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A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA

WESTVIEW

VOLUME 15

NUMBER 1

FALL 1995

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WESTERN OKLAHOMA PASTIMES

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2. Submitted artwork should be suitable for black and white reproduction. Work should be no larger than 8.5" x 14". However, photographs of larger work may be submitted. Please do not send slides. Include a SASE.
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4. We accept and enjoy both free verse and formal poetry.
5. Include a brief biographical sketch for our contributor's notes.
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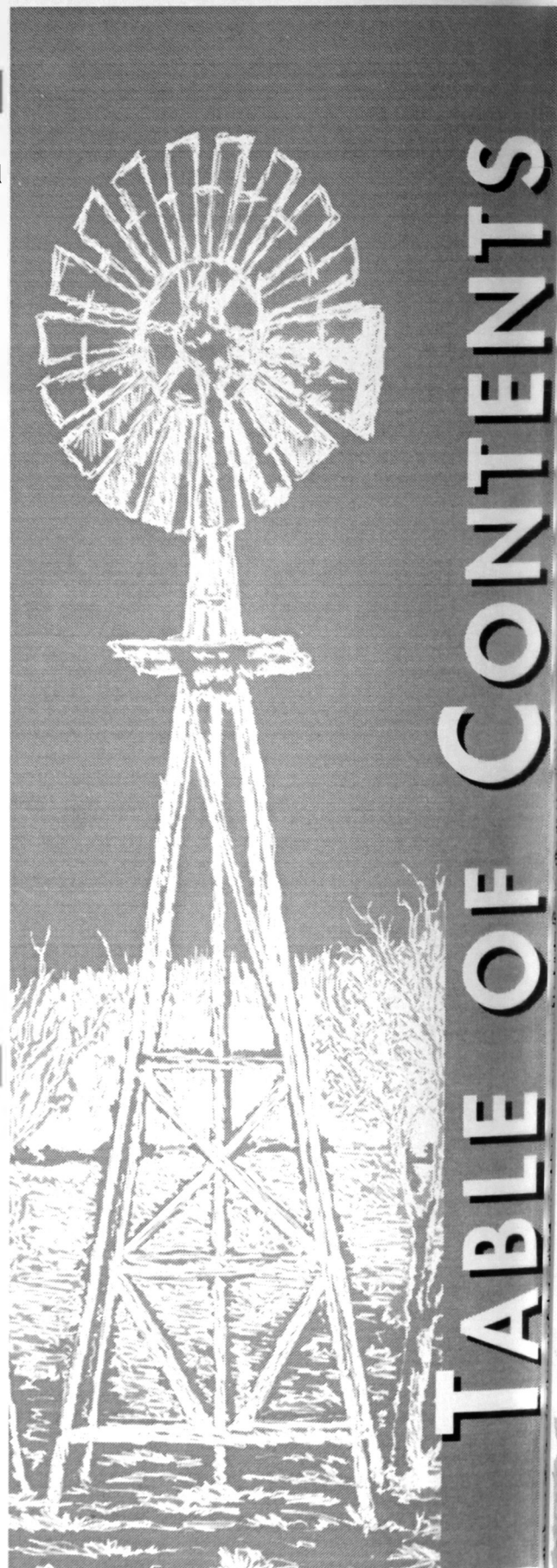
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SPIRITS MOURNING BY JAN BRADFIELD

MEMORIAL DAY 1995

by Viki Spencer Pettijohn

The fireman's big arms enfold
A tiny broken body.
The photo shows his tender
Anguished gaze,
The look of utter
Helplessness to mend
The little life.
He carries her in his arms
In an immortal moment;
He will carry her
In his dreams
All his life long,
And so will we all
In Oklahoma.

A mother hugs the men
Who tried to help her child;
A nurse receives
A dying baby,
Leans close to hear
The faintest cry for help:
"Mama..."
That tiny sound rings
Through the state.
Bell-like, booming
In our hearts.
The nurse will hear it as long as she lives,
As so will we all
In Oklahoma.

In uniform,
The Marine met death
At his post —
A good soldier to the last.
The workers found him
Finally
In the rubble
Still at the desk
Where he worked each day.
So many soldiers, sailors, pilots
Before him did the same,
Met death at their posts with honor
And resolution.
They served and sacrificed
To the last moments of their lives;
The nation remembers them,
And so will we all
In Oklahoma.

Not all soldiers are men
In navy blue and olive drab.
Not all wars are declared.
Sometimes our forces are
Little children
Who send teddy bears,
Or musicmen who give
Their songs,
Or strong Oklahoma women who quilt
Their faith and love for others
Into being.
Sometimes our wars are waged at home
Against all that is dark
In the human spirit.
And the uniforms change to firefighter yellow
Or surgical whites and greens.
Some forces wear no uniform that
Anyone can see —
Except love.
And they will feel the power
Of that love
All their lives.
And so will we all
In Oklahoma.

EL CENTAURO DEL NORTE

by Wendell Mayo

About half of what I will tell you is true. I do not say this because I am a liar, or because I believe history is a bad dream— rather, I say this because I believe there are other halves of the story, buried in the story, too many halves of the story that are also true— halves that perhaps spring from a side of me, my family, the speakers of *los cuentos*, that are curiously not buried in shadows, not dark halves that hide their faces from the public but halves that bare their little faces to the light, so open and pure in their telling from each tongue that all their little faces become true themselves, half-truths of all things...but everyone knows, as mathematicians tell us now, that too many halves, no matter how true, never become whole...

But in my family there exists one great story made of more halves than will fit into it. No matter where we have been, or gone, or go, the story is passed on, and in my fifteenth year it was given to me, first by my grandfather Mariano Luis Guzmán, not immediately, but after the prompting of my mother, Gloria.

One bright June day, I found Gloria in her kitchen, where we lived in Cleveland, Ohio, cupping her hands around some bread crumbs from breakfast on the table. She herded the crumbs into a little heap and said, "When we are in Corpus Christi, you ask your grandfather Mariano about El Centuaro del Norte. He will tell you the story."

I moved over to the table, near Gloria, and watched as she swept the heap of crumbs into the upturned palm of one hand and carried them to the sink. She made a little wave with her hand and scattered the crumbs into the drain.

"What is this story?"

"No," she said. "You wait—he'll tell you himself."

Before that moment with Gloria and her little handful of crumbs, I grew up thinking, now only guessing, that my family's great story was that of my father, Martín Guzmán, who after working in the cotton fields outside Corpus, having only, as Gloria tells it, saltines sopped in milk for breakfasts and lunches, joined the Navy, was stationed at Corpus Christi, toured in Korea while I was born, returned to haul pipe string into West Texas, near Lubbock, then attended the University of Texas at Austin on the GI Bill and, remarkably, graduated with honors in nuclear physics. He took us, regrettably but with great determination and hope for the future, into the north of the country, a faraway place called Cleveland, where he worked for NASA at the Lewis Research Center.

This had been the greatest story I had ever known—that such a man and his family might have made such a quantum leap from life in the fields, over a kind of high and rocky watershed dividing the north and south, time before and after the Korean War, while in Corpus so many others remained as my grandfather Mariano did now— closer to cotton than physics and deep-space travel.

Though we lived so far from Corpus, we visited Mariano with each vacation the government granted Father, three weeks, which he sometimes took, two in Corpus, one at Niagara Falls. And I looked forward to visiting Mariano, especially since he would take me to the Serpentine Wall, and the breakwater running out, made of large white irregularly shaped boulders snaking

far into Corpus Christi Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. It was wonderful to walk along the wall, the idea of it, the experience of extending myself so far out into the wide sea simply by walking, or crawling onto the winding rocks, by travel in a familiar way.

There, on the wall, a speck in the endless blue of sky and sea, I'd carry two buckets, balancing myself carefully as I followed Mariano. One bucket was empty for the blue crabs we'd catch, the other full of chicken bones Mariano had saved for crabbing. Later, as we made our way far out onto the wall and into the bay, the sky seemed half bare—a sheet of low clouds stretched like linen over the ocean, then broke in a ragged line behind us near the beach. Inland, over my birth city, the noon sun showered light.

I followed Mariano, though awkwardly, zigzagging over the top of the seawall, half of my mind on the unfathomable expanse of the water in the Gulf, the other half on the stiff sea air in my face. I was so distracted I fell behind Mariano, so I ran a few steps, skipping, the pails knocking my knees, to catch up with him. Mariano walked in his slow deliberate way, the brim of his straw Stetson broken across the front, little bits of straw sticking out along the break. The broken brim was pulled down, shading his eyes and dividing his face into patches of light and dark. I could see the brownish band of sweat along the bowl of the hat—an ancient sweat, there as long as I could remember, a kind of unique human hieroglyph for toil under the soil. It ran up from the base of the hat where it met the back of his neck in a mark like a small hand with its fingers closed. His face was long, his forehead high, and I found it remarkable that he had all his teeth. In fact, when he turned to be sure I was following him with the buckets, he smiled, and I was sure his teeth were perfect, so perfect that I wondered if they were real...but that was not what I

needed to find out, so when we settled on a couple of rocks, tied some bones to our lines, and tossed them out, I asked him, as Gloria had told me I should, "Tell me about El Centauro del Norte."

I saw one of his eyes in the shade of the straw Stetson; he rubbed his chin, pulled a couple of times on his line with a finger, wishing it seemed, that a crab would take the bone so he could delay his response...perhaps...but I believe the best of him, even now, and believe that in that pause and tiny tug at the line, Mariano was sizing me up to see if I was old enough to hear the story. So I rubbed my chin back at him, saw him smile a bit at one corner of his mouth, and again saw his perfect teeth, which may have been false....

"All right," he said. "You see, I didn't want to be a U.S. citizen; this all happened when I lived in Puerto Rico. My parents worked on a tobacco plantation there. When I was born, I was a citizen of Puerto Rico and Spain, then after the war with America, the island became a territory of the United States—and my parents told me we belonged to the United States. But all the time I did not care much about it. I was a boy, and things as far as I could see were the same. I worked with my father in the drying house, and my new country, the United States, was nothing—I was in Puerto Rico—*yes?* Well, I was small and could climb like a monkey. So my father would load my arms and shoulders with tobacco leaves until I'd look like a little tobacco king with broad green leaves for sleeves and a coat with green tails. Then I'd climb the slats in the drying house." Mariano gestured at the sky with the flat of one hand. "*Zip*—you see? And I would drape the leaves on the rafters high in the top of the house. My father would hang leaves on the lower slats. This was how I was in those days. The work was hard and hot, but I never minded because I was like a monkey—see?"

"But then, in 1915, my father said I must join the army of the United States. 'What?' I said to my father. 'Why do I have to go?' My father folded his arms over his chest and said, 'It is your duty.'" Mariano took his line in the first two fingers of his right hand and gave it a little yank. I saw him start to turn to me, to see my reaction to his story so far, but I turned away before he could look. Somehow, I knew if I showed him that I was indifferent, I'd draw more of the story out of him, and he continued, "You see, I was like a monkey and a boy, a Puerto Rican and an American—solider, tobacco hanger—I was suddenly all these things, when all I wanted to be was a monkey with tobacco on his back who worked with his father in the great, high, airy, sweet-smelling drying house.

"So, in obedience to father, I left my home, sad and desperate, not worried about fighting the Hun in Europe, or dying, only wondering how someday I would get back home. I did not want to belong to the United States if it meant leaving my home...but I went to the dock and took a ship with other boys to New York, where I was made into a soldier in the Fifth Infantry, the Fighting Red Devils of New York." The sun had gone over midpoint of the sky, drawing a little line of shade made by Mariano's Stetson closer to his eyes, nearly revealing both eyes, so he paused a moment in telling his story, glanced at the sun, and tugged the brim downward to shade his face. "I made friends in New York in the Fighting Red Devils," he said, "and I became a little happy about that, but I never forgot about my home, and some nights I would stay awake all night wondering about my family in Puerto Rico, then, dozing in the very early morning before the bugle sounded, I would dream of the tobacco house and the smell of the leaves and climbing high into the rafters....

"Instead of sending us to Europe, in 1916 we were

ordered to go to Texas; so we took a train to El Paso. I was surprised by this since I never thought I would have a chance of going anywhere south again, nearer to my home. There, in El Paso, we marched and practiced shooting our guns over and over, until one day we were ordered to go to Eagle Pass. So we marched southeast along the Rio Grande to Eagle Pass, just across el Rio from Piedras Negras—and after about ten days, we set up camp outside the town.

"At first, I didn't know why we were there—no one did—or if they did, my English was so bad I didn't know anyone was talking about it. But I was getting tired of all this practicing and was homesick, until one of my friends said to me, very slowly, 'Mariano, you'll appreciate this.... We are going after Pancho Villa.' 'Pancho Villa?' I thought. He didn't mean anything to me. I couldn't figure why so many soldiers had come so far to get just one man. For this I had to leave my home? My family?

"When we had been in Eagle Pass about a week, we were given a day's leave. The other boys went into town to the cantinas, but I just wandered around the town, going nowhere, thinking nothing, I was so homesick—can you imagine this?" I saw the skin around Mariano's lips and his crabbing line tighten at the same time—he seemed grateful for the little pull on his line because, again, he didn't seem to want to go on with the story. He brought the crab in hand over hand, out of the water. A couple of times the crab smacked against a rock, then swung in the air on the line side to side, still clamping its chela on the chicken bone—and I wondered at that moment what must have possessed the little crustacean to hang on to the tiny bone, despite being hauled out of its natural element. Hunger? Stubbornness? And again I looked at the sky, feigning boyish indifference to Mariano's story and noticing that the line of clouds over

the bay and city had been pushed back, out to sea, by the high sun....Mariano quickly stripped the crab from his line, dropped it into the pail, and continued.

"I walked awhile west of Eagle Pass, El Paso del Aquila, until I came to a settlement of small houses and many tents inhabited by *los colonizadores*, a place called La Colonia. I came to a little ravine cut square by a storm that wound off to the south and, I imagined, drained into the Rio Grande. There, near a little pile of dark rocks across the ravine, I saw a rider on a gray horse, with long bullets in ammunition belts crossing his chest, a thick high sombrero, a long thin rifle lashed to his saddle. He wore a gray canvas jacket and leathery *pantalones*. But all his clothes were blended together in the distance, blended even more with the snakes of heat rising from the ground....All of a sudden the rider kicked his horse and started across the ravine. I stood where I was. I didn't move. Where could I go? *¿Donde?* But even as the rider came closer, he seemed so stiff and straight in the saddle, and his gear so hard and bleached all the same color by the sun, that he looked as if he were a part of his horse, part of the same animal—a man and an animal himself, together, coming at me, beating the ground with four feet, coming at me...

"When he rode up to me and reined in his horse, I saw only one thing new, his thick black mustache that covered his upper lip. His mustache was shaggy like a dog's hair." Mariano ran a finger over his lip. "See, *muchacho?*... Well, the rider held the reins stiffly in one hand, and he had his other hand near the stock of his rifle. I remember the vein sticking out in the hand by the rifle. He didn't seem to want to say anything, and I was sure, then, that this man and his horse were going to kill me, so I blurted out, 'What are you?' He shifted in his saddle a bit, and I heard the leather creaking, which relieved me at the moment, but he never moved his hand



ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN SHEAR

with the big vein in it from his rifle. 'Don't you know?' he said. 'You've been looking for me.' 'Me?' I said. 'No... I haven't been looking for you, señor. I don't know what you mean. I'm not looking for you.' Then a thought formed in my mind, a silly thought, the thought that this rude ammo-belted man was Pancho Villa—right? But where was his army? Where were his Red Flaggers, his *soldaderas*, the *Yaqui*...all the peoples' armies my friends in the Fighting Red Devils had told me about?—the Brothers of La Cucaracha, Las Cucarachas, humble, ugly, and indestructible, like the

song, song of the common soldier...*muchacho*," Mariano said to me, "This is the song I'm telling you about," and he began to sing, first in Spanish, then English,

*"La cucaracha, la cucaracha,
Ya no puede caminar;
Porque no tiene, porque la falta,
Marihuana que fumar.
Una vieja y un viejito, se cayeron en pozo;
Y la vieja dijo al viejo:
Viejito tan asqueroso!
La cucaracha, la cucaracha..."*

The *cucaracha*, the *cucaracha*,
He won't travel anymore;
Because he hasn't, because he's lacking
Marihuana left to smoke.
Once a *viejo* and a *vieja* fell into an empty well;
Said the *vieja* to the *viejo*:
'Dirty old man, go to hell!'
The *cucaracha*, the *cucaracha*..."

Mariano hummed a few more bars of the song and took in another crab; then he said, "But, I want to tell you if this man shot me, all right?" I nodded and he continued, "So the man on the horse said, 'I am El Centauro del Norte...' and I said, 'So you are Pancho Villa?' and he said, shifting again in his saddle, 'Don't interrupt me or I will kill you—see?' So I said nothing, and he said, 'I am El Centauro...While your Twelfth Cavalry is looking for me at Boca Chica, I am here looking at *you*!... And so you have found me. Now, what do you want?' I didn't know what I wanted, but I thought I better think of something fast, so I said, 'General Villa, I just want to go back to Puerto Rico and work with my father in the tobacco house.' Then he laughed: he

removed his big sombrero with one hand and nearly doubled over, laughing in his saddle. Then as he laughed, I saw him draw his hand with the big vein sticking out away from the rifle. I saw my chance, so I ran. I ran without looking back, remembering his sombrero waving in the air and hearing only his laughter.

"That night, back with the Fighting Red Devils outside Eagle Pass, I laid awake a long time, very late, wondering if I should tell anyone about seeing General Villa near La Colonia—but I didn't, thinking how I might have to tell them also what I had said to him about my wish to go home—and I couldn't, you see, think of any words to substitute for my homesickness, or a way to speak them without feeling humiliated when I recalled General Villa's laughter and his sombrero waving at me as I ran...."

It didn't seem to bother Mariano that I hadn't any questions for him about his story, questions he might have expected a fifteen-year-old to ask. Mariano's story silenced me. It was beyond me to look back a generation, two generations, across the *mélange* of facts and to imagine that Mariano of the broken straw brim, Mariano of the shaded eyes, was once a monkey in a sweet-smelling tobacco house. As unfathomable was the fact that he had met a man my history teacher had characterized as "that bandit of the Revolution." What was within my reach was that Mariano had been homesick—we all were in our own ways—Mama for her family in San Antonio, whom we visited on a two-day trip; Mariano for his wife, Eva, then dead for five years; Father for his mother, Eva; and Father for Mariano, knowing he'd brought his young family so far north to leave Mariano in Corpus with his stories, small house, and chicken coop on Old Brownsville Road. So our yearly reunion was not a reunion at all but a kind of silent

lamentation of many generations. We ate, we laughed, then came the time to be silent—and I was, in this silence, over and over, dispatched from Father to Mother, from Mother to Grandfather, and more, to hear all their stories separately, my special sort of loneliness, hearing each half coming out and growing in my mind like so many ragged fronds of the palms of Corpus that rattled in the hot wind saying many things at once, meaning none...

Later that afternoon, after Mariano and I returned from crabbing near the Serpentine Wall, I saw Father in the driveway. He was pulling spark plugs from Mariano's little old Comet sedan. The car was a vague color of green, faded from the sun, baked out as it had stood years in the heat of the light reflected by bright white bits of seashells filling the driveway. I said to Father, "Mariano told me about El Centauro del Norte when we were crabbing."

"He did? Well, then he must have told you about how he joined the Revolution? He was a wagoneer under Orestes Pereyra near Piedras Negras."

"No," I said, then added politely, "maybe he was, but he didn't tell me."

"You see," Father said, "Mariano met General Villa outside Eagle Pass—this was maybe 1915 or 1916, I don't know..."

"Yes, I know."

"Good, well, General Villa said to Mariano, 'Do you want to join the Brotherhood of the Cockroaches?' and your grandfather replied, 'Yes, I am going home to Puerto Rico, and if I can go back there after the Revolution is won, I'll be most grateful,' and so the Centaur reached his hand down to Mariano and took him up behind him on his horse, and they made swiftly across the Rio Grande for Piedras Negras."

This certainly puzzled me, so I said to Father, "He

didn't say anything about Pereyra or fighting with Pancho Villa."

"He didn't—?" Father said, leaning into the engine of the car, his torso disappearing behind the engine block. "I wonder why not.... That silly old man, leaving things out, making stories all the time—you never know what to believe."

"Then the part about meeting the Centaur—that may not be true?"

Father suddenly stood up, out of the engine, and looked at me sternly.

"Yes, of course. That part is true. Everybody knows that! Ask your mother!"

I left Father wiping a spark plug with a greasy rag. I went to Mariano's chicken coop and sat by it to ponder this new part of Mariano's story. I suspected, watching three chickens peck up the corn scattered in one corner of the coop, that Mariano had not told me the real story because he still feared being labeled a deserter from the army, or worse, a traitor to the United States. Still, he had apparently told Father about his traitorous act, and now I knew as well, but I somehow felt nervous knowing this about the monkey boy, about my own kind, about being traitors to the United States, so I found Gloria in what had been Eva's kitchen. She stood by the tiny window at the back of the kitchen; her elbows rested on a narrow windowsill and her chin rested in her palms. She stared out the window at what appeared to be the spot near the chicken coop where I had been sitting moments before—but I was there, behind her, so it may have been another place she stared at—or through—or, it seemed at the time, beyond.

"Mama," I said, and she turned her head slightly without removing her elbows from the sill or her chin from her palms. "Father told me to ask you about when Mariano rode with General Villa and Pereyra, near

Piedras Negras."

"What?" she whispered, then louder, "What?...that crazy *viejito*! He would not have ridden with Villa—and *General* Villa? *General*? My foot! That butcher, that disgusting womanizing brute—El Centauro del Norte...*¿* *Sí*, that's what he was—looked like a man, acted like some *animal*." She turned around and leaned with her back into the windowsill, propping herself slightly away from it by putting her arms behind her. "Let me tell you about Mariano. He was a deserter. He got so homesick for Puerto Rico he just walked right out of the camp at Eagle Pass. Some Fighting Red Devil. But I can't say I blame him...*estúpido* Estados Unidos...*estúpido* *castrense*... but he was so homesick, right, that he walked straight out of the army camp and headed for Puerto Rico, all on his own, with nothing!"

"So he never had a leave and never joined the Brotherhood of the Cockroaches and fought with Pereyra for Villa?"

"*¿* *Sí*, never. Your grandfather was just a homesick little boy. That's all. He wanted to go home, but he only made it as far as Corpus Christi. He was hungry, starving. He never went home."

Finally, I felt the tremor of certainty, so I struck home.

"And Villa...he never met the Centaur?"

"*Pues*...of course he did! But that's not the point!"

So, disappointed that none of the stories seemed to match, I asked myself, what *was* the point? Mariano himself had told me that he was many things at once, monkey boy, soldier...but could all of these incongruous things also exist in one person's life? How could they? So I made my mind up to work on the puzzle, and I went to walk along Old Brownsville Road, out the porch and west past Villarreal's Lounge. After walking a short time, I found an old horseshoe in the dust and shells, bits

of broken, weathered asphalt covering the berm of the road. I passed a patch of prickly pear. I looked at the sky, gone orange in its corners, where two clouds, each shaped like a C, hugged the fat sun on each side. I stopped to watch a trail of fire ants cross my shoe, not afraid of them but fascinated by them.... My skin pimply, even in the heat, and I had the strangest sensation... that if horseshoes and clouds shaped like C's and fire ants and prickly pears could all exist at the moment of my little walk, then...what?... Could these stories? If one ant in the entire trail across the toe of my shoe is merely a phantom, does it somehow render all ants in all ant trails, all horseshoes and strangely formed clouds under heaven—all needles in the pale green flesh of the prickly pear false? Perhaps not... perhaps that was it, why the story in all its versions seemed so important and true and vital to Mariano and Martín and Gloria—that is, for each needle in the prickly pear that is untrue, several others no doubt will be there to remind you of their painful validity. So I sensed that all the stories could, in the most outrageous way, be true—Mariano running from Villa, joining Villa, or deserting the Fighting Red Devils—all of it, since my crazy mama and papa and *abuelo* all persisted in their belief in the Centaur, and there, standing with my horseshoe by the prickly pear and trail of ants, I first felt a strange kind of logic—that if one believed one great story, then all the other halves of it, no matter how inconsistent, so long as they were part of the great story, could also, in a way, be believed. But on my way back to the house, the night came on, the air stirred and washed over me in little waves against my skin, and there in the strong dark night at the side of Old Brownsville road I lost something, my nerve, my vision. And when I came to the stoop outside Mariano's house, I again felt my old need to verify just one part of his story, the part about the Centaur. I wanted to believe in

more than books say. I wanted to know that such a meeting with Villa had taken place and that, then, all meetings of all people in history could be possible, true, significant.

When I came in the front door, to my left a single lamp burned over Mariano. He was sleeping and snoring, making growling sounds that came from deep inside his sinuses. He had pulled both his legs up to his chest, and he lay curled like a little animal in the chair. He wore his shirt but had removed his pants, and his thin legs, peppered with gray hair, reminded me how, still, he was a monkey boy and took me outside myself, to the high rafters of the tobacco house in Puerto Rico he had never returned to. I could almost smell it...and that moment I knew that even if nothing else was true, I believed, I lived, deeply and precisely, in Mariano's tobacco house.

I put out the light and, watching him sleep so well, felt a little ashamed for wanting to ask him once more about El Centauro del Norte.

In a few days we prepared to leave Corpus, and I prepared for the worst sorts of goodbyes. But this time, this visit, Mariano decided to leave his tiny house on Old Brownsville Road to come live with us in Cleveland. Three days in our car, two motels, across the Mississippi, then the Ohio, Mariano was quiet, and I felt his silence inside myself, felt his silence silenced me....

Home for a time, a few weeks, having Mariano in our house in Cleveland, sitting in our yellow, webbed, aluminum lawn chair at one corner of our yard, or in our kitchen with his coffee, seemed exciting. And Mariano, too, seemed curious about the small things we had discovered in the north of America, the things that became part of our lives—our garbage disposal, our dimming light switches, clean and full plazas and strips of jazzy

stores. But after a time I could feel his homesickness for Corpus, for Puerto Rico, as I had felt his silence in myself during the trip north; and I became in a uncertain way homesick myself feeling his loss.... But there were times, nights when Martín and Gloria would fill the cooler with ice and stab bottles of beer by their bottoms into it and bring the cooler to the patio, set it dead center there, then light great oil torches at all sides and join Mariano sitting in his little yellow chair so far from home to make *los cuentos*, our little stories whose many halves I grew to know were true, grew to believe, and came to know my half, hearing from time to time one of my parents or Mariano say, and make a little laugh, You've been looking for me.... *What do you want?* or, *Do you want to join the Brotherhood of the Cockroaches? The Revolution?*

I grew to know my half hearing their little halves, seeing their little faces in the light of the great torches, my half in my face in that same light when, afterward, I was alone and the light of the torches doused, and I'd find my horseshoe from Old Brownsville Road, imagine with the exactness of dreams I had grown four legs, straight and strong, and wandered with them through the black rocks of the Rio, looking, looking...and why not? All stories are true, no matter how brutish or beautiful, and though we had come very far from the land of our dreams, though each of us in some tiny, fractured way would always be homesick, our homesickness was part of the story too, part of the story made of each one of our many halves, of the story we each held as our own, but part of someone else's story too, part of some long-forgotten whole.

Previously published in *High Plains Literary Review*.

AN INTERVIEW WITH WENDELL MAYO

by Fred Alsberg

Alsberg: When you lectured in Lithuania about American Literature, what types of writing were they most interested in?

Mayo: Nature writers, for one. For example, I read ten poems by Robert Frost concerning nature, translated into Lithuanian. At the conclusion of "Birches" one of my colleagues from the former-Soviet republic said, "Frost's birches are like our birches here in Lithuania; they are like Lithuanians—we bend but we do not break." Lithuanians are strongly drawn to American writers who have a healthy respect for nature. Lithuanians were one of the last peoples to be Christianized in Europe—sometime around the 14th century, so their pagan traditions, ties to nature, and fears of nature, have survived a little longer. Lithuanians are also fascinated by American writers who deal in various ways with the relationship of the individual to society. With the exception of the period 1920-1940, over the last two centuries, Lithuanians have suffered foreign rule: the Germans and Poles in the 19th Century; the French and Germans in the early 20th Century; and until recently, the Soviets. Because Lithuanians have been deprived of the opportunity to develop a national literature and identity, they are interested in work such as Whitman's "Song of Myself," the poet who saw America itself as a poem. Lithuanians are also attracted to American writers who deal in various ways with "displaced persons"—they were particularly moved when, for example, I read an excerpt from "The Diary of Peter Pitchlynn, 1828-37," published in 1993 in *The Missouri Review*. Pitchlynn was a Choctaw chief who recorded events on the infamous "Trail of Tears"—the displacement of Native Americans from their lands in the southeastern United States. Lithuanians reacted strongly to this passage since in the 1940's and 1950's over 300,000 Lithuanians were executed or deported by the Soviets to Siberia....I suppose I'm going on and on about this. But I'm very interested in the culture. Lithuanians are extremely sophisticated and modern people. But I suspect that because they lived so long under a modern totalitarian regime, they prefer literatures which reflect their desire for closer ties to nature and to their cultural identities. By the way, some of my favorite Lithuanian writers are the 19th century novelists, Žemaitė (for her depiction of rural life); and the 20th century poets Janina Degutytė (for her nature poems) and Justinas Marcinkevičius (for modern tensions, for example, his poem, "Evening: Atom Bomb Fright").

Alsberg: What makes character so important in stories?

Mayo: Character is so important because a writer cannot avoid it. Even in a piece of writing supposedly devoid of character (I'm thinking of the "Time Passes" episode in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*), at least one character is always present—the narrator. Even given the most objective point of view, there exists an implied voice saying, "I'd like to tell you this story." One cannot avoid characters in fiction, ever, so one must make the best of them! And that means to communicate, dramatically, what it means to be human. I think of the narrator as a kind of benchmark character. Other characters or elements of the story come into relationship with themselves and with this benchmark character, and it is these relationships —antagonistic, sympathetic, quirky, quixotic—that give a story a life-like complexity, a pointedness, a humanness. What else can be more important than making fiction appeal to humans? Who or what else will read them?

Alsberg: Why did you decide to write short stories as opposed to other forms?

Mayo: Edith Wharton suggested that writing finds its own dimension. I know that seems a bit mysterious, but I think this goes for writers, too. I began writing poems, published a few in literary magazines, but quickly became frustrated with the prospect of turning a single couplet around in my head for weeks at a time, thinking that all poems had to be very short (before I discovered that this was a peculiarly 20th century predilection). So while I slaved for the elusive modern lyric, I began to lose my sense of what I wanted to say. I needed more elbow room. Narrative gives me that. I look to poets for my deepest inspirations and for reminding me that at some level every narrative demands attention to sound and sense of language. And that other form, the novel? Henry James' "baggy monster?" I'm working on a novel-in-stories now. We'll see about that.

Alsberg: Does a great story always change the reader in some way?

Mayo: Yes. I believe the greatest stories have a pointedness to them (not a point) that says to a reader, "This story begins long before the beginning and ends long after the ending, long after you've finished reading." These kinds of stories project themselves into the deep past (perhaps in a mythic sense) and into an uncertain future of hope and dilemma. I believe that readers who think and feel deeply about their present circumstances are changed when they read these sorts of stories. I'm thinking, for example, of Joyce's "The Dead," Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing," Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Alsberg: You mentioned myth in conjunction with stories. Are mythic elements important to you?

Mayo: Yes, though my sense of what constitutes myth is changing. While archetypal mythic patterns—contest, metamorphosis, taboo, ect—are useful in stories, the kinds of experiences people share, whether in the deep past or not, are changing. For instance, folklorists are now studying “urban myth,” shared experiences of urban dwellers. And television has become instantaneous shared experience, folklore or myth, “in a box.” I tend to avoid looking to electronic mass media for patterns for my stories and look instead to others, to try to make something new out of them, to make my stories continue to offer an alternative to television.

Alsberg: How has your writing changed or evolved over the years?

Mayo: The opening lines of Yeats’ “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” reads “I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,/ I sought it daily for six weeks or so.” I’ve always thought Yeats wrote those lines a bit tongue-in-cheek—after all, he sought his “theme” all his life, not just six weeks. I know the modern predilection was and still seems to be a search for form, not subject, but more and more I look for themes or subjects, ones that seem to me important: why people suffer; the old ache of faith and faithlessness; a loss of centeredness, etc. I used to be so concerned about form. But now I’m beginning to feel that subjects tend to demand forms, not the other way around. As I write, then, form clarifies and transforms “subject” into something fresh, original, meaningful. So I continue to look for subjects...as Yeats writes in another poem, “I walk through the long shadows questioning.”

Alsberg: Should the reader always consider the character narrating a story to be presenting a slanted perspective?

Mayo: Speakers of stories offer slanted perspectives because they must be selective in what they speak about and how they speak about it. Form dictates this. Art dictates this. Even an omniscient objective narrator is slanted in the sense that it must select and arrange elements in a narrative to tell a story; these narrators become “arrangers” of a kind, for example, those implied in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. A good story writer can create the illusion of objectivity; or a uniquely compelling speaker who is trustworthy; or one who, considering other elements in the story, is untrustworthy—and everything in between. I think this is one reason story writing is so interesting—it’s a bit like acting: think of the infinite variety of personalities and perspectives (*dramatis personae*) the imagination can conjure up.

Alsberg: Do you ever research your stories before you write them?

Mayo: I don't often research stories *before* I write them, but I do research them *as* I write them. For me, research is part of the writing process, not separate: as I'm writing a story I may reach a point where the story begins to demand that I find out a little more about a character, place, idea, etc. I've learned not to fight it. I'm off to the library—or somewhere. One story may demand that I know precisely how the Boris Karloff monster was made-up for the original 1931 *Frankenstein* film; another, Pancho Villa's supposed whereabouts in 1916. Now I'm working on stories set in Lithuania. I'm keeping a list of research questions, so I can work on them when I get to Lithuania.

Alsberg: How does pacing in a story relate to memory?

Mayo: As a reader, I expect a sense of how a story moves forward in "clock-time." It's a basic instinct I have: how time is passed. And, for better or worse, I like to think that "progress" is being made dramatically as clock-time is passed. Memory is a kind of time, too, but quite unlike clock-time; it is more like dream-time. If you've ever had a dream you swore lasted several hours and woke to see that only five minutes have passed on the clock on your nightstand, then you know the difference. When I'm writing, I'm trying to manage both these sorts of time so that my story uses elements of memory to give it psychological richness, but not so much that the progression of the plot in clock-time bogs down.

Alsberg: Are any of your stories autobiographical?

Mayo: Sure. Some more than others. None are purely or mostly autobiographical. I'm afraid that the pure facts about my life would make little sense to anyone. "The Hermitage, 2:10 P.M.," which appeared previously in *Westview*, has very few autobiographical elements, perhaps none; it began with a single image: the broken clock on the mantle in the Tsar's palace. On the other hand, another story of mine, "El Centauro del Norte," is predicated on a story my uncle told me about my grandfather, but it goes far beyond that story when I decided to bring Pancho Villa into the narrative. Is that autobiographical? Perhaps. Both these stories do intersect my life at one point: I began to write them because I needed to answer questions for myself about myself.

SW OKLAHOMA FOLIAGE TOURS

by Keith Long

October has always been a special month for me, since Oklahoma's autumn falls somewhere in the middle of it. The fall season is only about seventy-two hours long in these parts, but I love it and try not to sleep through it. My love affair with Oklahoma autumns began way back when I was just a kid, riding my bike to school and kicking at the humps of sycamore leaves lining the curbs, or at least where curbs should be.

One evening, I think I was eight, mom stomped in from the kitchen where she was preparing dinner and turned off the television, saying something about jello and brains. I thought that sounded like a pretty icky meal, but I was game for anything in those days. As I waited on supper, I sat in the living room and read a twenty-year-old *National Geographic* that had pages and pages about the foliage tours in the Great Northeast. I figured that was up around Guymon, since I still hadn't separated the concepts of "state" and "country" in my young jello, and wasn't doing much better with my general sense of directions. But I was enamored with the tours and especially with the fact that people paid good money to go on them. My good friend Harv and I were always looking for a money-making scheme so we could buy Montana and hunt the rest of our lives.

There were photos of people with their comments about the tours, and since I was more familiar with people than foliage, I paid careful attention to them. One

elderly woman, who looked a little like my great aunt Gertrude, said "the hills just seem to roll into each other, offering subtle changes in the golden hues." I didn't know what a golden hue was and I had an extremely limited knowledge of hills, what with the West Street Alps, particularly McAlester Peak, totaling my knowledge of hills and mountains. "There's just a plethora of color everywhere one looks," said one older fellow that could've passed for my Uncle Fred. It made me start thinking, which was probably mom's reason for turning off the television in the first place. However, had she foreseen the gist of my thoughts, *Gilligan's Island* might not have seemed so putrid. I knew a lot of people like my Uncle Fred and Great Aunt Gertrude, and I imagined all of them would like to go on a foliage tour but might not like traveling all the way to Guymon. Hmmm.

At that point, mom called the family to supper, and I quickly discovered that we were having hamburger steaks, not jello and brains. Mom's such a kidder. The next morning was a Saturday and Harv arrived on his bicycle a little before eight o'clock to find me on the car port loading my bicycle down with supplies.

"Hey," I said. "I've been expecting you for hours."

"Had to mow the lawn, trim the hedges, pick up my room, and take out the trash," Harv said.

"I hate Saturday chores."



"Yeah, me too. Took me almost 13 minutes. So what's up?"

"I've got this great money idea. I'm going to go out and map a foilage (sic) tour, and then people will pay money and sign up for it, and I'll take them out and show them all the foilage."

"Neat. Can I help?"

"Sure," I said, appreciative of Harv's entrepreneurial mind and his quick sense of money just waiting to happen. In a few moments we were pedaling hard on West Street and zoomed past the Ninth Street intersection, thanks to the gravitational force of Crownover Slope. We labored for about five minutes to hit McAlester's Peak from the east, which was the easy way. I stopped on top of it, and looked over Muncrief's pasture.

"Wow," I said, "look at the way the hills just seem to roll over each other, offering subtle changes in the golden whoos."

"What?" Harv asked.

"Look at all the golden whoos," I said.

"Where?"

"There," I said, pointing out across Muncrief's pasture.

"That's just a bunch of prairie grass."

"But look how golden it is."

"It ain't golden. It's brown."

"Well, we could CALL it golden in our brochure."

"It's brown and it's dead."

I shrugged and thought maybe Harv's entrepreneurial mind wasn't quite the steel trap I had it figured for.

At any rate, we pushed on westward, racing through the chilly air down the farther reaches of the west slope of McAlester's slope, falling and falling until we hit about 117 mph at the bottom. Our momentum sent us into uncharted territory and halfway up another Alp about a mile west. We struggled the last half, finally deciding to walk our bikes up to give them a rest.

"Oh," I said, "how grand. There's just a plytheraw of color everywhere one looks."

"A what?" Harv asked.

"A plytheraw."

"What's a playtharele?"

"I'm not sure, but it has to do with a bunch of colors."

"I don't see any colors."

"Look hard. I see a light brown, and sorta light brown, and regular old brown and something a little darker. And look, a scalping of yellow from those sunflowers."

"I don't see anything."

"Yeah. Well, you must be color blind."

"I am color blind."

"There, see? You don't know what you're talking about."

Harv knew how to take an insult when it was thrown his way, and promptly pulled himself and his bicycle out of the southwestern Oklahoma foliage tour. As for myself, thanks to my uncanny ability to keep down my overhead and sundry front-end costs, I managed to break almost even on the venture.



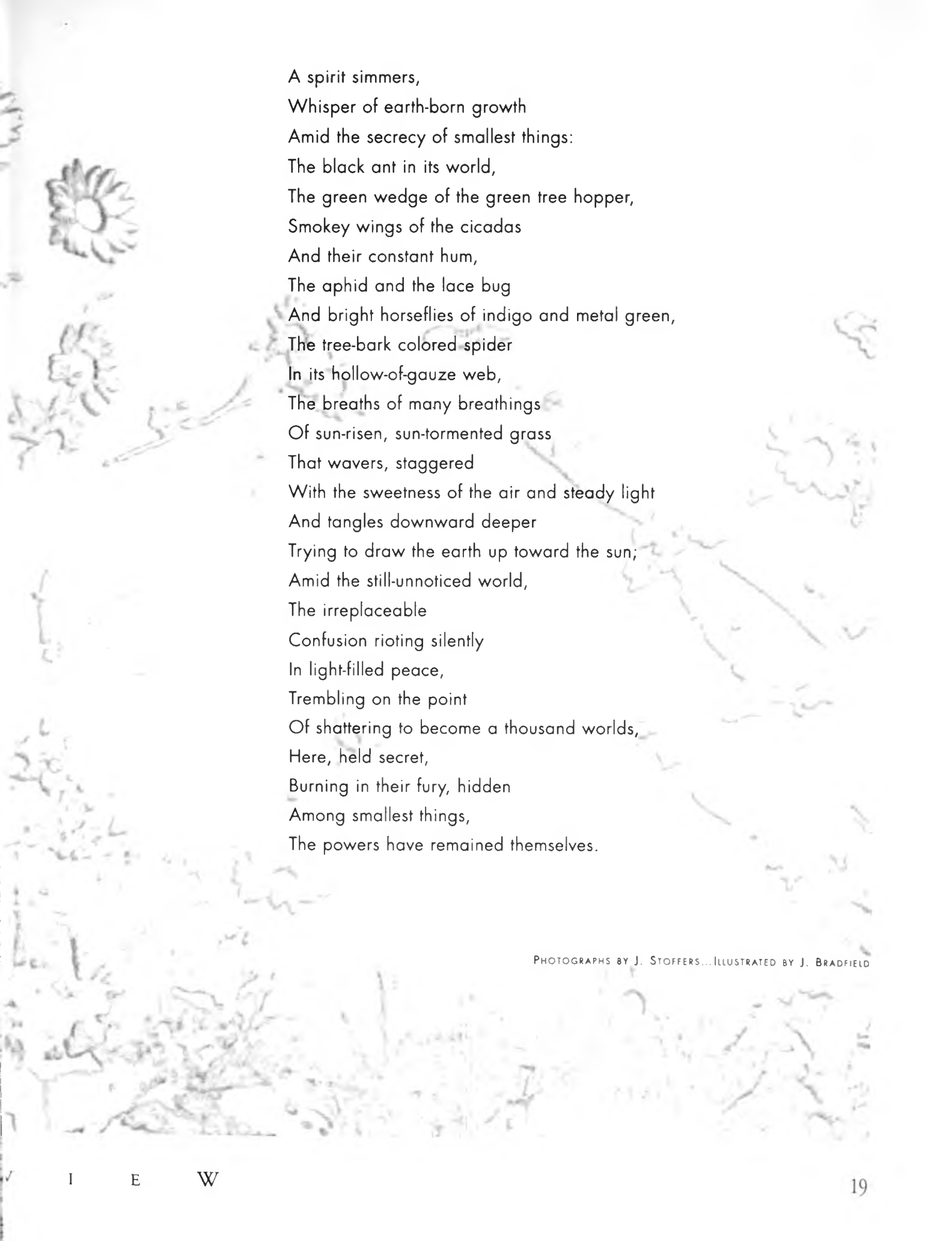
ILLUSTRATED BY RODNEY CLOUD

A FIELD

by Steven Frattali



Here
Where the odor of the summer's hay
Comes in the passing breeze
Moving the stillness of the summer noon,
The scent of fields standing still uncut,
And where the grass and tall weeds
Tangle in themselves, the field
Strewn with scattered wild flowers —
Yellow-gold of black-eyed Susan,
Blue of chickory and aster, the white of Queen Anne's lace —
And where the air
Is shimmering watery in midday heat
And small white butterflies,
The cabbage whites, float
In the burning
And sustaining atmosphere,
Here where the whole field wavers and ripples
And ragged goldenrod must
Nod and loll their crests,
Laden heavily,
Here in just-held silence,
A thousand rumors
Hushed from breeze to breeze,
In sunny vacant loneliness
When no one's here
Or only I am here,



A spirit simmers,
Whisper of earth-born growth
Amid the secrecy of smallest things:
The black ant in its world,
The green wedge of the green tree hopper,
Smokey wings of the cicadas
And their constant hum,
The aphid and the lace bug
And bright horseflies of indigo and metal green,
The tree-bark colored spider
In its hollow-of-gauze web,
The breaths of many breathings
Of sun-risen, sun-tormented grass
That wavers, staggered
With the sweetness of the air and steady light
And tangles downward deeper
Trying to draw the earth up toward the sun;
Amid the still-unnoticed world,
The irreplaceable
Confusion rioting silently
In light-filled peace,
Trembling on the point
Of shattering to become a thousand worlds,
Here, held secret,
Burning in their fury, hidden
Among smallest things,
The powers have remained themselves.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY J. STOFFERS...ILLUSTRATED BY J. BRADFIELD

THE RED NECK DANCERS

by David Hopes

They have cut down the hazel wood.
But fire came anyway to my head,
and fire to the stitches of my shirt,
and fire to the covers of my bed.

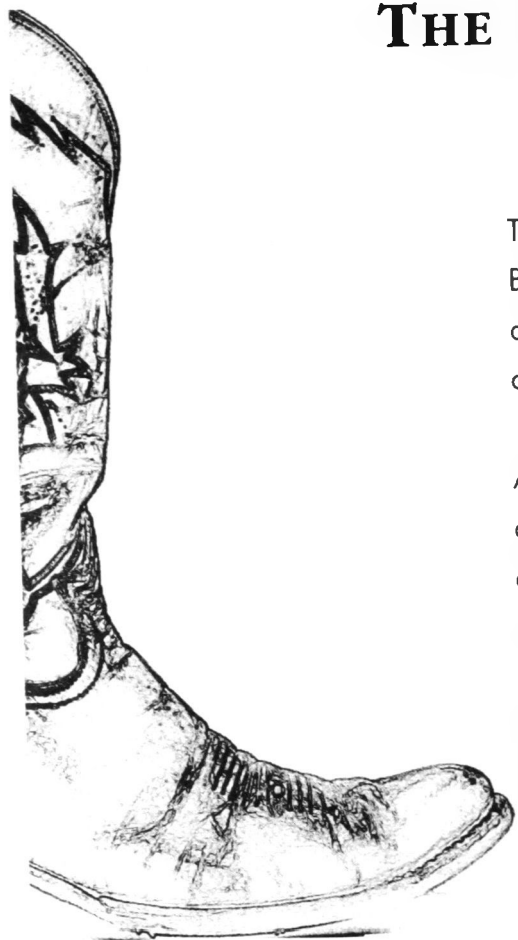
And nothing that signaled from the sky
and nothing that oozed from perfumed spring,
and nothing that whispered in the brain
meant to my turmoil anything.

So I went to dance with the redneck dancers,
the one-two kickers and the off-beat prancers.
Mom was a howler and howlers know
no better howling than Cotton Eyed Joe.

I heard the music under the street
and thought for certain minutes at least—
according to how I lifted from the ground—
I had done away with the hidden Beast.

But sis was a ranter and a ranter rants
no harder gospel than a boot heel dance.
Bro' was an angel and among hardened men
the angels sweat in flannel and denim.

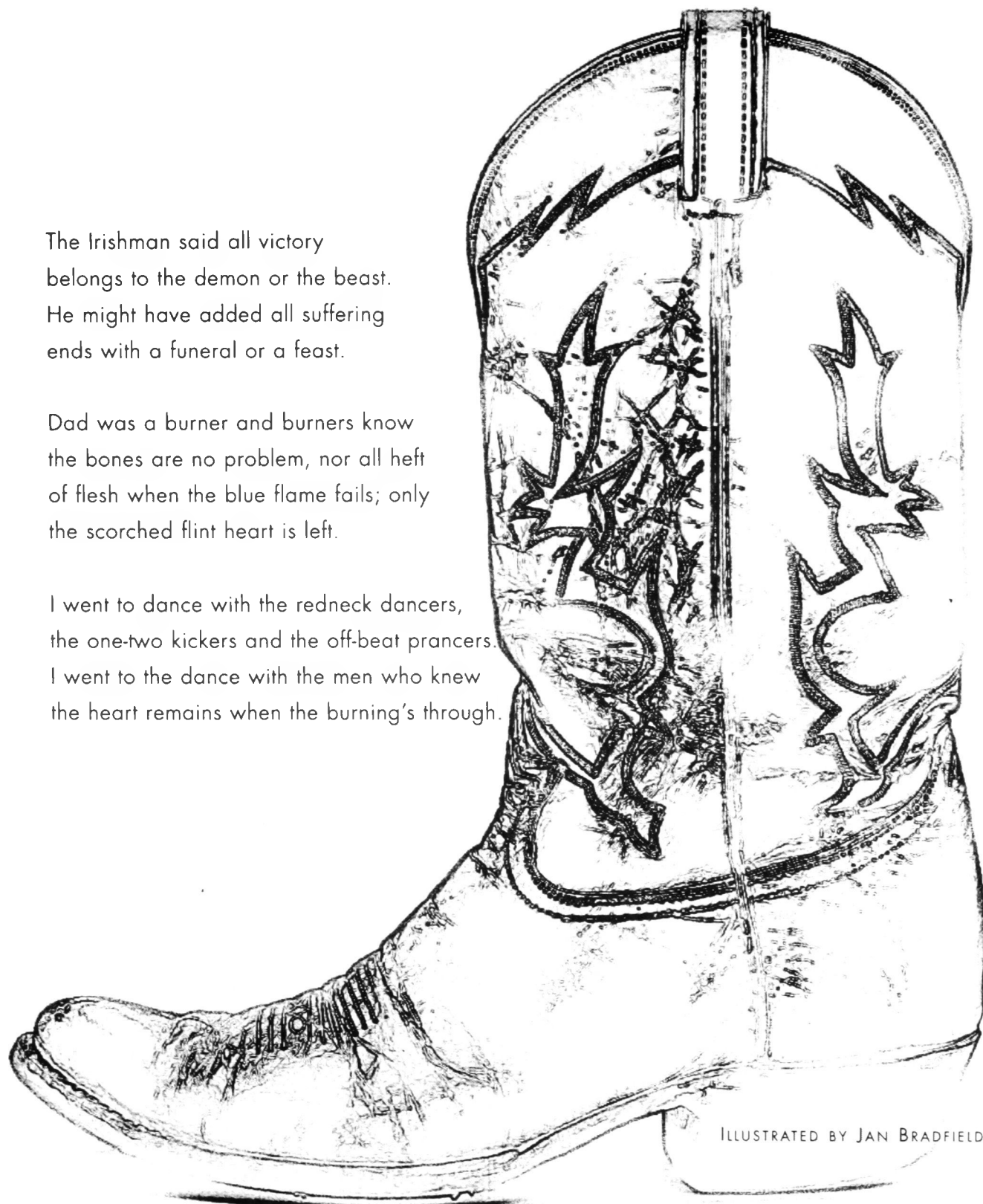
I went to the dance hall in black boots
and the red bandana at my throat.
my hair slicked back with dad's pomade,
to kick out the thunder note by note.



The Irishman said all victory
belongs to the demon or the beast.
He might have added all suffering
ends with a funeral or a feast.

Dad was a burner and burners know
the bones are no problem, nor all heft
of flesh when the blue flame fails; only
the scorched flint heart is left.

I went to dance with the redneck dancers,
the one-two kickers and the off-beat prancers.
I went to the dance with the men who knew
the heart remains when the burning's through.



ILLUSTRATED BY JAN BRADFIELD



FERRIS WHEEL

by Jannett Highfill

The obligatory steel bar across our chests,
our breath suspended, we sway backward and upward
as the farground becomes girders and spokes.

The lights of the town are flung out like dice,
and you caress the stars as if they could be pleased
into acquiescence, while I dread rushing to meet gravity
with open arms. Savoring the last rocking arc
you pause and step to earth like Sheba.

ILLUSTRATED BY JAN BRADFIELD

IN CHARGE

by Robert Cooperman

My mother plays gin
with peregrine greed,
pouncing on cards
as if tamer birds.
We laugh after the games
she'll always win.

She used to play ping-pong
with a fencer's lunging:
her serves, ferocious bees
that stung my nose
before I could swing.

Her swing was fluid
as a heavyweight champ,
the killer instinct
of a hungry polar bear.

I hated her lessons:
that life's a game
you can't win.
I lose gladly now —
whenever she calls,
falcon swift — "Gin!"

BURYING THE DEAD

by Garnett Kilberg Cohen

Geographically, Ohio isn't so terribly far away. Yet, for me, Ohio is a distant land, the place of my childhood: shimmering fields of mustard seed, of rusty trailer parks, developments criss-crossed with streets of 1950's starter homes, of playing outdoors until the streetlights flickered on, catching fireflies, collecting polished buckeyes, of sleepy little towns like ours with starched white houses, and—most of all—of rich Ohio earth, perfect for shaping mud patties (deep brown and pliable), growing corn and wildflowers, and for burying the dead in shady hillside cemeteries.

So as I drive up Mill Road, past fields of weeds and Queen Anne's lace, the sewage treatment plant, the Shell station heralded by the huge glowing saffron-colored half shell atop a pole, it's no wonder I imagine all the old trees, gas pumps, and fence posts rise from the earth like spirits as I approach. I cannot fathom they existed all this time without me. Like me, they must be returning for the funeral, called forth to revisit a distant land. Rounding the corner into town, I imagine all the familiar landmarks following me, ghostly, vaporish skins cast by their former structures, forming a parade behind me up Miller Road. *We're back! We're back!* I veer onto Dressler Street, then straight down to Main, the village green, the row of shops I visited with my mother when I was a girl so she could talk with her friends who were clerks, the soda fountain—*still there!*—where we all hung out as teenagers. As I approach Barberry Lane, my heart races, actually spins, like burning meat on a rotisserie. I take the turn. The row of familiar white houses spring from the earth. My parents' house is among them, third on the left. The old oak still in the front; for the first

time in years I envision the place where the ridges in the bark separate, to bypass a knot, meeting on the other side. How many times did I look at that image and wonder what it meant? What it represented? (For certainly, it was a secret sign.) I see the stump that once held the elm, felled—to the distress and tears of my mother—after the summer of Dutch elm disease. Cars crowd the driveway.

Pulling up to the curb, I notice the paint on the shutters and front door is chipped and peeling. Last time I was here it looked fresh. I feel the house is falling apart before my eyes. How could it age and decay without me? A woman crosses the drive, carrying a Corning Ware casserole, an aluminum foil cover rising like a tin mountain from the rims, glinting in the late afternoon sun. Two younger women accompany her; they resemble each other. Both with blanched red hair, as if it faded in the wash. Yes, of course—my heart stops spinning—Mrs. McIlhenny and the McIlhenny twins. The recognition calls forth a memory, long suppressed, forgotten. Before me now like it never left: my first funeral, one that would have never taken place without me. I wonder, would I ever have remembered if I hadn't driven up, just now, for my mother's funeral just as Mrs. McIlhenny and her daughters marched up the driveway? Or would that memory have remained buried, lost to me forever?

The story of that funeral starts with a fat girl, Debbie Driscoll, and her beautiful mother, Helena Driscoll.

Debbie was always anxious to be popular, even in fourth grade before the popular cliques had formed. Maybe her mother's stunning looks constituted a type of prophecy. Being confronted continually with such glam-

our must have been hard for a little fat girl. So she always planned events to win people over.

For her twelfth birthday, Debbie and her mother took me and Leslie Landham (a girl with cotton candy blond hair who would eventually be voted homecoming queen) to a special restaurant on the top floor of Higbee's Department store in Cleveland. On the hour and a half drive from our little town into Cleveland, Debbie stood on her knees in the front seat, her back twisted to the windshield so she could face Leslie and me. She wore a navy sweater, navy knee socks, and a navy and red kilt with a huge brass safety pin holding the flap in place. Leslie and I wore party dresses. Debbie's hair was cut in a page boy, her bangs slanting as straight as an edge of loose paper across the middle of her brow. I remember the flush of her cheeks as she spoke, her chubby fingers hooked over the back seat. "*Just wait until you see.* You've never seen a meal served like this. Have they mom? *Just wait.* You won't believe it."

Helena Driscoll kept her eyes on the road and didn't answer. I watched Debbie's lips. I had a visceral reaction to the way her upper gums showed when she spoke; but I knew such feelings were superficial so I fought them off and forced myself to look directly at her gums and smile.

At the restaurant, the maitre d' escorted us in a winding path between tables. Helena Driscoll's silk dress rustled as she walked. In the center of each table, a miniature lamp with a tiny fluted cup-cake-wrapping shade cast a yellow pool of light. At a table overlooking the blinking lights of Cleveland proper, our guide pulled out a chair for Mrs. Driscoll. She shot the man a closed lip salmon-pink smile. At that moment, I realized that the main reason I like to play at Debbie's house on Skytop Lane—rather than at my own—was her mother. In the same way her presence must have taunted Debbie with a vision of a bleak future, Helena Driscoll provided me

with material for envisioning a glamorous future. For at that time, I believed my womanhood would be a series of expensive nightclubs (like the one where Ricky Riccardo performed), exclusive parties, and glittering gowns. It didn't matter that Helena Driscoll seemed no more interested in me than my own mother; there seemed a chance with her. She was so alone, such a romantic figure, that I imagined there was room for me. I thought that in another life, we could be friends, confidantes even. The glamour of the restaurant and the view seemed a hint of what was to come.

Mrs. Driscoll crossed her legs, opened the huge menu—as big as a child's picture book—and lit a cigarette.

"Order us what I had last time," said Debbie.

Without a word, Mrs. Driscoll closed the menu and placed it back on the table. She looked bored. Her bright salmon lips slipped into a pout, her eyes stared over our heads, out the window. She pulled a sleek black holder from her purse and inserted her smoking cigarette. This gesture transported me to heaven. Debbie was not so moved. It was *her* party and she wanted her mother's attention, her assistance in establishing Debbie's hostess prowess.

When the meal was served, Debbie's promises seemed fulfilled. A grand presentation. The way I remember it—though my recollection seems absurd given we were in Cleveland in the early sixties—three waiters, one behind the other, sashayed across the dining room weaving between tables, supporting silver trays high above their heads on the finger tips of their white-gloved hands. Each tray featured a white cardboard oven suitable in size for a squirrel standing on his hind legs to fry sparrow eggs. With simultaneous flourishes, the individual ovens were placed in front of Debbie, Leslie, and me, perfect replicas of modern 1960 ovens. Each was

constructed of thick and sturdy cardboard. Along a panel at the back of the oven top, knobs and temperature gauges were stamped in black. On the stove surface, printed black burners held miniature sauce pans: one with peas, one with cooked carrots, and one with mashed potatoes. I pulled open my cardboard oven door. Inside sat a tin foil roaster, like a single square lifted from a TV dinner, brimming with three thin turkey slices and congealed gravy.

When we took our first bites, the magnificence of the presentation was eclipsed by the reality of the meal. The feast was sad: the portions tiny (the saucepans yielded no more than two large spoonfuls each) and the quality a notch below the school cafeteria hot lunches. I could barely swallow the mealy yellow-green peas. And on top of this, we were simply too old. The meal was conspicuously babyish.

Helena Driscoll nibbled on shrimp salad without extinguishing her cigarette. Instead, she turned her chair out from the table, so she could smoke between small bites. Despite her obvious indifference to us, I was impressed. I admired her high cheek bones, the manner in which her wavy hair brushed her shoulders, and I simply loved the way she smoked her cigarette—as if the very act of inhaling, each long drag, carried her further away from us three girls. To a land I would someday travel.

Surprisingly the food's quality didn't slow us down. We were greedy little girls. We finished what was edible of our meals in minutes. Leslie actually licked clean one of her saucepans, her tongue quickly swiping the edges. When she placed the pan back on a burner, Mrs. Driscoll came out of her dream world. She looked at our clean saucepans, our empty ovens, and crushed her cigarette out in the sparkling crystal ashtray. The white filter ringed with salmon lipstick.

"In another year, you girls will be too old for this," she said. I marveled at the social skill her remark revealed. In one unapologetic line, she managed to acknowledge both the Lilliputian portions and childish concept without accepting blame. Her statement clearly implied the mistake was not *hers*. She had planned well. *Technically* we were still young enough; we were simply one year ahead of our time. Debbie, however, completely missed her mother's adroitness; she couldn't drop the matter.

"Mother," she whined, as only a fat girl could. "They used to have more food in these ovens, didn't they?"

Debbie's eyes pleaded with her mother. I winced. I knew Helena Driscoll wasn't going to wink at Debbie and say, *Oh, you're sooo right, Debbie, now I remember, they used to be much bigger, more luscious meals.*

"No, they're the same size. You're just getting older, Debbie, they seemed larger when you were younger."

This was the worst thing she could have said; not only had she failed to fall in with Debbie, she had also suggested that both Debbie's judgment and memory were off. Still, Debbie couldn't let go. Her desperation was a pitiful thing to witness. You could actually see her thinking, groping for ways to save her credibility. At last she remembered something that she hoped would redeem the situation.

"The ovens!" she cried, brandishing hers above her head like a trophy, her eyes wild and anxious. "You can keep them! We have to return the pots and pans, but we can take the ovens home. They're ours, all ours!"

She stared ahead at nothing, her lips parted to reveal her gums. Such a pathetic victory forced me to look away. Debbie was a broken girl.

I saw little of Debbie after that. She never called. We stopped making the trek between her house on Skytop and mine on Barberry. I knew I should make the first

move, but I hadn't yet acquired the necessary tact to dismiss the inadequacy of the meal gracefully. Besides, I sensed the subject was taboo. How could I propose that anything as seemingly inconsequential as mashed potatoes, peas, turkey, and cardboard ovens had placed this strain on us? No, it could not be stated aloud. Never admitted. Yet the tension was palatable. For years, Debbie and I avoided each other. If I was thirsty in the school hall and Debbie was in line at the drinking fountain, I stuck my head under the faucet in the Girls' Room to quench myself. If the only empty locker in gym class was next to mine, she simply left her clothing in a heap on the floor. Not until high school, when her mother ran off with another man, did we begin speaking again. She lost weight revealing attractive features—her gum-revealing smile even acquired a certain charm—but otherwise she was a mess. Frequently drunk or stoned, she had fallen from a straight A student to a druggie. Her bouncy page boy now a stringy tangle, her once clear skin oily and gray. I never attributed Debbie's decline to her mother's abandonment, but rather assumed it was a natural outcome of the birthday fiasco. Who wouldn't need to anesthetize oneself against such a painful memory?

But immediately following the party—regardless of our lack of contact—I felt a staunch loyalty to Debbie. Was I simply atoning for my guilt at using her to be near her mother? Whatever, this loyalty found form in the oven. I couldn't bring myself to throw it away. My heart actually ached to think of the oven in the trash, soiled with coffee grounds and cigarette ashes. So I strove to make use of the mock appliance.

Most often, the oven functioned as a prop. Pretending to be a theater director, I would sit in the center of my pink fluffy bedroom rug with the oven surrounded by my Ginny dolls who served as the actors.

Most of my friends had Barbies, svelte single women dolls with doll boyfriends and doll cars. But I preferred Ginnies. They were chubby little pre-puberty girl dolls, five inches tall with bendable elbows and knees. Though I knew I should be outgrowing them, I loved them so much that I didn't want to give them up. I adored the way the dolls' knees and elbows moved, snapping in and out of place like real-life prosthesis. I revered the delicate little fingers and nails etched on their tiny hands, the blue glass eyes that opened and closed, the banks of thick black lashes that blinked up and down, the little girl swells of their molded plastic bellies. And I particularly loved my favorite Ginny, a flaxen haired beauty whom I called Bonita.

Bonita was the first Ginny I ever owned and it showed. From the way the thin sealer on her face flaked she looked like she was in the final stages of sunburn or suffering from a curious disease. And she was balding. In order to make her walk, I pinched the crown of her acorn-sized head between my fingers. The hair on the spots I held tightest—right above her ears—was becoming unglued. I could still manage to plait one pipe cleaner sized braid down her back (using the rubber band from my brother Tim's retainer), but it looked like a strange Mohawk or a snake dangling from her skull.

Since Bonita was my favorite, I always made her the star of my mini-productions (after the oven, that is). The shows were silly or formulaic: copies of television shows or my own pointless meandering plots. But, of course, my task was enormous considering all I had to work with was a balding doll and a cardboard oven too large for her.

In my biggest extravaganza, Bonita led a band of Ginnies on a complicated route from Tim's room, along the hall baseboards, through the bathroom, around the dangerous rim of the toilet bowl, back along the base-

board, into my room, through the dustballs swirling like doll tumbleweed under my bed, across the fluffy pink rug to discover hidden treasure—my mother's pearl necklace—inside the oven.

Yet in the end, my attempts to canonize the oven were in vain. As with the dinner, I was simply too old. The Ginnies went up on the shelf, along with the useless cardboard appliance.

This is where the McIhenny twins enter the story. The following summer I began babysitting for them, my first real job. When my mother and Mrs. McIhenny wanted a chance to talk privately at her house, she would give me \$1 to watch the twins at my house. That left only Mrs. McIhenny's three-year-old and her newborn, and they were too young to understand or repeat what they heard. This was important since, unbeknownst to me at the time, most of the conversations were about Mr. McIhenny, a polar bear of a man with carrot red hair. The meanest man on our street. None of us ever cut through his yard of weeds and littered appliances because he would yell or chase us out. A mean drunk. Rumor had it among us children that he killed off unwanted litters of kittens by cramming stones up their anuses. The parents whispered behind closed doors about stranger, more adult crimes. While it seemed my mother had little time for me or my brother, she seemed to have endless concern and time for the women in our neighborhood. The neighborhood crusader, the righter of wrongs, my mother was rarely alone.

The twins, Patsy and Colleen, almost six years old with matching curly red hair (rich and thick rusty then) and freckle smeared-faces, were no problem. Accustomed to the tyranny of their father, they always did exactly what they were told. I liked them. They followed me and seemed to admire everything I did. I particularly enjoyed inventing games for them. The title of

babysitter allowed me to lose myself in the world of childish invention with complete impunity from the criticism of my peers.

That summer afternoon—the one that just returned to me, so lucid among other faded memories—we were searching for something to do when Colleen pulled Bonita and my oven from my shelf.

“Do these go together?” she asked. “The oven seems kinda big for this doll.”

“No,” I said. The phone rang. I left the room to answer it—my mother calling to tell me to give the girls plain Saltines rather than Oreos with their Koolaid, to reseal the wax paper mouth of the cracker wrapping. (Where did my brain ever find space to store such a trivial detail, keep safe to call forth the very feel of the wax wrapping rolling back into place? As clear as Bonita's ice blue eyes.) When I returned to my room, I found the girls had placed the oven in the middle of the rug. They had placed Bonita inside so that only her plastic face and upper chest showed through the open oven door. Her eye lids, designed to shut when she reclined were closed so that the banks of black lashes rested against her cheeks. Like mourners, Colleen and Patsy kneeled on either side of the oven.

Taken by the scene, I paused in the doorway.

“She's dead,” I said. As the words came out, they seemed true. Poor Bonita was dead and the oven, with the solitary door drawn back to reveal only her head and upper torso, was her strange coffin. Even her peeling skin and balding scalp contributed—evidence of long suffering prior to her demise.

“Dead?” asked Patsy, her little girl eyes wide and bright.

“Yes,” I said grimly. “And we must have her funeral.”

Thus our game for the afternoon was born. Since funeral was a new game, it had an organic quality that

made it more compelling than our regular amusements. The activity was more involved, more real. As I invented each new component, I felt driven, controlled by a greater power. We dressed in my mother's clothing like true mourners, in a trance. When we twirled around in front of the mirror, we weren't girls playing dress-up, we were preparing for an event, a solemn, serious event. We wore only black. Patsy wore a black slip skirt, pulled up over her flat breasts. Colleen wore a black camisole that reached her knees. And as leader, high priestess, grand inventor, I wore my mother's short black cocktail dress, trimmed in sparkling black sequins, a dress she only donned on special occasions (with matching sequins sprinkled in her hair, a look that nearly rivaled Helena Driscoll's). I made shawls for the girls out of large swatches of black fabric found near my mother's sewing machine. We all wore long necklaces, and doilies on our heads.

When we were dressed, I instructed the girls to kneel with me around Bonita's coffin.

"We must mourn," I said in my new grim voice.

"What's that?" asked Patsy.

"Cry, act sad over Bonita's death."

I started and they copied me. At first, our cries were tentative, then artificial—"boo hoo's" and "wahh's"—children's mimics of cartoons. But somewhere along the line, our cries became real. At what precise point, I can't say. But gradually we were wailing, howling, shaking, screaming, sobbing. I was consumed by a deep and beautiful anguish I had never before experienced. Anguish over Bonita's death, over the sad little oven, over Debbie Driscoll's future, over the twin's mother, the McIlhenny's litters of kittens, over the way my mother ignored me, over how very alone I felt I would always be. The twin's tears were far more disturbing than my own. Rather than spring from vague self-pity or sentimental-

ty, their tears seemed to stem from a real terror. Their faces were puffy and pink, slick with tears. Their little shoulders shook.

I knew that as the babysitter, the responsible party, I should call an end to the game, comfort the girls, restore the situation to normalcy. Yet I was too in love with my tears, my sadness, the luxury of relinquishing all self-control. I had never felt such complete and utter grief, such total self-indulgence, such *ecstasy*. My sobs seized me to the bone, the very marrow; my entire body, my heart, my lungs, every cell, every atom, was crying. I grew scared for myself and the girls. But the pain was too exhilarating to stop—I loved my agony.

Somehow, between retching sobs, I managed to clasp the little coffin between my hands and lift it above my head, as if offering a sacrifice to the gods.

"Agagodoforada," moaned a primitive voice from deep inside me. The rush of sounds emerging from my lips seemed wholly appropriate for the occasion. No real words would have sufficed, could have illustrated my rapture.

Still holding the coffin above my head, I rose. First one foot, then the other. The girls followed my example. "Agaodohafta, megamontee, agodo," I said as I followed my lifted offering out the door. The three of us formed a wailing procession, down the hallway—I stopped briefly in the bathroom to anoint Bonita's brow (it seemed right)—across the living room, out the front door, down the concrete slab steps, across the front yard, the sidewalk, across the tree lawn, the curb, right into the middle of the street, where we turned and headed down the block. Where were the neighbors? The mothers? The other children? Did what we were doing really seem an innocent game not to be disturbed? Or had we managed to tune everything else out so thoroughly that the world around us ceased to exist. We seemed the



ILLUSTRATED BY BRANDON WEBSTER

the drive, I knew this was where I planned to go all along. The Trimble house, a prim white saltbox. Until recently, the house was the smallest on the street, the front almost the same size as the enormous American flag they hung out every Fourth of July and Memorial Day. But a few months ago the Trimbles had started an addition on the rear of their house that was larger than the house itself. The old house looked like a truck cab pulling an enormous load. The back yard was completely obliterated in order to put down the new foundation, then flattened by cement trucks and trampled by workmen. But now that the addition was nearing completion, Mr. Trimble had rototilled the back yard in order—according to my father—to put down “sod.”

We traipsed up their gravel drive, lifting our legs high so that our black garments didn’t trip us, around to the backyard, the freshly rototilled dirt. Still sobbing, we fell to our

only living beings on Barberry, beings with a mission.

Our thundering grief propelled us, as if prearranged, to the last house on the block. In fact, as we veered up

knees in the fresh Ohio earth. Where was Mrs. Trimble? Her two sons? The youngest, Albert, had spent the entire summer walking up and down the drive with a

quarter pressed into his bellybutton to train it to become an inny rather than an outy. His older brother, Herm, was so possessive of their property that he charged us to watch the cement trucks pour their thick and gritty batter into the new room's foundation. How could the neighborhood have been so empty, abandoned? Perhaps the memory has been buried so long that the peripheral images have faded, but that doesn't explain why the other details are so vivid, why no one interrupted our bizarre performance.

The ground was loose and easy to move, moist and malleable clumps that I could easily dig and lift. As we dug, my tears subsided. By the time we had a hole a foot deep and a foot wide, my anguish was replaced with anger. Mounting, inexplicable fury. I placed Bonita's coffin in the grave, closed the oven door, and pushed dirt over the cardboard, refilling the hole. Clenching my teeth, I patted the surface into a neatly pressed mound, and sat back on my haunches. The twins were still sobbing. Seeing them shake and cry annoyed me. I was irritated with myself for not stopping the game when it was obviously provoking inappropriate feelings. And I was pained by the state of my mother's garments. I didn't move, just sat there watching Colleen blubber until Patsy managed to choke out an appeal.

"Please, Alice, dig her up. We've got to dig her up. She can't breathe!"

Her desperation snapped me.

"Shut-up!" I yelled, ashamed even as I said it. "She's just a doll, stupid."

The twins immediately quit crying. Colleen gave one final whimper, a little tremor that ran through her body like an aftershock. My tone must have reminded them of their father.

"Come on," I said. "We've got to get out of here before the Trimble's get home."

We walked back to my house on the sidewalk. Neighbors roamed the street now. Mothers. Dogs. Cats. Children. The world had returned. I rinsed off my mother's slip and camisole and stuffed them in the washing machine. I scrubbed the damp knee marks I'd made on her dress and hung it back up in the closet, hoping the stains vanished by the next time she needed it. In the bathroom, we scrubbed dirt from our hands, watching the muddy water swirl down the drain, and cleaned beneath our nails with toothpicks. Presentable again, we sat in the kitchen drinking Koolaid and munching Saltines. We were still sitting there when my mother returned with Mrs. McIhenny, one child clinging to her shirt tail, the other riding a hip.

"What did you do?" my mother asked in the perfunctory remote voice she always used with me. I wasn't a woman with problems.

"Nothing," I said.

"You mean Alice didn't think up any of her clever games for you girls?" Mrs. McIhenny asked, a smile plastered on her blotchy face. She had been crying.

Colleen shrugged and took another Saltine. Patsy licked salt off the surface of her cracker.

"Okay, well play deaf and dumb if it makes you happy. But we'd better get a move on if I'm going to have dinner on the table before your father gets home."

At the mention of their father, both girls popped off their chairs. Before Mrs. McIhenny led her brood out the door, my mother touched her arm—such a loving gesture!—and said, "call if you need me. Neil can watch the kids."

Mrs. McIhenny smiled wanly and nodded, but didn't look back once she was out the door.

My mother went about her business as if she was alone which, for her, I'm sure was the case. I was left haunted by memories of the twin's startled faces when I

snapped. Already, I was ashamed of the way I'd treated them, ashamed of what I'd done to Bonita.

I must have planned to go dig her up. I'm sure I did. I could have given her to the twins. They had so few toys. But once the spell dissolved, it was not so easy to think of marching into the Trimble's yard, dealing with Herm Trimble. So as it often is with summers, one day turned into the next and then the next, without any clear demarcation. Yet I'm sure I would have found the right time if it weren't for the sod.

Walking home from swimming lessons one hazy afternoon I spotted the long flatbed truck in front of the Trimble house. Despite instructions, I had worn my wet bathing suit under my clothes. I was damp and uncomfortable. The crotch was riding up my rear end. Yet I stopped to join the circle of children watching the action in the Trimble's backyard. I even paid an extra nickel to shoulder my way to the front. Sod was not what I thought—seeds from pods sprinkled on the ground—rather it was a thick carpet of grass. The yard had been leveled to receive the lush rug. Men rolled it out in strips. My throat tightened.

Bonita gone, buried forever in an unmarked grave.

My brother, Tim, appears at my car window.

"I thought that was you, Alice," he says. His voice is gentle, grown, not the voice of the teasing boy I remember. "What are you doing sitting out here by yourself? Come inside."

Streetlights glow in the dusk. How long have I been

here? Tim opens the door. Stiffly, I stretch my legs and follow him into the house. Both the living room coffee table and the dining room table are covered with dishes: casseroles, salads, breads, pies. The room is so packed with bodies, mostly women, that it's hard to breathe. A broad woman with a head of brillo gray hair hugs me; I feel the retch of her shoulders. The silent crying. "You poor thing," she says. I want to tell her that she probably knew my mother better than I, but I don't. Yes, we talked on the phone: my mother sharing news of her friends' troubles, their illnesses, their husband's deaths, the plights of their grown children. Every few years she flew out to visit me and her grandchildren for a week. But we seldom really talked and she never listened. That doesn't mean I'm bitter. Now that I am a mother myself I know that a person can be good, warm and kind even, without necessarily being a wonderful mother.

I think of the mothers I knew—Mrs. Driscoll, Mrs. McIlhenny, Mrs. Trimble—all buried inside grandmothers. Across the room, I see the McIlhenny twins, their freckles faded so that their little girl faces live only in cracking old photographs now. I think of my mother. Then I think of Bonita. I see the ground cut away, the earth's layers revealed like a side of sliced cake. I see a strip of green green grass, a layer of thick brown dirt, the wall of the oven, and then Bonita inside the oven—the sway of her plastic belly, her blue glass eyes, her tiny fingernails—and find relief that she, at least, is forever preserved.

POETRY RODEO

by R.M. Davis

No winged horses here.
Spurring tired stock with whoops
to fake a buck.
Clutching the horn to hold
a moment's more attention.

Throwing a line to snag
the calf-eyed,
hands in the air
to sign four-second triumph.

Dressed funny for
his turn in the barrel.

Riding the bull.
Or throwing.

Don't call him a cowboy
until you see him
write.

THE SANDBURRS

by Del Cain

Like sandburrs they came
Catching rides
Any way they could.
Sticking in the sand
With the buffalo grass
They hold the land,
Ancestors of the men
On counter stools
In auction barn cafes
And the worn women who visit
Holding the handles of
Shopping carts
In the summer cold
Of grocery aisles.
Sandburrs still who stick
In the sand
To the land
Not hoed out by
Hail or heat,
Norther or drought,
Facing the cyclone
And the dust devil
With the same failure to fear,
Who persevere
To hold the land
To root in the sand
And green the spring
And bring blood
From the unwary
Who think to pluck
The sandburr from the sand.

UNEXPECTED FRIENDS

by Richard Terrill

Old lilacs decrescendo on a kitchen stand,
placemats in a stack,
numb late romantics on the radio,
and clouds that move in like bad neighbors
who clear away the confusion in the yard the cardinals liked.
Bowling trophy in with the antique candleholders—unused—
and the Master's diploma—unused.

You'll find my house the way I find it mornings,
couch and chairs a file for packs, papers,
books stacked according to degree unread,
dust undisturbed, dishes at peace with themselves,
bedsheets random, forgotten their story.
Popcorn poppper, unanswered letters,
shook rugs on a rail,
and lots of newspapers
and not much news.

I like unexpected friends who come by
play a note then drive off.
We make plans as if tomorrow were today.
We have a drink or don't, don't notice
the pauses in talk,
soloists with a missing page.

The shovel they came to borrow, unborrowed,
the connections between things in the world
seem once again to exist.
I defect from the study
to watch their car back off,
wave like some doubled consonant
before an ending.

MEN WHO ARE JERKS

by Catherine de Cuir

Lila Sue Linder had wised up. That's what she said. She told me jerks rise to the surface, and she'd seen enough jerks to last her a lifetime. Since she was only twenty-seven, there was no hurry about meeting the next one.

Lila swirled her pink squirrel around in her glass. We were drinking at the Wagon, where she sang and where I'd met her.

"I've been in love too many times," she said.

She would see somebody wonderful for six months or even a year, and suddenly there would be an apologetic phone call, a dinner with a sorry conclusion, a disappearance. Another song would be ruined for her, and the sight of one more restaurant or another bar would make her feel like crying.

"In a small town," she said, "That gets to be a problem."

I smiled. "So why are you telling me all this?"

"Cause I'm drunk, Jack," Lila said. "And you seem so understanding."

Pretty women always think I'm understanding. Lila had written some songs about her situation. She wrote a song called "I'm a Curable Romantic and I Just Got Cured Again." She wrote "Why a Beer's Better than a Man," and "Men Who Are Jerks." She said her boss at the Wagon won't let her sing them, because she told him they were Dolly Parton's.

I used to go watch her sing. She was something to see, with all that dark hair almost to her knees. Half her audience probably came to see what she'd do with her hair. The other half came to look at the rest of her. But Lila could sing, too. She was real good with her love-

gone-wrong songs. When my wife went back to Tulsa, and later when my divorce was final, Lila was the one I drank with.

Lila sighed and swirled that pink goo. "Too bad we're just good friends, Jack," she said. "Bill had the nerve to give me a post office box for an address. Claims he doesn't have a phone, either."

"Poor guy," I said. "Is he broke?"

"That means he's married, honey. There goes another cute one. There is nothing out there but men who are jerks."

"I'm not a jerk," I said.

"You are very sweet."

I'm not as bad as I sound. But I'm not a cowboy, which I guess left me off Lila's list. She told me a girl should never fall in love with a cop.

"I'm a California Highway Patrolman, Ma'am," I said.

"Same difference."

I started looking out for Lila, in a friendly way. She worked days at an office — "My singing wouldn't keep me in pantyhose!" — so I thought she might be short of cash. I fixed her some meals.

One night as I made hamburgers, Lila let her phone ring about fifteen times.

"Your phone's ringing, Lila," I said.

"It's Bill. Calling me from a phone booth while his wife cooks dinner. You answer — Let him hear a man's voice. I've met somebody new, anyway."

We let the phone ring while she talked about Clete. She said he was big — "Even taller than you, Jack," — and drop-dead handsome, with a year-round tan, a lanky

cowboy grace. She showed me his picture, too.

He'd taken Lila to the rodeo. I imagined her watching the dust rise as a steer's legs were tied. Clete was honest: He told her his divorce wasn't final, so he needed to see a lot of people. She knew that would change once they fell in love. He was mature: He had smile lines around his eyes. He owned a ranch down in Saugus, handled his own investments. I could see her running one finger down his nice leather jacket.

"It might be okay to be the third wife of a guy like that," she said.

"What? Lila, what are you trying to do to yourself?" I put hamburger buns on the rack. "Guys like that never grow up."

"I try to be realistic. It's a jungle out there."

Around this time Lila was getting a reputation locally as a good singer, and people told her to try her luck in LA or Memphis.

"Everybody from Escalon to Merced knows I can sing," she said. "That's a reason to leave here?"

She and her sister went to New York City that June, and she sent me a postcard: "Went up in the Statue of Liberty. It was 110 degrees in her forehead!"

I didn't think Lila would ever leave here. The truth was she wouldn't leave Clete.

Cowboy Clete told her to date other people too. That was where I came in. Suddenly she flirted with me, and the change was pretty subtle, for Lila. One day she patted me on the back and the next she let her hand rest on my shoulder for a minute. I hated to admit to myself that it was because of somebody else.

For my birthday she gave me pubic hair conditioner. Lila was always a joker. "This is a good product, Jack. I want you to use this."

"Are you going to check?" I said, but instead of hitting me, she laughed and let her eyes hold mine for a

moment.

It didn't take long for me to ask her out for a real date. I knew I was Clete's backup. No doubt I made Clete seem more impressive — the way the moon looks bigger when it's near the horizon. It was hard to pin Lila down, too. I asked her out for Saturday on Tuesday, and she said, "Honey, I can't think that far ahead." Then when I asked her out on Thursday she seemed insulted. "I think I'm busy," she said.

But we went out. I was happier than I should have been that summer, taking Lila around to movies and restaurants. She could relax with me. I remembered how she used to chatter to me about wanting to get married. Now she told me to date other people, too. But I had a plan.

I told Lila since I spent all day on Interstate 5, I was as glad to stay home and cook for her as go out. I figured that was something a guy like Clete wouldn't think of. I like movies on T.V. as much as movies in the theater, and I told her so, even when she offered to pay.

"Lila, listen," I said. We were sitting on the couch. It was August and we could hear crickets through the screen door. In scouts I learned to calculate temperature by counting chirps per minute, but now I couldn't remember the formula. I picked up Lila's hand. "I'm looking for long-time affection. I think you are, too. And I make a good living. I know you've been struggling along. Let's help each other."

Lila frowned. "I'm not sure what you're suggesting, Jack. Anyway, you couldn't make much more than me, or you wouldn't have gotten so scared to spend it." Then she tried to laugh me off. "I like you anyway, miser."

I felt too bad to explain. Maybe I said it too soon or didn't say it so well, but she missed my meaning.

I don't get angry fast. Lila was a pretty woman and I was out of my mind. I figured she was playing games



with me, so I gave Mandy a call.

Sure enough, that Friday evening Lila called me.

"Let's go have pizza," she said.

"I did have some plans, Lila."

I don't break dates. I'd feel like a jerk if I did. But I kept thinking of how Lila had looked last time I'd seen her. I imagined her long hair falling on me, and I picked up the phone and dialed Mandy.

"Get some extra rest tonight if you're catching cold, Jack," Mandy said. "But you better be ready to haul your ass out of bed and play ball tomorrow anyway." I liked Mandy for that.

I called Lila back and told her I could make it. She laughed. We went to Shakey's. I know she had a good time.

Since we were dating now, and not just friends, Lila had decided it was okay to let me kiss her. I can say this, looking back. I'd had some friendly good-night pecks, after which she'd quickly said she had to get her beauty rest. This time when I took her home she asked me in,

even though it was late.

"Have a seat, Jack, and I'll get you a beer."

Things were looking up. Here we were alone on the couch after midnight. Seemed like nobody was going anywhere.

Most people close their eyes when they kiss. Don't they. With Lila I never knew if that was a good sign or a bad one. She could have been pretending I was Cleo. I wondered more when she switched off the light. Still, I had Lila in my arms and I wasn't going to go nuts over something imaginary. She was little and smelled good and every now and then she would giggle. I was in love, like I said. We kissed quite a while. We got lying down, but when I started trying to get the clothing out of the way, Lila sat up.

"How many states do you suppose this is still illegal in, officer?" she said.

"I'm a highway patrolman," I said. "I don't mind as long as you don't do it in the road."

She wouldn't laugh at that. She stood up, stretched,

and said, "Jack, honey, I'm so tired."

"Goddamnit, Lila," I said, "What are you getting all this beauty rest for, anyway?"

"Well, don't get your panties in a bunch!" Lila said. "I told you, I'm not ready to make love with anybody these days."

It was like being back in high school. "I suppose you make Clete take you home at nine o'clock."

"Yes I do. Last time I went to his place I found these big red earrings on his kitchen counter. I figured I'd leave before I got counting dirty sheets." Now she was crying. She was always either crying or laughing. "Jack, all the movies Clete and I see, he's already seen with someone else!"

I kissed her on the forehead and went home. It was September. I could feel the season changing. Everything smelled like wood smoke.

Like I keep explaining, I'm a patient man. I've never touched a woman who was in love with someone else, but I figured I still had a chance if nothing was going on with Clete either.

"My little sister and I are so darn different," Lila said. We were back at the Wagon on a Monday night. A football game hissed away on the T.V. "Nancy's gone and got engaged again."

Nancy had married at seventeen the first time. The guy went to jail soon after, and the family just about forced her to sign divorce papers.

"But he needs me," Nancy kept saying. Still, once it was final she felt better.

"You don't really understand a person until you divorce them," Nancy told Lila. Lila said she wouldn't know. Nancy's new fiancé sold cars, so Nancy wouldn't end up supporting him.

That week Lila asked me over for a quiet evening.

Nancy's engagement and the holidays got her into a romantic mood. Clete was out of town, too — I asked. Lila had scented candles lit and a roast and baked potatoes on the dining room table. We joked around like usual. When I got serious she pretended I was staring at her salt and pepper shakers.

"Aren't these cute?" Lila said. They were little sheds marked "This house is full of s—" and "This house is full of p—".

"Stop changing the subject. You know I care about you, Lila," I said.

"Uh-huh," she answered, and started giggling. But she didn't try to stop me later with a lot of bull about what's legal where.

Afterward when I guess she thought I was sleeping, Lila looked out into her garden. From the bed I could see half-lit faces of sunflowers shaking in the wind. Mist would be creeping under the archway downtown. Being single is worst in December—but maybe that was going to end. I pulled the blankets up to my chin. Lila turned to me with a tender look that you'd give a kid, and seemed startled to see my eyes open.

"Winter's coming on," she said. She bent down and patted my cheek. "I've got a head full of yule fog."

"What do you mean, honey?" I asked. I tried to pull her into my arms but she went off to take a shower.

So, after our big night Lila avoided me for a few weeks. How do you get close to somebody like that?

Out on the road every day, between here and Stockton, I tried to think what must have happened. Whether the occasion had been before or after our night together, I couldn't tell you, but I knew her avoiding me had to do with Clete. She was crazy about that individual — even if I'd occupied a few thoughts.

I know Clete's kind of place — dark and noisy, with a candle blinking on each table. A steak house, expen-

sive but not sophisticated, with lots of food and attentive service. She's always said she feels funny in restaurants like that — some guy's told her good-bye in each steak house in town.

I picture them at dinner.

Her steak takes too long to chew. That much wine'll mean a headache tomorrow. But the wine makes her worries farther off for one night. Clete talks about his mutual funds.

At the end of the meal, I figure, Clete fills her glass with red wine again and says "Lila, I've put off saying this as long as I could. I don't want to hurt your feelings."

Lila puts down her fork and looks Clete in the eye (I know just what expression she uses. At least she hasn't slept with him. Clete's never fooled her. And of course, there's still me. I'm crazy about her.)

"Your company and conversation alone are exciting," Clete says. "But there's got to be more to this friendship. I can't resist you much longer."

Lila laughs out loud — he cares about her after all. She goes home with Clete late at night, and makes herself ignore those red high heels in the dining room.

I see all this, just like I know there'll be tumbleweeds along the road when it's windy: she thinks Clete's wonderful. She writes him a song. I can guess at a name — "Ever After." Shows him the song, maybe. Admits she wants to marry him. But he doesn't respond to that.

Could be I'm torturing myself. But I bet I'm not far from the truth.

When I finally got hold of Lila one Friday in January, she said, "Oh, Jack, I think I have a date tomorrow." I said I probably had something to do, too.

But she called me the week after that. When I went to pick her up she was wearing blue. I'd told her that was my favorite color. She was showing a little cleavage but

not that flower tattoo over her left breast. She'd brushed her hair down straight, the way I told her I liked it best.

We went to dinner at a Chinese place. "This is fun. I like to look at these little characters on the menu and pretend I can read them. Maybe someday we'll travel together, Jack."

"What's happened with Clete?" I said.

Lila looked down at her pink squirrel. "He's gone down to LA for a while. You can't expect a businessman to stay here. All people here talk about is how their kids lasso the dog and the Lay-Ze-Boy. Oh, I sent him a note," she said. "He was just a jerk."

"Well. So what else is going on with you?"

"My sister's married again. She found another convict — what can I say?"

The waitress brought the second drink. I cleared my throat.

"You know I've been dating Mandy," I said, "And you've been seeing God knows who all."

"Are you thinking of settling me down, Jack Rogers?" Lila asked. She took a sip of her drink. "I do like variety in my life," she said. She had a shaky smile.

"I know you do," I said. "You've said so. But I'm not so sure I like it. I know Mandy wouldn't. We're moving in together." Actually I'd just decided the day before.

Lila said, "Oh, don't leave me, honey."

Everything went dark at the edges for a minute. I looked at her close to see if she was kidding. I still wasn't sure.

"If I thought I'd ever had a chance with you, Lila—" I said. I shook my head. Do I have the world's shortest memory or what? "It just wouldn't work, that's all."

Lila stared right at me. "You're just another jerk, then," she whispered. "Aren't you, Jack?"

DROWNING CREEK DOCKS

by Lori DeLozier

Day is getting skimpy, here,
and falling apart on the rasping

docks. So much is falling apart.
The boards give

a little, and then a little more,
under the sluggish weight of my tennis shoes

and me. A clump of old men
fish off the favored slip, in a stagnant

ripple of pipesmoke. Dreaming and not,
dreaming and not; they lean on

their dwindling haunches, slack
back in gray vinyl chairs — paintspeckled chairs,

like the first stars over
the drowsy ridge — and the lake sinks

in the lagging light, and a crooked
cat, with one eye gone,

waits

for a wriggling minnow.

ON LIBERTY ISLAND

by Gus Pelletier

Like a chaste woman
she stood inviolate,
graceful as a nun,
her modest habit never
lifting a single inch.
Smudged as she was,
she was grand, glorious,
a world-class figure.

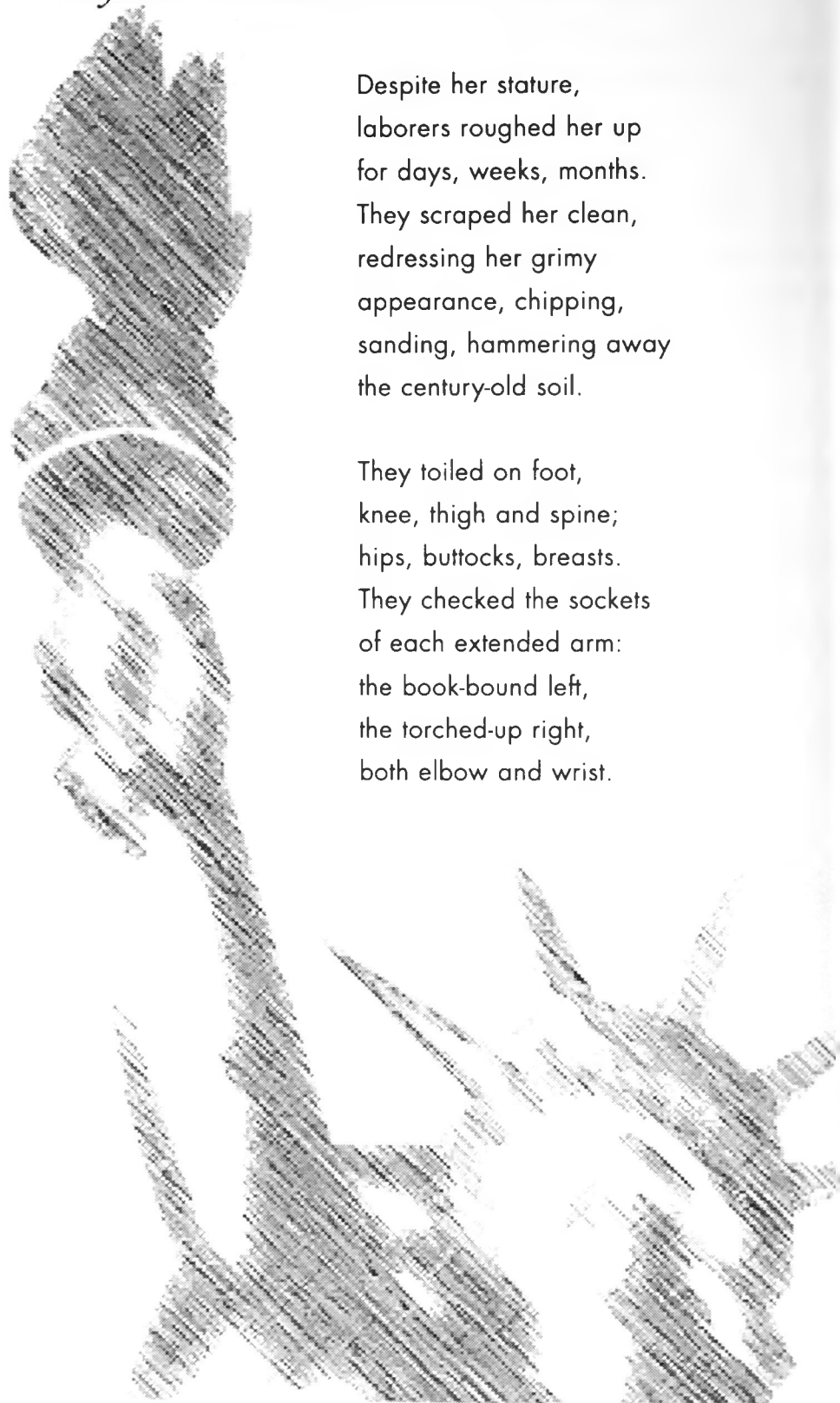
A skyline monument,
majestic, a totem
held in slack-jawed
homage by generations
with a new-world need
of her, she generously
took the masses in—
none too poor to love.

High up above it all,
her head in the clouds,
still she weakened,
pulled apart, succumbed
to what enveloping
moisture, acid, rained
upon her rivets, welds,
helped break her down.

Despite her stature,
laborers roughed her up
for days, weeks, months.
They scraped her clean,
redressing her grimy
appearance, chipping,
sanding, hammering away
the century-old soil.

They toiled on foot,
knee, thigh and spine;
hips, buttocks, breasts.
They checked the sockets
of each extended arm:
the book-bound left,
the torched-up right,
both elbow and wrist.

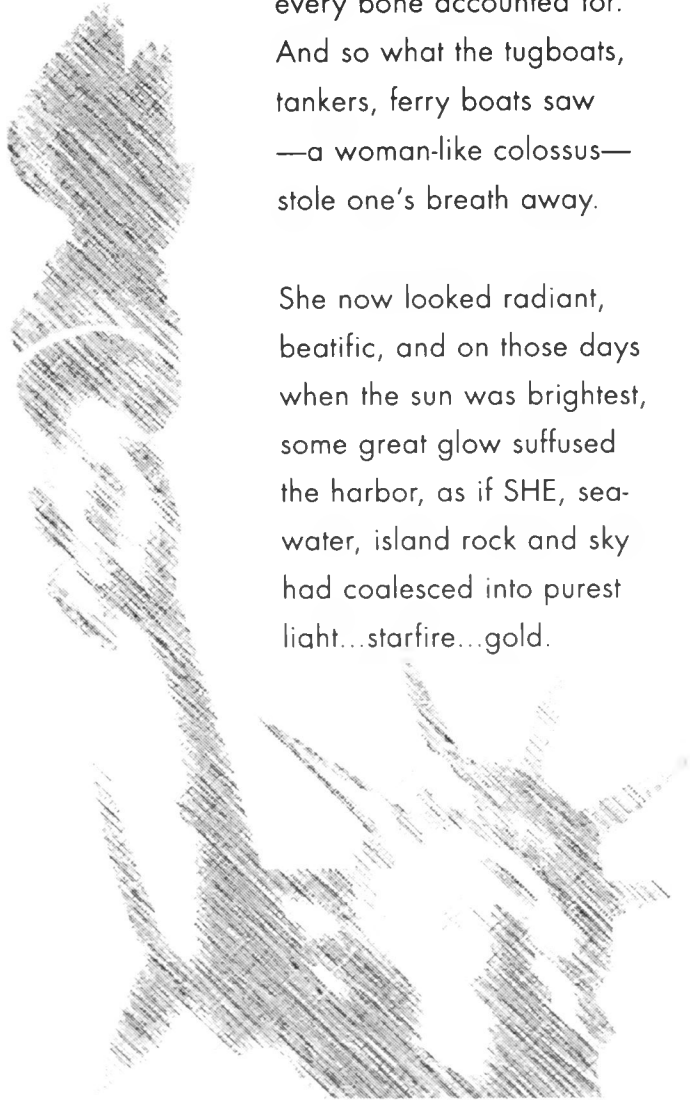
ILLUSTRATED BY JAN BRADFIELD



They brushed, buffed
the length of the nose,
the neck and the chin,
her Mediterranean mouth,
her Graeco-Roman eyes,
the Dutchboy hairdo,
the windowed tiara,
that daggered crown.

Not a seam remained,
no crack, slit or vent.
Each muscle was charted,
every bone accounted for.
And so what the tugboats,
tankers, ferry boats saw
—a woman-like colossus—
stole one's breath away.

She now looked radiant,
beatific, and on those days
when the sun was brightest,
some great glow suffused
the harbor, as if SHE, sea-
water, island rock and sky
had coalesced into purest
light...starfire...gold.



A SNAKE POEM

by Yvonne Carpenter

Inside the whitewashed cellar, a snake
lay coiled behind the canned green beans.
He'd grown fat in the cool dark, feeding
on mice that found the crack
where door warped
from sill. I killed him
and carried the carcass,
a muscle strong and dry,
draped over my hoe.
For weeks he lay in the weeds
as ants consumed his soft parts.



ILLUSTRATED BY RODNEY CLOUD

BRINGING THE PAST TO LIFE

by Joyce Stoffers

John Burroughs, referred to by some as the father of the nature essay, is dead. He has been dead since 1921. So why are people still speaking about attending performances entitled "John Burroughs Speaks," or "An Evening with John Burroughs"? Surprisingly, they should not be viewed as mentally suspect nor dabblers in spiritualism. Undoubtedly, they have just returned from watching Dr. Jim Butler convincingly portray John Burroughs, famed naturalist and friend of such people as Theodore Roosevelt, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Oscar Wilde. Dr. Butler's presentation is so convincing, in fact, that when he attended the "'Sharp Eyes': John Burroughs and Environmental Writing in America" conference held at the State University of New York College at Oneonta in July of 1994, the oldest participant, a white-haired, retired school teacher from Burroughs' hometown in Roxbury, New York, approached him with a warm hug and exclaimed, "I had always regretted never having met John Burroughs, but now I feel as if I actually have!"

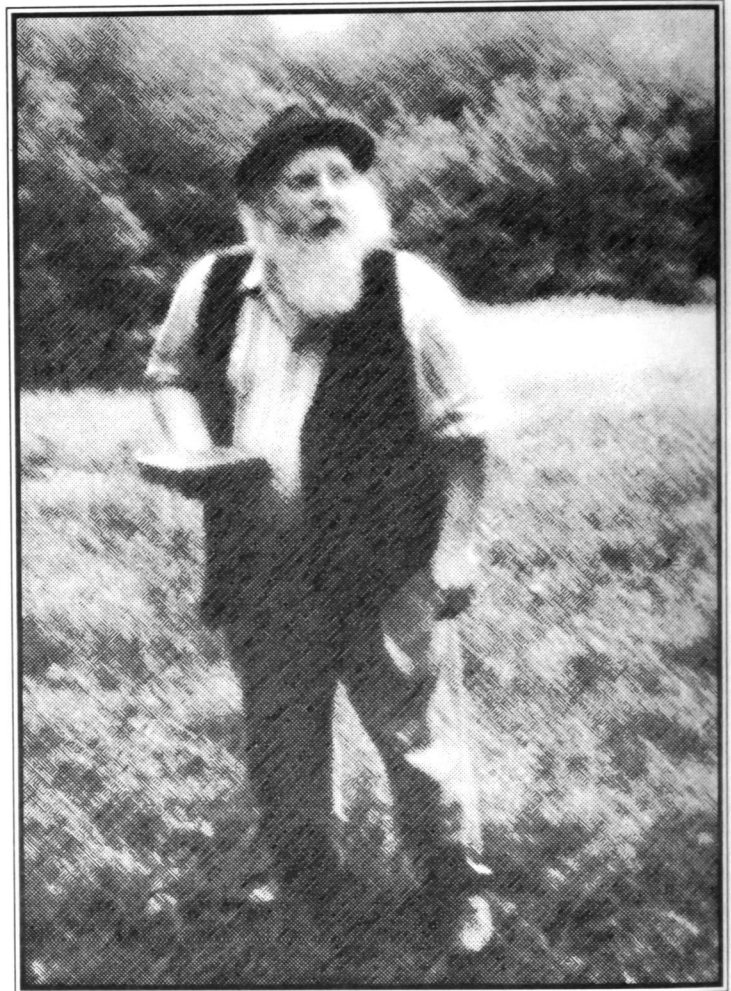
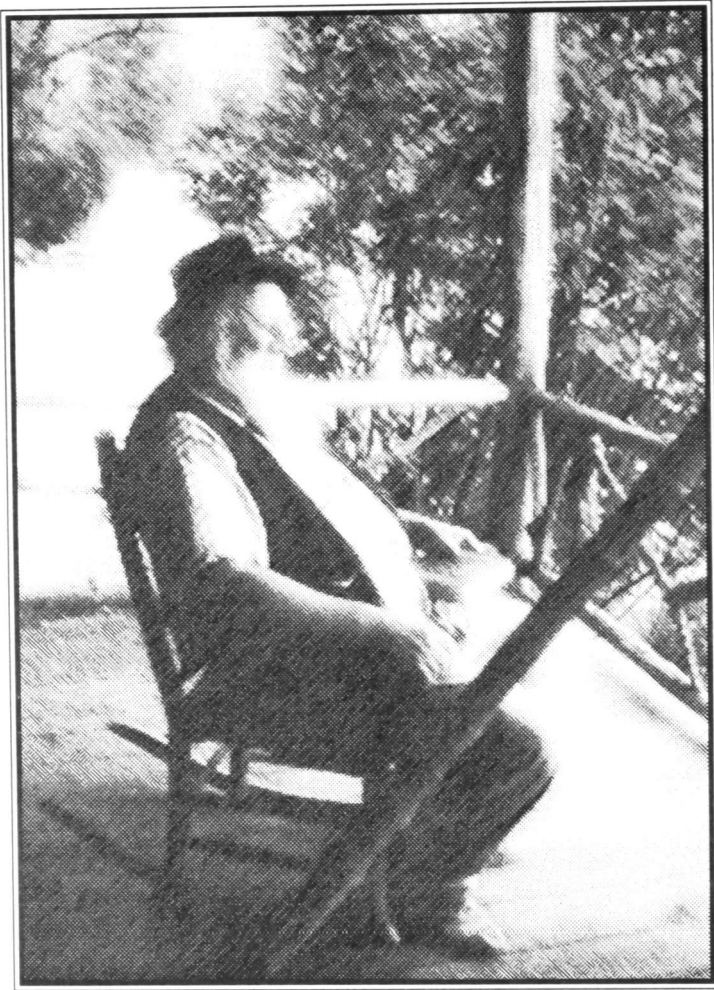
Dr. Jim Butler, Professor of Environmental Studies in the Department of Renewable Resources at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, is also a senior advisor for several federal ministries of the environment, and has worked with several state, provincial and federal agencies concerned with parks interpretation, management, and wildlife in the United States and Canada. As co-host of the Wildlife International television series viewed on the Disney channel and public television, he recognizes the importance of the role of non-print media in reaching audiences. He acknowledges the performing arts, particularly via outreach programs like the

Chautauqua, as a vehicle to enable students and the public to better identify with literary and environmental personalities. Says Butler of his own decision to begin his portrayals of Burroughs, "I must admit that I was inspired... by attending Lee Stetson's California performance of John Muir, 'Conversation with a Tramp,' and David Berto's performance of Henry David Thoreau along the shore of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts."

But why did he choose John Burroughs? Today, despite the rising popularity of nature writing, the name and works of Burroughs have not survived in the public mind or the literary and environmental community as have his contemporaries, such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir and Walt Whitman. Burroughs' relative obscurity is part of Butler's reason. As Butler puts it,

I believe in supporting the underdog. Burroughs deserves to be better remembered not only for the weight and influence of his writings, but also because his thoughts are as important to our current society as they were in his times. His influence, however, is felt in the rising wave of new literary nature celebrators, so many of whom effectively convey similar messages. Their roots, knowingly or unknowingly, are nurtured in the soils which Burroughs tilled.

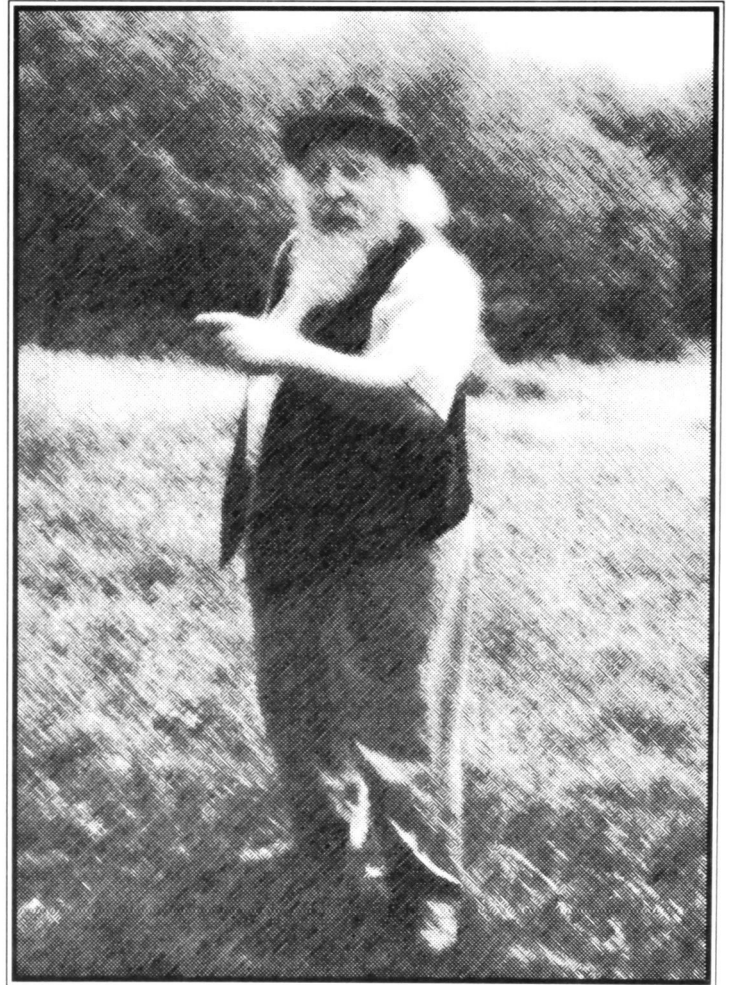
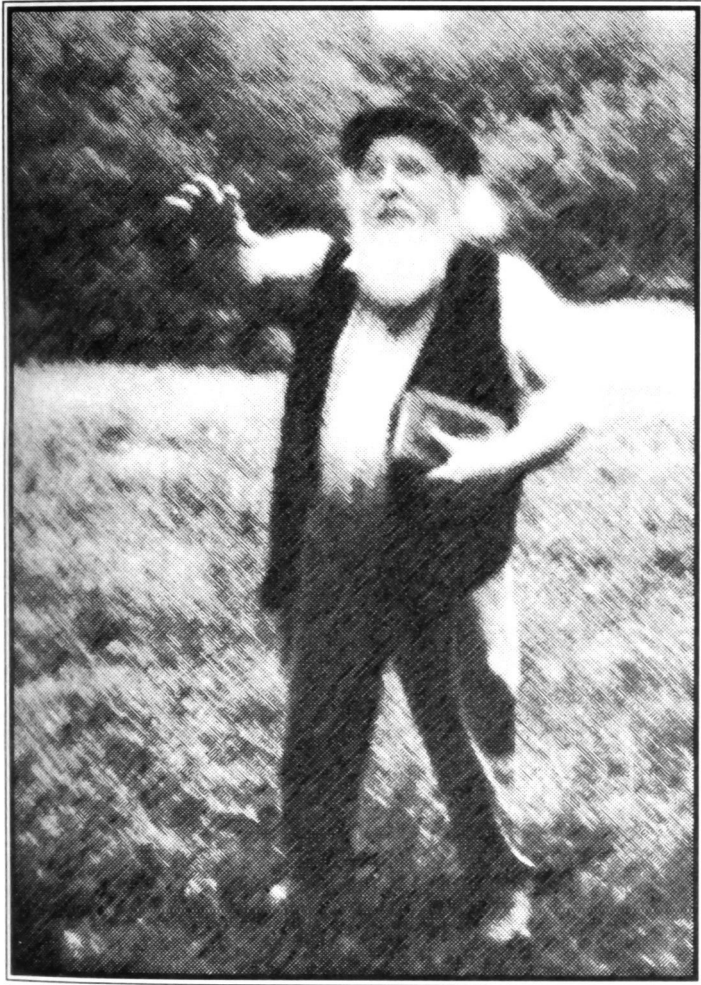
Dr. Butler's performance effectively puts the spotlight on the underdog Burroughs who is often seen only in the shadow of the monumental environmentalist John Muir. The portrayal features Burroughs late in life as he mourns the death of Muir, a man he both loved and respected greatly. But Butler wastes no time on a sentimental elegy,



for he livens things up with rich anecdotes about the two men and their travels, and even has Burroughs confess that at times he felt the urge to punch or thrash the ground with Muir. Periodically through the performance he reads from a rare 1871 first edition of Burroughs' first nature book, *Wake-Robin*, signed "John Burroughs" and inscribed with the note, "This Wake Robin was written in Washington while I was a clerk in the Treasury Department 1864-66."

Ever sensitive to the true spirit of John Burroughs, Butler also conducts nature walks in character. Having started his career as a park naturalist, he still teaches nature interpretation, so the expansion of his performances into the out-of-doors is understandable. He brings not only his own personal enthusiasm, but the

richness of his background in biology, so each walk is unique as he wends his way through field and woodland, pausing to turn over a rock or to identify a bird song. He explains that "the Burroughs nature walk must have a spontaneity that deals with the unpredictability of what bird song or butterfly might come from the forest at that moment or what salamander, fern or wildflower might catch the eye of the participants. This is an interactive performance." His biologist's expertise is accompanied by his value on historical accuracy; for example, you won't find Butler toting Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds*, but the 1897 edition of Thomas Nuttall's *Handbook of the Ornithology of Eastern North America*, a bird book that Burroughs would have used. "Authenticity is essential," he affirms. However, such



PHOTOGRAPHS BY J. STOFFERS. ILLUSTRATED BY J. BRADFIELD

authenticity can sometimes prove to be a bit disconcerting to even a veteran birder of today, who would turn the pages of Peterson's book ragged trying to locate birds identified by Butler as a High Holder, a Hair Bird, or a Red-Winged Troopial.

In addition to his performances and teaching responsibilities, Dr. Butler works as a conservation scientist active in the management and protection of threatened parks, nature reserves and wildlife species throughout the world. His work has taken him on projects to Europe, Indonesia, China, Australia, New Zealand, Central and South America, the Caribbean, Africa, and the former Soviet Union. One of his present projects involves assisting the Lubricon Cree in Northern Alberta, Canada as multi-national forestry companies plan to clear-cut the

lands the Cree claim as their own. He is also senior editor of *Borealis* magazine, the official magazine of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, and is currently working on a book which expands upon his paper, "Kindred Spirits: The Relationship Between John Burroughs and John Muir." His most recent book is a collection of his poems on nature and deep ecology (printed on 100% recycled paper and with many photographs by Dr. Butler), titled *Dialog With A Frog On A Log*, published by Duval House in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, from which the poems that follow are reprinted with permission.

PILGRIMS IN A NATIONAL PARK TOWNSITE

by Jim Butler

I. Into townsite gift-shops
they pour,
pilgrims
from our urban centres.
They linger here
in restaurants, shops, arcades.
As if by preference
to mingle
among paintings of mountains,
carvings and mounts of wildlife.
To thumb through books
of words and photographs,
when the reality
is waiting near at hand.
Unworthy substitutes.
they pilfer precious time
in trade for banality.

Yet here in shops
they linger.

Wandering aimlessly before store windows;
where the mountains
humbly bid
for their attention,
as reflections in glass.
An amorphous
shimmering phantom
beckoning.

II. Turnabout one and all.

Browse through
Nature's true book shelves.
Read her signs

in a universal language.
Gaze upon treasures
of a billion years antiquity;
carvings of
colossal magnitude
and timeless process.
The product of artisans
as old as time itself;
yet such precisionists
that they work
upon them still.
Modifying them
even as you watch.

III. Pause with the wildlife.

Don't waste your admiration
on lifeless head mounts
on stone walls
or paintings on
plates and ashtrays.

There is no substitute
for the living animal.

The spark of life,
wonder
or movement.

Or the mysteries
which still surround
even the most familiar.

IV. Go Pilgrims!

Leave this place.
Embrace things still wild. Authentic. Untamed.

This place is tantamount
to that which imprisons your spirit
and smothers your personality.

Listen.
The mountains call you still.
And await you.
Now go.

TWO TRAVERSED A WOODLAND TRAIL

by Jim Butler

Along a woodland trail
 A panting runner came.
With strain he raced on through
 Absorbed in fitness games.

Past trilliums, oak ferns,
 Beyond grottos unsearched;
Past tree-toads, red admirals,
 And a Hermit Thrush perched.

Uncognizant of treasures
 Which inhabit this place,
Oblivious to another
 With contentment on his face.

Who slowly rose by trailside,
 From things he bent to see.
Two passed this woodland trail.
 Two came quite differently.

With nature
 One in was company;
The other
 But an anomaly.

GRASSLAND'S SUNSET

by Jim Butler

Shadows stretching eastward from yucca's stiletto.
The longspur's trembling twilight falsetto.
Over the fragrant bouquet of a gentle Bordeaux,
A fading sun ignites the grasslands so they glow
In burning waves of orange, then finally indigo.

Fantasies indulge as landscapes embrace shadow
In ghostly wagon wheel squeaks and oxen bellow,
Mounds slowly winding of great herds of buffalo
And a presence still felt of the ancient Arapaho.
Magic lives here in twilight's afterglow.

CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES

Fred Alsberg is an assistant professor of English at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. He edits *Westview*, and his writing has appeared in magazines such as *Blue Unicorn*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Greensboro Review*, *Rhino*, and *Oregon East*.

Jim Butler is a professor of Environmental Studies in the Department of Renewable Resources at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. He also works as a conservation scientist active in the management and protection of threatened parks, nature reserves and wildlife species throughout the world. He is the senior editor of *Borealis* magazine, the official magazine of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, and has worked with several state, provincial and federal agencies concerned with parks interpretation, management and wildlife in the United States and Canada.

Del Cain has always had an affinity with northwest Oklahoma. He feels the wonderment of western Oklahoma lies in the fact that few people know of its charm.

Yvonne Carpenter has published fiction and poetry in *Grain*, *Concho River Review*, and *Westview*. She has also published non-fiction in *Farm Journal* and *The Texas Wheat Producer*. She is a co-partner in a wheat farm in Custer County, Oklahoma.

Garnett Kilberg Cohen is a professor at Columbia College in Chicago and is currently working on a short story collection and finishing a novel. Her fiction has appeared in *The Literary Review*, *Ontario Review*, *Chicago* magazine, *Other Voices*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Pittsburgh Magazine*, and most recently in *Descant* and *West Branch*. She is a former editor of *The Pennsylvania Review*, and a semi-finalist in the 1991 and 1994 Nelson Algren Short Fiction Competition. Her non-fiction has been published in *Writing: The Translation of Memory* (MacMillan) and *The Alabama Literary Review*, as well as several newspapers.

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

Robert Murray Davis has had his poetry and creative non-fiction published in various magazines from Nova Scotia to New Mexico. His most recent appearances have been in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Cimarron Review*, *texture*, and *Redneck Review of Literature*. The second volume of his reminiscent social history, *A Lower-Middle-Class Education*, is being

published by the University of Oklahoma Press. He has taught at OU since 1967.

Catherine de Cuir has had her short stories published in *Louisiana Literature*, *Grasslands Review*, *Shawnee Silhouette*, and *Sun Dog*. *The Southeast Review*. She has stories forthcoming in *Pacific Review* and *The Bellingham Review*. She is also a recent winner of the Jessaymn West Writing Award.

Lori DeLozier writes from Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. Her poems have appeared in *Ripples Poetry Magazine*, *Tantra Press*, and *Rural Heritage*. She has just recently been accepted for publication in *Midland Review's* spring issue, *Potpourri* and *ZuZu's Petals Annual Anthology*.

Steven Frattali, a writer and translator, lives in Weatherford, Oklahoma and teaches literature in SWOSU's Tele-Learning program. His poetry and translations have appeared in *Graham House Review*, *Webster Review*, *Pacific Coast Journal*, *Blueline* and others. Two of his plays have been presented in readings by the Contemporary Theatre of Syracuse. He recently completed a novel entitled *Unions*.

Jannett Highfill's mother was born in Ada, and her father was born and raised on a farm 15 miles south of

CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES

Freedom. Her father still owns the farm his father was born on. She has had several poems published on rural/agrarian themes, most recently in the *Rolling Coulter*. She has also had poems published in the *Kansas Quarterly*, the *Mississippi Valley Review* and elsewhere. She does a considerable amount of professional writing as well; her specialties are international trade and economic methodology.

David Brendan Hopes is a poet, fiction writer, playwright, and Professor of Literature and Humanities at UNCA. He directs Pisgah Players Theater Company and is founder and editor of Urthona Press.

Keith Long is a regular contributor to *Westview*, and during the past year his columns have also appeared in the *Antique Almanac*, *Update*, and the *Oak Ridge News*, as well as other newspapers. Long's writing has appeared in such national publications as *Cimarron Review*, *Midland Review*, *Weber Studies*, *Pegasus*, and *Living*

With Teenagers. He has written more than 700 articles for his home-town newspaper, the *Marlow Review*, over the past fourteen years.

Wendell Mayo is a native of Corpus Christi, Texas. His work has appeared in *Westview*, *The Yale Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Missouri Review*. He lives in Lafayette, Louisiana, where he teaches creative writing and is Program Director of the Deep South Writers Conference. He was recently awarded a summer grant to work on a novel-in-stories set in the former-Soviet republic of Lithuania.

Gus Pelletier's work has appeared in *Kentucky Poetry Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Florida Poetry Review*, *Poet & Critic*, *Maryland Review* and others.

Viki Pettijohn teaches American literature and directs the Freshman English Program at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. She principally writes non-fiction prose, but

has been known to produce a poem or two.

Joyce Stoffers teaches at Southwestern Oklahoma State University and is the assistant editor of *Westview*. She was one of the presenters during last year's "Sharp Eyes": John Burroughs and Environmental Writing in America conference at the State University of New York at Oneonta where she was privileged to see Dr. Jim Butler perform as John Burroughs.

Richard Terrill's most recent work has been in what's come to be called "creative non-fiction." His books are *Saturday Night in Baoding: A China Memoir* (University of Arkansas Press, 1990), which won the Associated Writing Programs Award for Nonfiction, and *The Cross and the Red Star: John Foster Travels to the Eighth Route Army* (Asian Pacific Foundation, 1994). His poems and essays have appeared in journals such as *North American Review*, *New Letters*, and *Northwest Review*. He teaches creative writing at Mankato State University in Minnesota.

MUSIC, THEATER, ART & LITERARY EVENTS

JANUARY

- 5-27 Michael Freed, classical drawings in graphite on paper; Jeffery K. Stokes, paintings from unconscious sources.
Opening reception for artists: 6-9 p.m. on Friday, January 5. at IAO*
23 Frosty Troy—SWOSU Panorama event

FEBRUARY

- 2-24 D.J. Lafon, new paintings.
Opening reception for artist: Friday, February 2: 6-9 p.m. at IAO*
7, 8, 9 26th Annual Jazz Festival—SWOSU Fine Arts Center
22, 23, 24 *The Servant of Two Masters*
SWOSU Theatre Department production
25 Rhythm & Brass—SWOSU Panorama event

ONGOING EVENTS

IAO will host poetry readings on the second Sunday of each month. Beginning November 12, the readings will be from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. The format will combine featured poet and an open mike. Any poet wishing to participate as a featured poet should call IAO and leave a name and phone number.

*IAO (Individual Artists of Oklahoma) is located at the corner of Sheridan and Hudson in Oklahoma City, and is open Tuesday through Saturday 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is free. Call (405) 232-6060 for more information.



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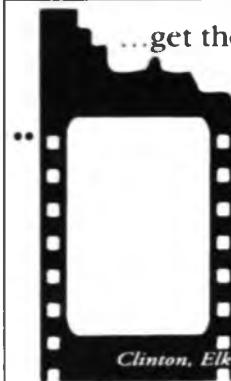


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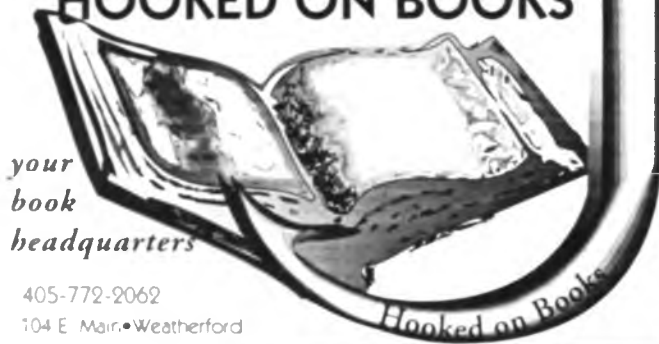
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