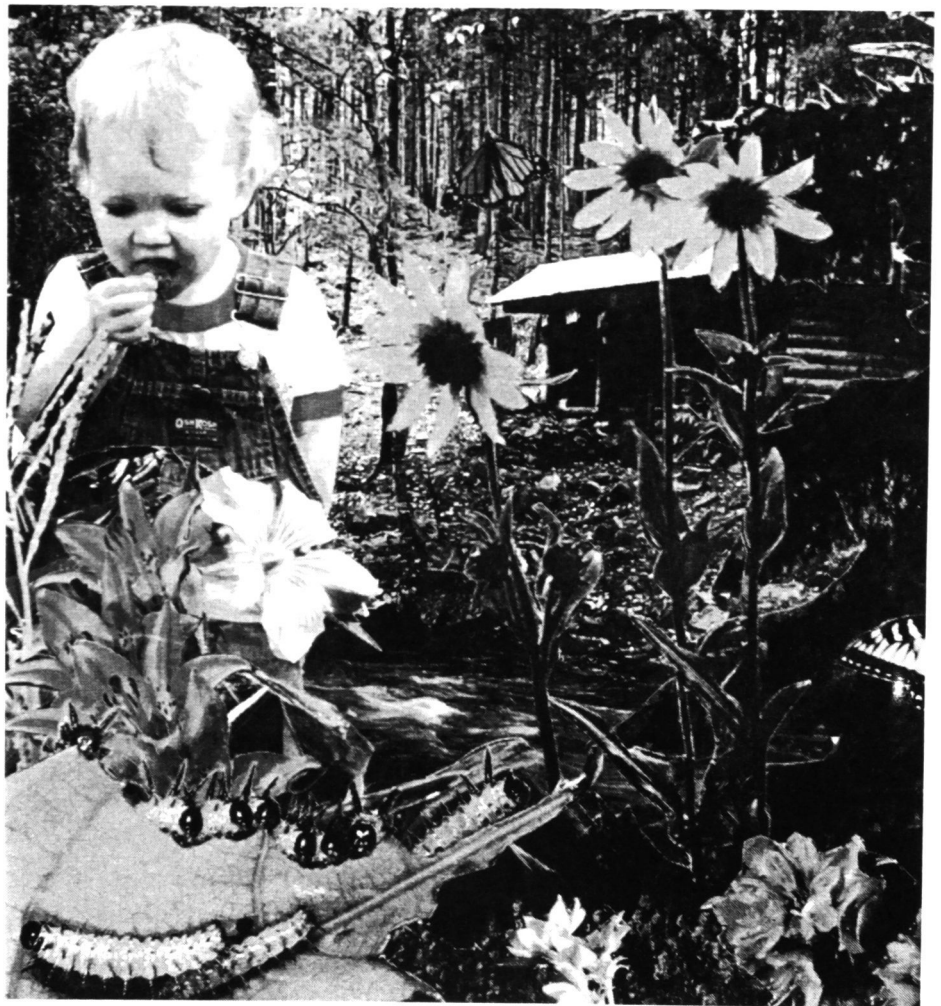


ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTA LAMB



Roadkill

Even reduced to a streak of gray and red,
this 'possum's life must be considered successful.
He was crossing the road—my keen but subtle sense
of the obvious says—to get to the other side
and now he has,
though the other side has turned
out to be farther than he'd ever dreamed.
A thin envy invades my fleeting regret
as I swerve to avoid him and his guardian angel,
the raven with its bloody beak
cleaning up after the rapture and escorting
his hissing ghost to its endless reward.

Paul Grant

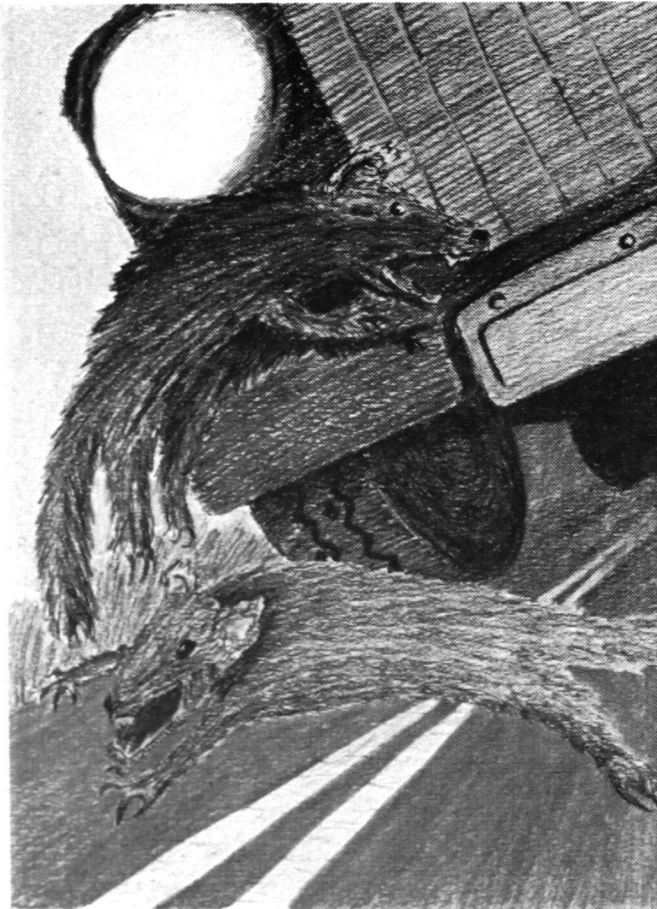


ILLUSTRATION BY EDGARDO GEORGE

Past Catalpa

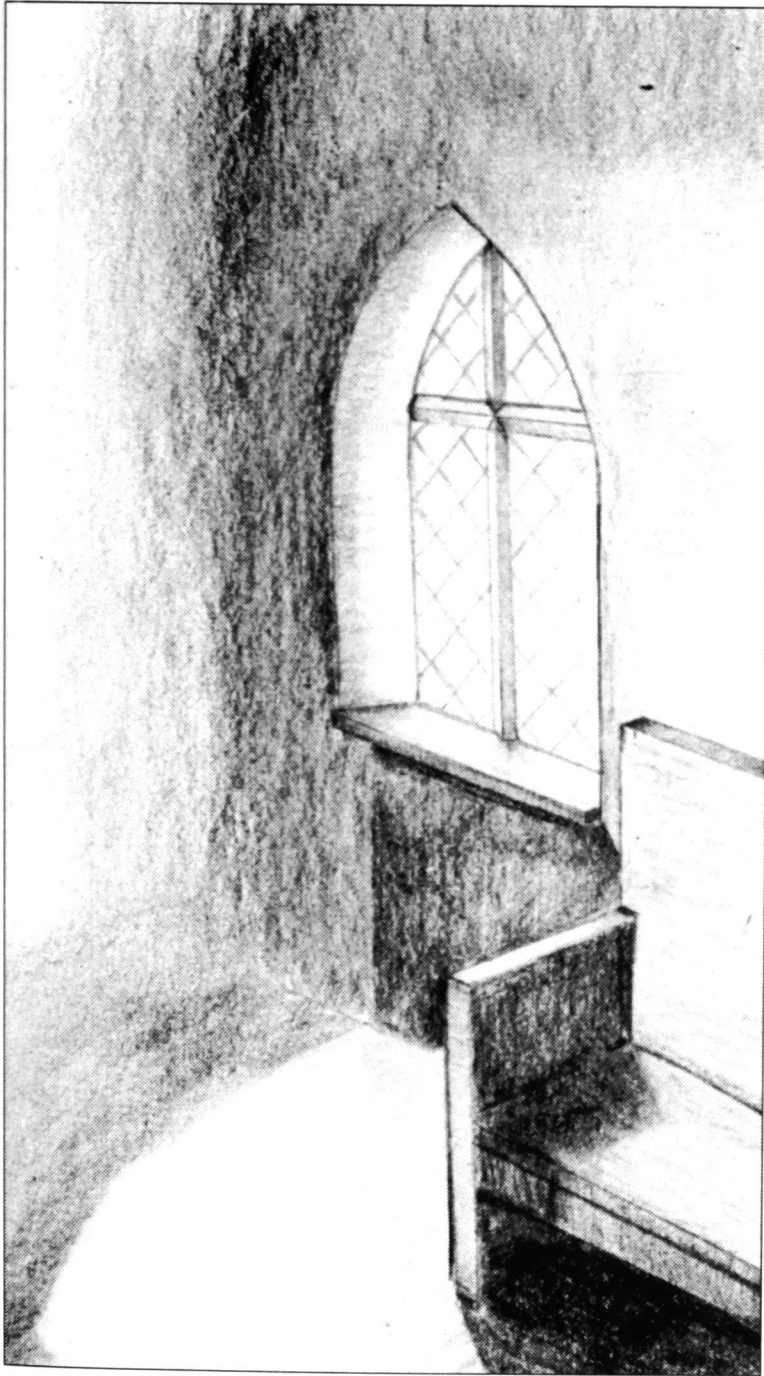


ILLUSTRATION BY PHILLIP SCHROEDER

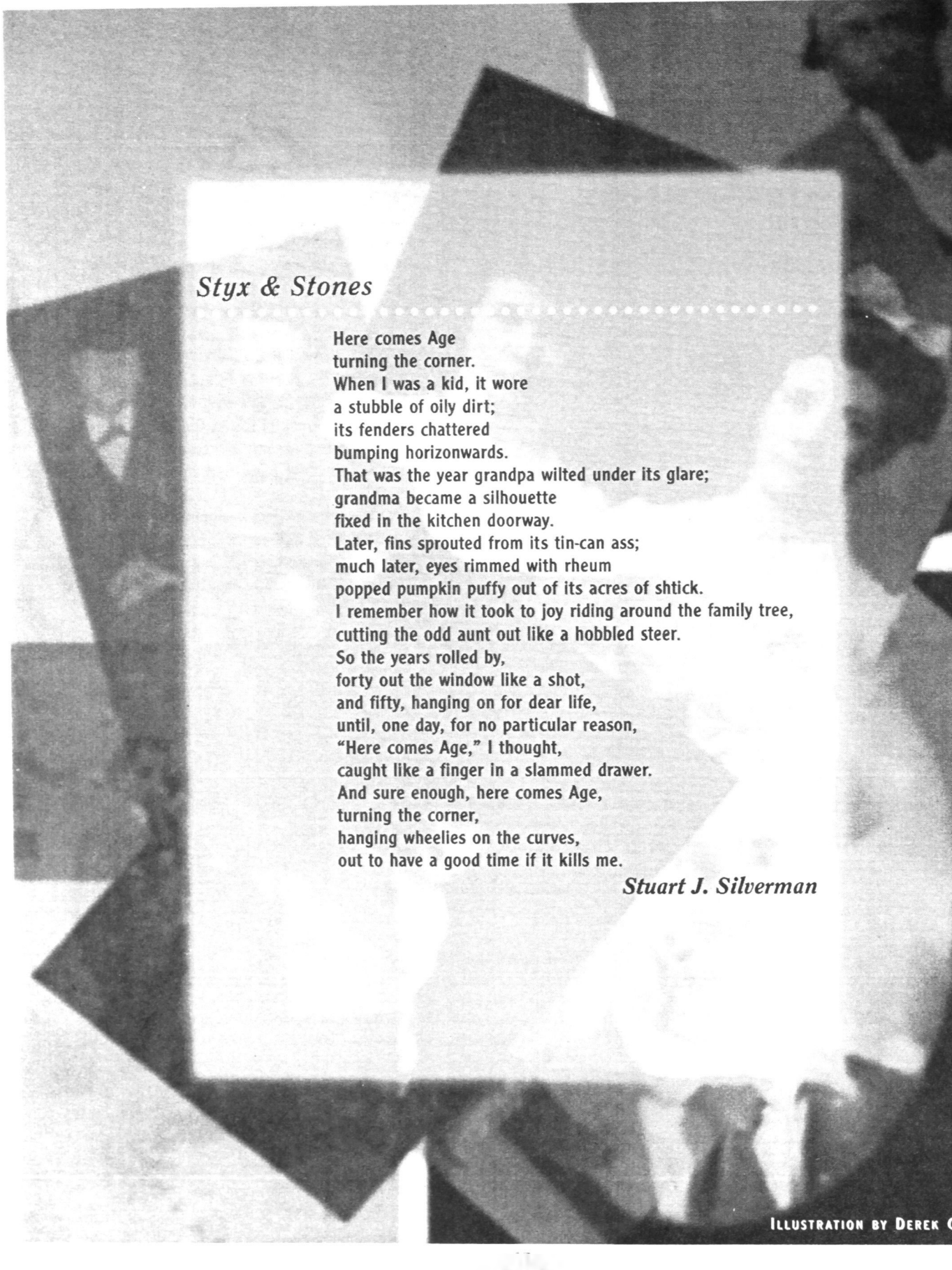
Sunday nights freezing, pheasants
squat amid dry yarrow, pale Orion
is a watch and ward. Stags scour
velveteen antlers on sumac trunks,
flee from station wagons skidding
over icy roads, welders and wives

up front, three kids in back seat.
Natural forces function in accord:
these hardy headlamps stab a path
to Gold Prophecy of Christ Chapel
open for worship. See low tallowy
light on pineknot pews, waxy roses

from a widow on new sawhorse altar.
Under a plank and ceramic crucifix,
feel the gutbellied stove's warmth.
You might just want to stay a bit,
pray again with basses and tenors,
a glorious noise only past Catalpa.

Edward C. Lynskey





Styx & Stones

Here comes Age
turning the corner.
When I was a kid, it wore
a stubble of oily dirt;
its fenders chattered
bumping horizonwards.
That was the year grandpa wilted under its glare;
grandma became a silhouette
fixed in the kitchen doorway.
Later, fins sprouted from its tin-can ass;
much later, eyes rimmed with rheum
popped pumpkin puffy out of its acres of shtick.
I remember how it took to joy riding around the family tree,
cutting the odd aunt out like a hobbled steer.
So the years rolled by,
forty out the window like a shot,
and fifty, hanging on for dear life,
until, one day, for no particular reason,
"Here comes Age," I thought,
caught like a finger in a slammed drawer.
And sure enough, here comes Age,
turning the corner,
hanging wheelies on the curves,
out to have a good time if it kills me.

Stuart J. Silverman

ILLUSTRATION BY DEREK GRAPE



Landscape with birds

Consider these matters of chance:
Birds eat twice their weight
in stone-cold food,
birds have shat on my hair.
Consider the past of the robin
I once cupped in my hands:
I felt the fear in its pounding heart
and darting eye, let it go
streaking off to a tree.

Consider the besotted bird that crashed
into a mirror in an orphanage hall.
Vanity of vanities, the wages of sin.
The nuns shoveled its body into a bag.
Consider the gutted birds
that lorded it over the orphanage parlor
from the glass-front curio cabinet.
Consider my mother, fruit
of the orphanage womb,

who channeled her fear into a beak,
tore at the walls and the ceiling.
Consider her cries, smothered
by mop and pail, or passing
through a telephone line
under a row of judgment birds,
passing from bird to listening bird,
circling back to the burial cairn.

So many messages, so little space.

Eileen Hennessy



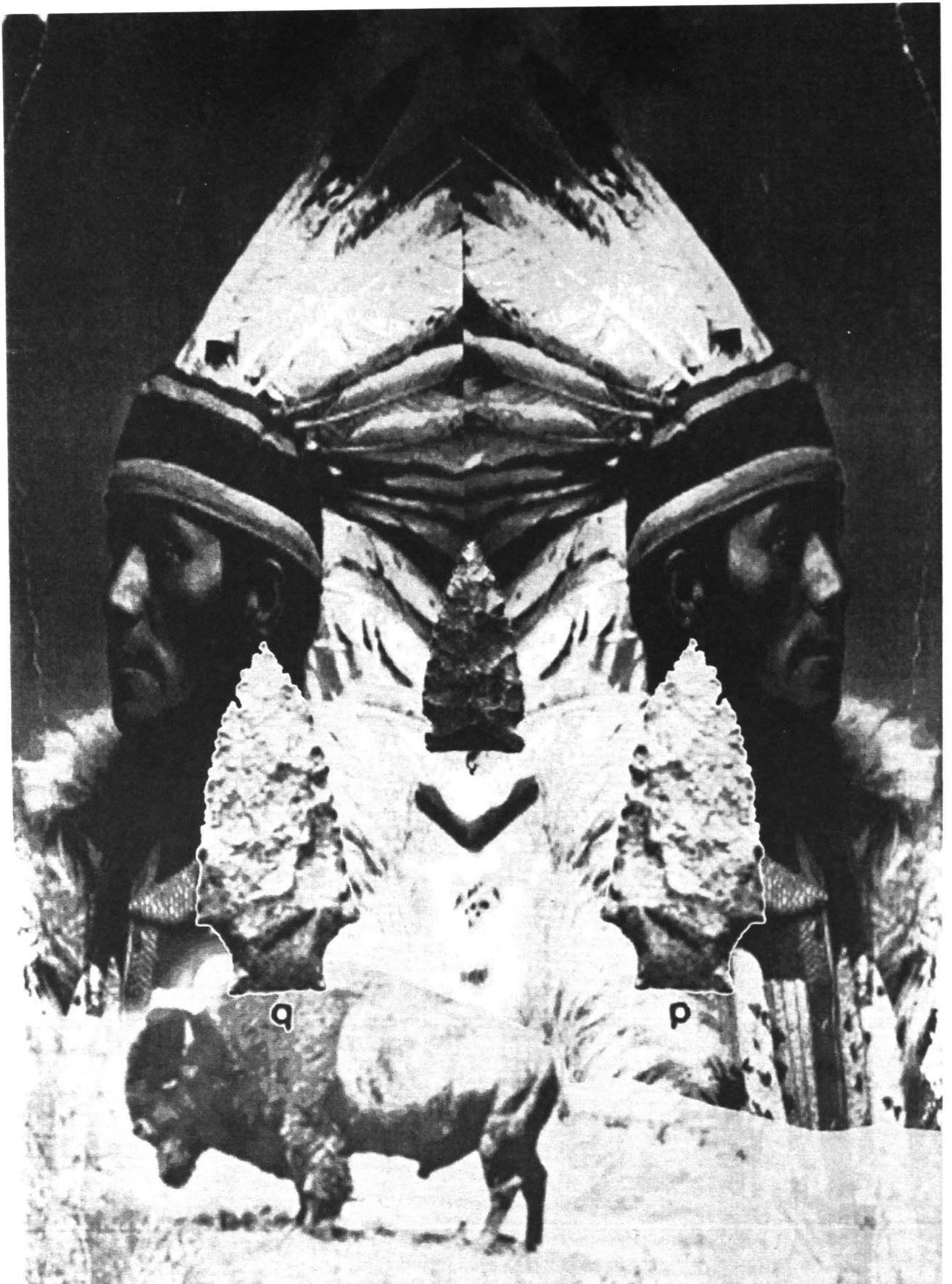


ILLUSTRATION BY NORMAN TABER



An Excerpt from The Mythmakers

by George L. Hoffman

More days passed and little was said about a hunting expedition into the land of Pilau. The hunters had been ranging through the higher hills to the north, and the village was living well off the deer and elk which the hunters brought in. With an abundance of smaller game and the wild foods gleaned by the women, the chiefs saw little reason to change their hunting territory.

"When we go to find Pilau," Big Bear said, "the entire village goes. Two moons, yet, and winter comes. Snow will be deep in this basin, but before the first snows fall, we will move down river to the low hills where Pilau will come to find shelter from the icy winds sweeping the high plains. We will meet him there, and our women will come with their knives from our lodges to take the skins from those that we kill. They will cut up the meat and dry it for winter. It will be a good time with much feasting and dancing. It is a time that will come when it will come."

And it did come, though the three young men who called themselves Tewa, had begun to doubt that it would come. For many days they had watched the skies for signs of approaching storms. Summer had given way to autumn, and autumn had drowsed through many warm days and chilly nights like a fat marmot waiting for some mysterious signal to tell it to return to its den. The leaves of the cottonwoods yellowed and fell, and one morning a skim of ice appeared along the edges of the quiet pools along the river.

"It is time," said Big Bear.

In short order, the tepees were dismantled and their skin coverings rolled tightly into transportable bundles. Bedding and gear were folded into compact bales, and the skin bags of nuts, seeds, and dried herbs, stowed among them. By midday the village was on the move.

Everyone carried something. Even the scouts ranging ahead of the main party carried small parcels of clothing and gear strapped across their shoulders. Behind them came other

young men, and old ones too, with their heavier burdens lashed across trailing poles which they dragged laboriously behind them.

Their dogs were of some help. Strong and wolf-like, they drew their own loads mounted on primitive sledges, the forward ends of which were fastened to their sides.

Then came the main body of women with their heavy bales of rolled skins across their backs. With their larger children toddling at their sides, they moved slowly and ponderously, their shoulders hunched, their heads down, their eyes upon the dusty ground.

Only the very small rode. The sick and the elderly walked with the others if they could walk at all. If not, they arranged themselves comfortably by the trail and sang their death songs. Their contributions toward the welfare of the village had been many over the years. Their last was the assurance that they would not be its burden.

Kah and other young men served as flanks and rear guards. They also carried whatever materials that would create no hindrance to their more important role of defense. The very life of the village depended on them and the advance scouts to detect danger and ward off attack. They knew the Apachu well. They could not be lax.

They did not pitch their tepees that first night, nor the second, nor the third. The weather, though perceptibly cooler, remained clear and crisp. They posted their sentries, they ate from their food store, and they slept their exhaustion away in their skin robes along the side of the river. When morning came again, they took up their burdens and resumed their journey.

At the end of the tenth day, they came to a major division of the river. The channel had widened and grown shallow. The valley became a broad expanse of cottonwood and willow groves interspersed with saltbrush and a few runty hackberry and elm. Big Bear led his people across the sandy shallows to the high ground separating the two forks.



"We will pitch our tepees here," he said. "Soon others of our people will join us. Our village will be large and happy. Then we will hunt for Pilau."

Two days later, more people came down the east fork of the river. They came with their bales and rolls of goods, their gear, and their food stuffs. When all the lodges were up and assembled, the high ground on both sides of the river became a small city of gray tepees populated by busy women, gossiping men, and shouting children.

"Now we will hunt Pilau," Big Bear said. "When enough skins have been taken and cured, we will add two more tepees here. One will be the lodge of Left Hand and this daughter who is so eager to share his bed. The other will be Long Scar's and his friend Hoya's. They will find women enough who will feel the itch of idleness through the long winter." He slapped Kah across the shoulder and laughed loudly. Kah coughed and grinned.

The chiefs of the new village parleyed that evening. They exchanged information and ideas about the impending hunt and made their plans to carry it out.

"I have seen their watering places along the river," said one. "I think they will soon be moving into this valley like ants to their nests."

"It is so," agreed another. "We must make our surround and drive the buffalo over the cliffs before they have time to learn of our presence. Once they smell our fires and the stink of our village, they will move far away, and we will have no meat."

"I will send my scouts down river to look for the buffalo," said yet another. "They will also watch for the Apachu. We need to know where the enemy is. We do not have time to fight him now, but if we know he is there, and if he knows that we know, he will keep his distance. Then we can hunt Pilau."

"I will send my scouts east into the grassy plains," said Big Bear. "When they see many buffalo on the flat lands above the bluffs, they will send runners to let us know. Then we can begin our surround."

"Big Bear has many fine hunters," said an old chief with a bit of envy.

"I have," agreed Big Bear. "I have one who easily draws the yellow bow of Tall Tree, the Osage. He carries the scar of the lightning bolt, and his arrow has the power of the lightning. It is swift and sure."

"We do not know this one," said a chief with much interest. "Is he of our people?"

"He is Tewa from some far place where the villages are of stone," explained Big Bear. The people have built their houses in great caves along the cliffs. They are farmers who grow corn and beans."

"Tewa!" spat the other chief contemptuously. "They are runty people who know only how to dig in the ground. They are not hunters. How can this one be a hunter?"

Big Bear was patient, but firm. "He and two others saved my two daughters from the Apachu. They did not say so, but my daughters told what it was that they did. Three Apachu were killed. Four arrows," he said as he held up four fingers, "---four arrows and the Apachu lay dead on the trail. My daughters were returned unharmed to my lodge. The Tewa are strong fighters. I think they must also be fine hunters."

"And this one with the scar draws the yellow bow?"

"He is the best bowman in the village. My young men have said that it is so. None can match his power and skill with the bow."

"It will be interesting to see if Pilau falls to his arrows," mused the other. "Very interesting."

There was much dancing around the village tepees that night. The strongest and bravest of the young men, clad in buffalo robe costumes, led the spirited dancers in a frenzied, milling, spectacle mimicking the hunt anticipated in the days ahead. The great drums were loud with a ponderous booming rhythm that pulsed and throbbed to match the measured chant of the spectators. The bodies, glistening with paint and other trappings, were a writhing tumultuous mass as would-be hunters pursued and killed would-be prey. The shadows cast by their ducking, weaving, twisting forms were eerie against the pale forms of the nearby tepees, and the spectators caught up in the frenzy of movement and sound left their places to join the dancers. Wives, old men, little children, all became an impromptu part of the milling chanting mass.



Kah, Left Hand, and Hoya were awed by the sound and frenzy of the dance. Silently, they watched the great wash of human energy before them until, one by one, they were led by grinning women to join the dancers. Embued with the uninhibited spirit of the ritual, they soon entered into it with a fervor that was not to be dissipated until, like a giant thundercloud whose energy has been spent against the enveloping hills, the dancers, winded and spent, collapsed one by one in quivering heaps near the outer fringes of the circle.

At dawn the next morning, Young Bull led a large party of young men across the river to scout the high grassy plains. Their mission was not to hunt, but to find Pilau in numbers large enough to warrant a great surround. They were to report their findings to their chiefs who would then organize the many groups into a coordinated hunting effort.

With Young Bull were Left Hand, Hoya, and Kah. The time for which they had long waited had come. They were excited and eager. They were to meet, perhaps for the first time, the great one called Pilau.

The grassy plains were a plateau originating far north at the foot of the low mountains. Without interruption, they swept southward to meet the bluffs and breaks bordering the north side of the river. There in the coolness of fall with the dryness and heat of summer over, Pilau often gathered in huge herds to graze on the ripened grasses. It was a good place. Water was in the river, food was plentiful, and the nearby hills and breaks were havens against the winter storms. Pilau came, grew fat, and found life easy.

But he had enemies. The gray wolves, the great bears, and sometimes Toho, the cougar, all preyed on him. But seldom did they take any except the old, the sick, and the dying. They were no threat to the great herds. They cleaned their ranks of the unfit and kept them strong.

The greatest enemy was the strange two-legged one who prowled the buffalo country and devised ingenious ways to take them in quantities enough to feed whole villages. That one Pilau feared most. He did not panic at the sight of the gray wolves or even Sush, the great bear. The huge bulls with their

horns, their hooves, and massive strength kept them at bay. They were nuisances at most. But the two-legged one was to be feared. When he came close, Pilau ran away.

Young Bull and his party knew that. They had no desire to excite Pilau and frighten him. They would do that later. For now, they must seek him out and know his numbers without revealing their own presence.

They followed the river north until they came to a small butte overlooking the plain. From that vantage point they could view the great expanse of grassland stretching to the east. They went up its western slope, threw down their gear, and rested. It was midmorning.

"When the sun is higher, the haze in the east will disappear," Young Bull said. "If Pilau is there, we will see him."

They ate their pemmican and drowsed. When the sun was directly overhead, Young Bear led the way to the butte's highest point. They found Pilau.

Kah was stunned by the vast panorama of treeless plains stretching to the horizon, and he recalled the day when he had gone alone to the Mesa Verde's north rim to shoot his arrow. That had been awesome, too, but there he could see valleys and ridges and distant mountains. There had been trees and defiles suggesting hidden rivers. Here he saw nothing but grass.

He recalled also the mystery he had known concerning the sun's appearance at morning and its disappearance at night. Red Hawk had said that Tawa's doorway from the house of Earth Mother would lie over the last hill. Surely this must be that hill. He found the thought intriguing, but dared not voice it to his companions lest them think him foolish. He sniffed and remained silent.

His thoughts had not been on Pilau. The magnitude of the space had captivated him. He had looked without thinking to see that one which he had been so eager to find. But Young Bull was not awed by the sweep of space before him. That was as familiar to him as the sky. Its mystery was no greater and no less.

"Pilau is there," he said, pointing to the northeast. "The dark streak that curls through the grass is Pilau --- many, many



Pilau. He is moving this way, I think. He finds no water there, and he must come to the river to drink. By nightfall he will be here. Tomorrow we can begin our surround."

Kali and Left Hand followed with their eyes the pointed finger. They saw the dark streak made up of countless tiny dots. To them it was incomprehensible. Only ants could exist in such numbers. Even Hoya, who was seldom amazed at anything, shook his head and grunted.

"Pilau," he said, "----so many Pilau!"

Young Bull sent a runner to the village with the news of his sighting. "Tell them," he said, "to make ready for our surround and drive tomorrow morning. When the buffalo have drunk and returned to their bed-grounds on the plains, we will move around them and drive them south. We will have them over the bluffs by noon.

Through the long golden afternoon, they waited and watched the herd creep nearer. The tiny antforms became creeping beetles, and the beetles changed gradually into lumbering hairy brutes with heads down and tongues lolling from half-opened mouths. Dust from the thousands of hooves billowed upward to hover like a dirty yellow cloud over the full length of what appeared to be an endless procession.

Suddenly, as a vagrant breeze carried to them the first scent of water, the leaders shook their massive heads, bellowed, and broke into a spirited dash for the river. Soon the whole herd was a heaving, galloping mass of dark forms spreading right and left in an ever widening flood toward the water. Even on the butte high above them, the earth seemed to tremble with the pounding of their hooves. Kali and Left Hand felt it and also trembled.

"Pilau is like Pokanghoya," Kah said. "He speaks with a very great noise."

They spent that night in their hide blankets under the few scrawny piñon trees dotting the tip of the butte. They ate their dry pemmican and thirsted for water. They would taste none until after the next midday.

Throughout the night, they slept with the muffled bellowing of the bulls and the softer lowing of the cows and calves drifting upward, as they sought to re-establish their herd relationships.

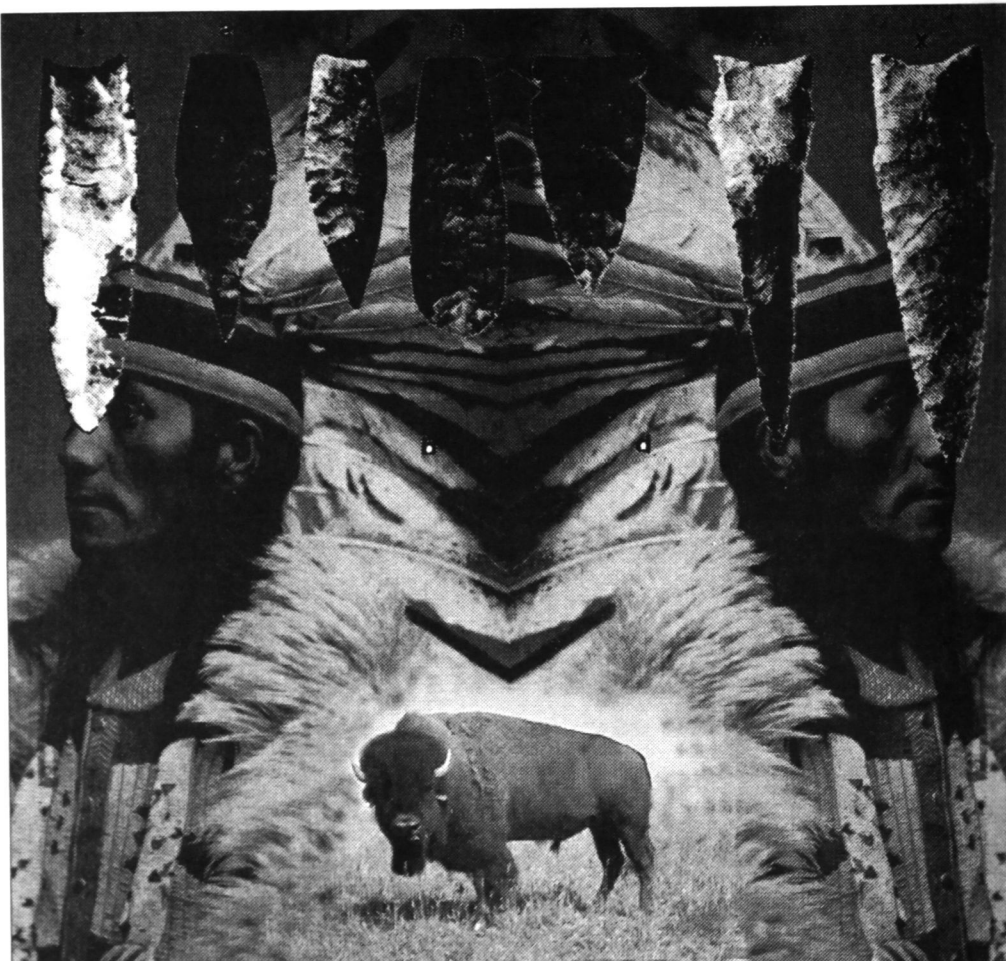


ILLUSTRATION BY NORMAN TABER

It was near dawn when the herd became quiet again, and the buffalo, with their paunches loaded with water, moved back again in scattered groups to graze on the high plains.

They went south and east to avoid the area so recently desolated by their pounding hooves. Gradually as they grazed, the scattered animals began to merge together again, first in small bands, then in larger groups until the one great herd became



three distinct units. By midmorning when they had filled their paunches, they began to find beds where they could rest and begin the pleasurable task of chewing their cuds.

"The herd to the south is the one we will surround," Young Bull said. "It is small and closest to the bluff. It will be the easiest to control. Our chiefs will have men stationed on either side, and the old ones and the women will be waiting below. Under our buffalo robes, we will move in a line to split those on the north away from those on the south. We will go as buffalo, and Pilau will think that we are cows and calves looking for places to rest. When we have established our line around them, we will become men again, and Pilau will grow uneasy and try to run away. We will shout to make a great noise and wave our robes to urge him on. All along the sides, our people will emerge from under their robes and wolf skins to keep him from escaping toward the east and west. He will run south where no one will stop him, and those behind him will panic and push him onward toward the bluffs that he cannot see. He will know his danger too late, for he will be a river that cannot be stopped. He will pour over the bluff, and we will have meat to feed our people for many, many days. We will go now."

Very skillfully, he led his robe-clad companions down to the level plains, where they became a line of innocent cows and calves threading their way through the thin fringes separating the two herds. They moved past bedded animals which rose nervously to face them. Their scent reached the nearest ones, and they snorted and wheeled away to trot with raised tails toward the safety of the main groups. One by one the scattered animals moved nervously away to make an ever widening space where the robed hunters dropped off at intervals to mimic resting cows. Gradually, the line lengthened to make an arc of stooped hunters peering from beneath their skins as they anxiously waited for Young Bull's signal to make them men again.

It came when the young leader perceived that he had reached a point in conjunction with that of hunters already in position along the eastern flank. He stepped from beneath his robe and gave a great shout. Those behind him followed his lead, in rapid succession and soon the line became a hullabaloo of sound and motion that sent the buffalo in panic-stricken flight to escape.

In orderly succession the hunters along the sides leaped from their concealing robes and added their clamor to urge the frightened animals onward. Their fright quickly turned into mass panic, as a sea of mindless, snorting, bellowing, hearing, galloping animals stampeded and competed for space. Those toward the front and sides could not escape the frantic animals at their rear. When they attempted to veer right or left, the hunters turned them back. Panic fed panic as they darted back into the ranks of the herd. Soon, a wild river of animals was surging southward in a narrowing vee toward mass destruction. When the first ones arrived at the bluffs and saw their danger, it was too late. Those from the rear pushed them forward. The river became a waterfall of stupefied creatures plunging to their deaths.

Only the rearmost animals escaped. They had no pressures forcing them onward. They turned away at the last moment and broke through the line of hunters which had been urging them onward. In their terror, even robe-waving hunters could not deter them. They tossed them aside or trampled them under if they were foolish enough to stand in their way.

Kah, Left Hand, and Young Bull were near victims of such a charge. They survived only because they were able to coordinate their defenses.

A giant bull, crazed by the awful commotion, broke away at the last moment and turned to make a mad rush toward the safety of the open plateau. Young Bull stepped aside to let him pass and almost instinctively thrust at him with his lance. Feeling the deep pain in his gut, the enraged bull turned on his tormentor and charged. Young Bull leaped away, but the animal was too quick. The hunter was struck and knocked sprawling. As the massive animal turned again, he found Left Hand blocking his way. Left Hand drove his arrow deep into a shoulder. The maddened bull tossed his huge head and rushed toward him only to find yet a third tormentor before him. The arrow from the yellow bow entered his throat at an angle and struck bone. Hunters were now all around him. He bellowed and switched ends, and the second arrow from the yellow bow slipped silently between his ribs and pierced his heart. With a sighing grunt, he sagged to his knees, heaved once and died. Kali had met Pilau at last.



Young Bull picked himself up and limped to Kah's side. He rubbed his bruises and grinned. "Old Bull very angry at Young Bull!" he chuckled.

"Pilau was very angry," agreed Kah.

When they went to the bluff, they found the dust settling over a scene of incredible carnage. Scattered below were great heaps of dead and dying buffalo. The mounds of tangled bodies heaved and writhed as animals sought to extricate themselves. They moaned and bellowed and they pitched and bucked. Many, on the edges struggled to rise on broken limbs and were quickly dispatched by the lances of the older men who had waited all morning with the women who were already busy with the butchering. The Hotonka Village had suddenly become rich with the spoils of their surround. They could waste no time or sorrow on Pilau's great misfortune. They had their own welfare to consider.

All day and far into the night the butchering went on. Hides were spread everywhere and piled high with meat. Haunches, humps, ribs, and shoulders hung in a hundred different trees

along the river. Only when sheer exhaustion had overcome them, did the butchers cease. Then they fed on the raw livers and hump fat, wrapped themselves in their blankets, and slept.

At dawn the work resumed. Few animals remained alive in the mounds of heaped bodies. Those deep in the piles had long since smothered, and those on top or on the edges had been slaughtered and pulled free. Through the long day the work continued, and when it at last became apparent that the huge quantities of piled meat must be saved from spoiling, the weary butchers turned away from the pile of dead animals and began the tedious work of packing their meat back to the village for smoking and drying. Many animals had been killed, and many had been made into food for the village. But many, also, were those that were left to rot and stink in the warmth of the autumn sun.

And, yet, as the old man in the village had said, Pilau was there in great numbers, and all the hunters in all the villages of the Tewa, the Apachu, and the Hotonkas could never kill them all. Pilau was too many! ~

Desert Dawn

The desert dawn is quick to light,
And slow to heat, the circumambient ground.
It floods past buttes and mesas (sight
Unseen by the dark surround)

Until it floods with a surreal light
Of ochres and dark greens, the gushing wound
Opening in rifts between each mound
And mesa waking. Now the sound

Of wakening birds and insects might
Announce that dawn has drowned
The eastern ridges, to any found
On the western ones. The feathery flight

Of hawks for prey, their swoop profound,
Tells some, too late, of the demise of night.
The desert dawn unfolds to human might
A godlike canvas, high-lying on a ground

Where tufts of silvery sagebrush spidery white
On neon blue the face of Nature drowned
With premature aging beard, while desert-varnish quite
Exposed the rifts in colored chalk-cliffs ground

On Vulcan's anvil by the darkness browned.
Flotillas of cloud patrol around
For the last time in dark, the first in light,
Signalling to far mountains found

Again, each rude outcome of night
As Dawn from bed arises quite ungowned.
Yesterday's sunset over this same ground
Dripped so bloodily, every cave was drowned

In oranges, purples, violets rewound
From the great spool of departing night——
All seen now in a subdued, retrospective light
Preparing the new day for the new fight.

James Vink

ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTA LAMB



*From the Dime Novel, The Badman and the Lady:
Chapter 12--"Lost in the Snow"*

"Hindus tell of being caught between
a snarling tigress and a drop-off deep enough
to shatter diamonds big as a statue's fist.
That was the situation, as John Sprockett-
gunfighter and guide to Sophia Starling-saw it:
a cougar screaming not ten feet from her
and a storm stampeding in like a herd
of longhorns, murderous on locoweed.

"Sprockett had time only to lunge,
as he had at the grizzly that had swiped
his right eye with its hell-born claw
in the melee that had left the demon-beast dead
and gave him the nickname he'd kill
any man for muttering in his presence.

"When the dust settled this time,
his Bowie blade was buried
in the catamount's tawny hide,
Miss Starling shattered
by the danger she had never imagined
amid England's culture and fox hunts:
seeing a man best the king of killers,
their mounts drumming desertion and terror
into the caliche, as they disappeared.

"At that moment, the blizzard hit: snow
like a million tacks hammered their faces.
'This way,' Sprockett gasped, lungs raspy
as the underside of a scorched skillet,
remembering a line-shack further up the slope.
'Just pray we don't stumble past it,'
he roared above the wolf-pack storm.
Ice stitched his eyes, her steps shortened.
'I shall lie down now, Mr. Sprockett. Save yourself.'
'Not if I have to cradle you like my own infant!'

"For a miracle instant blue patches darted
across the sky, and Sprockett spied the hut.
He nudged open the door like a bridegroom
and laid her on the mouse-gnawed pallet.
'You are truly a gentleman,' she sighed,
sank into the arms of the Prince of Sleep,
while Sprockett brewed tea in their unlikely palace."

by Robert Cooperman

John Sprockett Finds Shelter for Himself and Sophia Starling from a Sudden Snowstorm

I could shoot myself for losing our mounts
when that cougar screamed and attacked
while Miss Starling was showing me wild flowers.
This storm'll kill the horses, if that hell-cat don't.
Instead of steadying then, I shot, and missed:
always my unthinking way.
Their meat could've seen us through this blizzard.

Miss Startling thinks me a genius-Galahad.
The night we stopped in that Salida hotel
I didn't need a peep-hole
to imagine her bath, one strand of hair loose,
bubble-slick along her white neck.
If I'd drank that night, I'd have smashed
in her door, taken her like a grizzly.
So I bunked in the livery stable
and curried our mounts over and over,
hating their nickering companionship.

I should've just found a whore.
Instead, I met the dawn mean as a badger.
We dawdled all morning, mounts grazing
on stiff autumn grass
while Miss Starling pointed to peaks,
wild for mountains that can kill you
quicker than Quantrill's bully-boys.

I wasn't paying mind to sky or wind,
or to our mounts—spooked by cougar and snow.
That storm swooped like a hawk ripping a gopher.
Dumb, dude's luck I found this shack,
wood and stores laid in by a good genie.
But we're stuck, and not a notion in her head
of how I feel; and if Miss Starling knew,
she'd run shrieking into the blizzard;
not enough soapy water in the wide world
to clean herself of the filth
I'd smear her with, just by staring.

by Robert Cooperman



*Sophia Starling, Trapped with John Sprockett
by a Blizzard*

.....

Oh, this is grand! Wind howls,
yet a fire like English Christmas.
All that's missing, the punch
and a steaming Yorkshire pudding.
Mr. Sprockett the best of companions,
finding this line-shack
when he saw the snow advancing
like Indians on foaming ponies,
enough wood to last a month.

Even if we die here, I'll have lived
wild as an eagle or puma,
and not a proper mouse like my sister
or the other numb women of our class.
Mr. Sprockett smiles, shrugs, silent
admiration turning his ruined profile
pink as any of Homer's dawns.
I prayed for this storm, a sign
that my English morality is mere nerves
Indian women never feel, the female cook
at the Blue Lady Mine would laugh at:
"Take him or go empty as a scooped gourd,"
I can hear her scornful, unspoken advice.

The humour of it:
an English peer would pry me like an oyster,
but this man—a murderer by his own admission—
is nervous as a schoolboy eyeing the cane
his master wields for the pleasure
of burning birch-welts into buttocks.

Oh John John, unbend, my dear,
let me plant kisses like opened blossoms
on your brave face.
And if we freeze in each other's arms?
the price I'd gladly pay,
and no one in England need ever know.

by Robert Cooperman



During a Blizzard, John Sprockett Tells Sophia Starling of Sylvia Williams' Start in the Boarding House Business

I was camped on the Platte,
having quit Quantrill and the War,
loot enough to keep me comfortable.
I almost blew her head off, to hear her
sneaking in the shadows beyond my fire;
then she stood, black as a mine shaft,
shaking, rearing back on her skillet-handle.
"You could do with some dinner,"
I holstered, spooned burned beans,
her eyes on my scarred face like a Ute amulet.
In the morning she cooked me a sample
of the heaven I'll never taste.
That talent deserved a boarding house
from my booty as Quantrill's mad dog.
My Colt acted a persuader at the seller's head.

"I'll bet you'd make a mean horse swapper,"
she laughed, an unlikely princess in a fairy-tale.
"I'll pay you back, sure enough regular," she swore.
"Only man I ever bedded, or will, was Samson,"
her voice suddenly brittle as hickory bark.
I shook hands farewell, spread word
that if anyone lifted a finger against her,
I'd burn the town, feast on their children.

She's always got a bed for me,
a meal fit for the President,
a bag of gold she tallies against the principal,
though I suspect she's paid it off years ago.
Wind tossing snow through these unchinked logs
puts me in mind of her moaning dreams
for Samson, killed by slave-catchers
before she made her way from Carolina,
to my mind a feat more worthy of the telling
than all the killing I've done, the dirty money
she cleaned by taking that loan.

by Robert Cooperman



Sophia Starling: Diary Entry

Mr. Sprockett has gone to sleep,
and the stranger who wandered in
from yet another of the blizzards
that keep us imprisoned.
Mr. Crane's fists screamed frost-bite
when he pounded on the door,
his head a battering ram of desperation.
He claimed to be a convalescing consumptive
sent west by the dean of his seminary—
dry mountains a miracle for his lungs.

We bid him share our dwindling stores
and saw trouble immediately:
a hunger to devour everything;
I sense he has fed like a locust
on the supplies of others,
why he was put out in such fatal weather.
He apologized that recovery forces him
to eat like blood-drunk wolves.
A hunger in his eyes as well:
he stared, then quickly shifted,
seeing Mr. Sprockett's one eye
on him, jagged as a blade.

For the sake of safety, I asked
about Boston's opera house,
its climate and leading citizens.
Mr. Crane talked only of London,
averred it the one place in the world
a civilised man would call home.
"Or lady," he smiled, more oil
than blood in his lips.

"You'd best turn in,"
Mr. Sprockett rose, huge and grim
as the bear that had etched
terrible claws down his face.
There *will* be trouble, only I can avert,
but how, I keep accusing myself.

by Robert Cooperman

Cooperman's poems are from *The Badman and the Lady* soon to be
published by Basfol Books.
TO BE CONTINUED IN FUTURE ISSUES

CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES

Ann Boger has recently had or is due to have poems published in *RE:AL*, *Pearl*, *Surroundings East*, *CQ*, *Array*, *Midwest Poetry Review*, *The Slate*, *Sheila-Na-gig*, *The Advocate*, *Pegasus*, *Sidewalks* and *Potpourri*, as well as others. Her chapbook, *Night's Ridge*, was a finalist in the 1995 Pearl Chapbook Contest and her chapbook, *November*, was a finalist in the 1996 *Sheila-Na-Gig* Chapbook Contest. She had short stories published in *Cities and Roads* and *My Legacy* in the fall of 1996.

Robert Cooperman's second collection, *The Badman and the Lady*, is forthcoming from Basfol Books. 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.

Thomas H. Dobbs graduated with a B.A. from Harvard University in 1989. The unpublished author has a law degree from Wake Forest University. He is married and working as a lawyer in Tulsa.

Maria Shockley Erman is a student at Cameron University and is currently pursuing her teaching certification for English at the secondary level. Some of her poetry has appeared in both *The Rose Review* and *The Forum*, both of which are literary magazines from Cameron.

Paul Grant, a native of Louisiana, is a visual researcher and assemblage artist currently living in western Maryland. His work has appeared in *Sewanee Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Yankee*, *Northwest Review*, and elsewhere.

Joan Cusack Handler's work has appeared in *Poetry East*, *Agni*, *Feminist Studies*, *Madison Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly* and *Wisconsin Review* among others.

Handler was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 1993, 1995 and 1996 and was the first prize winner of the 1992 Chester H. Jones and Gloucester County College National Poetry Competitions. She has received awards from Roberts Writing Awards, *Negative Capability*: Eve of St. Agnes Competition (1992 and 1995), and the Allen Ginsberg Poetry Awards sponsored by Passaic County College.

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

Eileen Hennessy holds an M.A. in creative writing from New York University, and is currently a Ph.D student in the Arts and Humanities Education program at NYU. She began her professional writing career as a translator of books, chiefly in art history, and now specializes in

translating legal and commercial documentation into English from several West European languages. She is an adjunct associate professor in the Translation Studies program at NYU. Her work has appeared in various literary magazines, including *The Paris Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Prairie Schooner* and *The New York Quarterly*, and in several anthologies.

George Hoffman is a retired teacher living in Clackamas, Oregon, a suburban area of Portland. He was born on a farm near Custer City, Oklahoma. He earned his B.A. degree from the old Southwestern State Teacher's College long before it received university status. After a thirty-six year teaching career spanning four states, he has devoted his time to writing and traveling. He has published a chapbook of poetry and written several novels, one of which he hopes to have published in the near future. He has been a longtime contributor to *Westview*.

Robert Lietz teaches at Ohio Northern University. Over 230 poems have been published by *Antioch Review*, *Epoch*, *The Georgia Review*, *Ironwood*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Missouri Review*, *The Ontario Review*, *Poetry*, *Seneca Review*, *Shenandoah*, and other journals. L'Epervier Press published his first three collections, *Running in Place* (1979), *At Park and East Division* (1981), and *The Lindbergh Half-Century* (1987). Sandhills press published his fourth collection, *The Inheritance*, in 1988. *Dangerous Light*, a chapbook, was



CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES CONTINUED

published in 1991 by Franciscan University Press. *Storm Service*, was published in 1994 by Basfol Books, which will also publish *After Business in the West: New and Selected Poems* in 1995. Two manuscripts, *West of Luna Pier*, and *Character in the Works: Twentieth Century Lives*, a sequence that creates the lives and times of individuals whose names have been engraved on old fountain pens he has collected, are currently seeking publishers.

Ed Lynskey's latest work has appeared in *Blue Unicorn*, *Interim*, *Plainsongs* and *Poetry Northwest*.

Walter McDonald's latest book is *Counting Survivors* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995). Two other recent 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*, *New York Review of Books*, *The Ohio Review*, *The Paris 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.

● Stuart J. Silverman writes poetry, travel
● articles and restaurant reviews. The
● former English teacher has had 250+
● works published in over fifty periodicals
● and anthologies, including *Poetry*
● *Northwest* and Miller Williams'
● *Contemporary Poetry in America*.
● The latter resulted in the recent
● publication, in collaboration with his
● wife, Sondra Rosenberg, of *The Ozarks*
● *Traveler*.

● Roger Soffer was born in Boston in
● 1959, but was raised in Pacific
● Palisades, Ca. He was originally trained
● as a violist, but found his home in words.
● He graduated from UCLA in 1983 with a
● B.A. in creative writing, and went on to
● work as a screenwriter. His first
● produced script was, "Kazaam," starring
● Shaquille O'Neil. He is currently working
● on pictures for Hollywood Pictures,
● Paramount and Warner Brothers. His
● poetry has been published or is
● forthcoming in *A.R.T.*, *Atom Mind*,
● *Bottomfish*, *Briar Cliff Review*, *Cafe*
● *Eighties*, *Collages & Bricolages*, *The*
● *Distillery*, *Double-Entendre*,
● *Connecticut River Review*, *Dominion*
● *Review* and *El Locofoco*.

● Kristopher Standley is an advertising
● major at Pepperdine University and will
● graduate in December 1997. Born in
● Oklahoma, he enjoys using poetry to link
● his Native American heritage, as he does
● in "Legacy" and "Dream Catcher." He
● also loves to visit Sedona, Arizona, as
● often as possible. He has also written
● two novels and a screenplay.

● James Vink graduated cum laude with an
● A.B. in English at Harvard University in
● 1966. He received his M.A. in 1983 and
● his Ph.D in 1985 from Tulane University
● in New Orleans. His dissertation was
● *Freud and Spenser: A Dream*
● *Poetics*. He has been published in
● *Massachusetts Review*, *Tucumcari*
● *Literary Review*, *Syracuse Scholar*
● and *Hawaii Review*.





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