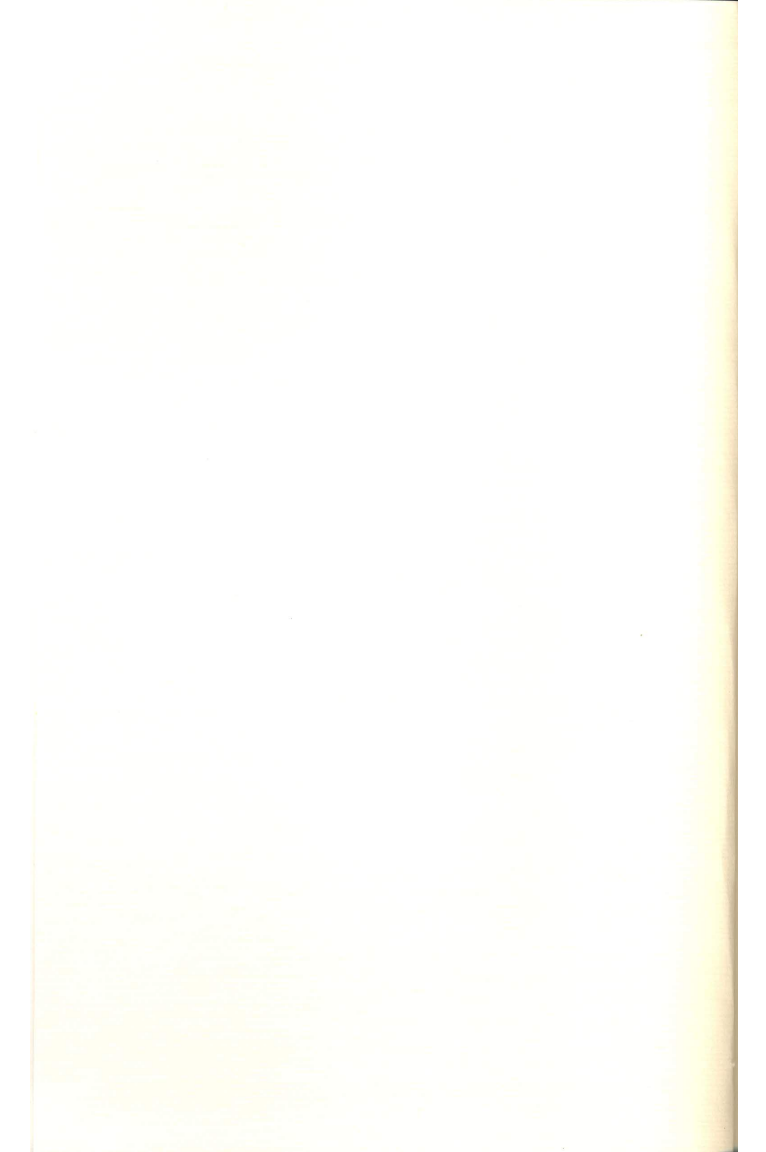

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW



T.S.U. DOTHAN
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Fall 1990

Volume 4, Number 1

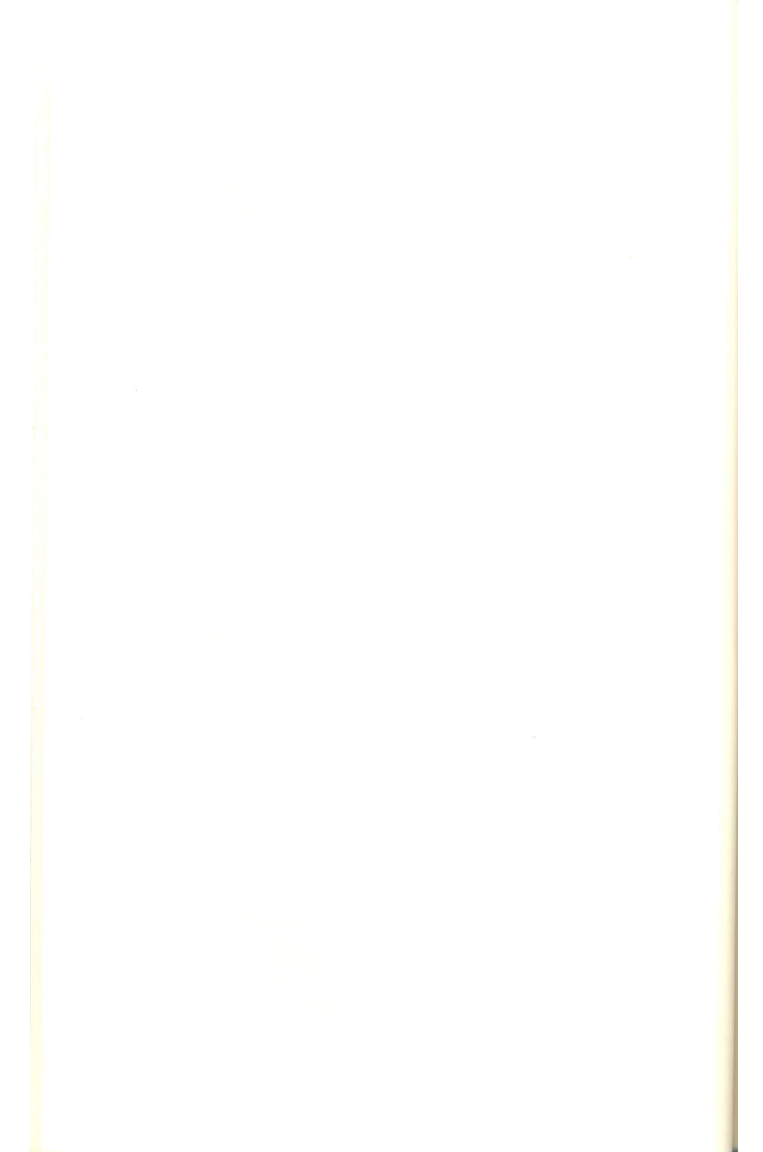


ALABAMA
LITERARY
REVUE

Fall 1990

Volume 4, Number 1

The Troy State University System



People are always complaining that the modern novelist has no hope and that the picture he paints of the world is unbearable. The only answer to this is that people without hope do not write novels. Writing a novel is a terrible experience, during which the hair often falls out and the teeth decay. I'm always highly irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it's very shocking to the system. If the novelist is not sustained by a hope of money, then he must be sustained by a hope of salvation, or he simply won't survive the ordeal.

People without hope not only don't write novels, but what is more to the point, they don't read them. They don't take any long looks at anything, because they lack courage. The way to despair is to refuse to have any kind of experience, and the novel, of course, is a way to have experience. The lady who only reads books that improved her mind was taking a safe course—and a hopeless one. She'll never know whether her mind is improved or not, but should she ever, by some mistake, read a great novel, she'll know mighty well that something is happening to her.

—Flannery O'Connor

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Contents

- Thea Temple*
Floating on Top □ 1
- Wayne Hogan*
Had a Card from Elvis the Other Day (poem) □ 8
- Michael Adams*
Spring Corn □ 11
- Diane Q. Lewis*
Forbidden Fruit (poem) □ 17
- Ken Denberg*
Driving with One Light Out (poem) □ 18
- Michael Sofranko*
Oedipus Writes a Letter Late at Night (poem) □ 19
- Mary Ann Mannino*
The Road to Emmaus □ 21
- J. L. Meadows*
After Playing too Hard at Love (poem) □ 36
- Patricia Flinn*
Boobies and Bathtubs □ 39
- Ken Poyner*
The Romance of a Nonbeliever (poem) □ 47
- Rebecca Fullen*
A Pride of Lions (poem) □ 48
- M. L. Marinelli*
Folding a Pale Sheet (poem) □ 49
- Anthony Bukoski*
A Balcony Story □ 51
- Paul Grant*
Blueprint (poem) □ 58
- Charles Semonos*
Proud Flesh (poem) □ 59
- Benjamin Buford Williams*
T. S. Stribling and the Florence Trilogy (review) □ 61
- Christopher Cokinos*
A Gathering around Robinson Jeffers (review) □ 68
- Jennifer Hill*
Fortuity □ 74
Full Moon on Dog Street □ 75
- Contributors □ 76



P. S. Davis

Floating on Top

Thea Temple

My favorite bathroom in the world: bright blue wall paper and a view I can almost see. I'm facing the mirror putting on makeup. The window is behind me but I know it's there by the way breezes rattle the empty toilet paper roll and blow up my skirt. From where I stand, if I look past my face, I can see a slip of blue sky, paler than the wallpaper, reflected in the glass. If I get down lower, slouch closer to the toothbrush cup, the top of your favorite maple appears in the corner. But I don't even try for the view. When I'm in a hurry, I say to myself things like "I already know what's out there" or "I won't be able to see downtown anyway with all the leaves so full in the trees." No need to add yet another set of thoughts to what is already bewildering enough—like, why am I shellacking my eyelashing until they resemble spiders' legs dipped in axle grease? Like, why on earth am I going through all this trouble to meet you? You never noticed what I looked like back then, why would you now? I glance at my watch, which is a mistake because I'm late—I'm late—and I know you expect me to be. So I rush, thinking it would thrill me to be on time for once and ruin your expectations.

Prematurely, I bat my lashes and watch as a tiny clump of mascara avalanches off and lands under my eye. Grabbing the towel embroidered "His" in flamingo pink, I touch the end to a faucet drip and dab my eye. The black smears until it looks as if I've been beaten. What doesn't come off hides nicely.

When you left I was in my militant feminist phase: thick underbrushes of armpit hair and faded eyes insisting on anger to get them noticed. All my clothes were variations on homespun cotton: gingham, pakistani cheesecloth, sun bleached knits. On the day it all ended, I hit you with a denim bag made from a pair of your old cutoffs. You said that was "unjust" and I had to laugh, because it was true. But I didn't laugh when you called me "macho." What a rotten and castrating thing to say. Had Owen and I done this to you—forced spite to the surface? Still, I played it out with a shrug, and I think you believed it. Yet here I stand three years later, doing a

Bloomington's mannequin imitation even down to the Bill Blass teddy with mother-of-pearl buttons at the crotch.

I learned so much from you about how visual acting can be. Standing in front of this mirror, you'd wave your razor in grand, sweeping motions, reciting Hamlet or Oedipus or some other script. You knew mirror soul-purging had become a literary cliché so you had to disguise it to yourself. But I wonder: are you rehearsing now? Is what's her face—Dodie?—bending over her baby whale shape to sponge up white piles of slop and stubble as they drop to the floor in your enthusiasm?

When you left it was fall. The leaves, lacey and red around the rims, looked bloodshot but were still so full in the trees neither of us could see the view. It was the day before. We had walked in the woods beneath the window and it drizzled just enough to dampen the leaves so that they stuck to the mud, and also to our feet. They were slick, wet leaf to wet leaf, and I had fallen and you helped me up only to fall down yourself. We both laughed.

As you grabbed my arm, I felt how strong and heavy you were, even as I laughed. You were covered with mud and I suggested we go back to the house and take a warm bath together. "I could make cocoa," I said. "We could snuggle under the afghan," I whispered, breathing against the hairs on your neck. We'd had an adventure, let's go be together, in our warm, dry house. Let's kiss. Let's hug. "I'm cold," I said, and shivered to prove it. You pretended not to notice, so I chattered my teeth. Loud. But you wanted what we'd set out to do. Never a compromise, never a change of plans. "The view," you said, pointing with one arm and encircling my waist with the other.

After our laugh, we didn't talk, not for twenty minutes or so.

"Are you angry?" I asked, finally. There was no reason. I hadn't done anything as far as you knew.

"Should I be?" you asked, throwing a rock up into the trees. It tangled, and plopped. You weren't looking at me, just around. There wasn't a clearing and wouldn't be until late in the month. By then you were gone.

The phone's ringing, but I'm not going to answer it. I'm almost out the door and it might be you changing your mind, or it might be her trying to change mine, and she could, and I'd rather not risk it. I can't figure out why I'm doing this or what I hope to get out of it or even if there is anything to get out of it. But I do know that lack of awareness is pretty fragile stuff. I stand chewing on my comb, looking at the phone as it rings, six times, high pitched and demanding, and then you give up. It has to be you.

On the walk to Steppenwolf's, I see three people who all remind me of you, playing frisbee. They flick it in a curlicue that the wind straightens into my shin. It bounces onto the sidewalk then rolls away. All three come running, apologizing in rounds. I step out of the way and let them pick it up themselves. The thinnest sends the frisbee whizzing, a bright red blurr, back at the other two.

Owen's old house is directly across the street. Every day I walk by but never look. I made a promise last year not to, and I've been good until now. Someone's painted it yellow and I fight the impulse to run across the street, squeeze between the cars parked bumper-to-bumper, and sneak into the foyer to see if it still smells of cigars. Sometimes, like the night you figured us out, it was so thick I could see the smoke swirl like paisley around the bare bulb dangling from the ceiling. I saw it just after Owen kissed me and we stood holding on to each other, afraid to think about what we'd just done but eager to do more.

Owen. Haven't seen him since you left. Even though you insisted otherwise, he really was one of your friends I'd adopted in the arrangement. Funny, but it seems I heard somewhere you're still in touch with him—that nothing ever came between the two of you. Pals as always. And I lost two lovers.

It would almost be a lie to say I wasn't in some way proud of what Owen and I'd done. Of course I couldn't think in those terms at first, but later, when I'd stand in the bathroom—a place that provided an excuse to be alone—there would be those big green leaves, tossing back and forth in the wind, hiding what I already knew was there, and I'd feel a sneaky pleasure over the whole thing. It felt good hurting you. If I looked closer at those branches almost entirely hidden beneath the leaves, I'd see things move and creak around in the joints: a squirrel, a bird; then I'd have to admit I probably let you know, deliberately, in some way. Testing you? Hoping to make you jealous? Seeing how well you knew my movements, whether they were honest or false? Nothing that complicated. It was only meanness. And also the desire to know how much smarter I was than you, that I could understand me and you and Owen and us together, and all you knew was the pain.

An old man comes out of the building and I look at my watch. It's twelve thirty and I should be entering Steppenwolf's air-conditioned lobby at this very moment. As I walk, faster, cool air brushing by me, faster, messing my hair, the pace pounding my heart, I try to control my future by envisioning the silverware and napkin, the round curve of the table, the calligraphy on the menu. Nonchalant-

ly, I order a glass of Zinfandel and some creamed herring to start. With more daring, I venture to imagine the two of you as a "them," dangerously basing this part on what I remember. It's dangerous because I've never seen you together before. Dodie was two years behind me at Barnard. We had friends in common but never got along ourselves. One said she was always jealous of me and I believed it, even before I needed to. So while I walk, I have to splice this picture of a girl smoking cigarettes to look like a woman onto my own very rich portrait of you, and somehow crop dimensions so both can exist in the same frame.

When I finally make it to your table, after refreshing up in the ladies' room first, it's clear I've failed. The clock says I'm twenty minutes late and you look smug. Your eyes seem to say, "some things just never change." Through my embarrassment, I hear the hostess ask me what I want to drink. Without looking at either of you, I forget the Zinfandel and hear myself order a Manhattan straight up. Everything feels so out of whack as I stand there staring down at Dodie's bobbed brown hair, the dull color of overbrewed tea, and how cheery she looks in spite of it. You're wider than I remember you, like my old Torino after a winter in the garage. Out of practice, I kept worrying about hitting something. But you still look good, and I can smell your Antaeus, amazed that you would use it at all, much less to this extent. I try to shake your hand but notice it is wrapped in gauze ("Tennis" you say). You lean upward over the crystal vase of gardenias in purple water. I lean down and kiss your cheek, noticing the diamond in your earlobe shining back gray from your tweed. That's when I tip over the centerpiece. Purple bleeds into the tablecloth taking on the shape of Lake Erie and I blot it before there's a small sea. As I blot away, I notice Dodie's fingernails. I can't make myself look at her face. They're perfectly painted and resemble little red Bic pen caps.

"Don't worry," Dodie says.

"It's almost cleaned up," I lie.

You call Heidi over and she changes the tablecloth. To get out of the way, I scoot around inside the window booth, right next to Dodie. Probably I should sit in the chair facing the two of you, but the waitress is billowing up the cloth from that side of the table I can't stand up another minute. It's going to look silly, the three of us facing the dining room, but what else can I do? Heidi pulls the table out to slide the cloth over the edge and there's Dodie's belly in the flesh, the little whale shape I'd hoped to see waddling across the dining room. But there it is, a silent mound pressing up towards

the inside of her skirt, pulling it taut. At first I want to cry. Then it looks fake to me, as trendy as a wok. I smile at this and you ask me if I'm listening.

"Dodie has been teaching playwrighting to blind children at the Manhattan Institute," you say, looking at her to verify even this simple fact.

"I thought plays centered on spectacle. How can you teach something so visual to blind people?" I ask.

Dodie seems surprised by my remark. I'm surprised she's surprised. Did you tell her I'm illiterate or something? You kick me under the table, then quickly assure me it was a mistake. Heidi asks us if we're ready to order. I notice she hasn't put another centerpiece on the table.

While listening to the tonal rise and fall of Dodie's explanation, I watch your profile, the dark, dark hair, the angled sideburns I could never get you to grow. Your diamond winks at me and I turn from it, slowly, and order the herring with sour cream and veal medallions "Gypsy style," your favorite dish. Because of this and also because Dodie has quit talking and started listening, you order the sauerbraten and latkes. Heidi, who waited on the two of us every Monday for six years, is surprised. So is Ursula, the hostess, who passes by to see how we're doing. You hate sauerbraten—everyone knows that—everyone except Dodie who starts talking about the LaMaze method and why she just ordered a vegetarian plate full of truffles, beets, stuffed zucchini, artichoke hearts gratiné, and pinenuts. I assure her I could never become a vegetarian. She assures me she will convert you. I laugh as I remember you devouring bloody terriyaki steaks, minty legs of lamb, Hawaiian pork chops, and barbecued ribs. You laugh back telling me how this will be the first red meat you've eaten all week and how much better you feel because of it. You order a bottle of Dom Perignon and Dodie tries to talk you out of it, claiming she won't drink any ("It's not good for the baby") as an excuse. I don't want to hear about the baby or how well it can serve certain issues. But then I find myself peeking every chance I get, sniffing with my eyes, as if hungry and looking for a loaf of homemade bread tucked under her blouse. The waitress saves me from getting caught when she brings the champagne.

It is now two in the afternoon and the weather is shifting. Turning to you, ignoring her, I ask about this role you've landed in the new Mamet play. You don't really like Mamet, or at least you didn't. One other thing we couldn't agree upon. "Do you have anything else lined up for when Dodie stops teaching?" I ask, pulling on a piece

of ryebread. Dodie brushes off the crumbs and fennel seeds and answers that she will continue to free-lance, that she has so many clients for ad copy she just doesn't know what to do. You say, calmly, steadily, as you take the bottle from Heidi and cover it with a towel, that you might work on *Days of Our Lives*, that you'd rather not, but the offer is eighty-nine thousand a year for only three days a week. It's not a big part, you say, but it leaves you room to find better, more challenging roles.

The champagne geysers out when the cork pops, but the two of us have our glasses ready. Dodie's accidentally clinks into mine, which causes her to pull back so quickly you almost spill the glittering stream onto the table. You take the glass with your injured hand, steady it, then continue to pour. When it's my turn, my arm stays erect, at a diagonal, unwavering in its direction but refusing to come any closer. Bubbles climb up the fluted sides and recede less quickly, so you don't wait to finish filling it. After you put the bottle back on ice, my glass settles and it's only half full. You glare at me, grab the bottle out of the ice, fill my glass and leave a trail of water from the bucket to my glass and back.

"We're going to drink a toast to Dodie and me," you say. Dodie has decided one little sip won't hurt her. I raise my glass an eighth of an inch higher.

You look at Dodie, put your arm on her shoulder, squeeze it, then hang your elbow over the top of the booth, behind her. From now on, every time you speak about "us," you pull her close. Out the bay window behind your arm it looks as if it's going to rain. The sky is the same dismal gray as downtown from my bathroom window in winter. It's strange how quickly it changed from such a sharp blue to this wan and muted color.

In almost a whisper, you tell me, "Dodie and I are getting married."

At first, I say nothing, then only "When?" holding my glass perfectly still.

"Tomorrow."

Your glasses surround mine, one on each side, banging into it without any feel for the music. Sipping first, I follow with a sigh, remarking first on the quality of the champagne then wishing the two of you a very happy life together. Before you can finish thanking me, I ask if Owen will be best man.

"Only family will be there. It'll be a small wedding," you say. The two of you are flying to Bethesda so both sets of parents can be there. Hers live in McLean. You sip your champagne and Dodie tells us she's

getting tired and adds she's sworn off caffeine. She's beginning to bore me and I think you look bored, too, and, despite the forced elation in your voice, a little scared. Your lip quivered when I mentioned Owen but it could've been from the cold champagne rushing past your teeth. Heidi clips by on her heels and you stop her.

"I'd like coffee. Do you want a cup?" you ask, looking at me. I nod. "Two coffees," you say.

There's a pause that doesn't disappear even when Dodie starts talking about the Betamax she bought for your birthday so you can tape the Royal Shakespeare productions when no one's home. "Which is all the time," she giggles. I look at her, then you. Your arm isn't around her shoulder; it's your own again. You're tearing your cocktail napkin and not listening.

Heidi brings us our coffee and I pour in the cream, watching it cloud on top. I don't stir it. I want to see how much it mixes on its own. It sits there, floating. Dodie says something about how you practice Hamlet in front of the mirror and then the movement in your lip is noticeable and I feel it, as strongly as if you'd blown on me instead of your coffee. Picking up my spoon, I stir my coffee too briskly and in one rush, ask "Have you even told Owen?"

You stare at me and I stare back and Dodie doesn't matter anymore. This isn't kind to her I know, mentioning Owen, shining the one moment that never ended on the table between us, so only you know what I'm talking about—so the moment is only lit for us. But I can't be worrying about that just now. This is for my sake. And she has her Betamax and your baby. So almost without effort, I reach inside and make you remember one last time, and sprawl out the remnants of our affair, shamelessly, in front of her. And you try not to look, you try to hide by pouring more champagne, but you're there, like you always were. □

Had a Card from Elvis the Other Day

Wayne Hogan

postmarked Budapest, Hungary, 76 Forint in postage due, the card had a pretty good Chamber-of-Commerce-ish photo of the Danube on it. In slanted and slightly flattened-out handwriting Elvis had scrawled "Hi pal how you doin'? Is this a river or what? Say hi to the Colonel for me. Chow baby, ELVIS." I had a card from Elvis

the other day postmarked LaGrange, Illinois, 15 cents postage due, heads of wheat wildly wavin' in the spring's winds etched in blood-brown ink around its borders, he'd written "Hi pal how ya doin'? Is this a river or what? Say hi to the Colonel for me. Chow baby, ELVIS." Had a card from

Elvis the other day, postmarked Sutter, California, no postage due, on the front was a vertical hand-tinted likeness of rounded rollin' Buttes full-a thigh-high golden grass leanin' with the wind anticipatin' black-nosed sheeps' winter grazin'. It read "Hi pal how're ya doin'? Is this a river or what? Say hi to the Colonel for me. Chow baby, ELVIS." I had

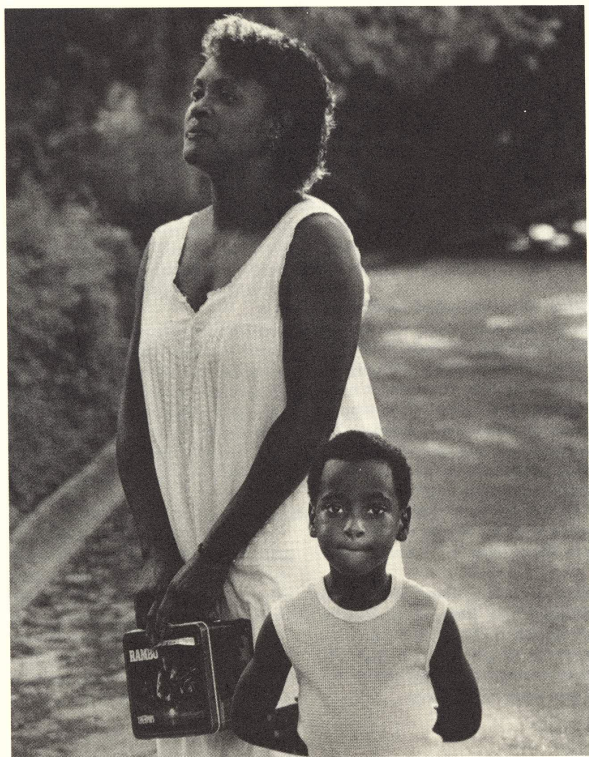
a card from Elvis the other day, postmarked Newalla, Oklahoma, 3 cents postage due. Pasted on the front're all-cap local newspaper headlines sayin' **BETHEL RAIDERS BEAT HARRAH TIGERS! DALE BLUEJAYS DOWNED BY MOORE'S**

BISONS! SHAWNEE'S SEMINOLES UPSET MC-LOUD'S CORNTOPPERS! Elvis wrote "Hi pal how ya doin a'? Is this a river or what? Say hi to the Colonel for me. Chow baby, ELVIS." Had a card from

Elvis the other day postmarked Kabul, Afghanistan, a thousand Afghani in postage due. On the front was a Kodak-processed black-and-white photograph showin' the inner spaces of the Kremlin with a tiny little airplane parked way off in a far corner surrounded by zillions of cheering onlookers. "Hi pal," Elvis began, "How ya doin'? Boy, is this a river or what? Say hello to the Colonel for me. Chow baby, ELVIS." Elvis sent me another card the

other day, postmarked Memphis, 10 cents in postage due'n on it was a hand-drawn etching of the Colorado Rockies in early fall with yellow and purple field flowers bloomin' their fullest'n aspens their whitest'n deer'n bear sippin' pure clear icy water from meanderin' streams crossed here and there by crafted little foot bridges. In slanted and slightly flattened-out writing Elvis scrawled "Hi pal how're ya doin'? Is this a river or what? Say hi to 'Scilla for me. Chow baby, E." I have some

doubts, though, about this last card actually bein' from Elvis, since on none of his others did he ever sign his name as simply "E". I'd appreciate hearin' about this from others who've heard from Elvis lately.



P. S. Davis

Spring Corn

Michael Adams

I'm sitting on my stoop, thinking about reseeding my lawn. I've lived in this trailer since Carla left, three years. Every spring I tell myself I'll seed the lawn. Every August I look at the weeds and dust and tell myself I'll do it in the fall. It's August again. Nothing's changed.

An old Dodge pick-up cruises by, slow, big blond fellow behind the wheel. He's leaning out the window, trying to read the house numbers.

Montana plates. I watch him. Mostly it's locals use our road. It doesn't go anywhere except the gravel quarry and the corn fields out east.

The truck stops in front of my driveway. A tall cowboy jumps out of the passenger's side door.

"Howdy!" he yells. "We're here."

"Here's nowhere," I say, but he doesn't catch it.

He walks up the driveway toward me. I had him pegged as soon as he jumped out of the truck—the crooked walk, boots, expensive but lived in, the big silver belt buckle. Ought to be a horse under him.

"Digger sent us," he says.

I met Digger in Montana the summer after Carla took our son and went to live in Tucson. When she left I quit going to work and got fired, so with time on my hands I decided to try bronc riding. I've been around horses all my life, owned three until I had to sell them, along with the land and house, to make child support. I busted my arm before the bronc even cleared the stall. Digger took me in. He's a retired rodeo clown, has a dude ranch outside of Helena, on the Hound River. "I knew it was time to quit clowning," he told me, "when my bones got to hurting so bad, by the time I got limbered up it was time to go home."

Crab and Glenda, my retrievers, come tearing out from behind the trailer, skid to a stop at his feet, sniff his boots. "They probably smell mighty good," he says, scratching them behind the ears. "You like that, don't you?"

He likes my dogs, they like him. I warm to him.

"Friends of the Digger?" I ask.

"Digger's my uncle. I'm Clayton." He grins. "I ride bulls."

"A bull rider," I say. "That's a tough line of work."

The big fellow I saw driving the truck comes up the driveway. "This here's Bill," Clayton says. "My cousin and clown." Bill laughs. We shake. It's like shaking hands with a beefsteak.

"Didn't Digger tell you we was coming?" Clayton asks.

"No, he never called." I have a few hours before I have to go to the warehouse for nightshift. "Come on in; have a beer; bring your things. You can stay in the spare bedroom. Here for the Stampede?"

They're from Helena, riding the circuit. Oklahoma yesterday, all night on the road, two days here, up to Casper, Pocatello after that. I start to get the itch. I'm not kidding myself about professional rodeo. I'm good with horses, worked as a ranch hand when I was younger, but I'm too old, too slow, too scared to make a living at rodeo. I drive a forklift five days a week. Almost three years at the warehouse. That's longer than I've ever worked anywhere. Forty-two years old, another twenty years, they'll be retiring me.

I've been seeing a waitress named Paula for over two years. We met right after the divorce became final. She's the one bright spot in my life. Paula works at a diner near the warehouse. She's got a fourteen-year-old boy, Duane. Duane and I took to each other from the start. I feel more like his father than I do Tom's, my own son. Duane's spending the summer in Arkansas, with his real father.

Paula's originally from Arkansas, but she's been in Colorado for years. "Me and Chris were moving to Oregon," she told me right after we met. Chris is her ex-husband. "He was a dreamer! It was the year before Duane was born. Chris had a connection that was going to get us in on the ground floor of a winery. We were going to be rich." She laughed. "Took all our savings. Six months later we were on our way back to Little Rock and I was pregnant. The engine blew up here."

"That's one engine I'm glad blew up," I said.

She gave me a puzzled look, holding a forkful of scrambled eggs halfway from her plate to her mouth. We were eating breakfast, had been together for less than a week.

"We never would have met if the engine hadn't blown up," I added. I felt like a drowning man must feel, pulled from the water just when he's decided he's too tired to fight anymore.

Paula talks about Oregon a lot. Orchards, vineyards, big white mountains. Trees as big around as houses. "It's not like here, Ed. It's green. Great big rivers. That's the place for a horse ranch!"

A ranch. That's my big dream.

The next day I go out to watch Clayton ride. The bulls are my favorite part of the rodeo. They're powerful, unpredictable. You can watch a bronc and get to know its moves, how it's thinking. But not a bull; he'll never move the way you expect him to move.

Clayton doesn't make his eight seconds. Bill jumps in while he runs clear, but not before the bull turns and butts him. Clayton's limping, holding his side. "Son of a bitch pulled right. I never figured him to do that."

At the medical trailer they tell him, "Two broken ribs. You're lucky; you got a bad bruise on your foot, but it's not broken. Take it easy for a couple of weeks."

Clayton walks off toward the corrals.

"Second time this year he's broke ribs," Bill says.

"He was anticipating the bull."

"When he was younger he'd just ride them, take what came. Now he's slowed down, has to try to figure them out." Bill shakes his head.

"You can't do that with a top bull," I say.

Bill's looking out past the corrals. I follow his gaze. There's a hot wind kicking up dust and dry manure. The sun's at the top of a sky bleached white as a bone.

"He's thirty-five years old," Bill says. "Thinks he can go on forever. I tell him to put some money away for retirement, but he just laughs."

"At least he's doing what he loves."

That evening we go to the Sundance. They have a country swing band. I would have brought Paula, but she's working a double shift because one of the girls is sick.

"I got a little nest egg put away," Bill says. "My wife and I have a ranch near Helena. Three, four more years and I'll settle down."

"Shit," Clayton says. "You won't last six months. You'll be like Digger, pining away for the old days, same damn stories over and over."

"That's no way to talk about Digger," Bill says. "If it wasn't for him you wouldn't have made it in rodeo."

"Ain't nobody done it for me. I done it for myself."

"You had the talent, but it was Digger took you from a two-bit sideshow rider to the top."

Clayton starts up from his chair. "At least I ain't spent my whole life as a clown."

I see a fight coming, get up, put my hand on Clayton's shoulder.

His muscles are like steel, vibrating under my hand. "Take it easy. Bill never meant you didn't make it on your own. He just meant Digger helped a young rider get some polish. Right, Bill?"

Bill doesn't say anything. After a few seconds he gives Clayton a curt nod. The tension doesn't go out of Clayton's shoulder, but he sits down slowly.

I wave to the waitress. "Let's have another round."

We're all quiet for a while. The waitress brings our drinks.

"Bring your girlfriend tomorrow," Clayton says to me. I tell him I'm planning on it.

A cowgirl walks by, one of the barrel riders. "There's a pretty lady," I say.

Clayton gets up, walks over to her.

"I should be easier on him," Bill says.

Clayton and the cowgirl are swinging around the dance floor to an old Hank Williams tune. "I wish I had half the love for life he's got," Bill says.

I leave the bar early to go to work. The boss tells me they're cutting back. "Hard times, Ed. I'm keeping you on, but we'll have to hold off on that raise." It's quiet, just me and the boss. The rest of the crew is out on the loading docks.

"I been due this raise for six months, Earl."

Earl picks at his fingernails with his pocketknife. He does that for about a minute, ignoring me.

"You got the money," I say finally. I'm thinking about the money he spent last winter on a new computer inventory system. Right after that he laid off four guys and froze everybody else's wages.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd tell the boys I got no choice," Earl says. "I'll be hiring when I can."

"You're not paying me to be your foreman." I tell him I'm not going to do his dirty work; if he's laying men off he can tell them himself. "There's not enough money in this company for me to do that."

The sun's coming up when I leave the warehouse. The eastern sky is red and smokey. That son of a bitch Earl will milk a man dry if he lefthim. I feel good; I got something off my chest that's been bothering me for a long time. Now I need to do some thinking, so I walk the five blocks to the diner, along the river in the dawn coolness.

I remember what Clayton said yesterday in the bar. "I tried the nine to five. Don't know how you can stand it. If it wasn't for rodeo I'd be dead or in prison."

"I got a kid living down in Arizona," I said at the time, but now, after three years at the warehouse, I feel like I need to think about more than just making child support.

Paula's behind the counter when I walk in the diner.

"Hi, honey," I say.

"I'm beat. I'll be off in fifteen minutes." She gives me a weak smile, a strong cup of coffee. I look in her face.

"What's wrong?"

"You look pretty for somebody who's worked sixteen hours straight."

"That's sweet, Ed, but it's not true."

I tell her about the warehouse.

"That bastard," Paula says. "He won't ever fire you."

"I'm not worried about that." I look out the window. Two minutes ago I felt confident, now I'm sad. The river's a mud flat a half-mile wide, fifty-foot trickle of oily water down the middle. Suddenly I turn to Paula and grab her hands. "I'm going to take you and Duane to Montana. We'll get out of this town, get a ranch." I'm holding both her hands in mine, like I'm praying. "What do we have here? A greasy diner, the warehouse, you in a two-room apartment, me in a leaky trailer." Paula's eyes are wide and brown. A strand of hair has fallen over her face. "Let's make something for ourselves."

Her eyes fill with tears. I put her hands on the table, hand her my handkerchief. "It's clean," I say.

"Look at me, I'm all teary." She tries to smile, cries some more. I put my hand on hers. "I don't know, honey. I don't know. I had my dreams once. Now I got Duane."

"We're not too old."

Someone comes in the diner. Paula bounces up, wipes the corners of her eyes, smiles. "More coffee?"

I go back to the trailer after breakfast. Bill and Clayton are eating cereal and looking glum. I pull out my wallet. "Get yourselves a good breakfast," I say, holding out a twenty.

"We're okay," Bill says. I tell him I trust them for it.

"My luck's going to change up in Casper," Clayton says.

"You ought not to ride there," Bill tells him.

"Hell, cousin, I'm fine." Clayton pounds his ribs. "See?"

"You're a damn fool."

"I'm a bull rider."

"Same damn thing," Bill shoots back.

Clayton puts his thumb in the middle of his chest. "The toughest and the best."

Clayton and Bill are leaving the next morning. Clayton goes out to the rodeo grounds; Bill and I talk for most of the morning about Montana, ranching, horses.

"I want to come up this fall, look for some land. Maybe bring Paula's son and do some fishing."

"Land's cheap. nobody's making a living off it," Bill says. He tells me we're welcome to stay with him anytime.

"Paula's talked about us getting married, but I've always put her off. I've already made one mistake, don't want to make another. But maybe it's time. I know I didn't do too well with Carla and my own son, but maybe I can help Paula raise Duane right."

That night all four of us go to the Sundance. Clayton takes Paula onto the dance floor. "Look at those two," Bill says. Paula looks like she's having a great time. I watch Clayton and Paula. All of a sudden I'm jealous. Paula and I haven't danced in a long time.

"You got to watch out for Clayton," Bill says. "He has a way with women."

Paula comes back to the table between numbers for a drink of her beer. She bends over and kisses me. Clayton leads her back onto the floor. The next song is a slow one; Clayton slides his hand down Paula's back, hooks his thumb in one of her belt loops. He runs his fingers over her jeans.

As soon as the number ends I go up to them. "My turn," I say. The band plays a romantic Willie Nelson song. Paula holds me close. She pulls my head down next to hers. Her hair smells of soap.

"It's good to see you jealous," she says.

"I've been thinking about Montana all day."

"Let's not talk, hon," Paula says. "Let's just dance."

Clayton watches us dance for a while, then the cowgirl from last night shows up and he dances with her. By the time we leave the sun's coming up. I feel like Paula and I have wiped ten years off our lives. I'm tired, light, happy as a bird.

Bill and Clayton have to get to Casper. Clayton gives Paula a hug. Her face is glowing. It reminds me of the spring corn, shining in the morning sun. Bright. Not dusty like the corn is now.

"You get tired of this old fellow," Clayton says to Paula, "give me a call."

"Come on," Bill says, grabbing Clayton's arm. "We got a long way to go."

They drive away. Paula's fingers are on her lower lip, her mouth slightly open. She's holding my hand, leaning forward, like the truck's pulling her north. The big machines in the quarry are starting up for another day. A thin line of dust follows the truck and hangs in the sun for a long time after it's gone. □

Forbidden Fruit

Diane Q. Lewis

Two of Cézanne's apples
fell out of the picture.
I took a bite of each

and put them back
with that side towards the wall.
I want to know if biting

apples is still a sin
since we now wear clothes
and do you think the painting

is worth as much
as it was? Certainly
not to Cézanne who

is out of the picture.
Don't laugh, it happens
whether you paint

or eat. Only
Cézanne's apples
remain.

Driving with One Light Out

Ken Denberg

From this patch of ground the sky breaks up,
falls back to sky, pale heart, paper tiger,
all the way up the cutbank to the other side.
Clouds drift and coil in the utter quiet,
one car downshifts a curve, pines, cedars,
whisper Tao in the thick, cold air.

It happens just like this: a fisherman driving
back with one light out, runs over his own
shadow, a rib cage of night, his skull of prayer.
A circle of light in the pupil of his eye.

What gathers with the birds on the limbs,
what country music twangs on the radio as stars
go down? The grove of warriors, a house of hats.
Two iridescent wings spiral down
in his hair. His dream of late hours
are caddis flies in his face,
the weary, one-eyed metal all night.
In a web, in the cooler,
in the dark,
trout beside beer cans
dream a footless sliding
back into wet motion.

Oedipus Writes a Letter Late at Night

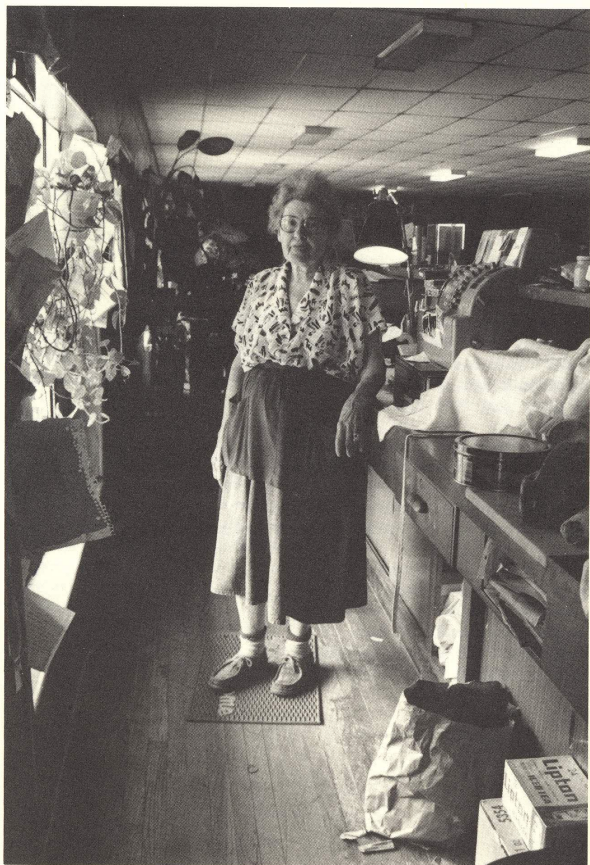
Michael Sofranko

So many nights I wake up with the foam pillow
comforting the ache between my legs,
but by morning say nothing
of the calm persistent dread
to the dreamgirl who reminds me
of the gold inside her womb.

When lights streaking by from the passing trains
wake me, full of the blurring faces,
I can't make out the ones I've loved
or called to love, or call again their names,
so many gone from coal to ash.

But my voice, with its shy prayer that pleads,
with its diverted eyes, lily loving and lost,
whispers into the wool blanket
I hold up to my lips; and of those
who hear me say their name, misunderstand and follow,

a few resist, a few confess,
a few love shame enough.
And I hold the disintegrated dream
against them, unable to sleep.
And I stare wide-eyed at the ceiling
and the shadows that swallow me.



P. S. Davis

The Road to Emmaus

Mary Ann Mannino

Halfway through his vacation, Father Jim Gallagher could tell it was not working out. He closed his breviary, which he had been trying to read propped up against the pillows of his bed in his mother's house. Then he slung the prayer book. It skimmed the desk top, hurling the plastic stand-up calendar to the floor, and hit the wall with a dull thud. Father Jim lay back against the cushions and shut his eyes.

He wanted to drift away from the experiences of fourteen fraudulent days of dinners with relatives, and neighbors, people whose names he remembered but whose faces in the intervening years had lost their structures and sagged like loose slipcovers. People whom his mother had invited to congratulate her son, the priest, who had recently left Holy Spirit parish, Cold Spring, New York, and was about to begin a new life, at age forty-two, as a missionary to the people of Costa Rica.

He had expected the enthusiasm of so many people to replenish his zeal, but that had not happened. He felt no conviction that he could or even wanted to improve the life of one Costa Rican.

The jangle of the doorbell startled him. Then he remembered that his mother had invited the ladies from her charismatic prayer group for dessert. He rose from the bed and tucked his black shirt into his slacks. He adjusted his Roman collar, put on his shoes, and walked into the hall.

As he descended the stairs, the ladies gaped up at him from the living room. Stepping closer, he tried to smile sincerely, but his face felt as stiff as his collar and his smile was a caricature.

"Don't think we don't know what you've been up to in New York these last fifteen years."

His back muscles tensed, and his hands began to perspire.

"Your mother's purse is bulging with newspaper clippings."

"Was it the day-care center for the elderly you started first?"

"The teen basketball tournament."

His mother slid her arm around his waist.

"After that first tourney, my Jimmy got his boys to look out for the old souls in the neighborhood who were too scared of the gangs to buy themselves milk. Jimmy's boys walked them to the store like vigilantes."

As she spoke, she brushed a few specks of lint from the back of his shirt where it had lain against the white chenille bedspread. He could feel the pride in her hand.

"I couldn't have done any of it by myself."

"The *Times* said you singlehandedly turned the neighborhood around."

His mother led them into the dining room.

He sat down uneasily. He did not like to be reminded of the good he had done.

"So, then you started a soup kitchen?"

The question was unexpected. It made him remember the smell of pine oil from scrubbed floors, Sister Betty's cinnamon coffee, Sara in her pea jacket and red beret holding a jar of honey.

"Lay members of the parish saw the need."

"Wasn't there a newspaper picture of you painting the kitchen in that abandoned house?"

"Yes, but others did most of the work."

"Nonsense," he heard his mother say. "He was there every Saturday night lugging baskets of vegetables and whatever leftovers he could gather from the markets on the Island. Jimmy was the first to arrive and the last to leave."

He remembered the obsession to get that dilapidated shell fixed up, and the soup kitchen in operation. He had been driven to lay linoleum floors at two in the morning.

"When did you start the kitchen, Father Jim?"

It had been his last project.

Before he could answer, he heard his mother respond for him.

He watched his own face and the rumpled faces of the grey-haired ladies reflected in the mirror above the buffet.

Someone touched his arm. Turning to the left, he looked into the doughy face of Mrs. Gormley, a woman whose son, Tim, the fastest runner on his grade-school baseball team, he had always envied.

Pressing his wrist with her damp palm, she whispered, "The doctors don't have much hope of stopping my sister Winnie's cancer this time. Could you say a few extra prayers for her?"

He nodded.

She squeezed his arm and continued, "If you pray, God will cure her."

Father Jim felt his face burn. Who did they think he was? He didn't have God on the other end of his phone. He stood up, and said that he had an appointment up at the rectory that he had forgotten about.

Mrs. O'Neil thrust an envelope into his hand.

"Buy a little something for yourself, Father."

The others opened their handbags and searched among change purses, bottles of aspirin, and rosary beads for similar white envelopes addressed to Father Jim in Catholic school Palmer scrawl.

"This isn't necessary, really. The order provides everything."

For them, his refusal verified his holiness. While he stood there awkwardly holding the cards, Mrs. Gormley got down on her knees.

"Your blessing, Father."

"Yes, your blessing."

"Please," said Father Jim. "Please don't kneel."

But they didn't listen. All five of them, including his mother, who had to be helped because of her arthritis, were kneeling in front of him.

He laid the envelopes on the table by his plate. In the mirror he watched himself raise his right hand to bless them. The setting sun caught the reflection of his ring in the glass, bathing his mirrored hand in a burst of light. He heard the contrast in the monotone of his prayer and the vitality of his mother's amen.

He walked across the living room and through the open door into the hazy sunlight of the sultry August evening. He stopped on the porch and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. He had lied about his appointment. Like a retiree, he had no place to go.

He meandered up the Anderson Street hill toward Woodale Road feeling fragile. Each lie he told hollowed him out. He lied so regularly now he felt as thin as paper.

He headed toward Pastorious park. Hearing the tinkling crystal sound of a woman's laughter, he glanced to his left and saw a curly-haired blonde holding a drink and leaning against the wooden railing of a side porch on an old Victorian someone had painted beige and blue. The way she held her head, tilted a little to the side as though she were listening intently to some inner voice, reminded him of Sara. Sara had been his first volunteer from outside his parish at the soup kitchen. She had read about the project in the newspaper and arrived because she said, "God didn't want people spending all their time in church praying: he wanted them out in the world fixing it up." The first time he saw her, she was holding two enormous jars of honey.

"What is this?" he had asked.

They needed flour, vegetables, and meat.

"You planning on making honey soup?"

"Bees," she had said. "My husband keeps bees. You use this instead of sugar. The beauty is, it's free."

On the porch sitting on a wicker rocker behind a newspaper was a man. Father Jim wondered if the man was the woman's husband. Sara's husband, the beekeeper, was tall, thin, and balding. He wore metal-rimmed glasses and was ordinary in every way, except he was Sara's husband. Husband and wife, some intangible unity, that made Sara often say "we did this" or "we went here." The beekeeper would be Sara's husband until he died or she died. That was Church law.

Father Jim strolled toward a bench in the park. Sara had said Church laws were detours on the path to God. He had called her a heretic. She laughed at him, pointing out that the church now permitted women to distribute communion. He said that laws could be changed, but until they were, it was wrong to break them.

He sat down and noticed a group of boys playing baseball in the meadow. There was a hit and the baserunner started to move. Father Jim thought he should stop at third and not risk an out, but he kept going and made home.

Beyond the baseball game on the edge of the woods, he noticed a woman's long hair spilling across the chest of a man she was nestled against. Father Jim imagined that the woman's hair smelled like apples because Sara's had the first time he got that close. He was sitting on her couch, and she was on the floor in the center of the soup kitchen's monthly bills, sorting them into piles for food, repairs, clothing and supplies, and miscellaneous expenses. She held up a bill from the drugstore for vitamin C, not sure where to file it. And he grabbed her arm and kissed the palm of her hand, then her fingers, and then the pale blue veins in her wrist, tracing them with his tongue. She knelt on the floor between his legs so that her body leaned against him. Never had a woman been so close to him. She moved her cushioning body easily across his. So this is what lovers do, he remembered thinking. And he remembered how abruptly he abandoned himself to the feeling. Never had such pure excitement seemed so joyously good, so compelling in its invitation, so insatiable in its demand that he love another in a way he never had. My God, Sara. My Sara, God. He remembered crying out. Opening his eyes, he remembered his guilt, as wild and terrifying as lightning cracking a tree open in the front yard. That day he ran from her living room slipping on the papers, losing his balance, and banging his knee on the doorjamb. But he returned.

There had been days he desired her obsessively, when he would call her at six A.M. and let the phone ring once, jealous that she might be making love to the beekeeper. He would arrive at her house at 8:30 when he saw the school bus with her children on it pass the Wawa where he was parked. He would interrogate her, panicked that she might not need him enough. Then he would make love to her in the sewing room among the bolts of cloth or on the living room floor convinced by the intensity of his passion that God sanctioned their love. There had been other days when he vowed he would never touch her again, when he went off to the soup kitchen to scrub walls, or to peel potatoes and chop carrots and boil huge cauldrons of pea soup in penance for his lust.

When it got dark and he could no longer distinguish the outline of the couple, he left the park bench and strolled back toward Anderson Street. Sara had told him she could no longer live with her husband, and she had left him. Father Jim had wanted her, often desperately, but he wanted her permanently only when the soup kitchen didn't need him so much, when the Christmas liturgies were over, when he could find a reliable replacement for himself at the teen center, sometime in the future when he could tell his mother without disappointing her. Still Sara was always there on the other end of the phone when he had to talk to her about the scheduling of volunteers, the cheapest place to get potatoes, or the symbolism in a movie he had just seen. And there had been days when he had to talk to her about things like that. This inability to control his need for her made him jog the streets of Cold Spring hoping to catch a glimpse of her leading her children into one of the tiny shops in the business district. It made him arrive at the movie theater just as he knew she would be leaving with her husband.

He was sure his lack of control led to the interview with the Provincial. He felt that the embarrassed looks he had seen on his parishioners' faces when Sara was present may have reached the Provincial in the form of letters, and he was going to be confronted. He talked to Sara about this possibility, but truthfully those conversations never seemed real to him. It was like playing "what if" when he was a kid. He finally settled on what he would say as he drove to Father Lawton's residence. If asked directly he would say, "Yes. Yes, I have done what you think I have done." He would marry her and break the Church law because he didn't see how he could get on without her.

The Provincial was late for the ten o'clock appointment. It seemed he waited hours for Father Lawton in the prelate's study sunken in

a high-backed leather chair, staring at the crucifix reflected in the shiny surface of the Provincial's desk. The Provincial arrived noiselessly, like an apparition. He reached across the desk and shook Father Jim's hand. In the warmth of that handshake Father Jim touched the foundation of his life. And as Father Lawton moved backward and sat down in the swivel chair behind the oversized desk, he felt the firmness of it slip away. He would be alone. The pride in his mother's face when she ironed his black shirts would erode into revulsion. Even in death he would be separated from her, and from his fellow priests. With Sara he would live in a continuous state of adultery. Forever unforgiven. Forever separated.

Father Lawton moved some papers. He took out a large envelope and laid it on his desk. Then he folded his hands on the envelope and looked directly into Father Jim's eyes.

"You have been given one month's vacation starting on Saturday. After that, you will be reassigned."

The Provincial paused, not taking his eyes from Father Jim's face.

Very slowly he added, "For your own good." And then, "For the good of the order."

Father Jim did not ask why. He asked one question. Could he be assigned to the South American missions?

Father Lawton looked surprised. Then in a kindly voice he said he would look into it.

When Father Jim reached Germantown Avenue, he remembered that his mother's chiropractor was dropping in after he closed his office to wish him success. He decided on the spot to step into Flannigan's bar and have a scotch to steady his nerves.

The bar smelled the way he remembered it, a mixture of warm soup and cold beer glossed over by the comfortable aroma of old wood. Father Jim sat down at the end of the bar where it curved against the wall, and ordered a scotch and water. The same tiffany lamps hung above the dark wooden booths in the back, and the walls were still covered with 19th-century photographs of very Irish-looking families. There was a couple in a booth and two men talking at the far end of the bar. The waitress was setting up, filling ketchup bottles. The bartender was slicing lemons.

"It's just not healthy, the way he's been acting," the waitress said.

"Seems the same to me."

"Nah, Lenny. I tell you he's going into one of those depressions. Doesn't say two words anymore when he comes in here."

"So when did he ever say much?"

"He used to go on about how he was a starter on the Phillies' farm team way back when. Now, every night it's, 'How's the weather? What's new with the Phillies?' and that's it."

"Every night he has two Beefeaters, leaves me a buck and good-bye. The perfect customer."

The waitress shook her head and wiped up some spilled ketchup with a cloth she had taken from under the counter.

"It's just not healthy. His wife's been dead three or four years and he's still wearing that black tie."

The bartender turned toward her, playfully waving the knife.

"Well, Jeannie, never thought I'd see the day you'd fault a man for mourning his wife."

She waved him and his knife away and continued talking.

"Just last week, I asked him what the name of that disease was killed his wife. I thought maybe my brother-in-law's mother might have the same thing. Anyways, I asked. His eyes just filled up. You'd of thought she died yesterday. Then real slow he says it, 'scler-a-derma.' The whole time looking down at the table. Next time I look over, he's gone. His drink barely touched."

"Guess he really loved her." Lenny put the lemon slices into a plastic container. "Some men do, you know."

"I know what I know," said Jeannie. "That man needs to tell somebody about his wife."

"He'll talk when he's ready, and he'll pick the person. That's how I see it."

"Listen to me. If he doesn't, it's going to eat right through him. He's going to be wearing that black tie to his own funeral."

Jeannie gave the top of the last ketchup bottle a little extra twist for emphasis. Then she tossed the empties into the trash can under the bar, and picked up the tray of filled bottles.

"He's 'bout due now, Lenny, and we ain't busy. Couldn't you. . . ."

"No. You know I don't go for prying."

Jeannie moved to the booths, depositing one filled bottle on each table.

Father Jim sipped his scotch. Often help simply amounted to listening to a man's story, and then pointing out a different perspective from which the man could view his own situation.

The oak door opened and in walked a tall man with thick white hair who sat down a few stools over from Father Jim. He wore a neatly ironed blue shirt and a black cotton tie. His eyes were opaque as though they had been painted with pale blue enamel. He looked no sadder than most men you see on a bus or in a church.

Lenny poured a Beefeaters straight up.

The man said, "How about the Phillies this week?"

"They might win it yet."

"No," said the old man. "They'll get close, real close, but then they'll blow it. They'll choke."

"I hope not. I've got good money on 'em."

The old man didn't respond. He wrapped his fingers around his drink and hunched over it.

Father Jim glanced over to see if he had a pack of cigarettes in his pocket or a newspaper under his arm. He thought he could start a conversation by asking for a cigarette or the sports page. The old man had neither. He was sitting there as still as a beer bottle. Father Jim slid across two bar stools, but the old man didn't look up.

Then the priest turned toward him and said, "I've forgotten how humid Philadelphia can be in August. Is there any letup in sight?"

The old man didn't reply.

While he tried to think of another opener, Lenny answered his question.

"It's supposed to rain tomorrow, but you never know. Most times rain just makes the humidity worse. Say, are you the new priest who's just been assigned up at Saint Francis?"

"No, I'm visiting my mother over on Anderson Street."

"Where are you stationed?"

"Come September I'll be doing missionary work in Costa Rica."

"Well, I'll be," said Jeannie who was back behind the bar. "You're the first missionary ever been in this place. What's it like down there?"

"I've never really been there yet. I've been in a few suburban New York parishes the last fifteen years."

"And at your age you got the calling to do more," added Jeannie. "What a beautiful thing!"

He was immediately sorry he had told them.

The tables in the back had begun filling up. Father Jim saw Jeannie talking to a couple who had just been seated. They smiled at him and waved.

If Jeannie were going to tell every person who came into the bar, the whole place would be gawking at him. Father Jim stood up and started to count out his money. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"I'd be honored, Father, if you'd let me buy you one drink before you go on your journey." The old man's face was as emotionless as the face of a clock.

"Thank you," said Father Jim.

"If it's the same to you, let's sit in a booth." The man picked up his drink and Father Jim's and ambled to the back of the bar.

Father Jim felt pleased with himself, and he gave Jeannie a conspiratorial wink when they passed her. They slid onto the wooden benches whose high backs cut them off from the rest of the bar. Father Jim noticed that the man's face was tired. The skin under the man's eyes rested lazily on his cheeks and the corners of his lips turned down exhausted.

Jeannie plopped a basket of pretzels in the center of the table. "On the house."

Father Jim noted that she was about Sara's age but heavier and without Sara's grace. He remembered Sara in sneakers deftly balancing a tray of dirty dishes and kissing him on the neck behind the cellar door at the soup kitchen.

He was surprised to hear the old man's voice. "I'm sorry. My mind drifted away for a moment."

"I said, so you are running away from society in order to save the world."

Then in a voice as soft as rabbit fur, he added, "Why?"

No one had asked Father Jim why, not the Provincial, not his mother, not even Sara who had quietly hung up the phone while he was explaining what had occurred in the Provincial's study. He looked down at his hand as he rubbed his finger around the edge of the pretzel basket. Various images came to mind, a dream he had of himself trapped in Sara's house while it burned to the ground, his mother's hands brushing his shirt, the Provincial behind his oversized desk. He settled on the Provincial.

"For my own good. For the good of my order. I will . . ." he began to fidget with the pretzel basket almost upsetting it, "be of some . . . good. I will compensate for . . ." He paused, groping for a word. "For . . ." He waved his hand in front of him. "Injustice."

The old man continued to stare at Father Jim, who began to feel as if he expected more. That in fact he knew that there was more. He tried to think of something to say to focus the conversation on the other man.

While he was thinking, the old man spoke. "Tell me, is there a baseball team in Costa Rica?"

Father Jim let out his breath. "I think so. There's baseball everywhere."

"A man has to be able to make decisions if he plays baseball," the man said as though it were a revelation.

Father Jim nodded. "I was never any good at baseball." He was fascinated with the contours of a circular knot in the pine table.

"I mean quick decision under stress. For instance, when he hits that ball, he has to be able to tell by the crack of the bat just how far he can run."

Father Jim nodded again because it seemed the man had paused. He was running his finger up and around the curling wood, tracing the outline of the knot.

"When he rounds first, he has a split second to decide if he can make it to second. If he hesitates, he is lost. He hears the conflicting commands of his coach, his teammates, the fans, but in the final instance, and this is important, Father, it is the player who alone can decide whether to run and just how far."

Blonde curls. The curling wood reminded him of Sara's ringlets.

The old man waved his arm at Jeannie. "Bring the bottle over here. Tonight I'm going to have myself a few extras."

"Father, if the man makes the wrong decision, if he hesitates when he should have run, he loses. If on the other hand, he runs when he should have stayed, he loses as well. You will agree, Father, baseball is not an easy game."

Jeannie set the bottle of Beefeaters on the table.

"Now, Mr. Mullin, you be careful." She looked quizzically at Father Jim. "Would you like another scotch, Father?"

"A light one."

"You will agree, Father."

Father Jim did not know what to say. He did not remember, perhaps had not even heard the question.

"Of course."

Jeannie brought his scotch. He took a sip. "Is your wife home by herself in all this heat?"

Father Jim congratulated himself on the cleverness of his lie.

The man poured himself a drink. "My wife is dead."

A smile crossed his face. "It will be four years this November tenth." His smile broadened and he took a gulp from the glass.

"The last few years we were always together." He held up his hand with one finger crossed over the other. "Like that. But since she died, she is closer than she ever was. I carry her with me always and will for eternity."

He tapped the side of his head with his finger. "She is up here." His smile turned into a hollow laugh.

"I wear this tie," he said, picking up the bottom edge of it, "to remind me." He chortled uncontrollably. Tears rolled down his face.

Father Jim had seen people laugh when they were too desperate to cry. He downed some scotch.

"Loneliness," he said. "You miss her." Then more to his drink than to the old man he added, "Believe me, I know."

The old man took another swig. He let the gin stay in his mouth a few seconds before he swallowed it. Then he smacked his lips, and spread his palms flat out on the table on either side of his drink. He looked up at the priest.

"You don't know."

He paused and began slowly to drum his index fingers on the table. "But I can tell you will."

The old man sucked in his breath, and rolled his hands around the glass of gin.

"Once a woman loved me. Love can't be ignored because it changes things. It gets right down inside you, and when you look out all the things you used to be are just that—things you used to be."

The man took a belt from the glass, and then looked over at the priest.

Father Jim nodded, not at all sure what the old man meant, but pleased that he was talking.

The old man finished off the glass and then began to pour another.

"When I was going on forty-five, I was down on life. It all seemed a waste. Then I found a woman who made me laugh. Simple thing like that. Everything looked new. The grass looked green like a just-mowed ball field. Felt like all of a sudden every day I wanted to race across fields like that with my mouth open and taste the freshness."

"Lucky."

"Not lucky. I choked."

"What do you mean?"

"At the time I was married to Mary, and had five kids."

He took a gulp of his gin.

"Three years I tried balancing between two lives. Couldn't give anything up. To hold on, I did things I never thought I could do. Always lying. Sometimes I'd lie to one, sometimes to the other."

He paused as though he were just figuring something out.

"Mary, she must have begun to notice things. Never said a word. She could tell I wasn't much interested in anything around the house, especially those things used to be I couldn't get enough of."

He slugged down more gin.

"One day she's lying on the couch, I think looking at TV. I'm

reading the newspaper. In an anchorman's even voice she said, 'Nick, when you leave, I want this house, and all the furniture in it.' She caught me by surprise, but I could tell by the distance in her voice she'd been thinking about this awhile. I hadn't really looked her in the face in along time. Now, when I did, first thing I felt was scared. All along I thought the first thing I'd feel, if it ever came out, was relief. But no. Seeing her cold and steady, I was damn scared. It was one thing to have this woman love me, to have something exciting to get up for. It was a whole other thing moving out of my house, looking my kids in the eye saying I was leaving them. I told Mary I'd have to do some serious thinking before I was ready to move out. Mary said, 'It's her or me. You got a week.' I hesitated. That week I got sentimental about things. I mean the roll-top desk I'd refinished for the girls, the kitchen I'd done over for Mary when she had the last baby. And then there was my boy. He liked to watch me fool around in the back garden with my tomato plants. It wasn't just me like when I was twenty. Now somehow I was tied up into all these other people. This make any sense to you, Father?"

The priest was pushing the pretzel basket back and forth, covering and uncovering the knot in the wooden table.

"Who was I if I pulled myself out? Who was I if I stripped myself of parents, children, church, friends, home, everything I had ever known? That's just what I'd have done if I'd have left Mary. Each day that went by, the more I knew I couldn't do it."

The old man paused, polished off his glass of gin and poured still another.

Father Jim wasn't sure why the old man wanted to talk about some affair that had been over and done with years before. It seemed pointless. The whole story unsettled him. He took a sip of his scotch.

Guilt. Now that she's dead, the old man feels guilty that he had ever caused her any pain. Father Jim had seen guilt rot many a man like standing water hollows out trees.

"Listen," the priest began, "this happens to people. A pretty woman. You think you love her. It happens."

The old man grabbed Father Jim's arm.

"No. You got to understand, Father. It wasn't I didn't love that woman. It was just that I didn't know how much. I thought maybe it'd turn out just like me and Mary. After a few years the romance would die and those other things, I'm not sure what to call them. Those things that made me father, son, neighbor, Catholic—they seemed to matter a hell of a lot. Those names. They were me. I choked."

Father Jim found himself very much interested in what the old man was saying. He had stayed with his commitment. In the end, he had grown so close to his wife that, Father Jim remembered Jeanie saying it, he mourned her still after four years.

"I thought I could just stop seeing her. I told Mary that I would. I meant to. Lord knows that. I knew it was the decent thing. It didn't work. Felt really bad then. Mary being sweet to me. Me a hypocrite, sneaking time off from work. Hated myself. Then one day at work, I heard about a transfer to Philadelphia. I put in for it. I made up my mind. I ran. I figured in a new city me and Mary would go back to the way things had been in the beginning."

"And you did."

The old man didn't move a muscle, just stared with those tired blue eyes at Father Jim who got the feeling those eyes could see into his own head, and that the old man was in there sorting things out.

"I kept busy at first moving, then adjusting to the job, building a patio, painting the porch. Didn't work. Wanted it to, but it didn't. I'd pick the paint colors I knew she liked. Even when I decided to do the opposite, to know what flowers she'd plant in the back garden, and then to plant different ones. I'd look out and see her flowers. Figured in time it would pass."

"And it did."

Father Jim moved his hands out in front of him as though he could coax the word "yes" from the old man.

"No. The more time went by, the more I knew that whatever had happened between me and her made it so that what had been with Mary never could be again. Spent my time in the garage. Got to liking to refinish furniture. I'd go out there after dinner. Some nights I'd work 'til bedtime. Time went by and all those things I thought were so important just faded away. Parents died. Kids got married; started their own lives. Friends stopped coming by. Finally it was just me and Mary."

"And then," asked the priest waiting to hear that somehow when they were alone, they had found a miraculous closeness that explained the closeness the old man had spoken about earlier.

"I began to hate her. I'd watch her sometimes just walking through the house, and I'd get angry. The way she'd made tea, always wasting water boiling a full pot, annoyed me. Whatever she'd say, it'd hit me all wrong. Nothing she did was her fault. It was my fault. I hated her because I hated the way my life turned out. When I had the chance. . ."

The old man poured the last of the gin into his glass. He drank it all in two swallows. He smacked his lips.

"I made the wrong call. How about you, Father? You look like

you might need a fresh drink. Jeannie! Jeannie, bring the good Father another."

Father Jim waved his hand at Jeannie. "Two coffees."

"Not me, Jeannie," shouted the old man. "I'll have one more. Long time we lived like that, Father. Two strangers who were together because they had no other place to go. The loneliest kind of loneliness because we pretended it wasn't true."

"That's when Mary started coughing. Anything I'd say she didn't like, this cough would come up, and she'd get all red in the face. It started happening when she was eating too. She'd get scared. Have a glass of water next to her. The doctor said the tube in her throat was losing its elasticity. He said she had to avoid getting nervous, and she could adjust to it. She figured someday she would be all alone and she wouldn't be able to stop coughing. Got so she wouldn't be alone. She'd follow me around. She wouldn't say anything. She'd come out in the garage and sit in a chair. She'd look at magazines. She'd knit. But then the paint remover would get into her throat and she'd start to cough. I stopped working out there except at night. Then if she woke up, she'd call my name until I came in. I didn't know what to do. She wasn't sick enough to be in a hospital. I couldn't afford a nurse. I stopped visiting the neighbors. Stopped coming down here. I sat around the house. Sometimes I'd read. Mostly, I'd drink."

Jeannie brought the glass of gin. She gave the priest a disapproving look, and set the glass in front of the old man. Then she slid the cup of coffee over toward the priest. Some of it spilled into the saucer.

The old man guzzled down a good part of the drink.

"One morning we're eating breakfast. Mary wants to go to the mall. I've got this headache. 'Alright,' I say, 'after lunch.' 'No,' she says, 'I don't want to miss the soap-operas.' 'Then tomorrow.' 'No,' she says. 'You don't have anything to do. I want to go now.' I don't like that, 'You don't have anything to do.' It makes me angry, her saying it so natural like that. I know I can't punch her, can't even swear at her. I get up, knock over a chair, and go upstairs to the bathroom."

"I hear her calling my name all the way up the stairs. Damn, it makes me mad. I figure maybe she'll come up there, so I lock the door. I hear the coughing start, and then the wheezing."

The old man pounded his fist on the table.

"I don't want to hear it. I'm sick of it. I turn on the faucet full force. I sit down. Don't read the magazines. Don't do anything. Just

shut my eyes and listen to the peaceful sound of that water hollering its way down the drain."

"I don't know how long I'm in there. Finally I'm all quiet inside. I open the door, and it sticks like it always does. I go downstairs, and we drive to the mall."

"I don't say anything to her, and she don't say anything to me, but we drive to the mall together in the same car, both in the front seat. We're like that all day. So right after dinner she goes up to bed. I take myself a beer out on the front porch, and put my feet up on this coffee table I trash-picked. Next morning she's dead. Doctor says it couldn't be helped, sometimes people die from schleraderma."

"After the funeral, I'm clearing out her clothes and things, it hits me that doctor was wrong about what killed Mary."

Father Jim leaned across the table.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just telling you, staying with Mary all those years didn't do her any good."

"Listen, you did what you had to. What else can anybody do?"

The old man stood up.

"Remember this, Father, a man can't be picking tomatoes come September, and giving them to his neighbors gussied up in fancy baskets when his plants shriveled up way back in some July drought."

"Wait a minute. Don't you see? You did the right thing."

"I'm paying," said the old man.

He laid a twenty on the table, and staggered toward the door.

Father Jim mulled things over drinking his coffee. Some men, often older ones, were just too set in their ways to see another perspective. Unfortunately, they ended up suffering. Then he began wondering if it was always summer in Costa Rica or if the seasons were reversed. Reversed is what he thought. When he was walking in the sunshine, she'd be trudging through the snow. She'd be bundled in her pea jacket with that red beret perched on her curly head like a flag. □

After Playing too Hard at Love

J. L. Meadows

I've come to be with this water
I've come to this river to see something
Something between the water and me
Confused by the spot next to me, near,
Empty.
I remove my shirt, the sun heats my back
For the first time this year.
I see a shadow that is not there,
Next to my own in the surface of the water,
Moving.
The water calls me; I want to go in, alone,
As I should have many years ago.
The child wants to go to the bottom
And break the surface splashing to shore,
Gasping.
I'm no longer sure I would want to return
To the clear outside, up from the suspension
Of eyes moving through water
Gold under the afternoon sun,
Burning.
I'm saying things that would not matter
If a shoulder were touching my own.
I wouldn't care whose
As long as it wanted to be there,
Touching.
The window without water is covered in dust;
The light it lets in is never enough.
I see a terrapin surface three times in the same spot
Before I notice it is a stick rocking under the surface,

Breaking.

I look up to the sound of wings across the water—
Turkey hen and gobbler fly to the other shore.
He lands ahead of her in a pasture hinting green;
And turning, addresses her in the dance of hope,
Loving.

Yet I remain firm, and the river down there,
The solitary shadow growing longer in the surface.
The water I heard calling is downstream now;
And the spot next to me, nearer,
Empty.



P. S. Davis

Boobies and Bathtubs

Patricia Flinn

The thing I remember best about my mother was her fascination for peering through keyholes. Anytime there was the slightest hint of a commotion in the hallway outside our five-room railroad flat on Adams Street in downtown Hoboken, her face would light up like the night sky on the Fourth of July, and she would spring into action, tossing aside her broom or dishrag or whatever else she happened to be holding, and dash to the door. There she would drop to her knees, wedge her head beneath the heavy glass doorknob and with one large and expectant eye, spy to her heart's content on whatever was taking place at that moment on the landing.

"Who's there, Ma?" I would whisper, sometimes crouching down beside her. "What do you see?"

Usually it was Mr. Reilly who lived in the apartment two flights above us with his wife, Rita, whom the neighborhood women referred to as "that long-suffering saint."

We all liked Rita, but not many of us, not even the men, liked Reilly. He was a silent, morose man who worked as a night watchman down in the Maxwell House Coffee plant on Hudson Street. He was forever coming home drunk in the dead of the night, waking everybody up and sending tremors through the house as he staggered and stumbled his long gangly limbs and bone-thin body up the winding, narrow staircase.

For at least two years, I lived in mortal terror of the man. A six-foot-four, one-hundred-fifty-pound Irishman with flaming red hair, beet-red skin, and wild, blood-shot eyes, he was the leading character in all my childhood nightmares. Perpetually tottering, he seemed always on the verge of bloody destruction. In my worst moments I'd see him tumbling down the stairs backwards and crashing through the milky glass pane of our front door like some terrible ogre, his flaming red skull split from end to end.

My mother, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy Reilly. Every time she heard him stumbling along, even in the dead of night when she was already tucked safely in her bed, she'd jump up and rush headlong

through the dark, cold rooms until she arrived at the front door, her right eye twitching with anticipation.

Blow by blow as the action unfolded she'd fill me in on all the bloody details: Reilly was down on his hands and knees and crawling; Reilly was being pulled to his feet by two burly cops; poor saintly Rita was bending over Reilly, weeping and wailing as she wiped the blood from his long pointy nose.

From time to time my mother would get so excited watching the continuing adventures of the Reilly family that she'd even clean out the dusty keyhole with a Q-tip dipped in rubbing alcohol just to make sure she didn't miss anything.

But despite the endless fascination my mother held for Reilly, he was not the only person in the building who captured her attention and devotion.

There was also Mary the Mop Lady who lived in the apartment below us and who wandered the halls on occasions mumbling to herself as she searched high and low among the rickety rails of the bannisters for her dead husband, Harold, who had died one night scrubbing down the linoleum on the third floor landing. After his death, which Mary never quite believed in—she claimed he had simply gotten lost in the building somewhere—Mary took over his duties as janitor. In return for her labors of hauling out the garbage from the back cellar and mopping up the hallway floors once a week, she was given a three-room flat on the first floor at half rent.

We'd see her every day as we went up and down the stairs since she kept her door always open a crack. My mother claimed this was Mary's way of letting Harold know he was still welcome, but other people in the building thought differently.

"She does it to let out the stink," they'd say, joking that they had to hold their noses every time they went by the door.

And it was true. There was a terrible stink to Mary's flat. It came from all the mops and dirty rags and old pails she used for cleaning the halls. She kept them lined up against the wall in her bedroom where she'd sit for hours mumbling to herself in the gloomy dark.

Since we all felt sorry for Mary, however, and knew that she was a bit off her rocker, no one ever complained. Nevertheless, it wasn't easy. Moldy mops are a terrible thing to keep on smelling every day.

But despite all this, my mother always got excited when Mary came up to our landing to scrub down the floor.

"She's here," my mother would exclaim, rubbing her hands together and kneeling down to watch the show begin. "And this time she looks bad, real bad."

I would sit at the dining room table glancing at the back of my mother's head, as I did my long division and dreamed of Sister Ellen, my English composition teacher, whom I was madly in love with at the time.

As far as I was concerned, she was the most beautiful, exciting woman in the world. Not only did she have exactly the kind of eyes I wanted—sapphire blue flecked with hints of purple—she also had the kind of voice I wanted: soft and low and lilting like notes from a toy xylophone.

It was like no other voice I had ever heard. Certainly nothing like my mother's, which some people described as being similar to a gasoline explosion, and certainly nothing like any of the voices of the people I knew who lived within our red-brick tenement. But since my mother got angry every time I mentioned Sister Ellen, fearing that I would one day grow up and turn into what she called a "liz-zie," I rarely talked about her.

"What's Mary doing now, Ma?" I'd say from time to time, just to let her know I wasn't thinking about Sister Ellen. "Is she rambling on about Harold and Lithuania again?"

"Oh, you want to see her," my mother would exclaim. "The poor thing looks like she's about to drop. She doesn't know what the hell she's doing. She doesn't even know enough to rinse out the rags. No wonder this place is crawling with cockroaches."

Sometimes my mother would insist I take a peek to see for myself what she was talking about, but the sight of Mary down on her hands and knees among the filthy soap bubbles did not work the same magic on me as it did on my mother. In fact, if you want to know the truth, it made me kind of sad. Especially when I saw how the hem of Mary's dirty yellow slip used to hang down from her housedress and trail in all that filthy water and how her stockings, which she tried to hold up with big round garters, would slip and sag beneath her fat, knobby knees.

But on top of all that, I knew how important that keyhole was to my mother, and how she really savored the moments she spent at it. The last thing I wanted to do was to steal those moments or hog them in any way.

In fact, most of the time I was very generous with my mother's keyhole. That is, until the Two Women arrived. Only then did I acquire my mother's fine taste for peeking.

They moved into the five-room flat directly above us—Edna, a pleasant-face buxom woman in her early forties who, we soon learned, wore see-through blouses and long flowing kimonos that opened to

the waist, and Dorothy, a tall, blonde lady in her early twenties who, it was rumored, sang and danced in exotic nightclubs all over New York City and was once engaged to a man on death row.

On the day of their arrival, however, my mother and I knew nothing about our new neighbors, but after listening to all the excitement taking place outside our door, as the women came trudging up and down the stairs with box after box of belongings, my mother's curiosity was driven beyond its limits. By 9 A.M. she was already at the keyhole, providing me with one of her finest play-by-plays ever.

By noon I learned that our new neighbors were two women who spoke a foreign language, wore long funny dresses, went in for lots of weird jewelry, had pointy fingernails, drank lots of white wine, and owned lots of unusual things like feathers and fur pillows and bright orange and purple paintings and big statues of fat, naked women with gigantic boobies, and large round bellies.

"Talk about shit!" my mother said, her mouth pressed against the doorjamb. "You wanna see this crap! Come on, take a look."

I didn't need much persuasion, especially since it wasn't every day I got a chance to see naked boobies. My own hadn't begun to appear yet, and so naturally I was more than curious to see what I was in for.

I knelt down, pressed my right eye up to the keyhole and stared. At first all I saw was part of my eyelash, but after blinking a few time I focused in on the two women. They were standing a few feet from my door, facing one another, their hands resting atop each other's shoulders. Then all at once they both leaned forward and kissed. A long, lingering kiss, smack on the lips. Just like that.

I was so flabbergasted, I almost fell over.

"What's the matter?" my mother screamed in my ear. "What's happening? Why are you so pale all of a sudden?"

I couldn't say a word. I simply hung onto the keyhole as if it were a life preserver.

"Answer me," my mother roared. "What's going on out there? What do you see?"

Never before in my life had I seen two women kiss like that. I felt like I was going Down in an Up elevator at breakneck speed.

"Move over!" my mother shouted, pushing me aside. "If you're not going to tell me, I'll see for myself."

It was an eternity before she removed her eye from the keyhole, but when she did her face was ashen.

"Did they stop?" I asked, after a long moment, wondering if it were safe to steal another peek.

"Never you mind," my mother said, grabbing my arm and dragging me to my feet. "Get out of here. Go to the bathroom. Go pee. Do something."

From that moment on the keyhole, Edna and Dorothy became my obsession. Every time I heard their door slam shut and their feet tapping down the stairs, I longed to throw myself on my knees and press my face to the door. But since my mother's startling and terribly unjust pronouncement that keyhole-peeking was now suddenly off limits, there was no way for me to satisfy my curiosity.

Thus, I was forced to live only for those rare and exquisite moments when I encountered both women in the flesh.

"*Bonjour, Mademoiselle,*" they would say, smiling at me as we'd pass on the narrow stairway. "*Comment allez-vous?*"

Most times I was too shy and tongue-tied to say a word. Compared to all the fat housewives in the building who spent their lives hanging out their windows screaming after their children, Edna and Dorothy were like creatures from another planet. Especially Dorothy who within only a few short weeks had captured my heart by becoming the talk of the building, the scandal of the whole neighborhood.

To my mind she was even more exciting than Sister Ellen who wore a black veil all the time and whose hair I had never once even seen. Dorothy's hair was like satin. Long and flowing and brightly gleaming, it shone like the sun on a lovely lake or a soft wet flower.

Night after night I would lie in my bed, picturing her in the room above me smoking cigarette after cigarette as she tiptoed around in her open kimono kissing Edna and crying a little over her old dead fiance who to my mind was the spitting image of Jimmy Cagney.

Why someone as fascinating as Dorothy could inspire so much gossip among the neighborhood women was something I just couldn't figure out, but there was no question that she was on everyone's lips. Even Mr. Reilly and Mary's stinky old mops took second place to what people had to say about poor old Dorothy.

"If only she wasn't that obvious," Mrs. McCarthy, who lived on the top floor, said to my mother in the laundry room one day. "If only she didn't flaunt her *aberration* so much. I mean, you think *those* kind of people would at least know how to use a little discretion."

"What kind of people," I asked, staring up at my mother defiantly. "What's she talking about?"

"None of your business," my mother said, giving me a vicious shove. "Now go over there and play."

I went no farther than earshot would allow, figuring that if I couldn't peek at my friends at least I could eavesdrop on my enemies.

"Oh, I tell you, it's terrible what this world is coming to," Mrs. McCarthy continued. "And to think they actually go around naked and wash one another's backs in the bathtub!"

"No!" my mother said, grabbing hold of her throat. "You can't be serious?"

"That's what I heard," Mrs. McCarthy insisted, nodding her head. "One of the neighbors across the street said she saw them from the window. Their shades weren't even down. Can you imagine?"

"That's unbelievable!" my mother exclaimed.

"Yes, and what's more, they do it all the time too. Right here in this *very* house under our *very* noses!"

The thought of Dorothy and Edna being so maliciously maligned while they sat naked and unsuspecting in their bathtub was simply too much for me. I burst into tears.

"What's the matter?" my mother screamed, running toward me in a frenzy. "What's happened now?"

All I could do was wail, my face swimming in misery and snot.

"Stop it!" my mother said, yanking me by the hair. "Stop it, you hear?"

"But it's not fair," I screamed. "It's just not fair."

"What's not fair?" my mother asked, eyeing me suspiciously. "What are you talking about?"

"Dorothy and Edna," I sobbed. "Everybody's always picking on them."

Mrs. McCarthy glared down at me.

"It's not polite to listen in on grown-up people's conversations," she said. "And what's more, children should be seen and not heard."

I began to wail even louder until my mother shut me up by clouting me on the ear with a right hook that left me reeling.

By the time my head cleared, I knew it was all-out war, and what's more, I knew I was firmly on the side of Dorothy and Edna. Even if it was true that they were taking baths together and looking at one another's boobies, I didn't think it was right for other people to go around snooping on them and then talking about them behind their backs.

I began plotting my strategy. My imagination knew no bounds. Like superman, it soared through the air faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive.

I saw myself crawling through their bathroom window as they sat together naked in the tub scrubbing one another's backs.

"Beware of windows and keyholes," I warned. "Your lives are in danger."

Other times I imagined myself flying straight through the ceiling like a mighty bird and burrowing myself in the warm sleeve of one of Dorothy's silky kimonos where I would lie in wait for her enemies like a deadly vulture ready to spring.

In bed at night as I lay listening to their soft laughter rise and fall in gentle ripples above my head, I pictured myself in the bathtub with them, splashing among the warm bubbles and then rushing to their rescue with one of Mary's mops as Mr. Reilly came crashing through their front door, his red lips frothing at the sight of their wet naked bodies.

For weeks I racked my brain, wondering how best to declare my love and allegiance. Then one morning out of the blue I came upon the answer. It was the simplest, most natural thing in the world. I would write them a long, passionate letter explaining everything that had ever been said about them, and how much I loved them. Then I would quietly slip it beneath their door and wait for their message.

All that afternoon through my geography, spelling, and science classes, I wrote and rewrote, telling them in the kindest way I knew that, although lots of people thought them bad, I would always remain their true and faithful friend no matter what. And although I tried not to mention anything about bathtubs and boobies, I did manage to say something about how important it was for them to keep their shades down "whenever they did funny things together." Finally, after six drafts and lots of crossing-outs, my letter was complete.

I was about to put it into the nice blue envelope I had brought along when suddenly I heard Sister Katherine Eucharista, my Earth science teacher, call my name.

"Laura O'Neill, bring whatever you are writing immediately to my desk."

At first I couldn't believe my ears.

"I must be dreaming," I thought, remaining glued to my chair. "This can't be happening."

But I wasn't dreaming, and before I knew it Sister Katherine was charging down the aisle at me like a raging bull, her long black veils flying behind her like the wings of a rabid bat.

"Next time you obey when I talk to you, young lady, understand?"

I was so stunned I couldn't even cry.

The rest is history. By the time Sister Katherine, Sister George, Sister Veronica, Sister Mary Louise, Sister Grace Edwards, Sister Claire, Sister Thomas, the principal, and my mother got through reading my letter, my fate was sealed.

Justice came quickly and unmercifully.

For almost a week, I couldn't sit down without crying out in holy terror, and although I was permitted food, I might as well have been dining in the state penitentiary, bread and water being all that was allowed me until I confessed my terrible sins and begged for God's sweet mercy.

As luck would have it, I remained the topic of hot conversation throughout the school until the day Felix Fitzpatrick snuck up onto the roof and threw a brick at Sister Louise's head while she monitored her class of fifth-grade girls skipping rope in the courtyard at recess.

After that, my reputation as the school's leading misfit faded considerably.

Slowly the weeks rolled on and by the time spring arrived, turning the only two trees on Adams Street from dirt brown to dull green, things were back to normal again.

The nuns stopped telling me what an awful child I was; Mr. Reilly broke two ribs by falling into one of Mary's metal pails; and Rita, Mr. Reilly's saintly wife, suffered a miscarriage after trying to drag her husband by the necktie up three flights of stairs.

As for Dorothy and Edna, well, I really don't know if they went on kissing and taking baths together since my mother wouldn't let me anywhere near them. All I know for sure is that one day I came home from school and saw them driving away in a big moving van.

Where they went is anybody's guess, but for years I prayed like hell that they would remember to keep their shades down and to stay clear of keyholes. □

The Romance of a Nonbeliever

Ken Poyner

When he raises the dead grown men cry
My wife assures me. I've checked twice,
But no money has changed hands. Not that I would mind
Paying for the show—but only where the wife
Might laugh as well, get at least a good night's
Good sense out of it. Serious as a week's rain
After a week's rain, she intends with two
Other couples this put on to be real. I know
The man does it for free only as
A teaser, will soon be bringing back loved ones
At fifty cents a word, fifty dollars a rap
On the table, maybe as mist in the kitchen
For two hundred. Like me, the other husbands
Are coming to find the wires and foot treadles,
Point out how commonplace anything the dead say
Through our medium is. I expect him
To seat the wives, treat them like they were still of a state
To dance topless at bar for tips alone.
No doubt he will have a full black coat, a voice
That makes good people think of an older man
Watching children run on a playground.
His movements will be as slow as the wife
After ten years in bed even when her flannel nightgown
Isn't in the way. I've seen all
The Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing movies:
I'll know if he moves the table with his knees.
But when he gooses my wife and claims the dead know
She was in former life the wife of a passionate man
That is when I go over the top
And we get all of this set down to basics.

A Pride of Lions

Rebecca Fullen

The lions are on the wall
There's mine
With a bone in between
the wide zoo cage bars
An orange water dish is pasted near
the golden paws of my cut-out lion
And fat white letters stand out
L . . . E . . . O
No one else named their lion.
I can pick mine out from far away.
As we single-file to lunch
I look over my shoulder to see the lions again
There's mine.
No, wait—that one has white letters too,
spelling LEO.
I fidgeted through lunch
Who copied?
Some of us got back to the classroom early
I glared at the wall
The other lion was shabby
the pencil lines didn't really make
eyes, nose, mouth.
No one was looking
I reached up high and tore down the crooked letters
I sat down at my desk
red hot but right.
The rest of the class came in
The dumb runny-nosed boy
pointed at the raggedy lion copy
I froze.
See, he said, it's like hers.
He turned
his big head smiling
I like your lion
It has a name and everything
His blue eyes shined at me
I think I said thank you.

Folding a Pale Sheet

M. L. Marinelli

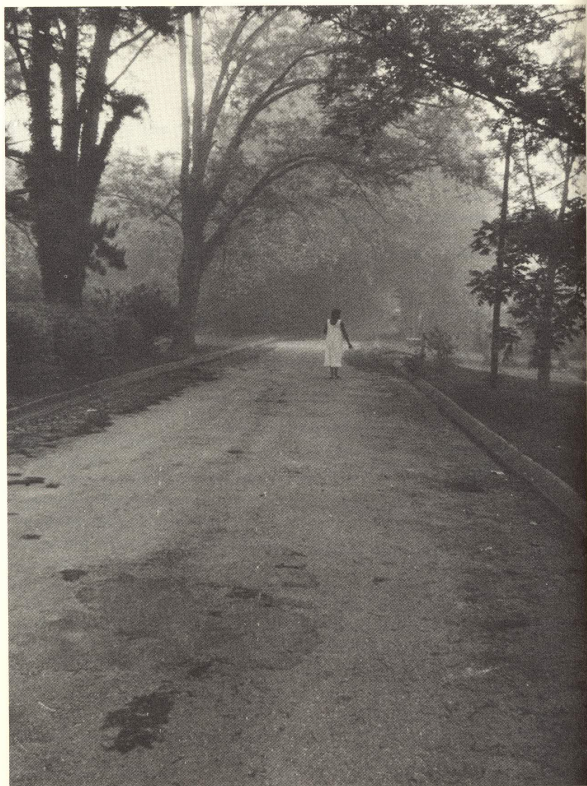
folding a pale sheet,
honing the crease with sincerity
she imagines his head
cradled by linen,
by her arms, her singing breasts.

she does not want a future,
only the feeling of him
slow as spring-fed
surrounding, allowing,
lapping at her until there is
no more wheat to crush.

she smells his courage.

like an Indian, his hands lace the pony's mane.
she wants those hands in her hair,
late sun washing her mane to red.
one circle of light,
only one more crisis in his eyes.
"prepare," she thinks,
willing him to move like the cougar,
past all tenses,
past stealth and grace.

and raising the carved blue beads to her ear
she hears his footsteps: years away, still,
the sharp intake of breath
when he first knows that
she is part of him.
like stomach.
like arms.



P. S. Davis

A Balcony Story

Anthony Bukoski

I give 'em a Tampa or two, go into an Indian Two-Step. Once in a while, feeling good, I throw in a Front Irish. Here's your basic Tampa: Scuff, Hop, Toe, Heel, Toe-Step, Brush-Step, Ball-Change. Say them like they're separate words. Say them fast, "Brush-Step, Ball-Change," and you get the rhythm of the Tampa. So if I'm a broken-down biddy with spider veins on her legs, who cares . . . I can dance! Watch me Shim-Sham! Watch me Wind the Clock! There's sixty years talking in them shoes, Mister.

"So you Wind the Clock," Eddie says. "Now work on your Tea for Two a little."

"I am already. Patience," I tell him. "Rome wasn't built in a day."

"We ain't in Rome, and we haven't practiced much, so come on."

I give him a Tea for Two. It's three brush-step, brush toe-steps in a circle. You automatically get the beat of the song in your head, just like you do this one: "It had to be you" (scuff, hop, toe, heel . . . back-step, brush-step, ball-change) "It had to be you" (scuff, hop, toe, heel . . .).

We've been at it fifty years. Oh, Jeezus, are we out of it, half-a-century behind. Even our stage name. There was something seemed left out when he suggested "Eddie and Ethel, The Dancing Couple" back in '37 in Duluth-Superior. "You gotta be crazy," I said that time. "That's it? Our name? 'Eddie and Ethel, The Dancing Couple?' Who's gonna hire anyone with monikers like that?"

"Work on your Back Irish and trust me," he said.

We've never had top billing. Clowns, magicians, comedians, animal acts—they came first in Houma and Willmar. In Blooming Prairie we were once upstaged by a flea circus. That was it as far as Eddie was concerned. He tried sales. He worked two weeks selling carbon paper door to door. That was in the sixties when offices were getting Xerox machines and nobody was using carbon paper. They thought the old guy, Eduardo The Carbon Paper Man, was a riot. They wished they could duplicate *him*. He'd stand all alone in the middle of the office and bow, thinking he was on stage at The Gaie-

ty. What a scene with them laughing, him doing a Back Irish out the door and telling me "No Sale" in the alley.

He got arrested a few weeks later—in "east Someplace" across a bridge from a molasses works, I remember. We never talked much about it. It's been years that it made the paper. He'd been walking along on the levee at midnight, sick about the carbon paper he'd spent a double sawbuck on. He started talking to people—men. The cops find out quick in east Someplace when someone new's working the levee. They hauled him in. When we left, the paper said, "Eddie Johnson, co-partner in 'Eddie and Ethel, The Dancing Couple,' lewd vagrancy, suspended sentence, ordered to leave town." The judge applauded when Eddie did a "wings," which is one of your hardest moves and usually saved for the grand finale. Both feet jumping, knees bent, arms, or "wings" going in a circle; this was Eddie in his prime. You shoulda seen!

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," he says from behind the curtain that separates our kitchen from the living-bedroom. "Here he is . . . dee-rect from the Pilgrim in Boston, the Lido in Vegas . . . world-renowned Septuagenarian of Tap . . . Ed-die John-s-s-on!"

He throws back the curtain and, shimmying, hits me with a Tampa, clicking out the beat on the linoleum of the bed-living room floor.

"Ready now? Watch your Eddie," he says.

I nod. He gives me a few more steps, backs up.

"Whew, I gotta sit a minute." He tries to hold himself in. He winks, out of breath. His hands are trembling. He falls back on the foldaway. He's still got hair or I don't know my Eddie, and he's still got teeth, but his face and belly sag like years of blue plate specials, years of rotten comics, plate spinners, and unicyclists have taken it out of him. When we're working a room, he wears his waist cinch under the shirt to tuck him up good. But how do you tuck up the face of a disappointed, bitter man who went nowhere in the business? His face is a reflection of our career, it looks to me. The wrinkles and the loose skin of seventy-four years collapse around his mouth and chin, drain downward. If his hatband reads Size 6 3/4, his lower face around the cheeks and jaw must be 7 1/2. Everything, his chin, his chest, settles toward those dancing feet. His hands got a beat, too. The doc called it "the trembles, a harmless embarrassment, benign hereditary tremor."

"Stop that tremulousness," I sometimes tell him before we go on stage, "they'll think we're drinking."

He wears a canary-colored jacket, works with it off on "Little Brown Jug" or "The Sunny Side of the Street." Hands trembling,

belly pinched so's he can hardly breathe, he never misses a brush-step, never denies himself a ball-change or two. His dancing shirt's yellow around collar and cuffs, maybe it's missing a button, maybe the pants with the black velvet stripes down the side are frayed, maybe lewd vagrancy. . . .

Way back in Kansas City it was like that—pain and disappointment forty years ago. I know what made his face and belly drain down. I was with him. I was part of it. The ads read,

See the Special 3-Unit Full-Length,
Big-Time Burlesque Show. Featuring Sunra,
Sun Bathed Nature Girl . . . Texas Rae,
Sweetheart of Texas . . . Rickey Rich,
New Orleans Fashion Plate Woman Impersonator.

Plus

8 ace funsters, 20 sassy lassies, 8 beautiful
dancers . . . You'll laugh a lot . . . you may
blush a little . . . but you won't be bored.
We dare not tell you more.

Plus

Eddie and Ethel, The Dancing Couple

I mean, every day we'd put on the makeup, shoes, and smile. Did we get a mention in *Variety*? Did we at least get a line in *The Star*? Every day was work. K.C. was hot all that summer. We'd eat at the diner we liked on Prospect, then hurry back to the dressing room for continuous matinee and evening performances with a "Red Hot Rambler Show" Saturday midnights where, for a second before the houselights died, the dancers—. Well did they or didn't they? "We dare not tell you more."

A sign in the lobby read the place was "Refrigeration Cooled."

"Stay in the theater, honey. Don't go back to the room tonight," he'd say after the show. "You'll bake. I can take heat. I'll run over, check on things, maybe grab a sandwich to bring you. Be gone a minute."

"Sure, Ed. I'm bushed."

Sometimes if I was real bored I'd go to Union Station or walk down The Paseo, trying to get a breeze off the Missouri. The room was on 18th Street. He didn't want me coming up. I'd bake, too hot, he'd say . . . said he was "on retreat," needed to be alone to work on steps. He had the wood suitcase in the room. It's a block of wood with a handle for when you're traveling and want to practice. On wood

you get the real sounds of tap better than you do on tile or linoleum.

I found out later he was dancing on the suitcase. He was whispering insinuations, whispering brush steps when I knocked. A woman's voice said, "Don't open!" I guess I knew about Eddie by then. "Don't open," the woman's voice said. The hall stunk of cabbage.

"Who you got in there?" I said.

"Don't be dumb," he said. "I'm changing clothes. I been practicing. You know the 'Shim-Sham' we do—?"

"It's me," Rickey Rich said. "We're having a cigarette together, talking." (Rickey Rich, female impersonator, would "die" one day when she hung up her gowns and went back to being Cloyd Follner of Metairie.)

Even back in K.C. when I caught him with her/him, Eddie's face was red and sinking and he had what the doc called "a mild-to-coarse shaking of the hands." I had walked in. He was naked. She had on a blue skirt and a pink veil. As his partner I wasn't giving him what he needed. The thing in "east Someplace" when the carbon paper business went under was for money. I could understand that. But what business could he have been talking about with Rickey Rich two blocks off The Paseo past midnight? It was all part of his disappointments.

So this was Eddie, I thought, a double threat. This was my partner and husband—blond hair which he touched up from time to time to get the highlights, green eyes which weren't gonna be fulfilled in this business no matter what, raspberry mouth which whispered "brush-step, ball-change" to me in bed at night as though he had his tap shoes on. And all of this eventually sagging toward the ground.

I see his kind from our room every day now, from our balcony. We have two rooms on a fourth floor, a long walk up from the city street. In the alley in back I've seen people crawl out of garbage cans, guys practicing what the "septuagenarian of tap" himself once did on the levee, seems like a century ago. Whenever I see myself in a window—thinning hair, rouge deep within the crevice of my cheeks—I'm reminded of Eddie entertaining the judge that time when I still didn't look half bad in the window of the bar across the street. On the balcony of the fourth floor fire escape, I now watch and listen for dancing feet. From up here I watch my life go by. When it's hot and Eddie's asleep, I sit out thinking of the fellow Jean Harlowe married, of how when she saw him undressed, he didn't have anything to show for himself . . . was real little and had to strap on this thing which she laughed at. Where we're going we couldn't afford to get in to live, but they give you lunch if you're with the show.

"I'm ready. Fully recovered," Eddie says. "Musta practiced a little too hard."

The Tampa's stationary, the Indian Two-Step a traveling step. "Watch me," he says. He gets up from the foldaway, puts on his canary jacket. "Watch me travel. I'm stepping over in front, see . . . hopping on the right, stepping back, sliding, gliding, hopping. I'm stepping together, brush-step, ball-change. How you like me this way?" he says.

He dances down the fire escape, does a Shim-Sham at the bottom, does a Break, Winds and Unwinds the Clock. I love his style—excuses, regrets, lies. He left me with a broken heart in Conneaut when he had a job in Sandusky. Sounds lousy, but you don't know my dancing Eddie, his hips, his knees. No one does a scuff, hop like Eddie. At the Roxy with an orchestra, me in blue chiffon with pink feather headdress, him in his canary coat; it's me for him and him for me. Lewd vagrancy or not, it's official. You can tell *that* to the judge!

We practice out on the street. Waiting for the bus, I do a Double Seven, then jump on the sidewalk as cars pass by, Eddie giving me his velvet, raspberry sound, "Ta-cha . . . ta-cha-cha . . ." he's saying.

I say, "You look great for being in your eight—"

A line of cars zips past.

"Seventies!" he says. "Oh, watch the feet of fire!" He hits me with a Cabriole, insinuates me, syncopates me, travels sideways, taps out. "Be careful," he says. When I think he's gonna step into the path of an oncoming truck, he shimmies at the driver and breaks into a "Front Essence."

"You goofy old son-of-a-bitch, watch out!" the man yells. Raising his finger, he speeds by. It's good to get a job in the business. We read *Variety* every night in the library. Eddie's even practicing a stand-up routine for when our legs give out.

"Ethel Johnson, Two drunks walkin' down the railroad tracks, one says, 'Oh, my achin' head,' Other one says, 'Head nothin', these stairs are killin' me.' Ta-cha . . . Ta-cha," goes his voice as he breaks into a "Flap Step and Turn."

"Eddie Johnson," I say, "heard about the two Irish quee—." As soon as I get to the word, I realize I shouldn't of brought up the subject.

"No, tell me what, Ethel Johnson."

"—two Irish queens? Hugh Fits Patrick and Patrick Fits Hugh."

I shouldn't of told it. Don't know why I did. "You loved me, Eddie,

didn't you, in K.C., Davenport, Mason City? You know, all over? Didn't you love me, Eddie? Wasn't it true between us?" Some of the pink feathers of my headdress mat together. Over my costume I wear a coat from the Next to New Shop. He gives me a Nelson Eddy stare. I shouldn't of started the joke.

"I liked you not in Grand Forks," he says. "I'm a poet, too."

"Did you have a girlfriend I didn't know about? Is that why you didn't love me in Grand Forks?"

"What do you think Rickey Rich wasn't? I liked you not in Grand Forks."

"You don't make sense."

"Your 'scissors' were lousy, your 'paddle step' a disgrace, dear."

"Well how about you and Rickey Rich, who was really Cloyd Fol—?"

"Clever conundr—condom. Lemme explain, Ethel. You might've forgot it in old age. Our aim with the 'Wings' and other steps is to create sounds that, when you think about them, are impossible. How can I move this foot twice, see, and get four sounds outta two?"

"You loved me in Scott's Bluff, I know that much, Eddie."

"Maybe I was making two sounds outta one. How would you know? Maybe I was discreet," he says. "How would you know? Was it magic?" He laughs, claps his hands, taps his feet. "Ethel Johnson, two guys and a gal in an elevator when the lights go out. Gal says, 'Now you two behave yourselves in the presence of a lady!' Half-hour later, 'You two? You two?'"

Cars speed by. "Look-it the old bastards!" someone yells.

We need tokens for the 10th Avenue bus. If Harold's driving, we do the "Cuban Pete." He knows we're light and lets us on if there's no one else getting on behind.

"Face me quick!" Eddie says. As the bus rolls up, we step-across, ball-change, reverse. Before we finish doing a shimmy-up, we see Harold opening the door.

"Where to, Eddie and Ethel? Lemme guess. Paramount? Windsor?"

"Rose Room at The Towers," Eddie says. "Matinee. Looks like we still got it. The feet don't stop."

"Pretty swank, the Rose Room. What's a guy to do though, hey?" Harold says.

"How're you these days?" we ask.

"Bound up from drivin' all day. Some dancin's what I need to move around, get out of this seat. I don't know."

We go from 9th Street to 28th where the Rose Room is. Eddie

could never make it on foot, has to save what he can for today's matinee show.

"Big, crowded city, but if you're gonna work, I guess, hey," Harold says. We hop, step, and turn out the door, give him a Front Essence for good measure.

"You gonna do 'Limehouse'?" he asks, leaves us dancing in a cloud of exhaust fumes.

In the Rose Room they're lined up. There must be eighty-ninety waiting for the show, all dressed up, rich, expensive, show-going people. Some of the finest in town.

"It's our meal ticket," says Eddie. "No worse than Duluth-Superior."

"A start, Eddie," I say.

"Ladies and gents," the emcee says from the stage, "The Towers is proud to welcome two of your favorites, Eddie and Elea—no Ethel. Remember them now with a big round of applause."

"It's us," he says as we wait three bars, then travel out. They smile when they see us and clap. And old guy hollers nobody cares for him, his kids don't come to see him.

It's "Limehouse Blues" time, "Cuban Pete" time. They like us in the Rose Room, *love* us here. Nurses push them out onto the floor. Nurses swing the wheelchairs back and forth, dancing along behind. Some of the audience have come with walkers and canes. Some sleep with mouths open. Snores syncopate "Sleepy Time Gal." The half-dead old folks stare at the floor. They always enjoy a Cabriole. Thank God, it's "Refrigeration Cooled." Thank God there's lewd vagrancy. I heard a joke once. "Eddie Johnson—Two guys and a gal in an elevator when the lights went out—"

"Shimmy for me, honey," Eddie whispers. "Front Irish like your life depended on it."

"I am, Eddie," I whisper back.

Jeezus are we traveling now. Jeezus are we going places. □

Blueprint

Paul Grant

I understand its music so well
I can sit at a piano and forget
I never played, can feel as though
I simply made a decision one
day never go play again.

It's all about the bad luck
of parents, that the best
they could do was never enough
to keep their children from becoming
homeless slaves to the tyrant freedom,
wounded though always on the mend,
doomed to survive long enough to know

We're almost saved by dreams,
but even in dreams
a white bird flies
from a black hand,
singing us through the door
in time that's invisible
except when it's opening.

So on this side of the door,
I try to make them laugh
with my lies about the weather
and my pratfalls. But I don't
play piano anymore.

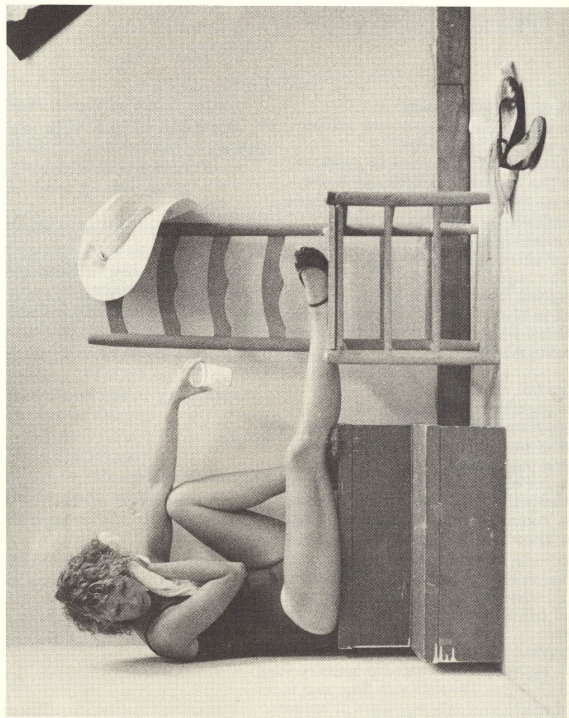
Proud Flesh

Charles Semones

Full of yourself already,
you should have known your leaving
was tossing light away—
your body-light I'd come to count on,
like the fire you'd built in my heart:
fire as cold as this month's ghosthood
of redbud, constant as my name,
on greening hills, in dim hollows.
As dusk comes on, you won't tease me
in the curvature of wind
haunting its way back home.
I sit in clean sight of the rusty bell,
without a clapper, that signifies your
famous silence.

Your absence dangles
in midair, midbrain,
like the unanswered question
I never dared to ask when you were here.
I've always thought proud flesh
means *not healed right*,
but you're proud flesh of another kind
entirely, the kind that brings a person
low. Too much pride goes before a fall:
you know how strict the scripture reads.
Some old would-be saint lessoned you
in those drawly mornings, afternoons
of Sundays racked by tedium and guilt.
And to think you're the one who turned out
truant.

It's plain as Polaris you know how
to keep away. Rest easy. No country song
will find you. Seasons will flare and fade;
cold snaps and rain squalls will happen.
Now you're too far north for love or pity. . . .
I pare my heart down to its core for truth:
you've been gone so long, I'm halfway
used to it, half over the wasted light,
the proud flesh of you.



P. S. Davis

T. S. Stribling and the Florence Trilogy

Benjamin Buford Williams

THE FORGE, 525 pages; THE STORE, 571 pages; UNFINISHED CATHEDRAL, 383 pages. By T. S. Stribling. With introductions by Randy K. Cross. The Library of Alabama Classics. The University of Alabama Press. \$27.50 cloth. \$12.95 paperback.

No Southern writer, and certainly no Alabama writer of major significance, with the possible exception of William March, has been more neglected by modern critics and readers than T. S. Stribling. Thomas Sigismund Stribling was born in Clifton, Tennessee, on March 4, 1881. His mother was Amelia Waits of Lauderdale County, Alabama, whose brothers had served in the Confederate Army, and his father was Christopher Columbus Stribling, of Lawrence County, Tennessee, who had served in the Union Army. His father was a staunch Republican and his mother an unswerving Democrat so Tom Stribling, as he put it, was always "neutral" on the Civil War and politics. He grew up in Clifton, but spent much of his childhood at his grandfather's place near Gravelly Springs, Alabama. In his autobiography, *Laughing Stock*, Stribling recounts his experiences of coming down the river on a steamboat and walking the country roads of Lauderdale County alone. His parents ran a small country store in Clifton, and as Tom grew older he clerked in the store and was able to observe the characters who frequented the place. The slow pace of minding the store allowed him to read a wide variety of books and to begin writing stories of his own. At the age of twelve, he sold his first story which was published and distributed as a grocery store pamphlet. After brief stints as a weekly newspaper editor and as a law clerk, Stribling attended Florence Normal School (now the University of North Alabama), graduating in 1903. He taught school in Tuscaloosa for a short time, and attended the University of Alabama Law School, receiving the law degree in 1905. He began the practice of law in the office of Emmett O'Neal, a distinguished Florence attorney and son of former Alabama gover-

nor Edward Asbury O'Neal. (Emmett O'Neal became governor in 1911, the only father-son governors of Alabama.) Stribling's position with the O'Neal firm lasted only eight months as it became apparent that Stribling was more interested in writing stories than in a law career.

Stribling had submitted a few pieces to the *Taylor-Trotwood Magazine* in Nashville, Tennessee, and when the editor, John Trotwood Moore, offered him a job on the magazine at ten dollars a week, he readily accepted it and bid farewell to the law forever. Although his job amounted to little more than office boy, Stribling relished the opportunity to be involved in an enterprise that encouraged creative writing, which his parents, especially his father, had tried to discourage. One of the by-products of this job was that Stribling met an aspiring writer who told him of the money to be made from stories written for Sunday School publications. In addition, Stribling found another ready market in adventure stories for such periodicals as *American Boy*. Though the price paid for these stories was minimal, he was able to sell a sufficient number of them to finance travel in the United States, the Caribbean, and South America. Stribling's career as a novelist began in 1917 with the publication of his juvenile sea story *The Cruise of the Dry Dock*. The sales from this book provided him with enough money to give up his reporter's job on the *Chattanooga News* and return to Clifton to devote full time to writing. He sold stories to *Adventure Magazine* and *Everybody's Magazine* while working on his second novel. He completed this book-length story dealing with the plight of an educated black who returned to the South hoping to serve his people. By 1921, having failed to find a publisher for the novel, Stribling decided to take a trip to the Caribbean. He left his manuscript with a friend and asked him to circulate it among New York publishers. While he was on this trip, he received word that *Century Magazine* wanted to publish the novel serially, and with his permission *Birthright* appeared in *Century* beginning in the fall of 1921. The same publishing firm brought out the novel in book form in 1922. On his return to the United States, Stribling wrote and published two novels based on his Latin American adventures, *Fombombo* (1923) and *Red Sand* (1924).

When Stribling turned again to novels of his native South and the social problems brought about by changes wrought by the Civil War, he was on solid ground. *Teefallow* (1926) was published by Doubleday, his publisher for all of his later books, and was his most successful novel up to that time. He wrote a stage play version of the book which had a limited run in New York under the title *Rope*.

Two more novels with Southern settings followed: *Bright Metal* (1928) and *Backwater* (1930). Sandwiched between these books was his final return to the Latin American theme with *Strange Moon* (1929).

Stribling's major contribution to the Southern Literary Renaissance was embodied in his "Florence trilogy," *The Forge* (1931), *The Store* (1932), and *Unfinished Cathedral* (1934), recently reprinted by The University of Alabama Press in its Library of Alabama Classics series. It was for the second novel of the trilogy that Stribling was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1933. These novels, set in and around Florence, Alabama, center on the Vaiden family whose lives and actions symbolize the changes taking place in Florence and the South from the 1860s to the 1920s.

The Forge, the first novel of the Vaiden saga, covers the period from the eve of the Civil War into the Reconstruction era. The three families whose lives and fortunes are intertwined in the novel are the Lacefields, antebellum aristocrats; the Vaidens, yeoman farmers of pre-war Alabama; and the BeShears, a family of country storekeepers. Stribling treats objectively and realistically such matters as slavery, miscegenation, emancipation, Reconstruction, and the Ku Klux Klan. Whereas the treatment of this same period by most other novels, such as *Gone with the Wind*, deals with the disintegration of the antebellum way of life in terms of the socially prominent, Stribling focuses on the impact of change upon the middle-class Vaiden family. Over the course of the trilogy, the Vaidens embody Stribling's major theme—the passing of social, political, and economic power from the families and institutions of the plantation to the lower and middle class opportunists and entrepreneurs of the post-Civil War period and early twentieth century.

Miltiades Vaiden is the protagonist of the entire trilogy, but *The Forge* begins and ends with the story of Jimmie Vaiden, an Alabama cotton farmer and blacksmith, who fathered three sets of children including Gracie, daughter of his mulatto slave. Jimmie's son, Miltiades, is engaged to Drusilla Lacefield, daughter of the upper-class family that lives on a nearby plantation on which Miltiades is the overseer. Drusilla jilts Miltiades for a more socially prominent suitor, Emory Crowninshield, who, during the Civil War, is colonel of Miltiades's regiment and is killed at Shiloh. During the war Miltiades rose to the rank of colonel, became regimental commander after Crowninshield's death, and returned to Alabama a war hero. After the war, he was the leader of the Klan in the Florence area, and hoped to marry the widowed Drusilla and take over the Lacefield plantation. The Klan's attempt to keep the freed blacks working as

tenants on cotton plantations was thwarted by carpetbaggers who lured the blacks to Florence by promising free food in return for their votes for the Republican gubernatorial candidate. The Lacefields, along with other cotton growers, were unable to maintain their plantation without the black labor and were forced to sell out and move to Florence where they lived in gentile poverty.

Miltiades Vaiden's last hope for a new start in the post-war period was tied to the cotton crop on his father's land. Unable to keep their former slaves as tenants, Miltiades and his sister managed to harvest about \$2,000 worth of cotton, their pride forcing them to pick the cotton at night. The money for the cotton was placed with J. Handback, a Florence storekeeper, who accepted the money even though he planned to declare bankruptcy. The loss of the money drove old Jimmie Vaiden from planter and slave owner back to the "forge" where he had begun as a blacksmith, turning out horseshoes at ten cents each. The reversal of fortune of Jimmy Vaiden symbolizes the collapse of the antebellum regime.

For Miltiades, the loss of the money leads to his jilting Drusilla and marrying Ponny BeShears, daughter of the low-class country storekeeper. At the end of the novel, Miltiades came to understand the shifting power structure in the South but was not yet ready to abandon his antebellum code of conduct. He noted that the times

would require a somewhat different man from the slave owner.
... who was not too scrupulous about his business methods.
... The reins of power in the South would be transferred to tradesmen, to shopkeepers, to men like Handback, or even to such a grub as Alex BeShears.

The Store begins in the 1880s with the fortunes of Miltiades Vaiden, now in his forties, at a low ebb. Losing the cotton money in the Handback bankruptcy reduced Miltiades to a squalid existence in a poor section of Florence on the small income derived from his marriage to Ponny BeShears. By accident, he discovered the clandestine relationship between Handback and Gracie, the Vaiden's former slave. Miltiades was able to blackmail Handback into giving him a clerkship in Handback's store, and later manager of Handback's cotton farms. Vaiden secretly sold 500 bales of Handback's cotton for \$48,000 and hid the money with Gracie. When Handback had Miltiades arrested so that he could search Vaiden's house, he and the sheriff frightened the pregnant Ponny into a miscarriage and death. In order to avoid a lawsuit, Handback settled with Vaiden for \$10,000

of the money, leaving Vaiden with \$38,000 to build his future upon.

With his less-than-honorably acquired capital, Miltiades opened a store in Florence. He muses on the fact that the store is not the one he envisioned:

He had meant to found a large, handsome store, but he had reproduced, almost automatically, Handback's store, BeShears store, and a thousand other stores throughout the South.

The disintegration of Miltiades Vaiden's antebellum ideals reinforces Stribling's theme of the shift of power and influence to the shop-keeper class. In summing up his joining the group he despised, Vaiden realized:

He had no manor; he had no liberal and cultivating amusements, nor was he a patron of the arts. He pursued none of the *post bellum* graces of life, and for all he was getting out of his money, he might just as well be Handback, or his father-in-law Alex BeShears, or any other of the ten thousand money grubbers in the South. He was disturbed and disappointed in himself. After he had transferred the ownership of the cotton from Handback to himself it was a sort of moral duty for him to use it at least with more enlightenment than Handback had been doing.

But, of course, Miltiades became one of the "money grubbers" and ultimately became more successful at the game than any of the others. By compromising his antebellum values, he rose through the "store" to become an opportunistic tenant landlord, banker, and entrepreneur of the "New South."

Unfinished Cathedral moves the story of the Vaidens forward some forty years, and Miltiades, now in his eighties, is the wealthiest and most powerful man in Florence. Although Miltiades remains the symbol of the rise to economic power of the middle class and is the protagonist of the entire trilogy, his nephew, Jerry Catlin, emerges as the central figure in this novel, symbolizing Stribling's theme of the secularization of religion. Catlin is the son of Miltiades's sister and a former Union soldier from Tennessee (reflecting Stribling's own parents). Catlin is a Methodist minister whose beliefs sound very much like a civic club creed. He was brought to Florence through the influence of his uncle to be the assistant minister of the church, but primarily to be a fundraiser for the nondenominational All Souls Cathedral which Miltiades hopes will be his monument and tomb.

Catlin is also troubled by his repressed love for his uncle's young wife, the daughter of Drusilla Crowninshield, who had married the older Confederate hero who had been at the Shiloh battlefield where her father died.

Unfinished Cathedral is set during the land "boom" period of the 1920s in Florence. The basis for the boom is the building of Wilson Dam and the anticipated development of the Tennessee Valley as a new center of industry. The novel abounds in land speculation, racial tension, and religious vagaries. The rape trial of six black boys (obviously based on the Scottsboro case) threatens the land boom because of negative publicity which would frighten away northern capital. The leaders of the community unite to forestall a lynching, not out of moral suasion but by an appeal to the economic interests of the town which could be damaged by such action.

The novel is replete with ironies including the final one in which old Colonel Miltiades Vaiden is murdered in the "unfinished cathedral" which he had largely underwritten. Many people might have had reason to kill Vaiden, but the bomb-throwing assassin is the son of a vicious, white trash tenant farmer who has carried a grudge against Vaiden in a dispute over an eleven-dollar wagon. The bomb, in killing Vaiden, destroyed portions of the building as well. The ruined "cathedral," born of the commercialization of Florence and of religion, symbolizes in its demise the end of the land boom in Florence, and the end of the adulterated religious fervor of Miltiades Vaiden which prompted its building in the first place. The character of the Colonel, the last to bear the Vaiden name and the last link to the Confederate past, is the embodiment of both the passage of the traditions of the Old South and the emergence of the crass commercialism of the New South.

In summary, the trilogy gives us a realistic, if unflattering, picture of the changing South. Jimmie Vaiden of *The Forge* is the representative of the collapse of the slave economy, built on the labor of the blacks and defended by an invented code of behavior that disintegrates under the pressures of war, Federal occupation, and emancipation. With the code goes the political, economic, and social system that had developed out of slavery and the frontier. In *The Store*, Stribling gives us the central theme of the rise to power of the shopkeeper class, supplanting the plantation owners in influence, wealth, and power. The storekeeper, such as Handback, succeeded in the post-war period by foreclosing farm mortgages, untroubled by the honor code that governed the Lacefields on the upper-class level and the Vaidens on the middle-class level. Miltiades Vaiden realized

that he could sacrifice his honor for wealth and position. Even though he justified his theft of Handback's cotton as a retaliation for Handback's earlier unscrupulous taking of the Vaiden cotton money, Miltiades came to know that he had joined the Handbacks and the BeShears as moneygrubbers. *Unfinished Cathedral* is Stribling's ultimate statement of man's pious hope and worldly show. Miltiades's monetary support of the building of All Souls Cathedral is his attempt to provide himself with a memorial that "would tell the passer-by that Colonel Miltiades Vaiden had lived." The bomb that killed him and partially destroyed the unfinished cathedral marks the final destruction of the values once held by him, including his commercialization of religion in the building raised to glorify man rather than God.

With the perspective of more than half a century since Stribling published these novels, readers today should be able to judge the accuracy of his portrayals of Southern people and institutions, unencumbered by the contemporary sensitivities of Southern readers and critics of the 1930s. The republication of the Florence trilogy will give modern readers an opportunity to become acquainted with one of the most powerful social realists in American fiction in the twentieth century. Stribling was an uncompromising interpreter of the changes taking place in the South and in Alabama from the Civil War to the Great Depression. □

A Gathering around Robinson Jeffers

Christopher Cokinos

THE ROBINSON JEFFERS NEWSLETTER: A JUBILEE GATHERING, 1962-1988. Edited by Robert J. Brophy. Los Angeles: Occidental College, 1988. 222 pages. \$20.

The rehabilitation of Robinson Jeffers is underway. Stanford University Press is issuing his collected poetry. Robert Hass recently edited a selection of Jeffers's poems, *Rock and Hawk*. The Random House book has garnered much positive attention, as readers rediscover the prophetic, disquieting power of this poet who declared:

One light is left us: the beauty of things, not men;
The immense beauty of the world, not the human world.
Look—and without imagination, desire nor dream—directly
At the mountains and sea. Are they not beautiful?
These plunging promontories and flame-shaped peaks
Stopping the somber stupendous glory, the storm-fed ocean?

(“De Rerum Virtute”)

American Poetry Review in 1987 featured “Home,” a previously unpublished Jeffers narrative. In its fifth anniversary issue, the journal *American Poetry* devoted all its pages to Jeffers criticism, publishing, among other things, approving commentaries by poets as diverse as Betty Adcock and John Hollander. With the renewed interest in narrative among contemporary poets, Jeffers's thick narrative oeuvre is attracting attention; Mark Jarman discussed Jeffers's narrative “The Love and the Hate” in a 1985 essay in *New England Review/Bread Loaf Quarterly*. And, as the critic Terry Beers has said, new critical approaches and the general opening up of the canon mean for Jeffers's work the possibility of “a greater measure of respect.”

There have always been readers of Jeffers, of course. His 1939 *Selected Poetry* was reprinted several times. Many naturalists

venerate Jeffers—as they do, say, Aldo Leopold—as one of the essential writers of the environmental movement. William Nolte notes in *Rock and Hawk: Robinson Jeffers and the Romantic Agony* that he could be “the most widely read ‘unread’ poet in world literature.” As well, Jeffers has a core of dedicated critics, who have studied and stood by the poet, some more as partisan defenders than as scholars. Despite the resurgence of interest (there have been others, though this one seems more deep), Jeffers still remains little taught. If he is represented in the classroom at all, likely it is with only one or two poems—“Shine, Perishing Republic” and “Hurt Hawks,” for example. He is hardly regarded as the major American poet some believe him to be.

But the 1987 centennial of Jeffers’s birth gave his supportive critics and readers a chance to celebrate and evaluate: There were festivals, exhibitions, and publications, including the book, *The Robinson Jeffers Newsletter: A Jubilee Gathering, 1962-1988*. *Jeffers Newsletter* editor Robert J. Brophy, a noted Jeffers scholar, has brought together a diverse collection of articles, letters, memoirs, documents, and photographs—even a poem by Czeslaw Milosz. The book not only demonstrates the lively history of the *Newsletter* but also, importantly, helps illuminate our understanding of the poet.

The *Newsletter* began publishing in 1962, the year Jeffers died. The publication was first under the tutelage of the poet’s biographer Melba Berry Bennett, then passed to Brophy. He comments in his preface, “The *Newsletter* has become the repository of things useful to scholars, instructive to aficionados, and of interest to all who delve into the poet for whatever purpose.”

The son of a preacher, Jeffers was educated in boarding schools in Switzerland before attending Occidental College, from which he graduated at 18, in 1905. He then foundered upon the direction his life should take, studying medicine, literature, and forestry. Complicating matters was his affair with Una Call Kuster, who, at that time, was married to a prominent attorney. Una and Robinson were finally married in 1913, with every intention that they would live in England, where Jeffers would write his poems.

World War I prevented them from pursuing their overseas adventure, so they settled in Carmel, California, their “inevitable place,” Jeffers once said. As Brophy writes in his introduction, “Jeffers freely identified the two greatest influences on his life and poetry as the Carmel landscape and his wife, Una.” Jeffers spent the rest of his life on the coast, traveling only occasionally from the home, Tor House, which he built with his own hands from seashore boulders and in

which he, Una and their twin sons lived. Brophy writes:

The Carmel Big Sur landscape was both Jeffers' medium and his message. All of his poetry from 1914 quarried its seascape and crenelated canyons, isolated beaches and foreboding headlines for symbol, theme, and story. The landscape taught Jeffers—the violent nature of beauty and the importunate epiphanies of God, the cycle of storm and serenity, solstice and equinox, erosion and burgeoning life.

That Jeffers is so closely identified with this landscape is both part of his strength and part of the explanation of why he has been ignored—in the mainstream—by many critics and writers. Long perceived as a misanthropic crank of interest only for his descriptions of the California coast, Jeffers has not fared well critically.

After being hailed in the 1920s with his breakthrough volume *Tamar*, which he published after two unsuccessful, immature, and lackluster books, Jeffers saw his reputation rise. (Jeffers, in April 1932, became the first of only two poets—the other was T. S. Eliot—to grace the cover of *Time* magazine. The striking Edward Weston portrait *Time* used is reproduced in *A Jubilee Gathering*.) But in the coming decades his reputation peaked then plummeted. His dark vision of human psychology and civilization, his insistence that “the excellence of things” placed humanity in a diminished role in this vast universe that was his god, his indifference to literary politics, his continued emphasis on narratives—all these played against Jeffers. No longer the novelty he was early in his publishing career, Jeffers was out of step with politics and fashion. Reviewers, critics and fellow writers no longer cared to hear of his transhuman worldview, nor did they respect his style—long lines, bold statements and narratives steeped in incest and violence, Jeffers's emblems of human introversion.

His standing had fallen a long way from the praise of Babette Deutsch, who, upon reading *Tamar*, said she “felt somewhat as Keats professed to feel, on looking into Chapman's Homer.” By the time *Hungerfield* was published in 1954—the last of Jeffers's collections before his death—the taciturn and aged poet labored in hard times. His wife had died. He was in declining health. And while awards were bestowed and some of his plays were produced (with varying success), he was not nearly as praised nor recognized as when he had burst onto the American scene. But Jeffers, in his last days, wasn't much bothered by the indifference nor by attacks from writers like Ken-

neth Rexroth, who thought Jeffers a pompous, incompetent rhetorician.

Over the years, Jeffers's readership *outside* fashionable circles has responded positively to his poems that are, as Brophy puts it, " 'mini-sermons' to a race out of 'sync' with its world . . . (and) parables for understanding the world and man's place in it."

One such positive response is included in *A Jubilee Gathering*. Poet Dana Gioia's review of the Hass-edited *Rock and Hawk* was originally published in *The Nation* and reprinted in the *Newsletter*; it appears as the last long piece in this anthology. Well-reasoned, well-written, and altogether praiseful, Gioia concludes, "Jeffers has entered his second century quite splendidly."

Shorter, but also significant, is the response Gioia's review prompted from Edward Abbey, again published in *The Nation*, then in the *Newsletter* and now in the anthology:

Jeffers is one of our great and basic American poets, right in there with Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams. Jeffers in fact was more than a great poet; he was a great prophet. Everything he wrote about the corruption of empire, the death of democracy, the destruction of our planet and the absurd self-centered vanity of the human animal has come true tenfold since his time.

A Jubilee Gathering is more than a collection of laudatory reviews, however. In fact, Gioia's is the only review, as such, printed in the book. (No reviews published during Jeffers's career are reprinted here.) There are several items of note.

The book includes some of Jeffers's early and obscure (some possibly pseudonymous) verses, whose lines hold little promise. They are, in fact, dreadful. But to read them is useful, if for nothing else to see how far he came in breaking out of the mold of conventional versification and sensibility. Scholars likely will appreciate these poems' having been collected in one place.

These early works are in stark contrast to a late poem, "Whom Should I Write For?" a poem to his deceased wife that opens the book. "I think it is taken," the poet says of his wife's consciousness, "into the great dream of the earth; for this dark planet/Has its own consciousness, from which yours came,/And now returns . . .".

Kamil Bednar's "Robinson Jeffers in Czechoslovakia" is perhaps the book's most interesting article; it brings to light the fascinating fact that Jeffers's work has been quite popular in that country. In

1962, for example, a 5,000-copy edition of "The Loving Shepherdess" sold out in two days. From 1958 to 1983 10 volumes of Jeffers translations have sold 136,000 copies in Czechoslovakia. The magazine *Kultura* exalted Jeffers this way: "Discovery of poetical America! . . . Jeffers is one of the greatest poetical personalities of this century."

Memoirs of the poet and his family abound in this book. The famous photographer Horace Lyon writes of the difficulty of capturing on film an unguarded and relaxed Jeffers, while Richard Eberhart recalls a visit with Jeffers and muses on the quality of his life and art.

Among the 21 chapters in *A Jubilee Gathering* are explications of "Hungerfield" and "Return" and an analysis of the complex time structure of Jeffers's verse play "Dear Judas" (which includes some background on Jeffers's dramas, a neglected area of study). There is a history of Tor House, written by son Donnan, and a series of letters from Una to a friend.

Clearly, with such diversity of material, some articles will be of greater interest than others. The casual reader may not be terribly interested, for example, in the extensive bibliographic checklists or a detailed history of Jeffers's association with the Quercus Press. Some scholars likely will be. There is a lot here, and much of interest to anyone who knows Jeffers, even if only from the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. The book is attractively designed and illustrated with photographs of the poet, the California coast, his home, and drafts of letters and poems. Robert Brophy provides useful headnotes to the chapters, though there is, frustratingly, no index.

"What have I to do with you?" asks Czeslaw Milosz in his poem "To Robinson Jeffers," reprinted here from his collected poems. Milosz gives Jeffers his respectful regard, but still decides, "And yet you did not know what I know. The earth teaches/More than does the nakedness of elements. No one with impunity/ gives to himself the eyes of a god." The poem is powerful, and a contrast to the many acclamatory works in this book. It is a welcomed addition—welcomed for its balance and its beauty as a fine poem in its own right.

There is, of course, some distance between the conclusions of Milosz and the accolades of Gioia and others here. But all these writers and critics are responding to the unusual power and integrity that Robinson Jeffers's poems (and life) possessed. The responses are illuminating and provocative, as is much in *The Robinson Jeffers Newsletter: A Jubilee Gathering, 1962-1988*. This is a fine gathering. □

Alabama Literary Review National Young Writers' Contest

The purpose of the Dorothy K. Adams Award is to encourage and reward creative writing at the secondary level. The winner for 1990 is:

Jennifer Hill
Auburn, Alabama

Fortuity

Jennifer Hill

Young Writers' Contest Winner 1990

Light pours through morning-glasses
Wet rings on coffee tables
Lipstick-red crescents on the rims of white porcelain cups
Stale cigarette smoke lingers in the folds of curtains.

Outside,
Dogs lie by the early streets
in slumber thick as mud,
patent-shiny noses nuzzled near the damp pavement,
licked by tongues of dawn.
Wet leaves cling to the buckled sidewalk
like leeches or sticky worms
trampled by an invasion
of school-bound slickers and clanging lunch pails.
Ambitious cars streak silvery by,
ignorant of the indolent mutts and clamorous children.

And in the squatting rows
of placid, red-faced houses
behind the half-shut lids of yellowed shades,
clearing blue-flowered china
and smoothing white-sheeted beds
with prune-puckered hands,
the meticulous wives,
gray-faced and red-eyed,
mole-haired,
bleary as watery breakfast eggs.

But I am young like the day.

Full Moon on Dog Street

Jennifer Hill

Young Writers' Contest Winner 1990

Dog Street slides sideways by the lolling river,
licking at its asphalt banks with greedy tongues.
Wet black silks of pavement shimmer with metallic sheen;
Abandoned buildings cower like frightened trees;
Ragged windowpanes cry with gaping mouths.

The night overtakes the city slowly.
Like an enormous man cloaked in black
he rises from bent knees,
encircling in his shrouded arms its serrated edges,
inky cape falling in generous folds.
Head bowed, lips pursed,
his funneled breath blows the heavy fog,
rolling on oily currents,
tumbling over graveled concrete.
And his face, pale and watery,
grave as a corpse, solemn as a communion wafer,
suspended in the bat-winged spread
staring down on Dog Street.

Starless,
But for the gaseous neon streetlights
staring at their sisters in dark, glassy pools.
And another, propped against a pole,
glaring reproachfully at the moon,
resentful as a wayward son.
His face, rigid in the lunar light,
glows luminous white,
like an electric ghost.

Contributors

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Mary Leigh Marinelli is a professional photographer in Salem, Massachusetts. Otherwise, she writes poems, polishes silver, and travels with blood relatives.

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Thea Temple teaches English at the University of Cincinnati. She is currently completing a collection of short stories begun under a Taft Grant. She has fiction and poetry forthcoming in *The New Press*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Japanophile*, *Chiron Review*, and *Yellow Silk*.

A native of Alabama, **Benjamin Buford Williams** is a professor of English at Auburn University in Montgomery. He has published numerous articles on Alabama literature and biography. He has edited and co-authored many books and wrote *A Literary History of Alabama: The Nineteenth Century* (1979). He is included in *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of American Scholars*. □



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