



HAYDEN'S FERRY

R E V I E W

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At the upper end of the dancing floor, on a raised platform, sat the musicians—a young girl with a harp, a boy with a violin, and the old man, father of the other two musicians, blowing on a flute . . . Dancing was kept up until way in the night, which with flirtation, chit chat etc. made the hours pass away pleasantly.

Arizona Miner

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Trouble

I remember walking into Gaucho territory
wearing my Cobra jacket
and climbing those three flights
to where Renee Zucker was babysitting.
I was nothing then, the vessel
of nerves and hopes a teenager is,
so when I found trouble
I must have felt I'd located
part of myself.
I got away, untouched,
through the alleys and the park,
and later went back again.

Soon thereafter, in sports,
I found the legal excitement
within lines, the trouble
skill can get you out of,
the good drug of praise.
The cliches are true:
it was like being saved.

But trouble loves someone
who thinks he's trouble-free.
It slipped into my house,
it whispered to my parents.
And then on dates
it came along with me.

How foolish it seems
to ever have sought it,
ubiquitous as it is.
Renee Zucker always has another name.
And the Gauchos are forever waiting
for a mistake.

Now if trouble must come
in this adult night,
in this half-lit, half-understood
night of open doors and corners
still to turn,
I pray for trouble
to energize, quicken me,
to even be kind,
before I'm caught, hurt,
told to sing a foreign song.

An Orchestration of Dream

I, too, have been attracted to a voice
or shyness
and prefer subtle, deliberate accidents,

yet downstairs at the Booth Theater,
cocktail time
before showtime, she was someone to look at

before she moved, but when she walked
my way
first one nipple peeked out

from her high-necked black dress,
then the other,
alternating in rhythm

with her stride. The house lights
were flickering;
I followed the crowd toward *Equus*

and a different promise, played
and replayed her,
even imagined the shop, the mirror

she must have filled with visions
of herself,
that dress opening and closing,

her nipples like signals the sensate world
might slow down for,
erect, the fabric brushing against them

and my eyes, how many eyes she must
have conjured

before she said yes, I'll take it.

The theater darkened, and men with
horses' heads danced,
a wild incipience in the air.

I knew where she was sitting, closed up,
motionless,
like a secret half told,

the distance between us now part
of her genius,
her orchestration of dream.

Afterwards, I waited by the coat check
for one more look.
The man she was with, who didn't exist,

suddenly did. He held the claim check,
she his arm, then she
began to work herself, slowly,

into her coat as if always
there was more to do
before the diminishment

set in, the getting home.

Mannlich Among the Sheaves

Mannlich Veidt had a recurring nightmare in which appeared a sand dune, an iron-rusted phone booth, and a woman's choked-off scream. He'd been having the vision since moving to Marin a year ago, when he gave up Silicon Valley for a new life on his own terms. The software job he gave up willingly; the loss of his wife, Paula, was an unexpected consequence of the change. Waking from his visions, Mannlich rose from his bed and went out on the redwood deck to practice Yoga. With each Cobra, Breath of Life, or Salute to the Sun, he focused silver light into his solar plexus.

In the afternoon, his free-lance consulting work completed, he'd drive to Mill Valley and sit at a table at Tingles, sipping a Dubonnet and attempting eye contact with the ladies. If there was such a thing as a happy divorce—for there are happy marriages—Mannlich attained one. Paula had split amicably, and both of them moved into new lives as one might pick up and transfer consciousness into a new body. His books balanced, Mannlich cut his wife a check and mailed it for Tenerife each month, and he set an equal amount aside to pay for sailing lessons, a membership in the Marin Singles Society, for his afternoons at Tingles—frills that reminded him that work was not all there was to life. This year the books would slide completely into the black, so Mannlich Veidt decided he could take the time necessary to fall in love. The idea shined like a polished blade as it cleaved his imagination, and he ran a lemon wedge around the rim of his glass of Dubonnet.

Mannlich worked this new concept into his small red notebook, flaring out the word "love" with his pen. The world, he knew, was a sea in which the puckered fish could meet and press lips before returning to the business of gobbling each other. Most of all, love did not mean a complete overhaul of his priorities, and it would not mean an end to fun either. On the contrary. He scanned his copy of the Marin Singles Monthly, the tide tables for the social intercoastal waters. And he knew his

body's energy flashed on the tables at Tingles, proclaiming his availability, the silver light of his openness.

In the late afternoon, Tingles was awash with possibility. Mannlich's eyes prowled the tables while his hand moved pen across notebook. He absently rubbed his clean-shaven chin, inspecting for stubble. Then, he was staring into his own reflection, mirrored by sunglasses of a woman at the table next to his. Her hair was pulled back into a French braid and her jaw moved in a small, polite chewing motion. He watched the jaw. She seemed preoccupied with her salad, and moved chunks of avocado across the lettuce. To Mannlich's amazement, she glanced up and smiled, her glazed lips parting beneath the twin reflections of his own startled face.

Mannlich raised a hand in a calm wave, worried at once that his upturned palm might be mistaken for a defensive gesture. So he stood and went to her table, offering his hazel eyes and an invitation that she join him.

"No," said the woman, "but please sit here with me."

Her name was Sheridan Hyphen-something and Mannlich listened while she described her important family and acquaintances about whom she hardly gave a shit. He felt the urgent desire to reach up and lift the glasses from her face, thought about directing his energy into that idea, hoping Sheridan would feel his pressure and remove them herself.

"You're not married," she said. "But you have been."

Mannlich sat silently.

"Or you were recently. You've been out of the swim of things. You're much too polite."

"Well then," he answered, tilting his head like a bird does when it is thinking, "what would you say to a night in the city?"

"I'd say, Mannlich, you're over-compensating."

He felt a meanness start inside him, but he squelched it. She smiled faintly.

"You think I'm just a rich bitch, don't you?"

"Oh, no . . ."

Sheridan jabbed her fork into the heart of lettuce and then she stood up.

"I'd like to meet you again," she said. "When you're over your shyness."

She took up her bill and turned away. Mannlich watched her disappear behind a jungle of ferns, and he took inventory: designer jeans stuffed into cowboy boots, small cheery ass, a

margin of tanned skin between belt and fluttery blouse, that tight, twisted braid. A few nights later, his nightmares returned and the woman's screams pierced his sleep.

Mannlich felt it was not a matter of coincidence, but calculated fate that brought him to Sheridan at a hot-tub party on Mount Tam. The party was portentiously organized around massages, cocaine, and Napa wines. In the tub, Mannlich was neck-deep in the frothy water, haranguing a stockbroker from Larkspur when she walked up, dressed but undressing from Mexican sandals, short-shorts, and a T-shirt that said: You Get What You Pay For. Mannlich saw her eyes now, deep brown, pupils hard black seeds, and her nipples, emerging from beneath the shirt, were dark copper.

"I'm outa the tub," said the stockbroker, lifting his pink body from the steamy water. "You guys have fun, now."

Sheridan shimmied into the bubbles and tossed back her head. Her hair webbed up into peaks where the water soaked into it. They sat, unwinding a while, saying precious little. Then Sheridan reached beneath the foam and caressed Mannlich's foot.

"Have you ever fallen in love?" she asked.

"Yes. Everybody does, although nobody has the slightest idea what they mean by it."

For the first time, Mannlich studied her eyes. There was something cruel, tortured about them, and he felt an awful sorrow about it, pity. She squinted in the bright sun.

"I hate the light," she said.

"Light is very important. No kidding. I project it everywhere I can."

She stopped rubbing his foot and crossed her arms over her breasts.

"Then you believe in pure evil?" She asked this, then fell darkly quiet.

"In only the abstract sense," Mannlich replied. "We are not evil, if that's what you mean. But we draw it to us, as if we were lightning rods. I meditate every day, to keep it away from me."

Sheridan seemed about to laugh, and Mannlich moved his feet away to the center of the tub. But she probed with her toes and ran them up and down his calf.

"You're such a deadly serious man," she said. "I like that about you quite a bit. I minded when you stared at me in Tingles. But I knew you'd taken the bait."

"But you smiled at me."

Again Sheridan paused at the brink of laughter, then she leaned across the tub and kissed him slowly, her tongue plunging into his mouth. Mannlich tasted something salty.

She sat back, beaming.

"Silly. When a man stares at a woman, she feels angry, and also complimented. I'm returning the compliment."

With that, Sheridan climbed from the tub and retrieved her clothes. And she's returning the anger, too, Mannlich thought, watching as she abandoned him for a group of merry-makers beneath the limbs of a redwood tree. They were snorting cocaine.

The salty taste lingered in his mouth, and Mannlich felt compromised. He'd revealed his spiritual essence to Sheridan, his core of beliefs, and she had not given him love so much as she had offered up a taste to him. Of what? Mannlich needed the inner calm of a sensitive, quietly centered woman who could offer healing powers. And he was attracted to this idea: that he didn't need love, not like one needs a source of income, but wanted it, as one wants a spring day when the sun lies low and your bones are cold.

He had felt relieved and happy—if that was what it was—when Paula left for the Canaries. She went on a curious note; there might have been fights and things since forgotten, but he was sure that the split was amicable. He was glad it had ended because he did not love her, or what he felt was not shaped like that word. It would do no good now, now that he had made room for new emotions to flourish, to associate with Sheridan, who was psychically bruised and battered, who lacked the capacity to give.

He waited until Sheridan was preoccupied with her new cocaine friends, and slipped from the tub unnoticed. Driving down Mount Tam, the fresh sea air blowing over his face, Mannlich felt clean of her.

He did not see Sheridan again for several months. By then he was attached to a calm, decent woman named Tillie Smith, and they shared their weekends. On a Sunday afternoon nearing fall, he left Tillie at the mountaintop house and drove into town for groceries. They planned to fry fish on the hibachi, so Mannlich stopped at Gundies-by-the-Sea for briquets and salmon steaks.

On his way back to the car, he passed a red convertible coupe.

Sheridan sat in the passenger seat, running a file across her nails. He tried to avert his face, but she spotted him and cried out.

"Mannlich, hey Mannlich."

He turned and walked to the car, where once again his twin images were reflected in her glasses.

"I was afraid we'd never see each other again," she said. "You know, we servants of sin have got to stick together."

She offered her hand and Mannlich had to shift the groceries to take it. He could see down the top of her white tennis dress.

"Hey," she said, "give me your number and we'll get together."

Mannlich felt the fish where it soaked through the shopping bag, and shifted his feet. The expressionless face behind the sunglasses held him.

"Oh, you're married," she said, caressing the bulging shopping sack with her bright nails.

Mannlich glanced at the top of her dress. Her breasts glistened with sweat, silvery in the sun.

"Umm, no, not married," he said finally.

They exchanged telephone numbers, using a scrap torn from the grocery bag, and promised to call each other. Mannlich, back in his car, shook all over. He saw in his mind a descending staircase: it spiraled dizzily beneath him. He drove back up the mountain, went directly to the kitchen, unpacked the groceries, and crumpled the bag into the trash. Tillie came in, and he kissed her. Then he took the phone off the hook.

Later that evening, as small flames danced in the fireplace, he held Tillie close on the sofa.

"Something's bugging you," she said. Her eyes flashed in the firelight.

"No, not really."

"That's funny. I have the sense that you're down."

"It's really nothing," he said, and he worried his face behind her neck, nuzzling. He focused light into his midriff but could not still the pounding there. After Tillie had gone, he returned to the couch and stared at the fire. It came to him that the sizzle of wood in the heart of the flame resembled the sensation at his throat.

He went into the bedroom and lit a candle against the growing fear inside him. When the flame had flickered and died, Mannlich was deep into his recurring dream, and he pumped his legs against the fierce resistance of the sand dune. The sun

blistered his skin, his throat burned with the fire of his own hearth and, up on the rise, the telephone rang out with the cry of a thousand temple chimes. Mannlich reached the summit, crawling on his scorched knees to the phone booth, his ears smarting from the volley of noise. He clutched the receiver in his hand and drew it to his gasping gill mouth. In this dream, the voice did not scream out in anguish, but spoke in mellifluous tones.

"Love me."

Mannlich woke to an absence of fear. On the redwood deck, where he performed his Yoga, Mannlich saw that he was seated on the sill of a vast window that opened out into the harmony of his soul. He stepped right through and his heart swooned with goodness.

In the kitchen, he opened cabinets and stared at the cups and saucers of his marriage. He could see the heat marks, red and shimmering, where Paula touched things, the flaming shapes of lips and fingertips glowing in the enamel. And in the stainless steel sink he read the scars left behind when he had smashed her potted fern there, the memory of ceramic shards glowing yellow, and the scratches ran like blood across the metal.

He went into his study, pored over a morning's work, put the software proposal into a manila folder, and left it out for the postman. Then he telephoned Sheridan.

At his table by the waterfront at Tingles, Mannlich watched the sails and spinnakers, opening like flaming wings of seraphim on the bay. Beneath the waves, fish paired off and darted under the rocks. Plankton flowed into their mouths like hot light.

When Sheridan finally arrived and took his hand, he saw they sat beneath the fanning palms at Tingles, like Moabites under the dripping leaves—and wasn't she as beautiful as Ruth, passing with the reapers among the sheaves. When she spoke to order her meal, he saw the iron-rusted girders under the skin of her jaw. The harsh mandible snapped beneath the formed plates of her skull, and as she said, "How nice it is to see you," Mannlich distinctly heard her undervoice, shrieking and howling:

"Kill me, Mannlich. Kill me, please."

They fed on a lunch of dates and avocados, of sweet white wines and fragrant cheeses, and when they were done, Mannlich had her in his car, spinning down the interstate, through the brightening window into his soul. There were many places he would take her.



"Self Reflexive Portion, Part 29," sabattier process photo, 11"x14".



"Self Reflexive Portion, Part 25," sabattier process photo, 11"x14".

The Ticking Tomb

It ain't like them hook man stories. It's better, cause it really happened, but you'll never hear about it over to Kemblesville. They ain't said a word about it yet, nor ain't likely to.

Let's back up a dozen years to the summer me and Benny Sikes turned eighteen. We had spent the better part of May and June playing ball for a company team—maybe you heard of them, the St. Clair Clippers? They had a big papermill down the valley by the Delaware line, and we used to bus up to Philly and down to Wilmington to go doubleheaders against the shipyard and factory teams, I'm talking hardball, mister. We were the left side—me at third and Benny at short—just the way we had played for Kemblesville High for three years and missed the state championship to those ringers from Pittsburgh, every damn one of them playing paid.

By the end of June I was playing with taped ribs and two black eyes off a little rhubarb we had over a suspicious tag I laid on some dumb rivetknocker who was circling the bags with his head yanked over his shoulder to watch the ball instead of me tripping him. Benny was favoring a sore knee and a broken thumb on his glove hand that he wouldn't admit was broke or else get benched but which took all the power off his batting stroke.

"Yank," he says to me, "we're beating ourselves to death over this." We were piled into the back of that old Studebaker bus with our legs crooked over the equipment bag, coming back from a bruiser with Delaware Drydock. We had won 9-8 in twelve, but it cost us.

"You can say that again. I'm all used up." My ribs were grating around so loose that I felt like if I unraveled that tape I would just sort of spill out onto the seat.

"What say we give it a rest?"

"And do what instead?" Thirty bucks a game wasn't making us rich, but at four games a week it was sure easy money compared to running a pulp press or bolting on fenders over at GM.

We'd both decided to coast all summer and see about real work in the fall. Besides, playing was always a kick, and we were loose and quick and young and that doesn't last long for anybody.

He settled back and pulled his hat brim over his eyes. "I don't know. I'm just saying is all."

"It's something to consider."

"Let's consider it over a beer."

Well, everybody knows that we didn't do no such thing as quit, in fact Benny got in four solid years in the minors in Oklahoma City before his knee gave out on him for good, but that night we took his Dodge pickup down to the R. Watcha Eat tavern and lubricated our creaky joints with a few gallons of cold Rolling Rock, and that's when he met her.

It was Tuesday and we had the place practically to ourselves. I remember, because Tuesday's special was always Philly cheesesteaks, and we wolfed down a couple of those badboys apiece before we got down to the business of our future. Her name was Wanda. She was a new girl, and she sidled up to Benny like she had known him all his life, all legs and tits and wild blond hair.

"Hi there, I'm just coming on. Can I get you boys another pitcher?"

She might as well have reached under the table and yanked his johnson out by the roots, for the look on his face, all popeyed and slavering. For about a minute he couldn't put two words together to make a sentence, and for the next four hours he just sat there sucking up suds as fast as he could to give him an excuse to call her back to the table. Right away they start mooning over each other.

That's always a bad thing, and Benny wasn't long on sense to begin with. He was scraping his cleats on the linoleum, and she kind of parked herself handy and got him all worked up.

"You're ballplayers, I bet."

Not that the two-toned caps and uniforms give us away. She's got those hooters stuck in his face and he can't see past them and I don't blame him. She had a shape and a half, that girl. Steam heat.

He says, "So when do you get off anyhow?"

And of course she's got to close up the joint and we end up scuffing gravel outside for half an hour while she rearranges the ketchups and counts her tips and so forth. Then we packed her

into the pickup between us and Benny says, "You want to go for a ride?"

"Yeah," she says. What else? "But let's stop someplace first."

So we did, to pick up Ginny Rae, who I guess she had called because she was all dressed and ready when we pulled into her driveway. Now I had a date, and boy it suddenly got awful crowded up front, with this new element bottled up on my lap and causing no end of excitement every time we hit a frost heave in the road.

Ginny Rae was a little bit of a girl, dark as they come, with big eyes you couldn't get past. They just reflected back at you. But I was seriously more interested in watching this Wanda go to work on Benny. She says, "Turn here, honey," and he did, and next thing you know we're on a dark road tunneled by trees and heading straight down to Stony Creek. We made a couple of turns here and there, I wasn't paying attention. It was all I could do to keep Ginny Rae out of my face, and after awhile I wasn't trying so hard as before. Where we came out was a dark little triangle of a place called Yeatman's Station, which had a single old frame house and an old church. I didn't like it already.

"I brought you boys down here for a reason," Wanda says, and I believed her. You just can never trust a woman that knows she's a looker. They've always got schemes. "This is a special place."

"Oh? And why's that?" Benny says, kind of slurry and feeling pretty good about himself.

Ginny Rae says, "You mean you don't know? I thought all you boys knew." And giggled, you know how they do.

"Know what?" I said. "What's to know about? We're somewhere down along the creek, that's all."

Wanda leaned over to me and put a hand on my shoulder. I was smothered in females just then. She practically put her tongue in my ear. "About the ticking tomb," she says.

"That's a lot of crap," Benny said, and I agreed. It was a worn out story: a dead man chipping his way out of the grave with a little hammer. I had heard the story in school but never been all the way out here, which was just a little clearing in the middle of the woods.

"Get out," Wanda says.

"What?"

She opened Benny's side and gave him a shove. "Get out," she insisted. And so he did. The crickets and cicadas were making a

helluva racket, and you could be sure, off in the middle of all that dark woods, sixteen kinds of creepie-crawlies were keeping their slimy eyes on us.

Anyway, there we are, heading over to the churchyard like the four horsemen, and there's about a nickel's worth of moonlight shining up those headstones like a cheap Halloween trick. Wanda leads Benny by the hand through the rusty iron gate and past a whole row of citizens planted way back when the Redcoats were still raising hell in this part of the country, and before I can say a word Ginny Rae has me following along like a puppy. Ain't it always the way—good sense just ain't around where women are involved.

"This is the one," Wanda says, standing over a long slab.

I said, "What one?"

She sighs and tosses her head, and breaks Benny's heart right there on the spot. I mean it's just awful to have to watch that sort of thing. "Listen," she says. And there's nothing to listen to, at first. "Put your ear to it," she says, and like a fool, I got down on my knees and did. So did Benny. We both heard it: a faint tapping. More like a ticking. Like an old windup clock.

"Jesus," Benny says. "Let's get out of here."

But Wanda had other ideas. "It's going to be fantastic, Benny. I promise," she said in a stage-whisper, and pulled him down onto the slab, right on the tomb, and didn't even mind that we were watching. But I never went in for that kind of stuff, so I asked Ginny Rae if she could tear herself away from these hijinks and take a walk.

"If you say so," she says, cool but disappointed, like she was used to watching. We found our own slab a couple of rows over and went at it hammer and tongs, as they say. Man, she was a sweet little number. Not too long on looks, but she was soft as an old mitt, broken in in all the right places. She had curves in her curves, and everywhere I grabbed there was a perfect handle. This went on for awhile, and when we were all finished, we just laid there passing a cig back and forth.

Over on the ticking tomb, I heard Benny and Wanda still at it, working off those cheesesteaks. And a funny thing: the ticking. I could hear it now all way over where we were, getting louder along with Wanda. "Oh please!" she was saying, "Oh do it! Oh, baby, baby, baby, oh do it!" And the ticking went on like a countdown, till she finally blasted off. You couldn't even hear the damn crickets for about a minute.

And when they were done, you couldn't hear the ticking anymore. I led Ginny Rae over to the ticking tomb, and she's all demure and smiling with that secret way women have. Which you know how they get, afterward. Anyhow, right next to the tomb you can hear it again, faint, tick-tick-tick-tick. And something else: Benny is white as a sheet, scared clean out of his wits.

"Take it easy," I told him, "Put your pants back on and let's blow this movie."

Back at the truck, we're all packed in like before, only I'm in the driver's seat. Benny didn't look like he should be operating complicated machinery right now. "I'm taking you home," I said to Wanda. I put the old Dodge in gear and turn around the little triangle to head back the way we came, but I'm only halfway around, directly across from the churchyard, when she says, "Stop right here, sweetie." It didn't make any sense, but I hit the brakes anyway.

She hopped out. "Thanks for the ride home," she says.

We were right in front of that clapboard house that must have been a hundred years old. Even in the dark you could see it needed paint. No lights were on inside.

"You live here?" I said. We couldn't have been two hundred feet away from the ticking tomb.

"You figure that out all by yourself?" she says. And then laughed and tossed her head in that way she had and carried her unsaddled breasts up to the house, swinging her bra like a bolo. She clattered onto the old leaning porch, and I swear I saw a man-sized shadow parked in an old rocking chair up there, a shotgun across his knees.

We peeled out of there, and make no mistake Ginny Rae got a kick out of it all, and so we ditched her like a bad idea as soon as we could and wound up at Benny's place for a stiff belt of Johnny Walker.

"Who's supposed to be in that tomb anyway?" I asked Benny once he had calmed down. Good thing he had a strong heart.

He gulped some of Mister Scotch and started to get some of his color back. "Damn if I know, Yank," he says. "All I know is what they said around school. They used to say it was some crazy old geezer trying to chip his way out with a little hammer. You know, the kind has the pick on one end."

"That's what I thought," I told him, but there was more to it than that thin story. "Well, he's sure taking his sweet time about

it. What killed him?"

"Search me. What always kills people in stories? Love or money."

I didn't like these shenanigans one bit, but I have to tell you once the scare rubbed off we went with the program. It takes awhile for that sort of novelty to wear thin, especially when you're in the middle of a hicksville summer and the curveballs are getting harder to hit. We'd sweat out the afternoons under a sun that withered the grass and baked the sense right out of our heads, then drown our aches and pains over at the R. Watcha Eat till Wanda got off, and hustle her and Ginny Rae out to the churchyard for the submarine races. Always the same routine, but after the first time, Benny worked out a new twist: soon as we hit the last curve above the creek, he'd kill the engine and lights and coast down into the triangle, pulling the pickup off the road into the shadow of some big elm trees.

If you're asking me, it made it even creepier.

Then he and Wanda would skip off to their slab, and Ginny Rae would lead me by the hand to ours. Even without a moon, she could find it, and I guess that should have worried me. And I have to admit, that damn ticking gave me shivers, but what's a fellow to do?

Every night was Halloween.

And every time, Wanda would insist we drive her the two hundred feet to her front door, and every time that shadowy man in the rocking chair would be waiting up for her. Benny asked her about him, but she just smiled, clicking her front tooth in that way she had. "Don't worry about old Zeke, sugar," she said. "He lets me come and go as I please."

So he asked me: Who was this joker? Her old man? Her father? Some depraved uncle or brother? I said I didn't know, but that we should keep to our policy of making a quick getaway. We dropped it.

That same night—and this was maybe two weeks in—he says, "Yank, you think there's something a little bit queer about this whole thing?" He was in love, and he couldn't see that this was as normal as it was likely to get.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "These things have a way of working themselves out."

But I never guessed how that would turn out.

Benny had to go up to Philly for a few days to get his knee looked at, and things sort of speeded up. But the afternoon

before he left, we drove down there in daylight. We didn't have a game, and it seemed like a good time to get a better grip on this thing. We drove past her house slowly, and there was no sign of life. The shutters were open, but the windowpanes were so gray and dingy you couldn't see in. The front windows had curtains anyway. The rocking chair sat on the porch empty. Old Zeke must be a nightowl. We knocked awhile, but nobody was home.

So we walked across the little triangle to the churchyard, opened that creaky old gate, and hiked back to the ticking tomb. In daylight, it was not so much, just a smooth marble slab like all the others. It was the roof of what they call sepulchre—I asked Mr. Brink, the history teacher. That's just a marble box that's buried shallow instead of really planting you, like with a headstone. Pretty convenient, if you ask me—just plop in the stiff and put the lid on, no fuss, no muss, no messy cleanup. Apparently it was all the rage back in the old days.

We tried to make out the writing on the slab, but it was no good. The d. date was there—1771. But the b. date and the name were rubbed out, all but s-o-n at the end. "Somebody's kid," Benny said, and I agreed. You never think about people that are that dead ever being connected to anybody else, like in a family. You always just think of the person, all by himself. One to a box.

There were still some carved flowers left around the edges, and the word "wander." We rooted around some of the other graves, and pretty soon wound up at the one Ginny Rae and I had been camping on. Ezekiel What's-his-fart had apparently died "witless," whatever that meant. 1730-1799, the end. We walked on down to the gate, and I looked back on kind of a reflex and it was funny, the whole churchyard was overgrown with high grass, but you could see a path worn right from the gate to the ticking tomb.

And when we got in the pickup, I swear I saw the curtains draw back at the front window of the old house. Somehow I knew it was him and not her watching.

That night I was parked in my booth at the R. Watcha Eat when Wanda came on. "You're all by your lonesome," she says, swooping those creamy balloons of hers into my face. "Does that mean we don't get to go for a ride tonight?"

Where a woman like that is involved, friendship is worth about twenty cents. "Sure, we can go for a ride," I said. In for a

penny, in for a pound.

She licked her lip and clicked that front tooth of hers. "I'll be counting the minutes, sugar," she says.

I had my own pickup tonight, and we drove down there after she got off, punishing an eight-pak of Rock ponies along the way. I said it was a pretty night, all those stars up there in all the right places.

In a singsong voice, she says, "Rove, if you will, the stars up yonder, but absence made the tart go wander," and giggled.

"What?" What was this silly bitch up to now?

"Nothing, just poetry. Edward Farthington. Don't you like poetry?"

All the poetry that concerned me just then was busting out of her blouse, but as we got closer to the creek I was having doubts. "I'll just drop you off in front of the house," I said. "Okie-dokie?"

"The dickens you will," she says. "That's no fun."

So I had no choice. Benny would understand—anyway, she was no good for him. I tried to tell him. We legged it up the path to the ticking tomb, and all of a sudden she had about six hands, stroking, tugging, unzipping, unbuttoning. I was flat on my back on the slab, and it was like being in the planetarium at the Franklin Institute on our senior trip: these two enormous planets were orbiting above me, surrounded by stars. I zoomed in for a closer look, astronaut-style, and we had ignition. All bets were off.

And then, the ticking started.

Real soft at first—tick, tick, tick, tick—then louder and louder—TICK, TICK, TICK! TICK, TICK, TICK! I tried to push her off me, to get away, but she had me. Leglock, hammerlock, liplock, pinned. I felt like she was sucking my whole body inside her. By now she was moaning and muttering, then yipping and yelping, finally screaming to wake the holy dead. Under my head, the cold slab was hammering like a metronome, faster and faster. I felt it shaking, quaking, shuddering, trembling like a volcano about to blow. And then, with her hot breasts muffling my ears, I gave her all I had. She wasn't screaming anymore but smiling, her front tooth clicking, the tomb ticking like a Timex, the marble slab sizzling like a griddle. Under my back the slab still trembled but gradually settled down, like somebody was pushing at it from below and decided it was just too heavy to move.

She moved off me, and the stars prickled my skin like needles.

What the hell was going on?

She got up and stood over me, and for just a split second I couldn't move, I felt like a stiff at my own wake. "Take me home," she says.

Old Zeke was guarding the porch, and I swear this time he stood up. I wasn't sticking around to get acquainted—I made tracks out of there. Back at my place I had a late appointment with Mister Scotch, and in bed alone I heard that damn ticking all night long, but on my ceiling there weren't any stars, just water stains.

So now what happens? I'll tell you. Benny was still out of town, and next night I got to the R. Watcha Eat early and rattled around waiting for Wanda to show. I watched the clock over the counter, the clock was ticking. Six-thirty, seven-thirty, eight o'clock. Tick, tick, tick.

The waitress who brought over my pitchers stood by the booth each time, drumming her fingers, waiting for me to pay up—tick, tick, tick.

In the backroom, Big Mike the owner was typing out the paychecks with his index finger, one letter at a time: tick, tick, tick.

The counter girl tapped a pencil on the bartop: tick, tick, tick.

One of the regulars stood chicking his boot against the barstep, tick, tick, tick.

When I got up to use the john, the spigot dripped—tick, tick, tick.

Behind the counter, the night cook was boiling water in a covered pot. Using a mitt he lifted the lid and plopped in a dozen wriggling crabs. When he put the lid back on he held it there, grinning, while the doomed critters clawed against the metal. You could hear them, tick, tick, tick. "Got to hold the lid on tight, or they jump right out and bite you!" he says.

Where was Wanda?

"Wanda Nickerson?" the counter girl replied, still tapping her pencil. "She's scheduled. But we'll get by without her, I guess. Slow night."

"Wait a minute," I said. "What did you call her?"

She laughed a hard laugh. "Don't tell me you never even asked her name," she says. "Isn't that just too typical."

Just then Benny walked in, back from Philly. "Where's Wanda?"

"Come on," I said. "Let's go find out."

His pickup knew the way better than mine, so we took it. He did his whole routine with the lights and engine, and we coasted to a stop near the churchyard. "Now what?" he says.

"I don't know—how am I supposed to know?" But my instincts told me try the ticking tomb, and before I even said so Benny and I were headed up that worn path again. What did we expect to find? Maybe nothing, maybe Wanda spread-eagled on the slab with some lucky farmboy, who knows. What we didn't expect to find was old Zeke and his shotgun stalking down from the tomb looking like he had just done some dirty business and nobody better get in his way. There was enough moonlight for six graveyards, and we didn't have time to find a decent hiding place.

"You there!" he bellowed, and we took off into the rows of headstones, tripping over marble slabs and stumbling around like something on the Saturday matinee.

I looked back—the way you should never do in a situation like that. I saw the flash of his shotgun muzzle and felt all those pellets roar past my ear so hard I lost my place for a minute. Benny tackled me down behind a headstone as that creepshow fugitive let loose with another blast. The shot rattled like hail against the headstone. "You don't belong here!" he yelled across the churchyard. "Get out of here and don't never come back!"

It sounded like a good idea to me, but you know Benny, he's always got to have the last word. "Where is she?" he yelled back. "Where's Wanda?"

I couldn't tell whether old Zeke was laughing or only grunting. "Back where she belongs," he shouted, and blasted away. "Where she usually is this time of night!" Blam, blam, blam.

It was almost two weeks before me and Benny got the nerve to go back there. We went in daylight, figuring maybe our imaginations had got the best of us that night. But we couldn't ignore the pellet-holes that peppered the driver's door of Benny's pickup. And Wanda had not come back to work since. Ginny Rae, too, had done a disappearing act.

The house was the same as on that other day—quiet as death, the rocker empty. But there was somebody home, that much we both knew. You could feel them in there, watching.

We slunk up the path like housebreakers, nervously looking over our shoulders. The ticking tomb was still there. I knelt and pressed my ear to the slab: tick, tick, tick. Faint, faraway, no

louder than a wristwatch. Benny heard it, too.

"Where do you think she went?" Benny asked, scouting the churchyard Indian-fashion.

I said, "I don't even want to guess."

"Maybe we should break into the house. Maybe she's there."

I shook my head. "She's not in the house, Benny."

"Yeah, you're right," he says, and he was so sad about it I knew right there and then I couldn't ever tell him about my wild night at the planetarium. What was the point?

Benny was shifting around from foot to foot, and none of this was sinking in. "Then where *did* Wanda go, Yank?"

I shrugged. I wasn't going to be the one to spell it out for him. "You know women. They never stick around long."

"I'm not cut out for this romance stuff," he says. "Let's go throw the ball around."

On the way out of there, the valves in Benny's old Dodge were tapping, tickety-tickety-tickety.

Now, Benny made the mistake of telling this story around, which you ask me was why he finally left town for Okie City. He kept getting into fights over it, specially when I wasn't there to bail him out. I myself am a little brighter than that, and tried my best to forget it ever happened. But two things made me remember, which you ask me is two too many.

The first is that Mr. Brink the history teacher came down to a ballgame one afternoon during a rainout and caught me in the dugout. He started talking about sepulchres again, which as he said I had brought the subject up a while back and he heard I had been out to the ticking tomb. The raindrops splattered the concrete roof of the dugout, tick-tick-tick.

He says, "Funny thing is, Yank, nobody knows anymore *who's* buried out there. Used to say it was an old man, but that's not necessarily so." He chewed on his pipe awhile to make me fidget. "Could be anybody, man, woman, or child." Then, like a babysitter trying to have a mean laugh on the little brat that won't go to sleep on time, he says, "Could be a lot of people." What was I supposed to say to that? I sat and watched the rain make mush out of the basepaths and run down the drains by the dugout.

And the second is this: A couple of days later I was up to Philly to visit Benny in the hospital, where he was having his knee fixed by the doctors. I went out into the stairwell to cop a cig

while they gave him his sponge bath, and I heard somebody, a nurse probably, come into the stairwell on the floor below mine. I listened to her footfalls on the metal stairs—thud-thud-thud, then bang-bang-bang, then clop-clop-clop. This went on and on, till finally, after about ten minutes it seemed like, I could hear her way at the bottom: tick-tick-tick, tick-tick-tick, tick-tick-tick, and she just kept going, and I kept on hearing her. I got chills, listening to her like that. My cig burned all way down to the filter. And I could still hear her, and the only other thing I could hear was my own heart pounding at my sore ribs. Tick, tick, tick, she went, and thump, thump, thump, went my heart.

It came over me again worse than ever, that graveyard scare. I could see the headstones shining like teeth under the moon, that path worn through the high grass from all those feet going back and forth from the ticking tomb, old Zeke standing guard in his rocking chair. The slab of the ticking tomb hot under my back, trembling. And the footfalls on the stairway, softer and softer, going tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick.

Lordy, I thought, she must be a long way down.

15½

Sometimes change stays close to the body, it's the new
dreams the boy tends with his hands, the imaginary girl.
Your teenage son getting in trouble downtown
and you assure yourself he's growing-up towards whole
boy, not just golden. But you want him good again.
Your boy like young Eros with bow & arrow;
the archer trying out tequila up at the lake overlooks
old valleys—of all A's, the aquarium guppies,
of clean room, model planes, little sister. His quiver
black leather and studded, says it clearly, perfectly—
for now.

High School Teacher

Usually they stare at me
or out the window,
whichever's more interesting.
Right now, I'm losing
to robins, grass, wasps,
but mostly hormones,
unstable as their loves
on this sunny afternoon
one hour before spring
break. So I give a test
on Emily Dickinson,
the woman whose bird
bit a worm in two,
the poem I've included
for analysis of new material.
Two boys in the back
snicker, then mouth
the next line in unison:
"and ate the fellow raw"
as Kell points to his lap.
A girl in the front row
pumps one tanned leg up
and down, up and down,
and the boy next to her
is hypnotized, his paper
blank, while Leslie writes
MARCUS MARCUS MARCUS
all over her margins.
I should probably call
it a day, but my job
is to set the tone,
so I swallow what wants
to be a smile, tell
them their hour's almost

up, even as my own
sex begins to pulse,
more subtle than theirs,
a little more selective,
though my hourglass, like my figure,
is filling up fast.

Heroics

Playing only half of Beethoven's Third
at the high school band concert, we only
half butchered it by our mathematics.

Years later I heard it played by some
philharmonic orchestra dressed in black
and realized our calculations were off
by virtue of infinitude and time.

Turning to a new arithmetic,
a math of higher fractions,
the melodic calculus, I found
remnants of harmony, soft scraps
we neither heard nor
dreamt of hearing in the desperate
squeaks of clarinets and the bad
approximations of trombones.

Even by finite numbers
one half of a third is a sixth:
Billy Malseed on the tympany
for the first time, Art Dodzweit
mastered by his new French horn,
and I pressing my upper lip numb
with my tarnished trumpet, all of us
trying to guess what Beethoven had in mind,
knowing nothing of Napoleon in the Alps.
Our grim conductor never cracked a smile.

The Worley Club Cafe

The highway bends just right for a place like this,
slowing you straight into a gravelled parking space
and scrambled eggs folded like a formal handkerchief,
hashbrowns a flat rectangle, great coffee.
You thought this place was famous for something,
not eggs, God knows. They're out of pie today.

Everyone here has a first name but you.
The waitress could be your grandmother, the one who
refused to go to your parents' wedding, cut you
out of her will, and left it all to the Humane Society.

The guy at the counter drives a hard bargain
on his hard-driven pickup etched a faded blue
against the wheat stubble. He'll throw in the pair
of stuffed pink dice he won at the fair, and the gun rack
but not the rifle. The short order cook is hooked.

After ten this place gets back to normal,
just the waitress saying this is her last cup,
the cook washing up and hauling into the mountains
in his faded blue dream, the giant moosehead
under which you ate so fearlessly glowering steady
through his bright glass eyes, and you driving away.



"Fantasyscape: Renaissance I," Prismacolor, 28" x 22".

Home Fires

The officer's boots crunched on the loose gravel. Without bothering to look, Bonnie Withers listened as he picked his way across the dry riverbed towards her little Toyota's final rest stop. She poked awkwardly inside the cement chunk border of her fire pit with the clump of dead mesquite she'd been using as tongs. The morning sun was too low to give off any warmth, and her hands were still stiff from the night's chill.

"Hello, Ma'am," said the officer. Younger than her brother Will, thought Bonnie.

"Mornin'," she said.

"You're staying out here, Ma'am?"

Bonnie nodded in the direction of the battered car. "It's not going anywhere. I'm not either."

He nodded slowly and pulled out a metal-backed notepad. "Do you have some identification? Driver's license? Car registration?"

Bonnie sighed. "I'd offer you some coffee, Officer, but I'm fresh out."

He repeated the questions in a louder voice.

"I heard you," she said. "I'm not deaf. Or retarded." She stared at him a moment, as if expecting argument. When none came, she continued. "No, I don't. Not anymore."

"What happened to them?"

"Don't suppose you have any coffee?"

"No," he said. "May I have your name, Ma'am?"

"Have I committed a crime?"

"This is private property, Ma'am. We've had a complaint."

"This?" Bonnie gestured. The Toyota rested against a dead tree. A threadbare tire was half-buried in a wash of debris. On either sloped side of the channel, rip-rap interspersed with hard-packed yellow dirt, to which clung desert weeds and shrubs. "I can't see that I'm offending too many neighbors in this country club lot."

"It's still private land, Ma'am. I've got to ask you to move on."

Bonnie wiped her nose with the cuff of her sweater. "What happens if I don't?" She bared her teeth in a smile. "Is your jail warm?"

He didn't laugh. The policeman walked over to her car and rested a gloved hand on its scratched, dented hood.

"All my worldly possessions," said Bonnie. "Think I should have a yard sale?"

"How long have you been here?"

She shrugged, knowing he couldn't see the gesture. When he didn't hear an answer, he turned back to look. The weak sun flashed off his tinted glasses. His boots looked sturdy and warm.

She shrugged again. "Coupla months."

"Where you from?"

"Midwest."

"There are shelters, you know."

She laughed and bit her lower lip. "Ever had a drunk pee on you when you're asleep?"

He walked around the car, looking in the windows. "There's a baby carrier in here, and toys. You have a child?"

Bonnie stood up. "When do I have to be out of here?"

"I'll take you to a family shelter if you have a child."

"No. Thank you."

"Ma'am, I know this seems . . ." He took off the glasses and rubbed the red lines they'd left on either side of the bridge of his nose. He stared up at the white sky and the brighter whiteness that was the winter sun. "It's going to rain soon. These dry washes aren't good places to be when it rains."

"Appreciate the weather report, Officer. I haven't heard the news in a while. Weather these days just seems to be what happens while the sun moves up and around—it gets cold and then colder. But then what do I know? I thought before I came here that this part of the country was supposed to be hot. At least warm. Was I surprised! Should have brought that nice fur coat. That's me, never prepared. I'd never make a boy scout, would I?"

Bonnie couldn't tell if he flushed from embarrassment or anger. Sarcasm, she knew, always brought trouble from them. It gave the anger they felt around her a place to hit. But, living alone in the open, she no longer choked back her words. The mountains were too far away to echo them. Their heat evaporated in such a hungry sky.

The earth had its roots in her now. She'd lost the pattern, the

key, to cities. She couldn't move from this dry channel. She'd been where this officer was—clean pants, chewing gum in silver wrappers, the smell of cigarette smoke and a car's interior. She knew the difference. He must think it was just washing up, renting a place with a stove that heated up when the dial turned, giving away her time to people who spent their days in dusty rooms and laughed at electric shadows. She remembered plumbing. When it didn't work, it hardened into dead metal, crusted and flaked in a dry white bowl below uselessly swinging handles of white porcelain marked "froid" and "chaud" that left nothing but spit for washing a tiny red face whose budding nose openings couldn't breathe. Choked off by hidden tubes, houses made hard-edged, drafty tombs. Nature, most and least, did not lie.

She didn't want to move. She'd been in his shoes, but he didn't know hers. Let him feel bad. Did he think she had a choice here? That she was just camping out a few days? She willed him to go, imagining that once the sound of his squad car's tires ended, she'd lift a scourge of stiff branches against the husk of her car until her arms stayed down against her will. Then she might be hungry and humble enough to panhandle the suits or walk the long path to the church where the priest gave quarters.

The radio strapped to his hip crackled. He touched it until the sound stopped, then reached into his pant pocket and brought out his wallet. He handed her a five dollar bill.

"Get something to eat," he said. "Don't be here the next time I check, okay?"

"Sure," said Bonnie. "No problem."

The garbage truck bellowed a dinosaur's warning. Irritated metal squealed. Restaurants blocks away erupted last night's browned onions. The swish of traffic, a speeding morning tide, obediently stayed a few deadly feet from the curb.

Bonnie neared a girl wearing shiny tights and a zippered turtleneck dress that matched her vivid plastic hoop earrings.

"Oh, Jesus," said the girl. Her lips and nose pulled together. She stepped aside in doddering heels. "Christ, they're everywhere."

The girl pulled a vinyl bag higher on her shoulder, turned, and moved to the shelter of a bus stand.

Bonnie trudged past without response.

The door to Gold's Cafe opened and banged shut in front of her. Bonnie's stomach growled at the sudden smell of coffee and

toast. Stilled, she felt for the folded bill, rubbed its face upon itself, and entered.

A few people sat alone at tables and along the counter. No one looked up. She took a corner seat. The radio sang something she knew she'd heard long ago. She rubbed her hands, then tucked them under her arms. They felt like winter weapons: packed snow hard as rock and as dead.

A black woman with an apron swathed round her belly turned an earthenware mug upright on the table. The full glass bubble swayed as coffee approached, then was pulled back. Steam curled off its dark, liquid surface, up through the spouted neck. Bonnie looked up into eyes that neither welcomed nor condemned, but met hers with patient, blameless suspicion. She pulled the money loose and pressed it against the table, weighing it down with an amber glass ashtray.

"Want cream?"

"Yes, please."

"I'll get you a menu."

A man two tables away looked at her over his newspaper, sighed, turned the page, and lifted it again. Bonnie tried to imagine where she'd last heard the song that still played. Country music was this area's radio language. She couldn't remember what the songs she once knew sounded like anymore.

The door opened and clattered shut. The woman who entered looked as out of place to her as Bonnie herself did. For all the other reasons.

"Excuse me. Excuse me," she said to the black woman.

"Just a minute, Ma'am."

The handsome woman blushed and stepped a few paces back and forth. She ran one hand's long fingernails along the countertop. The other arm clutched some papers.

The waitress plugged a scrawled newsprint slip onto the aluminum carousel behind the counter, and turned it to face the cook. She slid her hand under an order steaming beneath the heat lamps, and brought it to a man down the counter. She lifted his coffee cup. She nodded and moved to the dispenser.

"I'd like to speak to you a moment," said the woman.

Bonnie knew, without looking, that everyone in the cafe silently cheered the waitress's unflappable sureness. Her duty was clear, unaffected by wealth. This was obviously not a designer handbag neighborhood.

The black waitress finished. She stood behind the cash register

and waited expectantly. "Yes?"

The woman pulled a flyer loose from the stack clutched under her arm.

"Are you the proprietor?" she asked.

The black woman bowed her head.

"I'd be very grateful if you could post this in your shop. I'm going to all the merchants on this street. It's important that I reach everyone."

She pushed the paper over the cash register. The owner took it. Her glance went down and up like a slow yo-yo.

"He might come in here," said the woman, gesturing around the cafe. Her eyes passed over Bonnie and returned briefly before moving politely past. "I've got to find him."

"What'd you lose, lady," said a heavy man at the counter, "your puppy dog?"

Visibly angered by his assumption, the woman straightened her spine and tilted her well-coiffed head to the side and back.

"No," she answered, her voice a soft barb. "My father."

The owner's eyes returned to the paper in her hand. "He's a good-looking man," she said noncommittally.

The man at the counter reached for the flyer and looked. "Haven't seen him," he said.

"He's ill," said the woman. "He needs medication. Without it, he's more . . . disoriented. He probably can't remember how to get home."

"You think he's around here?"

"No. I don't know. He missed his stop. He could be anywhere near the bus lines. I thought he might have continued south, towards the river, because his bus to the senior center was going that direction. But I don't know anything for sure. No one's seen him. He's been missing . . . a week . . . now." The woman felt her throat as if her glands were swollen. The hand shook.

Bonnie rubbed her own neck and looked at the blackened half-moons of her split fingernails. For an instant she imagined her own father wandering through the streets that she now knew so well. She would have liked to introduce him around, show him what had resulted from his refusal to accept her phone calls. Nothing she'd done to him was so bad that she'd deserved to be treated that way. Everyone makes mistakes. But she'd paid for hers. A lot.

The bell in the kitchen rang. The owner lifted the flyer to the woman as a kind of salute. "I'll put this in the front window,

Ma'am. I do hope you find your father."

"Thank you."

Bonnie smiled, caught in a mental vision of her dad sleeping with his back curled against the chain link fence of the shelter. She closed her eyes and rocked in her chair, remembering Boner Jack and The Beard. They could show her pompous father something. They'd change his perspective on the world. She laughed to herself.

"Do you know something?"

Bonnie opened her eyes. The woman was standing closer, staring at her intently. Bonnie's mouth opened in surprise.

"You laughed," said the woman. "Please don't hide anything from me. He's very ill. He needs help. Please?"

Bonnie slowly sipped her coffee. She lowered the mug, smiled again, and rocked in her chair.

"Please," begged the woman. "Take me to him."

"She doesn't know anything," said the owner.

But the woman wouldn't turn away. Bonnie looked at the powdered face, the colored eyeshadow, the gold chain around the woman's neck. She laughed a bitter laugh.

"Do you know how many lost people are out there?" she asked the woman.

The woman's gaze, a dumbstruck suitor's, grew more intense with the attention. Bonnie suddenly despised her.

"I don't know shit. Let me be." Then, to the black cafe owner, she said with mock *hauteur*, "I believe I'm ready to order now."

First rain plopped random dots across the pavement. The moisture pressed long unwashed odors back towards the ground. A car approached: yellow lights showed a swirling mist that wasn't yet a downpour in its path; its wipers beat a squawky rhythm.

Bonnie felt the tremor as a slow train came near. Lights ahead alternated flashes from the turnstile that descended in shaky drops toward the road. A bell clanged. Across the barrier, the car rolled closer and stopped. With a hiss, the rain came nearer, harder.

Rivulets of water shivered off Bonnie's hair. The train rolled closer, moving with irritating slowness when Bonnie watched it off to the side, then impossibly fast and faster as it swirled in front of her. She fought her first instinct to run, then a sudden, mad urge to jump forward and meet it. In the gasping breaths between the locomotive's cars, Bonnie watched the wipers of

the car flap, now soundlessly, backward, forward, backward, and on. The two people sitting dry inside it looked through the train at her without speaking.

The train swooped past. The beeping warning lights lifted to free the road. Still on beat, the car's wipers could be heard again as it pulled forward. A woman was driving. The man with her peered sideways through the glass as Bonnie stepped once more toward the tracks. He had neatly cut hair and a stiff shirt collar just showing above the neck of a solid sweater. The car purred by.

Across the tracks, a footpath of packed dirt and rocks curved into the wash. Bonnie trudged down it, while the rain beat harder on the back of her head. Her hair had flattened into a slick helmet, and her clothes weighed heavy on her shoulders and arms. The path, slippery even when dry, felt treacherous under her smooth-soled shoes. She watched each step. At the bottom, she looked up.

The Toyota was an island. A plane of rippling water encircled it. Bonnie heard the funny sound of pebbles suddenly clink against one another as the water rolled them downstream. Rain pricked the grey surface with thousands of tiny circles.

Her feet slid out from underneath her. She landed heavily.

"You okay?"

The voice came from behind her. Bonnie turned and saw a man sitting partly under a mesquite bush. She flushed, angry and embarrassed.

"Yeah. Sort of."

"That your car?"

"Used to be."

He chuckled. "Used to drive it, too, I bet. Now you could pilot it, I suppose, if you liked boats."

Bonnie didn't answer.

"You live here?"

She pushed herself up with her hands and grabbed a shrub to pull herself closer to him. His eyebrows were bushy and grey. He smiled idiotically in a lined face, showing gold on a molar. His clothes matched too well.

"Yes, I live here," she said. "Welcome to my humble abode."

"I appreciate your hospitality. Care to share my tree?"

"It doesn't seem to be doing you a whole fiery lot of good."

The old man pressed against its spines. Thunder rumbled from the pigeon-colored sky. He shrugged. "I should've hid behind it."

Then you would've thought I was the voice of the Lord God speaking in the wilderness."

"Those were burning bushes, weren't they? One, at least?"

"It wouldn't catch fire. I tried."

"No, I can't imagine it would have," said Bonnie.

"Can you make a fire?"

She saw he was shaking. "No, I can't right now," she told him. "My matches are in the car, and it's too wet."

"That's a pity."

Bonnie sniffed hard and wiped her nose on her drenched sleeve. The old man's pant legs had ridden up above his socks. Thin-haired legs showed white and goosepimpled.

"Your daughter's looking for you."

His face squinched together. His eyes looked at hers with vague comprehension.

"You've been wandering around a long time?"

He nodded.

"Bet you've seen some interesting stuff."

"Yes, I have indeed." He smiled. "Do you have something to eat?"

"No," she said. "Sorry."

They listened to the hissing of the rain. The clouds looked low enough to touch.

"Women hold up half the sky," said the old man. "Know who said that?"

"No."

"Mao Tze-tung. Chairman Mao. King of the Reds."

"I don't hold up anything," Bonnie told him.

"Sure you do. You can't help it. You take up space, right? You live. You breathe. When you stand up, you move the air out of the way."

She shook her head. "You're crazy."

"I might be," he agreed. "I've stopped giving a damn about a lot of stuff that used to be real important. But I'm not alone. Billions of Red Chinese could take over the world, do you know that? Because their women fight like men. That Chairman Mao's a clever guy. Doubled their army."

"He's dead."

"Doesn't matter." The old man leaned forward and whispered, "I saw some Chinese. Here! Now!"

"They grow flowers."

"Where?"

"Down there." She gestured up the stream.

"They raise flowers and sell them in the supermarkets."

"A plot. A damned plot," he said. "Their women sell them, right?"

Bonnie shrugged.

"See?"

She laughed, liked the sound of it, and laughed harder. The old man looked pleased that he'd said something funny.

"You pay attention to me," he said. "I like that."

She felt in her jacket pocket. She had a dollar and some coins left from the meal. She could take him to the diner and buy him some coffee while the black waitress called his daughter. They'd owe her. They might buy her supper.

The rain stopped. Bushes continued to drip, but little circles no longer dented the sheet of water, and she could look up without being stung. Used to be that washing your hair in rain water was a good thing, she thought.

"It's stopped," said the old man.

"Looks like it."

"Do you see a rainbow?"

She looked back and forth. "No."

"Maybe it's over there, up the ridge or on the other side," he said.

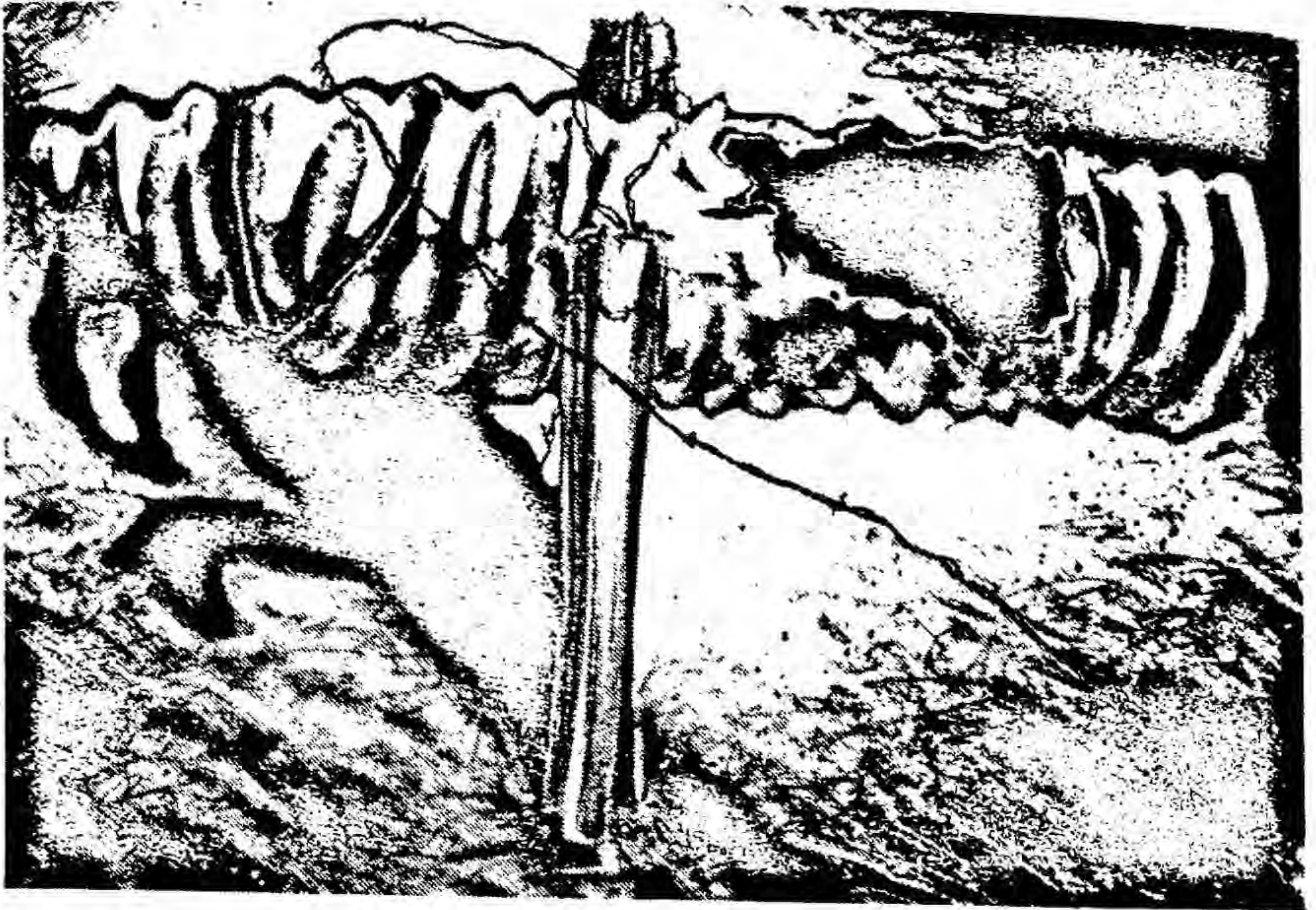
"Maybe."

"I might go try to find it."

She slid her hands back into her pockets and clenched the money in a hard fist. The old man stood up and shook himself. His pant legs were plastered against his skin. Mud smeared the arms of his sweater.

Or maybe, thought Bonnie, the daughter would figure she'd had him all along. She thought of the police officer who looked like her brother Will. Jails were never warm.

The old man patted her shoulder when he walked past. Bonnie watched him come to the edge of the running stream. He waded in, unsteady as a man on stilts, and pushed through the water downstream from the Toyota, over her drowned fire. It almost reached his knees. She watched with disbelief as he forced himself farther in, then up the opposite side. It wasn't as deep as it looked.



"Memory Launcher," monoprint, 9"x12 1/4".

New Age at Airport Mesa

My husband was hanging wet sheets, almost in disbelief,
When he had his heart attack. It kicked him
In the neck and shoulder; the heavy linen,
Flying backwards with him, was sucked
Into his mouth—he was like that Wyoming snowfield
Where the ground above the old cistern collapsed.
I was still grieving when the oleander blossomed.

So Ruth and I rented a cottage for a month. I painted
The stream and poplars. Ruth meditated
And made enough cucumber sandwiches to feed
Us and our dead husbands. She had a vision that third week
Of a naked Navajo giantess eating a peach.
It was so real that the juice of the peach
Ran down her chin and breasts striking the dust
Like a rain of nails. Ruth was delighted with her vision
Until she realized it was meaningless.

Our last afternoon in the cottage she was feeling nauseous
And I was bored
So I visited the canyon for the first time alone. I whistled
A warning to the snakes.
I found a sandstone platform above a young palo verde.
My mind wandered for I don't know how long
Until I realized I had been staring, at some distance,
At two nude women, girls really,
Kneeling before one another and touching themselves:

They began to kiss—they were both blonde, it was
More like one woman and a mirror. What they did I wouldn't
Tell you. But toward the end I could even hear them.
As I listened to their cries rising above the desert,
I began to cry with them. The hot wind
Dried my tears. It dried their mouths, their whole bodies . . .

Later when I told Ruth she amazingly approved
And announced it was a vision. I agreed
So she would stop talking . . . I smiled.
Sat on the couch.
I told her I was done feeling sorry for myself.

Fever

—for my wife

In your sleep you talked.

*There are cows standing in white mud.
A bale of hay has fallen out of the sky for them.
The cows are rejoicing,
Standing on their hind legs.
Their rough teats caked
With the white mud.
Their great skulls above the ground fog.*

While you talked I bathed you with a sponge
From a basin of ice and alcohol.
I told you that in my childhood,
During the mud season, old boards ran from the house
To the barns and then out into pastureland . . .

*The farmer's wife is walking
On the old boards out to the dancing cows.
She's pissed and wants their milk.
Another bale of hay
Is falling from the sky. It's killed the farmer's wife.
Good enough for her.
The mud is sucking her down. Good-bye.*

I said, "You know I love you."

*Oh, my god, the farmer's wife is alive.
She's climbing out of the mud
Onto an old board. She looks like a tooth.
Oh, my god, she is a tooth.*

I love you too.

The Saints Of Negativity

It was the first snow in memory, and
A dark morning.
The cypress trees had fallen from the skies
Like long fan feathers of the white ibis.

The patron, Piero de' Medici,
Eating his orange,
Childishly summoned Michelangelo
Back to the villa
From the Infirmary of Santo Spirito
Where the sculptor
Had dissected a fresh body, his awful
Studies in anatomy.

A huge block of snow was shaded
With skins
And the young Michelangelo
Was to make a virgin and child.
Servants of Piero, as a joke,
Had spoiled the marble
With a trickle of ox blood. Then
They paved the uncarved block
With more snow and a glaze of water.

Under the afternoon sun
Michelangelo reached the courtyard
And the snowmen of Piero's bastard children
Had sagged into large pears
Which the hungry birds sat upon . . .

Piero de' Medici, disappointed with the sun,
Had gone to bed with his first cousin
Who as a girl
Had roasted and eaten her favorite falcon.

Still in his hospital apron
Michelangelo sat in the cart
With one hand on a muddy wheel
And stared into the white stubble
Of the distant field. All he could see

Was the bearded face of the old peasant
He had undone that same morning.
He took his wrap of knives
And approached the block of snow. He threw

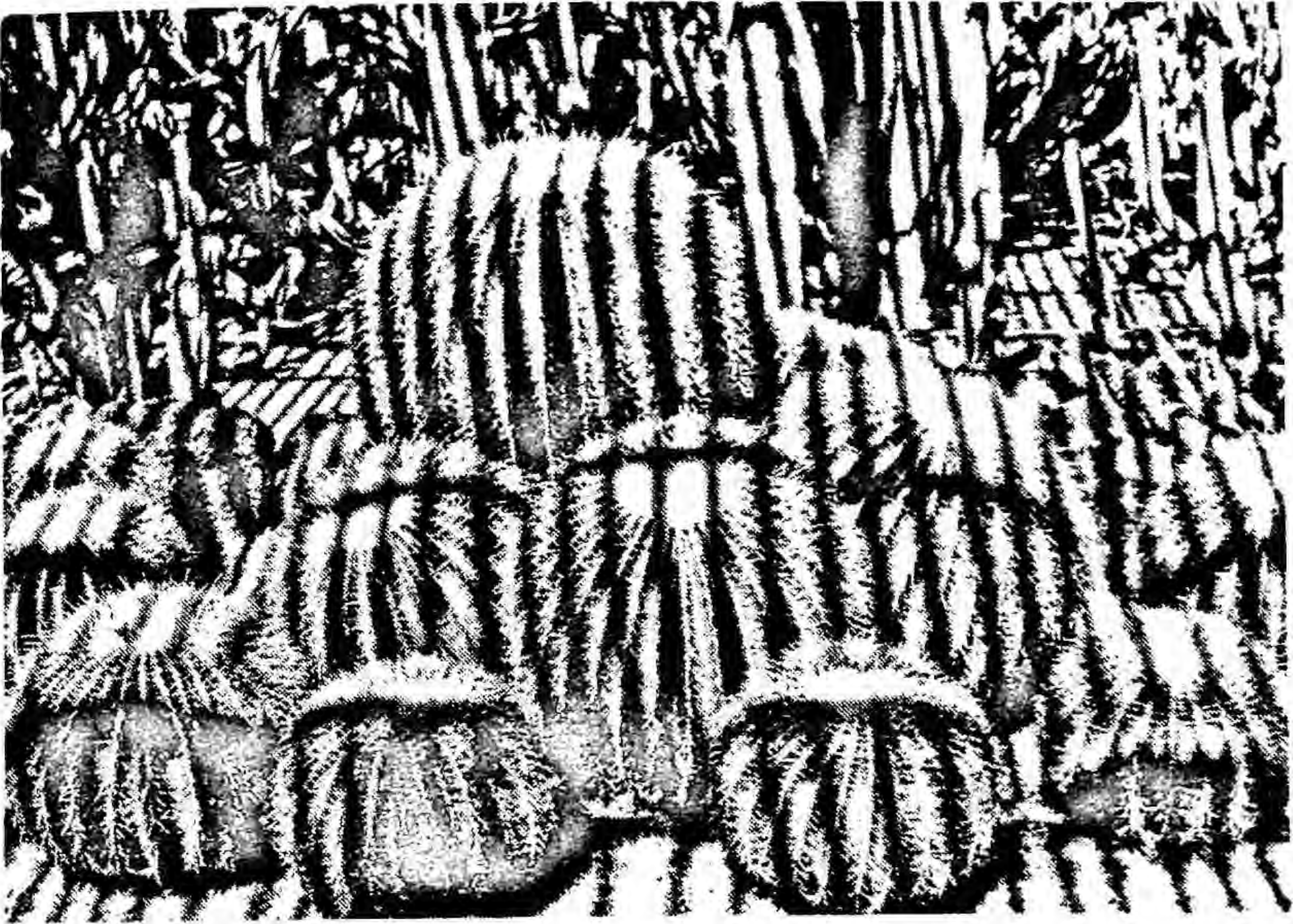
Off the goat skins. He told Piero later
That a woman and child were buried in snow;
That he found them, but
In the sunlight they turned to water
And wine, possibly water and blood. He didn't
Know. Make no mistake, he said,
The earth like a crust of bread absorbed them.

Safe Conduct

The snowplow was a rattling iron box
With a long chain sparking behind it.
The one curled blade raised to the air in Sanskrit.
The blue light on the floor of the cab
Was muted by a rag. The window, cracked
On my side, was sealed in the rose tint
Of a pin-up from the garage.

The windshield wipers made time. The highbeams
Failed in the night,
In the revealed light that is snow.
From the back of the truck Charlie Minor,
Who stood with a shovel in a mountain of rock salt,
Coughed and yowled. My grandfather shifted gears
And we began the descent to the county roads.

The blade dropped like the lip of a snarling dog.
Coming off the hill, going fifty,
We left the hard dirt that Parker plowed
And hit the drifting snow. Eight years old,
I reached into waxpaper
For chunks of ham, some cheese and the red potatoes.
He laughed, a thermos of coffee in his hand;
Past midnight, he looked back
And I was asleep,
Propped up with a pillow of old surveyors' maps.
Charlie Minor drank from his pint of whiskey,
Yelling to my grandfather, "Sure is a bitch, Earl."
My grandfather adjusted his weight and put it to the floor.
The next morning his heart gave out.
In the barns we passed there were cows, each with a face
As distant as this world.



Untitled, Black and White photograph.

The Job

A calf-a-minute job means the tools
must be ready and the men willing.

Takes someone to wade through shit,
push calf after calf up to the chute,

leaning into it with both legs,
and someone else who'll catch the calf

that slams head-long into the squeeze,
to pull the trap-bar down tight over its ribs

while he also tips
the calf, table and all, down flat

so a third guy can lean his elbow into the flank,
while a fourth makes a quick-catch, both hind feet

roped, that he stretches out,
swinging into it with his hips,

so the fella across the table from him
can lay into the brand—

the butane torch in the branding pot
bellowing its flame at two irons,

one always red and one step behind him.
At the same time the ear man—with his tools

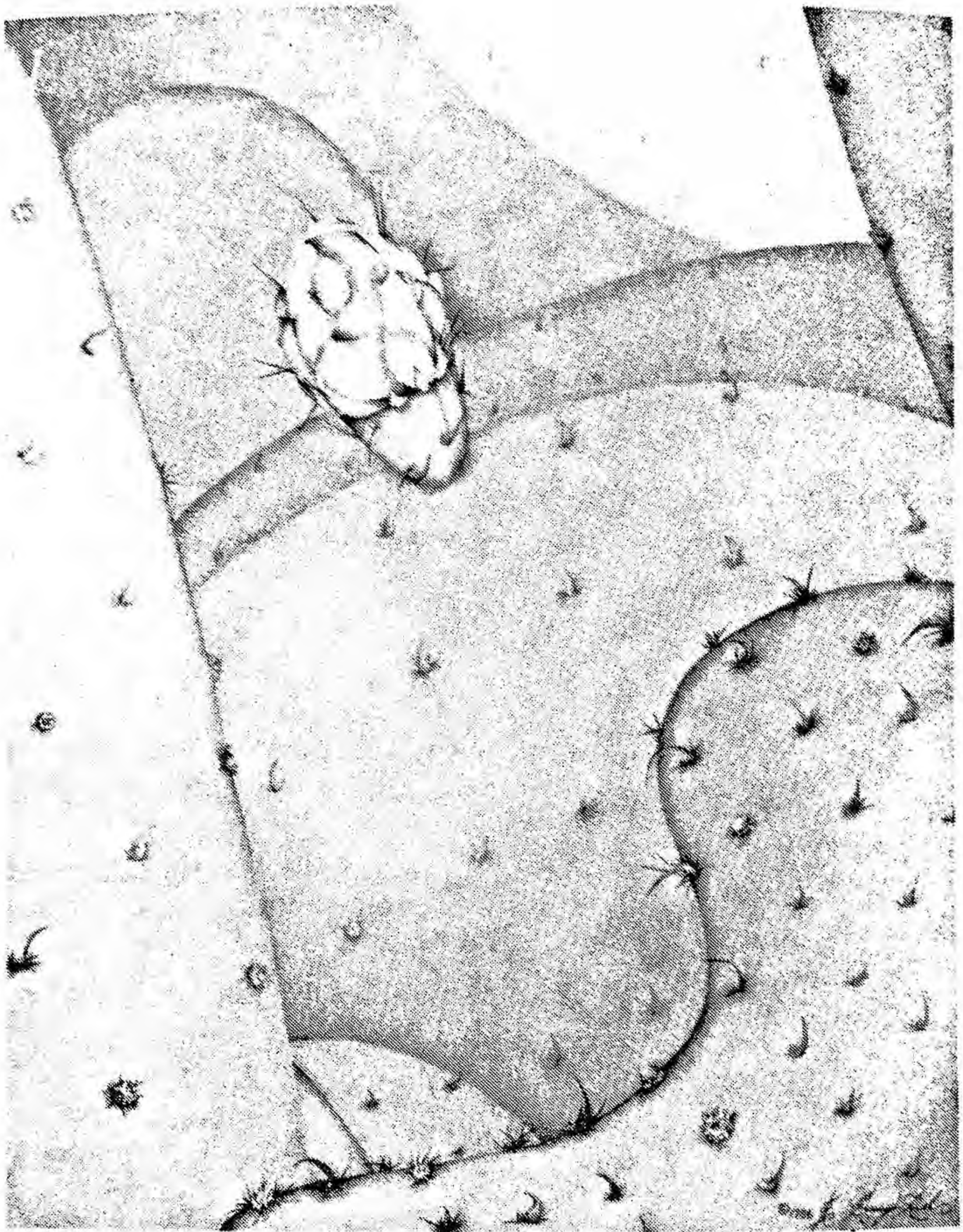
knife, stone, and ear-tick oil
on an upended lug box—

shoves his thigh down onto the calf's nose
to cut a slit in the right ear, a swallowfork

in the left, as the blood spurts,
while the last man, the one who cuts the hairsack,

who milks out the testicles, and snips the cords
off fast, tossing them (the oysters)

into a bucket, is the one to fry them after.



"Fantasyscape I: Sensual Succulents Series," Prismacolor, 21" x 17"

The Pride Of This Valley

The goat was cornered—behind it was the cruel simplicity of a barbed wire fence, and closing in from the open field were Billy and Jasco. "Let's get a little closer, Jasco," said the ranch herdsman to his younger friend. "But walk steady now, walk steady. That bastard's wild. He'll slip right through that wire fence if we press him."

Side by side, Billy and Jasco walked cautiously, their boots crunching stalks of dry brush against the arid ground. A mosquito buzzed in Jasco's ear, and landed on his neck. Jasco swatted it and said, "I thought we left the mosquitos back in that irrigated pasture. Guess one followed us." He wiped the smashed insect off his neck, and with his thumb and forefinger ground the remains until there was nothing. Smiling, he looked over at Billy to see if he had seen him do this.

The sun hung low in the sky and in an hour it would pass behind the flat-topped Indian Mountains. In one more hour the valley would turn purple and dark. They had to shoot that goat, and skin it and hang it so that it would be ready for the Sunday barbecue tomorrow. The task seemed simple to Jasco.

When they got within 25 yards of the goat, it started getting squirrely, ramming its head against the barbed wire. "That cocksucker's got wind of us. Let's us take a stand. Easy now," Billy raised the rifle and pointed it at the goat.

Jasco could see the goat's face clearly. He could see the white froth on its hairy lips. He could see its eyes—there was no mind to them; they just reflected light like two glass buttons sewn to a doll. Jasco drew in a breath of raw, dusk air, and watched Billy, a 28-year-old man in dusty blue jeans, a man lean and tough from work, pull the trigger and drop the goat. Wap. The goat fell dead, stone dead.

The two of them walked over to the fence and looked down. Jasco's ears rang from the gunshot. He had to give the animal credit. Ever since the goat had charged past them and escaped out into the cattle fields, it had put up a good fight. An hour had

passed since Billy and he had gone up to the barn to "take care of the slaughtering business with that goat."

Billy knelt down and patted the still warm and loose rump. "Sorry fella," Billy said in a quiet, apologetic voice, "But I'm afraid you got elected for a barbecue." Billy turned to Jasco, his face serious. He scratched his unshaven jowl and said, "Grab his hind legs. Let's walk him back up to the headquarters." Jasco perked up; Billy made the whole thing seem very practical.

Sunlight diffused through the rolldown shades that covered the two east windows in Jasco's bedroom. He woke up slowly—the warm, morning light upon him. Only on Sundays did Jasco get to rise after the sun. The bunkhouse was quiet. Now that all the alfalfa was put up, the hay crew that his uncle hired had moved out. In another month, he would be gone too and back home starting his last year of high school. Until then, his uncle had an extra hired man besides Billy Chester.

Minutes passed before Jasco heard a vehicle on the gravel promenade which joined three dwellings—his uncle's house, Billy's trailer, and the bunkhouse. The sound of the engine made a low throb in his chest. When Jasco looked outside, he saw a pickup pulling a black iron barbecue cart. Billy was driving, and Jasco watched him bounce up and down, synchronous with the metal cart as it strained and bucked behind the lunging vehicle.

Jasco reached down and scratched himself. Standing in the light of the window, his eyes wrinkled slits, his hair ruffled from sleep, he said out loud, "I guess we really are going to cook that goat." He imagined his friends back home would get a real kick when he told them about this one. Most of them were working at the community pool as lifeguards; life sure was different back home.

Jasco's tiny bunkhouse was comfortable in a way different from his parents' rambling split-level with its white wool carpet and antiseptically clean glass table tops and shelves. Here Jasco was pleased with the worn furniture that he selected from his uncle's storage room, and found the faded green linoleum more practical for his daily 100 push-ups. The first 80 came easily, and the last 20 he managed with blind determination. He refused to cheat by bending his back or resting on his chest.

His pectoral muscles were filled with blood and his arms pushed out from his torso like a scarecrow. Out on the front porch, he punched the side of the bunkhouse. The brightness of

the morning sun closed his eyes and his right fist stung. He looked at it and saw chips of white paint stuck against the sweaty red knuckles.

As Jasco walked to his uncle's, he noticed Lajolla was working in her garden. It wasn't much of a garden really, just a small patch of eight or ten stalks of corn, a couple tomato plants, and some squash. The squash looked the best. But Lajolla was fond of it, and some Sundays Jasco helped her weed. The weeds were forever—the vegetable plants weren't strong enough to dominate without outside help.

Billy wasn't around. Jasco wondered if he should stop and say hi to Lajolla, or whether he should just continue down to his uncle's place and help with the preparation for the afternoon's party. It was nearly ten and the guests would start coming around one o'clock.

Jasco could tell Lajolla noticed him but she kept working as if he were not there. "Did the weeds come back again?" he asked.

Lajolla put down the hoe. Slapping dust off her green slacks and straightening her bikini top, she smiled shyly. "Hey Jasco, how are you today."

Lajolla put both hands into her back pockets and started rocking nervously back and forth on her heels, her hips gently waving with this motion. Jasco allowed himself one quick look at the two large breasts that were poorly concealed by the bathing suit top, and then he looked around the garden as if to inspect it.

"How come you're not getting ready for the barbecue?" Jasco asked, bringing his gaze back to her brown eyes.

"I was waiting for Billy to get back. He's out feedin' the bulls. The front field's kind of wet. I'm worried he might get the pickup stuck," she said.

"Don't worry," said Jasco, wondering why on earth she fretted so much. Billy was so damn independent. Occasionally Billy did get his truck stuck. A couple of times Jasco had been with him when this happened, and Billy had cussed and spun the tires so much that the truck dug itself down to its axles. But after Billy cooled off, they walked back up to the headquarters and got the tractor. It wasn't that big of a deal.

Jasco hoped that Lajolla would invite him in for a glass of iced tea. Sometimes she did and they would sit at her kitchen table and talk. Last time she made cookies to go along with the tea, and told him the story of how her parents named her after a part

of San Diego they had visited on their honeymoon. Jasco said that was pretty weird and Lajolla agreed, but they both decided that they liked her name anyway.

Today it appeared that they would not have tea. Jasco listened politely as Lajolla rambled on about the barbecue, not really interested until Lajolla mentioned the name of one guest he was curious about.

"I'll bet you're excited about getting to meet Mr. Acey J. Waterfield—he's the pride of this valley," Lajolla said, her voice full of conviction.

Jasco had heard this name over and over. His uncle talked about Acey all the time. "Acey was a real athlete in his day," his uncle told him. "Acey made all-American when he was playing for Reno State." "Acey would have played pro ball if he hadn't been shot over in Viet Nam." His uncle dwelled on the part about the pro ball the most. Yes, Jasco admitted, this guy's past did sound interesting; nevertheless, he couldn't understand why everyone was so intrigued with this Acey guy.

Billy drove up with a fan of wet mud on the side of his pickup. "Christ, it's wet out," he yelled to Jasco and Lajolla. "Them irrigated fields are like quicksand." He climbed out of the truck, and walked over to the garden to join them.

The top of Billy's shirt was buttoned and his clothes were covered with shackles from the grain he had fed the bulls. Lajolla unbuttoned his collar, saying, "You better get your rear end in the house and get changed."

"Only if you get yours in there too, little lady," Billy replied, winking at Jasco when he said it.

Jasco laughed; he felt warm inside. He said, "I'll see you two over at my uncle's."

His uncle's ranch house was about 50 yards away, just inside the front gate which linked Walter Stiggley's Registered Hereford Ranch to County Road 71. The fresh paint and the thick wood beams of his uncle's house belittled the other buildings on the complex. The goat carcass was sectioned and Uncle Walt was now preparing cuts of meat at a large wooden table next to the barbecue. Standing by the black iron tub, Jasco felt the heat from the bed of hickory coals which lined the inside of the barbecue—all grey and amber, moving in the mirage of heat.

Not looking up from the task of seasoning the meat, he said to Jasco, "There's two things a guy has to know when he cooks

goat. Number one, you always barbecue it with hickory wood—nothing else. Number two, you got to salt, pepper and garlic it real good, or else it turns out gamey'er than a mud hen." He drew the blade of the long butcher knife back and forth against the sharpening steel with the quickness of a Japanese chef. When he was satisfied, he flipped over a lengthy rack of ribs. The meat thudded against the wooden cutting table. Jasco's uncle cut the rack in half, and then he continued with his seasoning. "Put another log in the fire, Jasco," Uncle Walt said. "And go fix me a bourbon and water. Fix one for yourself if you like. Hell, you do a man's work around here. You might as well drink a man's drink."

At his uncle's outdoor bar, Jasco ineptly poured the drinks—first putting ice in two cocktail glasses, then filling one glass until it overflowed with bourbon, dividing the contents of that glass with the other, and then topping them both off with water. He sipped each drink to make sure it was O.K.

When he returned, his uncle said, "Acey Waterfield is real anxious to meet you. He called me the other day, and he said maybe us three could go fishing some Sunday over at his ranch in Wistler. It would do you good to meet some more prominent folks to socialize with than the herdsman and his wife." Uncle Walt paused, swirled his drink, and then took a noisy sip. "Now don't get me wrong. Billy is a good worker, but he doesn't quite have the background that you have." His uncle laughed. "Jesus Christ, Jasco, you being a football star and everything, for a seventeen-year-old kid you do real well for yourself. Yes boy, your mother says you do real well for yourself."

Jasco had nothing to say. He disliked it when his uncle categorized people. Holding the drink that was as cold and wet as a snowball, he listened to the goat meat pop and snap as the fire seared it. Jasco took the fire iron and poked at the coals—flipping the ashy logs over and exposing their red, heat-blown bellies. In his mind, he tried to form a picture of Acey J. Waterfield, but the spell of the fire was broken as the guests started to arrive.

The guests were mostly local people. Smitty Pierce, the County Watermaster, and his wife, Lucille, came first. The Van Loan family and their hired help arrived second. The Van Loans owned the ranch next to Uncle Walt's and were good neighbors. Uncle Walt and Mr. Van Loan traded trucks and tractors back and forth, and each helped the other during round-ups when

livestock needed to be branded, doctored, or sprayed for flies. Jasco was glad to see Scott and Larry Van Loan. They were the only high school kids, other than himself, that lived in the valley.

Skip Digger, the diesel mechanic from town, his wife Crystal, and his retarded boy showed up. Skip waved hello, and threw a set of plastic blocks down on the lawn. Jamie, his "not quite right son," tried to fit two blue plastic cubes into his oval mouth. Three-hundred-pound Crystal went straight to a bowl of potato chips. Uncle Walt's brother, Jed, arrived in his pickup with his farm dog in the back. Millie, the waitress from town that Uncle Walt dated, drove up in her V.W. Bubbly and bright in a flower print dress, she walked out into the yard carrying a huge container of her famous macaroni salad.

The casual Sunday rhythm which the first few carloads followed was broken, and guests drove up in a continuous stream. Soon Uncle Walt's house was surrounded by 3/4 ton pickups and long, American cars with mud tires in the rear. The air was full of voices—of men recounting their week, of wide-eyed and joyous women complimenting each other on the food they brought, of children screaming at grasshoppers they discovered in the planters.

As Jasco tended the fire for his uncle, he looked out at the valley—at its green level pastures which stretched until they blurred and blended into the dry, bordering hills. Over the summer, the openness had stretched his mind. It made him think about his future; it sometimes made him contemplate things; it sometimes made him feel lonely as it did now. It was not the people at this party but the valley itself that he would miss most when he returned home.

Jasco's spirits rose when Billy and Lajolla joined him. Billy wore a baby blue, pearlsnap shirt which looked by its stiffness to be brand new. He had his good felt hat on, and he had pulled himself into a tight-fitting pair of jeans. Around his waist he wore his prize rodeo belt and sterling buckle. Lajolla's lower half was a repeat performance of Billy's, except her hips flared out nicely. Her shapeliness was displayed as well on top by the knit blouse she had pulled over her large breasts. Her face looked like candy. Her lips and cheeks were bright red, her eyelids were bright blue, and on her ears hung pink plastic loops. She smelled like candy too. Billy smelled like a western herb. Jasco was glad to see his two friends.

The three of them got some beers and returned to the barbecue. Billy took an interest in the cooking, and decided Jasco had been neglecting his duties. He threw on another log, and lowered the iron grate a couple more inches with the hand-crank on the cart's side. Like a father he lectured Jasco on the art of barbecuing, while Jasco and Lajolla secretly laughed and made faces behind his back.

Their easy peace drained away when a latecomer drove up in a new yellow Oldsmobile. The car's custom license plate read, "A.J.W." Uncle Walt greeted the man, and the two of them slowly made their way toward the barbecue, stopping often so that Acey J. Waterfield could give his regards to the other guests.

Jasco recognized that there was something extraordinary about Acey, and this he attributed quickly to certain details. The way he walked with a limp was neither spastic nor pathetic like the walk of an invalid; rather, Acey limped with authority, and this authority was accentuated each time he caned the ground with his ivory and black walking stick. His boots were ostrich skin. Jasco had wanted a pair of those himself, but he had gone into town and discovered that they cost nearly \$300. Acey had grey eyes and a straight, narrow nose; his smile was big and full of even, well-formed teeth that were stained slightly with age. His hair was salt-and-pepper grey and cut short. Jasco figured that he was in his late forties.

Uncle Walt said, "Jasco, this is Acey Waterfield. Acey here is one of the legends of these parts. His ranch is one of the finest—last year they did an article on it in the *Cattlemen's Journal*."

Acey extended his large hand to Jasco; the man's grip was painfully firm. Jasco tried to squeeze back, but his hand was trapped and immobilized. Acey let go and shifted his weight back onto his cane. With a victorious smile he said, "Jasco, it is a pleasure to meet you. Your uncle talks highly of you. He says you're a football player. I used to play ball myself, but I got this bum leg over in Nam. Don't do too many sports now."

"Well Acey, you're in better shape than I am," said Uncle Walt, patting his rounded gut. "Now you remember Bill, my herdsman," Uncle Walt continued.

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Waterfield," Billy said excitedly. "That bay horse you sold us last winter has been working out real good."

"Well, I pride myself on my horsesense," Acey replied, and Billy chuckled politely.

"Now, now, let's not forget this pretty gal over here," Acey continued, completely in command of the conversation. "Lajolla, I believe it is. My, don't you look nice today." While Acey said this he limped over and put his arm around her. Lajolla held her arms together and smiled blankly, enveloped by the large man.

Uncle Walt was beaming; however, Billy was tense. His left eye was squinted and his jaw was tight. His eyes remained on the arm draped across his wife's shoulder. Jasco thought Billy would say something, but he didn't say a word. Acey continued to hold on to Lajolla as he talked. Finally, Lajolla said she had to go mix the salad that she had brought. Billy followed her silently. Jasco's uncle said, "Hey Jasco, why don't you go buy Acey and yourself a drink. Hell, they're free for the mixing." They all laughed. Jasco was relieved that Billy and Lajolla had left.

"Lead the way, boy," Acey said, kind of pushing Jasco along.

At the bar Acey did the honors, making, Jasco noted, two very stiff drinks. Acey's face formed itself into a shape it had not taken while they were by the barbecue. His eyebrows were cocked upward and he was smiling a smaller smile without showing much of his teeth. Acey got close to Jasco and said frankly, "That herdsman's wife is a nice little number, isn't she? Your uncle says Billy's dumber than a post, but he roped her, didn't he? I bet you wouldn't mind getting to know that Lajolla gal, would you boy?"

Jasco was startled. What was wrong with this sonofabitch?

"Now, now, don't you get me wrong, boy. This is just bar talk between two men—you and me," Acey said, motioning for Jasco to sit down.

As Jasco listened to Acey's stories about Viet Nam and his college football days, he felt the liquor Acey fed him take away his guard. Acey's drone was hypnotic.

"I saw two of my best buddies get killed over in Nam, so I went out and killed twenty Gooks—ten apiece. Those are the type of odds I like," Acey said, plunging the sharp end of his ivory and black cane into the sod. Slowly he pulled it out—dirt innards clung to the end. "Them Gooks had to pay," he said. For a minute he was silent.

"Though the China girls were nice over there—they never bathed, but they were clean like a dog. Can you imagine that,

boy?" Acey said, now more calm and reflective.

The conversation turned to sports. "My last college game was the Gator Bowl. My coach shot both my knees full of novocaine so that I could play. I scored two touchdowns, but Jesus H. Christ I thought I would never walk again." Acey exhaled long and hard, and eased back in his chair. Absently, he tapped the ground with his cane. "Football cripples a man more than being shot over in Nam. I ought to know . . ."

Acey seemed to have an unending life history. Jasco tried to tell Acey something about himself—about his hometown, his ambitions for college, about his football, but Jasco's interjections were merely small obstacles which Acey steered around.

Jasco was glad when his uncle finally came over. The meat was done, and all the casseroles, salads, loaves of French bread, and desserts that the guests had brought were lined up on a long table which was set up in the middle of the yard. The smells were wonderful and Jasco was starved. Now the prospect of eating goat appealed to him. Somehow, the animal's spirit vanished when the meat was put on the grill—its haunting, vaporous stare was gone.

Everyone in the party lined up and filled their paper plates with goat meat and all the fixings. Most stopped at the bar to refresh their cocktails before sitting down in haphazard rings formed by putting groups of lawn chairs together in circles. Jasco started to sit with Billy and Lajolla, but he stopped when he saw that a number of other folks, including his uncle and Acey, had joined them first. Lajolla saw Jasco coming and smiled meekly. Jasco stopped, looked around, and then sat with the two Van Loan boys, whom he hadn't had a chance to talk with anyway.

"Hey you guys. Do you know of anything going on in town lately?" said Jasco, sitting down carefully with his full plate of food.

"Nope," said Larry. His mouth was full of food.

"Show some manners, Larry," said Scott, who was Jasco's age. "There's a dance in town next Saturday. Wanna ride in with us?"

"Yeah, come on," said the younger brother, "Roxanne Flournoy and her friends are gonna be there."

"I just might," said Jasco. He took another bite of goat.

Jasco liked visiting with Scott and Larry, but could not seem to get his attention off the group that had gathered around Acey. Acey and his uncle were acting silly and teetering back and forth in their chairs. Both men were well into their sixth or

seventh drink. Sometimes his uncle would lead the conversation, but usually it was Acey, talking about Nam or football and saying "Jesus H. Christ" every other sentence. One time when Lajolla got up to get some drinks, Acey poked her in the rear with his cane. He laughed and laughed. After awhile everyone else started laughing too. Lajolla, Jasco noticed, took her time about coming back with the drinks.

As everyone finished dessert, the party became louder. The children were excused, and full of food and pent up energy, they began to run around the yard and play. The women started clearing the tables and throwing away paper cups and plates. Scott and Larry picked their teeth with toothpicks and talked about the rodeo. Jasco continued to watch Acey J. Waterfield, a man he had taken a distinct dislike to.

Jasco felt someone nudge his shoulder. It was Scott. "Jasco, get with it, looks like it's time for some entertainment."

Larry pointed at Jasco's uncle. Uncle Walt ran into his house and came out with a small, sturdy, wooden end table and two short stools. As soon as he returned to the group there was a lot of commotion—the ring of lawn chairs opened up, the three new pieces were put in the middle, people shifted places, and more people came over. Then two men went to the center—his uncle and Billy.

They squatted on opposite sides of the table on the little chairs and locked their right hands. Acey acted as the referee, and held the triangle formed by the two hairy forearms. Acey said, "Go," and for a second muscles burned. The plump blood vessels on Uncle Walt's temples looked like they would burst. Then Billy flattened his opponent's arm to the table.

Immediately, without giving Billy a chance to recover, Acey sat down at the table. A few quiet words were said between them and then Billy shook his head and laughed and sat down. Jasco watched from the back of the crowd.

There was a wild look of intensity on Acey's face that Jasco found sickening. Before they locked arms, Acey rolled his shirt sleeves all the way up his biceps. His arms were more brawny than Jasco imagined. They were covered with black ringlets of hairs and, on the undersides, blue veins, and on his sinewy right bicep there was a tatoo of a skull and crossbones underscored with a military insignia.

From that moment on, Acey never broke his stare at Billy—his gaze drilled into Billy's eyes. Jasco was not surprised

with what happened. The second Jasco's uncle said, "Go," Acey snapped his wrist hard-over collapsing Billy's the wrong way. Billy managed to hold on, keeping the arms perpendicular for awhile. But he had been ambushed, and slowly, as Billy grunted loudly, his arm slipped downward until it was pressed flat. Acey congratulated himself with a laugh. The tension subsided and soon everyone was patting the both of them on the back.

Jasco spoke casually, addressing Acey from the back of the crowd, "Nice going, Mr. Waterfield. You'll have to give me a workout sometime." Jasco nodded respectfully and turned around as if to walk towards the bar.

"How about right now?" Acey asked, becoming serious once again.

"Maybe sometime when there are not so many people around would be better," Jasco said.

"Don't you like playing ball when there are people in the stands?" Acey asked.

"Well I guess I do," Jasco said, and then, with a new authority, sat down. Acey sat down too, and started his stare.

At first, the crowd was quiet. Then they were overcome by their liquor and again became enlivened by Acey's tension. "That sonofabitch means business, Jasco," someone said. "Hope you've had plenty of arm wrestling lessons, boy," said another voice. "Show him who's boss, Jasco," said Scott Van Loan. Everyone started laughing. Acey did not break his stare, but he did let his mouth roll up to a grin and back down again into a hang of concentration.

When they locked arms Jasco felt the power of the man's hands again. Acey strove to get advantage in the grip, but Jasco didn't let him. Jasco felt a third hand on top set their arms, and Jasco smiled and stared hard into the eyes that opposed him. Jasco was pumped and his wrist set with a hair trigger which he knew he had to pull first.

"Go." The single word set off a violent explosion in two men's arms. One man's wrist collapsed and his arm fell under it. One man cried out in defeat. And in that man's eyes, Jasco saw a spooky mindlessness that he had seen once before.

Going After the Milch Cow

Always in the back pasture, the white-faced cow never came no matter how long I tried to blow her in, the horn so hard against my lips my teeth felt as if they were bending like old nails under stress. For several long years we milked that dumb beast that would not come in to the sound of the horn. Her

udder almost dragging earth, she wouldn't move at all unless you walked behind and whistled all the while you gently waved her home. The other barnyard stock were quick to trough, but the white-faced cow chewed one slow cud: I never saw her swallow. Once a flock of starlings roosted on her back. She left them on

all night before she slowly whipped them off without any effort except her tail. I wondered how you could make a slow cow go, how to get her home in time to get the milking done by dark. I tried all the neighbors said. Nothing worked. I wasn't dumb at twelve; *experimental*, I like to think. I cried

a lot, but cows are used to bawling calves and kids. Nothing ever seemed to work: she hardly shook her hide to keep the flies at bay. The pies she left in that slow wake I skipped till my feet were raw. Then I swore I'd speed her up. I grabbed her tail and cranked the fat rump like a Model A. I found her forward gear.

Souvenirs

A hundred pictures of the London Blitz
or more he sent back, the postcards a pale
sepia and held together with Red Cross
gauze. When he wrote, the V-letter came crushed
by many hands, through many lands. Once
even it bore a postmark from Morocco

and a stamp from Roma. We never knew where
he was nor how. He sent an Iron Cross
from somewhere near Berlin in '45.
Just before the end, he sent me another
B-17 someone had whittled out
of Black Forest pine, its metal props

snipped out of a prewar tobacco can.
My mother loved the Irish linen. My
sisters gasped at the wonders that he sent
them, little things that made the marvelous
seem true. We placed the souvenirs along
the mantle and window sills and read his words

about a wider world he was going to help
us see. The war filled us with dread, so too
the age into which we grew. It was his way
to give us hope, the souvenirs, mementos
of being there, wherever it may have been
before he disappeared over the Netherlands.

Rebuilding

The barn burns
in the night,
and tentatively
turning
an ember
with his boot
the farmer
relives
the night
in his truck
with a waitress
half his age.
It's a small town.

His wife
serves
the neighbors
coffee, and by dawn
the farmer
has sketched
a new barn
on a napkin
at the table,
the way it
should have been
built the first time.

Keepsakes

One June during our tornado season
The air raid siren sent us to the basement.
I looked up at the ceiling, our first floor,
Hearing the flash and hammer at the windows,
Knowing my room might disappear, my bed,
My books, my shoes, even the dancer
Who twirled on my musical jewelry box.
I hummed or played dominoes
To block the thunder, and block the radio's
Hysterical reports of destruction.

After the all clear, we went up
To find the windows in the kitchen shattered.
Glass in jagged chunks covered the floor
Mixed in with greenery, lilac leaves,
An elm branch, and giant white
Catalpa flowers from our favorite tree.
I walked out into the sweeping rain.
The elm, too high to climb, had toppled,
Crushing a parked car, and bringing down
A bird's nest to eye level, with three eggs.

I climbed the dark stairway to my bedroom,
Past the frightened cat, who shrank from touch.
I opened my jewelry box, and lifted out
My three lockets with their tangled chains.
I felt the knots. I recognized the shapes,
One locket like a heart, another round,
Containing a strand of my mother's hair,
And both entwined about my baby locket
Dented with teeth marks. I held my lockets.
I turned the key and made my dancer dance.

Twenty-five years later, New Year's Day,

My Arizona house was ransacked.
I walked bewildered through my changed rooms
Which looked as if a wind had blown them open.
Everything I owned was heaped on beds,
Or thrown in corners, tossed away
In the intruder's search for gold or cash.
My jewelry box was gone at last,
My locket destined to be crushed and melted
To make a fraction of a bar of metal.

I thought about the dancer on her spring
Who always rose up with the lid
And spun in circles to Brahms' *Lullaby*.
She was as real as all my shadowy neighbors
Who told the police they heard nothing.
I swept up glass. I put my things away.
I told myself to forget, not to care,
And I could feel the shock in my brain—
A magnet, polarized to pull and hold
Turning its negative side to the world.

Parable

Down in the basement on the old table
I used to draw and color with my brothers.
We made a paste of flour and water
To stick hearts onto our homemade cards,
And keep the glitter clinging to the paper
When we poured it around a glowing moon.
My speciality was faces of women.
I made a profile with a single line,
Added hair, and one sideways eye.
Sometimes I illustrated Bible texts,
And I remember drawing five virgins
Holding unlit lamps in a kind of frieze,
Looking across at five other virgins
Who refused to lend them any precious oil.
The story puzzled me. I always lent
My paste, my scissors, even my new crayons
Although I knew I'd get them back broken.
Yet here the bridegroom shut the heavy door
To keep the foolish virgins from the feast.
I saw myself outside in the black night,
My lamp useless, my eyes beginning to smart
As the violins began, and I heard laughter.

I looked up at my brothers as I worked
On my identical faces, foolish and wise.
My brothers looked alike. I looked like them.
One had drawn a farmhouse, one a dog.
I took the tube of silver glitter, to pour
Stars on the veils of my ten women—
I understood the parable, though I didn't.
The foolish virgins, sleepy and forgetful,
So like myself, were going to go to hell.
And everyone who was foolish, who forgot,
Nodded off, who dreamed of something else

While the bridegroom delayed, and lamps went out,
Someday would find herself on a threshold
Shut out of friendship, family love, and hope.
My brothers seemed far from me, the table wide,
And the naked bulb swinging above our heads
Left half the scary basement in shadow.
Out of our sight, spiders were eating flies.
Mice were quaking in their dirty holes
Afraid of us, afraid of the cat upstairs.
Near us the hulking furnace puffed and clanked.

At The Salmon Feast

Below me a white salmon, oily and rich,
Lies on the grate above the sparking coals.
The smoke blows into my face, greasy
And stinging. I've already eaten delicate
Pink flesh of the ordinary salmon.
I'm holding a fork and plate like everyone
As the fisherman describes this last salmon,
The largest, and best. It's almost fresh
Because its big vein was cut on deck
While it still lashed, and spattered sea water.
It bled freely before it was packed in ice.
Now oil rises from the cooking muscle,
Froths and drips and hisses in the flame.
The sound is louder than the subdued talk,
Or tinny music coming from the house,
And for a moment I hear nothing else.
I seem to have disappeared from my body,
Though all around me people are flowing,
Solid, real people, with eyes and lips.
Sweat shines on a brow; veins protrude
In wrist and throat. I watch the long spine
Under the packed muscle of a shirtless man.
Then, shocked, I see my own torso
Spread across the rusty grate in the smoke.
Invisible fishermen lean to watch me gasp,
One drop of sea water caught on my large eye
In which the whole sky is refracted,
The strange sky, with its dry, murderous air.

The Lillian That Remains

Two images remain:
Lillian over a kitchen sink cracking open clams;
Lillian leaning slightly forward
in a straight back metal chair smoking.
Most of what I get is from standing
in the doorway of the kitchen while my aunts
wash dishes, drink coffee from chipped mugs:
That Lillian *stood* God knows why!
dead center front of the streetcar
all the way down to Kaufman's—
Margaret *tried* to get her to sit
but Lillian declared she was *protesting*;
Lillian in stockings **and** nail polish **spitting**
on the **steps** of Our Lady of Perpetual Hope
on the **very** morning of the **bishop's** visit;
Lillian *sitting* on the *front* stoop
in the *middle* of the afternoon
for all the *neighbors* to see
smoking and *drinking* bourbon.

Lillian used to tell me about going
to the farm in Sturgeon, hunting
for hours in the bush for turtles—
you could get the mothers
coming from their eggs down to the lake.
On the back porch she'd coax
their heads out with scraps of meat
so Paul or Rege could chop it with the axe.
"But," she said, "you only have that instant.
Lose it and you have to wait
hours sometimes for it to appear again."
If the instant was not lost
she would go in with her knife,
separate leg from shell,

lumping the meat in a pot for soup.

She told me this three
of the five times I saw her
once saying, "Some of them
I waited hours for. But I got 'em."
The last two times from the metal
chair of Mercy Hospital;
the first time in the kitchen
of the house in Ligonier
bare feet slapping linoleum,
waving her knife like a cigarette.
This is the Lillian I want to remain:
Lillian cracking clams,
steam sticking her hair
to plucked eyebrows.

The Three-legged Dog

which I wanted as allegory,
pushes his snout, all hair-commas & snot,

against my pants-leg.
The host coaxes in *dog-patois*, coaxes

each of us back from self-revulsion,
from art. Up close, I see the actual

harness steadying some leg
device, studs & a leather-wound wood piece—

the dog wobbles
but moves. Neither of us is enticed

by sauce-impastoed
shrimps or the party canapes, but by despair,

a state so low man goes in
on all fours, either as dog

which prefers flesh,
or the ingenuous lamb which eats

its own mood.
The dog holds up his snout, & I look

in the loose-lipped cleft
at teeth, phlegmatic, the only one of his retinue

attentive.

Farney's Sister

The storm expected many days had tasted
of carbolic: lightning
pulled from tree to tree,
violent but short rains Farney's sister thought

she conjured over the straying
squash rows, over pole-beans
supine but knuckling beanless onto their strings.
Such is the seniority of memory over desire:

as it soothes, & the senses callous
enough, I now smell
in my head the blackened
sweet potatoes that oozed then over our stick fire

under the WPA culvert.
In that picture, the culvert cuts
off the popple-choked fields from lawn & garden
over which Farney's sister sings,

as she stamps the culvert roof,
whisking a gauze bag of lightning bugs
in parabolas at the end
of my Dad's trout rod, her dress rucked

almost to the waist.
Now I see my little head look
out of the culvert arch;
the fire my two friends prompt
with throwaway boards or paper grows
as smoke pushes, swelling my clothes

with composite field smells.
In the picture, I can't twist my head—
even now, here, as I remember which muscles—
to look up at Farney's sister, I can't.

Hibiscus

Red, silky, lavish, it still
must have been an easy plant to grow—
it was everywhere at the Florida house, while
the ferns died, the aloes died, the grass
yellowed with strange diseases,
and the vines along the fence
turned their passion flowers to face
the neighbors. At pruning time
my mother struggled cutting
her one successful plant until my brother,
Allen, took over the job. From Allen
I learned to catch a feeding bee
in a hibiscus bloom, pulling all the petals
over it, plucking, and dropping the flowerhead
into the ready jar. Or you could shake
the red pod to make it buzz, holding it
next to a person's ear like a satin rattle.
Allen did that, without regard
for angry insects, his sister,
or the brown velvet bruises where our fingers
pinched the petals;
but afterward gave me, to guard,
the mayonnaise jar filled with hibiscus
gently unfolding with bees, opening
as if for the first time, proclaiming
that particular red
with a series of tiny explosions against the glass,
and a constant hum.

Chez Persephone

I like it here. You might as well
learn to love your winters—

each time I go to you
more reluctant, riding with zebras

and leopards, that pageant of spangles.
You make incredible

whoopie; I stand around
in garlands. We can't go on like this.

I get one big party, then months
alone, with my mother.

Here, I'm not responsible for
the clouds, the people bring

gifts of blue glass
when they visit, there's no

paperwork. A house of slate
and satin!

Thinking of you
in all that whiteness, the wet

branches, the long, long nights,
I don't really want

the earth again: there's
no need for sacrifices,

friends. Oh I could stand
some minor worship

in this underworld marriage—
but standard celebrations, adoration

of millions, a virtual
fan club of mortals

reminds me of so much snow.
Spring doesn't last, and was

too much like heaven, anyway.

Le chant de solitude

Laissez venir à moi tous les chevaux toutes les femmes
et les bêtes bannies
Et que les graminées se poussent jusqu'à la margelle
de mon établi
Je veux chanter la joie étonnamment lucide
D'un pays plat barricadé d'étranges pommiers à cidre
Voici que je dispose ma lyre comme une échelle à poules
contre le ciel
Et que tous les paysans viennent voir ce miracle d'un
homme qui grimpe après les voyelles
Etonnez-vous braves gens! car celui qui compose ainsi
avec la Fable
N'est pas loin de trouver place près du Divin dans une
certaine Etable!
Et dites-vous le soir quand vous rentrez de la foire
aux conscrits ou bien des noces
Que la lampe qui brûle à l'avant du pays très tard est
comme la lanterne d'un carrosse
Ou d'un navire bohémien qui déambule
Tout seul dans les eaux profondes du crépuscule!
Que mon Chant vous atteigne ou non ce n'est pas tant
ce qui importe
Mais la grande ruee des terres qui sont vôtres entre
le soleil et ma porte
Les fumures du Temps sur le ciel répandues
Et le dernier dahlia dans un jardin perdu!
Dédaignez ce parent bénin et maudissez son Lied!
Peut-être qu'un cheval à l'humeur insolite
Un soir qu'il fera gris ou qu'il aura neigé
Posera son museau de soleil dans mes vitres.

"Les biens de ce monde", 1949-50

Dorothy Neil Cohen

Translator

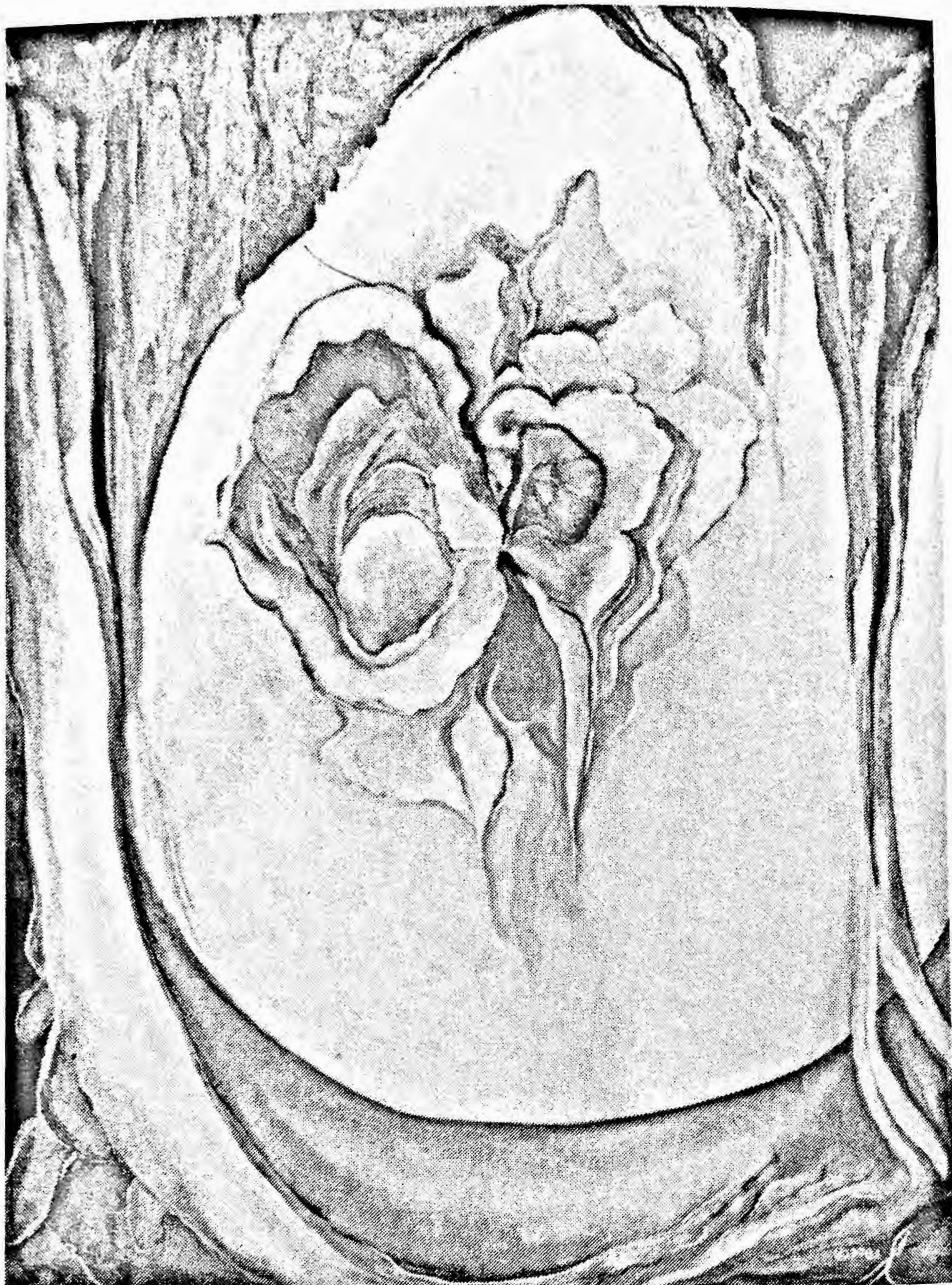
Song of solitude

Let all horses all women all exiled creatures come to me
And let spreading grasses advance to the edge of my workbench
I want to sing the astonishingly lucid joy
Of flat country rimmed with barricades of strange apple
 cider trees
See me place my lyre like a hen's ladder against the sky
Let all peasants come to see this miracle of a man who
 climbs up to stretch for vowels
How amazing, good folk! for a man who comes to terms
 with the Fable
May find in a certain Stable his place near the Divine!
Coming home at night from a town celebration say to each
 other
That the lamp burning so late in the country ahead is like
 a carriage lantern
Or the light of a vagabond ship that drifts
Alone in deep waters of the twilight hours!
Whether my song reaches you or not is less important
Than the great rush of fertile lands that are yours from
 the sun to my door
Composts of Time sprinkled over the sky
And the last dahlia in a neglected garden!
Scorn this gentle kinsman! curse his Lied!
Perhaps some gray cloudy evening when there's snow
A horse in an extraordinary mood
Will rest its sunshine muzzle on my windowpane.

Mon Dieu ce n'est pas parce que tu as coupé ta barbe
Rouge et verte comme des côtes de rhubarbe
Ni parce que tu ne te vêts plus à l'antique
Comme les jeunes gens dans les sociétés de gymnastique
Que je ne suis plus capable de te reconnaître
Pauvre rouge-gorge à la croisée de la fenêtre
Tu m'arrives au moment où je t'attends le moins
Tu entres tu ne sais plus aucun mot de latin
Tu te heurtes au mur de la bibliothèque
Avec cet à quoi bon tenace de l'insecte
Qui grille dans le four obscur du radiateur
Les ailes de la nuit et le miel de son cœur
Tu es là je ne sais comment Tu te réchauffes
Au feu de bois Tu te tâtes les côtes
Pour t'assurer qu'il n'y a rien de déplacé
Dans l'horlogerie délicate de l'éternité
Et je te parle à mots très humbles
De la souffrance intraduisible et des coloquintes
Qui sont en bas dans le jardin et qui éclatent
Dans l'air avec un bruit de savates
Qui fait songer au pas de l'homme en son cachot
Innocent comme un œuf et le ciel sur le dos.

"Poèmes inédits", 1948

My God it's not because you've shaved your beard
As red and green ribbed as stalks of rhubarb
It's not because you don't still dress the same
In antique robes like young men at Olympic games
That I no longer recognize you
Poor robin redbreast on my windowsill
You come when I expect you least you enter
You've completely lost your bearings
Hurling yourself against the library wall
With that helpless tenacity of an insect
That singses night wings and the honey of its heart
In the radiator's somber oven
You are there I don't know how You warm yourself
At the wood fire You lightly touch each rib
To be sure nothing's out of place
In the delicate clockwork of eternity
And I speak to you in very humble words
Of untranslatable suffering and of colocynth
Down there in the garden that explodes
In the air with a slap of old slippers
Making me think of man's step in his solitary cell
Innocent as an egg and heaven on his back.



"Fantasyscape I: Floral Series," Oil, 24" x 18".



"Fantasyscape VII: Floral Series," Oil. 22" x 28".

Paperweight

When I think of my body, I usually see Martin Heffler trying to pull open the stage curtains for the fifth grade's rendition of *How the West Was Won*. Martin was only a fourth grader, and maybe that had something to do with it, but really, it was the curtains that wouldn't budge. They were gold brocaded velvet, and they were beautiful to look at, but start working them in across the traverse rod and they became as ponderous as wet laundry.

At the far right of the stage, Martin was up there grunting, actually grunting. He was red-faced and the curtains weren't going anywhere. Cruelty, inattention. I don't know what it was, but the teachers just let poor Martin struggle for awhile, which was wrong because they basically understood the laws of physics. The curtains were a rock and Martin was a pebble.

Sheer determination was another thing though. Martin passed from pulling on the rope to hanging on it, and his grunts lowered in pitch. What started out as moderate effort became painful and maddening. All of us were sure he would burst a vein in his head or pee his pants, for in our minds, fate was always assigned to one of these two ends.

How the West Was Won turned out to be more an assignment than an artistic creation. The pioneers were deadpan and the Indians communicated only with timid war whoops. By far it was Martin Heffler who had stolen the show, who neither burst a vein nor peed his pants, but who lent me this image of my body as something heavier than night and beyond the laws of physics: the cumbersome gold curtains behind which Emily Mills, dressed as the state of California, waited to be discovered.

It goes back that far, to the third grade, to Martin raging against those curtains and me sitting in the audience with the first realization that if it weren't for my body, I could fly, I could go anywhere, I could be anything. One night in Louisville in 1976, Prentice Dorn left his post at the bar and delivered himself to me, tall and dark-haired, a man whose hands are more com-

mitted to my memory than his face, not because he was unattractive, but simply that his hands moved so smoothly. They were like water as it edges around something big, as it pools and cuts until everything is surrendered without a sound.

Prentice had already finished cleaning the bar and was following me around. It was after closing and I'd only had the job at Fiddler's for three weeks. Prentice had worked there for over two years. He was telling me about how Walter, the maitre d', had fouled up some reservations that evening and how a furious party of six had been left sitting in the lobby for over a half hour. Walter had given them a round of complimentary cocktails and humbled himself in a slew of perfected apologies, then taken it all out on the two nearest waiters. And if Nick was too stupid to notice that the bus boys were stealing his tips, Prentice maintained, then he deserved it.

This was stuff I liked to hear about, everything I couldn't see from the kitchen, though I didn't envy those who worked the dining room, who stepped lightly among the tables of Louisville socialites in the half-dark elegance that was as imagined as real. A waterfall of blue-green lights, potted fig trees and magnolias. It was a strange place to work. There was constant bickering among the cooks: what could be served with what, who threw out the last can of peppercorns. Back by the coffee station, the bus boys hung out and watched the plates as they were taken from tables. Leftovers were up for grabs, the good stuff, the practically untouched prime rib or lobster, the Wellington. Nobody went away from this place hungry. John would leave quietly after midnight with cake or eclairs for his little girls. Even the cats survived by prowling the garbage cans out back. It was the way that city fed itself, and no one thought of it as stealing.

I knew, as he followed me into the pantry and back out to the prep station, that Prentice was sizing me up. He had watched me like this for three nights, following me out to my car where he stood complicating the darkness, talking about Louisville's water system and his father's bowling alley and a host of trivia that, though meaningless to me, was tender.

So on this the fourth night, when I reached up to slide a can of olives onto the shelf and felt Prentice close behind me, his arms around my waist, I was not surprised. No, in fact I leaned into him the way a person leans into a storm, a little off balance perhaps, but determined to go somewhere, despite the wind and the rain. It was an awkward moment, Prentice kissing my hair

because he couldn't get to my face. I couldn't get to anything on Prentice, so I leaned back further into his arms, into his chest, to the place where his heart became the same pounding as Walter's fist on the outside door. He had locked himself out and wanted to know why it took so long for us to get there.

That was the fourth night, April, when Prentice took two bottles of the house Zinfandel and we left Fiddler's, though we were unable to make it all the way up the stairs to his apartment. We had to stop out there on his porch to taste each other, mouth and neck and shoulders, everything unwinding into the black shoal of night.

If I could, this is where I would have stopped it, on the porch where desire was still blind, where it was only a sound: the whining first gear of a car or dogs barking in the distance. But Prentice unlocked the door, he opened the wine with a deep, resounding pop, and the next eight years began to take shape.

Later that night in Prentice's bed, I started at his foot and dreamed my way up his leg in the old way, like the pioneers scratching at the dirt, looking for signs, for smoke, for California. Prentice moaned a little. It was the kind of sound that's hard to distinguish. Sometimes it's pain; sometimes it's heaven and there's no word, there's just this sound that comes out into the room, all breath and feeling.

"Do you want coffee?" Prentice asked me in the morning.

"Yeah. Always," I told him.

It wasn't a test, though to watch a man moving around in his own kitchen is a kind of revelation. Prentice had a specific cabinet for cups. Things were looking good.

Prentice in the morning in his boxer shorts. Why is the world that kind of place, happiness and sadness converging, the smell of coffee making everything new?

2

There is a moment when I look down at myself and the consequences of life are made real. Ankle and skin and bone, the long curve of the arm, a patch of hair. Something that hums in the darkness.

With clay, you get to feel what the body is really like. The hands are incredible. There are 27 bones in them, and then the wrists turn in, delicate as hairpins, frustrating you, making you crazy. Once I worked on a foot for a month. I made everyone

take off their shoes when they came into the house so I could study their feet, and still my foot, if I had to tell the truth, was mediocre. One Christmas, as a joke, I sculpted Arthur's balls, but they cracked when I fired them. They're on my desk now, paperweights, a sad reminder of Arthur at the AmTrak station when I gave him two apples and a box of Jujubes and told him I loved him, really, forever.

Something hums in the darkness, forever: my body, where happiness and sadness converge, where apples and feelings are transformed into a patch of hair.

3

Fiddler's wasn't four stars, but it definitely had a reputation. The service was good. Even though Walter had lived in Louisville for over twenty years, he played up his Algerian accent, and the customers were charmed. In the safe confines of the kitchen, though, he returned to his everyday slang, to name-calling and cracking the whip, to pointing out that all bus boys were born with their heads up their asses.

From six until ten I was a slave, then the dinner rush died, I got myself a drink and started clean-up. The front doors were locked at twelve and on good nights I was out of there by one.

Theft is a harsh word, but it's the word Ron Mayfield used when he spoke to the night shift one Friday before we went to work. Even though he was one of the owners, we didn't see him that often because he lived in Frankfort, so when he walked in, his gray Saab parked in the loading zone, we stiffened a little and Nick, who was about to throw a loaf of French bread rocket-style across the room and onto the counter, gracefully put his arm down and strode across the kitchen like, hey, it was just work as usual.

Mayfield had a way of making it seem all very vague: inventories and loss statements. He avoided being accusatory. If I had been a jury and looked out into their faces, I wouldn't have seen anything, not from the cooks or the bus boys or the waiters or anybody. Simply put: nobody here had stolen a thing. Mayfield was having a business problem; that's what it was, and maybe we even sympathized with him a little.

Nothing really changed. Oh, one night Walter saw John leaving with a couple of slices of raspberry torte and he told him to put them in take-out containers, but that was it.

I told Prentice, who was still wiping down the bar when John left, what Walter had done.

"Yeah, he's O.K.," Prentice said.

I sat down on one of the stools. The lights in the dining room behind us were already out, and for some reason, Prentice was moving slowly that night. In another month he was due to start an internship with a local architect and he planned to cut down on his hours at the restaurant then. I had been thinking of that, of the fact that I would be seeing him less.

Prentice was beautiful at his work. No, he was beautiful doing anything. I saw him mowing his father's front yard once. He had to stop and empty the grass catcher every couple of times around the yard. His shirt was off and the air was sweet with St. Augustine. His father came out on the porch and I could see the resemblance and I thought whatever happens, I'll be better for this.

"Prentice," I said, bending a straw in half, "do you think it's stealing?"

It wasn't a test; it was a question, though I admit there was a lot in it.

Prentice covered a bowl of cut limes and looked up at me. He was tired, he was running late, but he paused thoughtfully and then he said. "Dee, everything is stealing."

4

It was a really bad year for Martin Heffler. Besides the humiliation suffered in those few minutes before Mrs. Gallagher's sixth graders claimed the West, Martin underwent the trauma of being accused of stealing. Birdy Watson stood up just before lunch and yelled that his lunch ticket was gone, and several other students discovered theirs missing also. Through a long process that involved a desk search, conferences, an anonymous note, and a lecture on the importance of truth and honor, Martin's name was arrived at. No formal punishment was dealt out as far as we knew, but Martin was a small boy, and if anything, he lost weight that year. He took to folding his homework into tiny squares the size of quarters, and later on, he stopped riding the bus.

So when Prentice told me that everything was stealing, I remembered Martin and the Zinfandel and Walter turning his head and the cats slinking up the alley. I saw Arthur with the apples and my heart, and I saw myself turning to Prentice in the

night, throwing the covers back and easing onto him, telling him there and there.

The most I ever took from Fiddler's was a cherry cream pie. I was having lunch guests the next day and Estelle, the pastry chef, said to go ahead, in another day or so it was going to be stale anyway. It was a whole pie, eight pieces, with creme de glace and everything. I served it on these little bone china plates, and all I had were salad forks, but I used them and it didn't matter.

Prentice was even less a thief than I. On occasion, he helped himself to what he wanted, but this was excusable because Prentice was never paid for all the work he did. Constantly he'd be in there on his day off or before his shift. In an emergency, Prentice was always there, like when the pipes burst or when they needed someone to pick up new kitchen equipment from St. Louis.

Prentice was a real asset. Prentice was the man who bought me three rings and moved me twice. After his internship with Signature One Consultants, they hired him full time, and then he only came into Fiddler's with clients or sometimes alone for a nightcap.

"Prentice, are you happy?" I asked him.

"Happy," he answered, but it was the kind of answer I could never trust.

I told him to explain, that there were all kinds of happy, that we should know each other's mind.

"O.K.," he said, pretending concentration, eyes closed tight, hand on his forehead. "Tell me what I'm thinking."

5

What I'm thinking is that you can never leave it until the very end, like that moment in "Ripley's Believe It Or Not" when they show a man and his body finally separating. It's an old photograph and the authenticity is questionable, but the idea itself is great, how you get up and walk across the room and leave your body just lying there.

It's not bitterness that makes me say this. It's simply how much my body possesses me, how Prentice would stand in a doorway and I'd be unable to think clearly.

One night I thought I lost my body in the main branch of the Louisville Public Library, but if so, it hadn't gone far. I'd been reading an oversized reference book, *Twelve Moons of the*

Year, and it was closing time, and when I stood to leave, I was thinking of the final illustration in the book, a landscape, winter-brilliant, the stars caught in the high, barren treetops. It wasn't until I was in my car and five blocks away that I looked down, and like a tired swimmer come back to the shore, it was there, all of it, my knees and breasts and the small of my back, which later that night Prentice moved to and kissed twice, once cold and light, then a second that lingered.

6

I gave up doing hair and there was only one kind of eyebrow I was any good at. Prentice came in and saw the mess, saw my face smeared with dried clay, and just smiled.

"No, I can't get studio space at the junior college," I told him.

"I didn't say anything. Relax." And he made his way to the kitchen.

In '80 we went to Minneapolis to visit his mother and a couple of years after that we camped in the Ozarks, which later Prentice admitted was not all that restful as a vacation. The trails were poor and the season unusually wet.

From the other side of the room, Prentice watched me so often. What he saw was probably no different than clay: an impasse, a collarbone. The small features of children that, when set in marble, seem no more than strokes or petals. His hands knew these things as well as mine.

The best present that I ever gave Prentice was on the occasion of his going-away party from Fiddler's. He was kind of embarrassed with everyone standing around in the lounge in their street clothes, but he appeared cool and gracious nonetheless. I let him open the gift in the car, and he was surprised, if not also confused. It was a three-foot porcelain platter shaped like a fish. The scales were in detail, shimmering, and the eye, an oval of gold leaf. I had found it in an Oriental market, and the only time Prentice took it off his coffee table was the Thanksgiving we tried to serve the turkey on it, but it was all wrong. Prentice was always slightly overwhelmed with gifts. He'd look at them closely, amazed, and he'd thank you ten times.

When I think of my body next to Prentice, I see how time is a ritual, a complicated working out of who will reach over and turn the lamp off at night, of how things will finally be said and done.

"Dee, it's not too late for med school," my mother offered long-distance from Boulder, but Prentice and I were still together. She had no idea what it was like, this body, walking downtown and smelling rain, to be taut and wingless and waiting in a crowd for the bus with this bag of tricks, with this body, with wet hair.

Louisville is an old place, but it had attempted to modernize itself. There was a pretty successful renovation project downtown, though there were still the rattraps and walkups that could be had cheap. It was a city that didn't demand much. It could be traversed easily, the neighborhood sidewalks were wide, and its economy was moderate but growing. I wouldn't consider going back there, though it's a place that I'm glad I lived in for awhile.

In Louisville on my thirtieth birthday, Prentice gave me a ring, a garnet: a black-red stone set in a gold band. I couldn't ask him what it meant. Anyway, what could he have said? There were 27 bones in Prentice's hand when he touched me, when he laid back the flesh, there and there, and found only a sparrow's black-red heart.

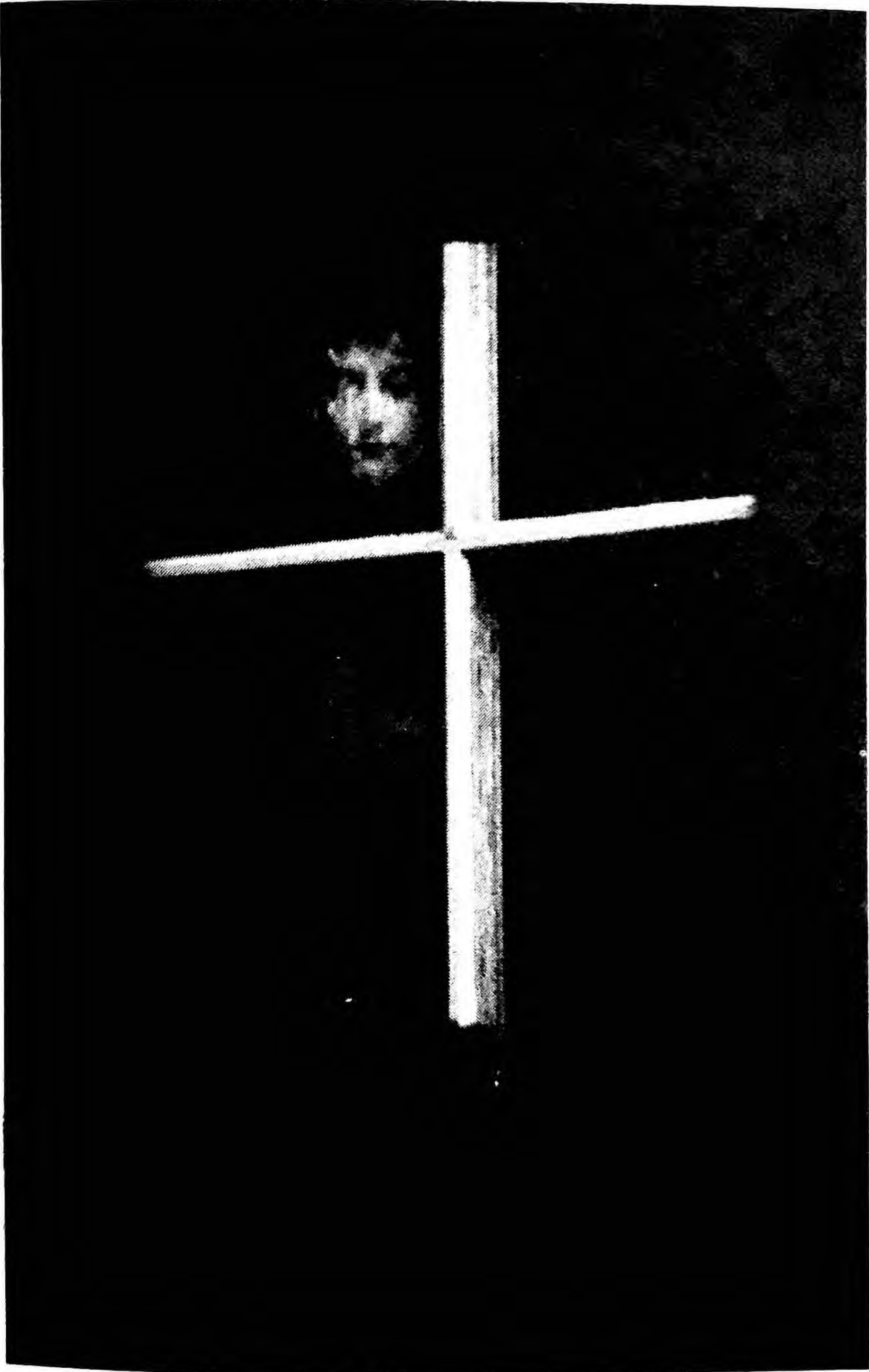
7

After all of that, after eight years in Louisville, I ended up going to Boulder, though I warned my mother that medical school was out. No questions. I took my time getting there: three days during which I often stopped to read the map, checking the way Interstate 40 bulldozed through Illinois and Missouri and Kansas, then, outside of Denver, how it burst into spider lines going everywhere. On the third day I had to stop to repack some things I'd hastily arranged in the backseat. The ironing board was hitting the T.V. screen everytime I braked. It was just past Salina, a rest stop from which the great American prairie rolled westward, not exactly as the fifth graders had made it out to be, but lonely all the same. The wind was blowing as it usually does there, cool and unpredictable. If you could have stood there by my car and felt it, you'd know why California is such a happy place and why the settlers cried into the soil, feeling the full weight of their bodies.

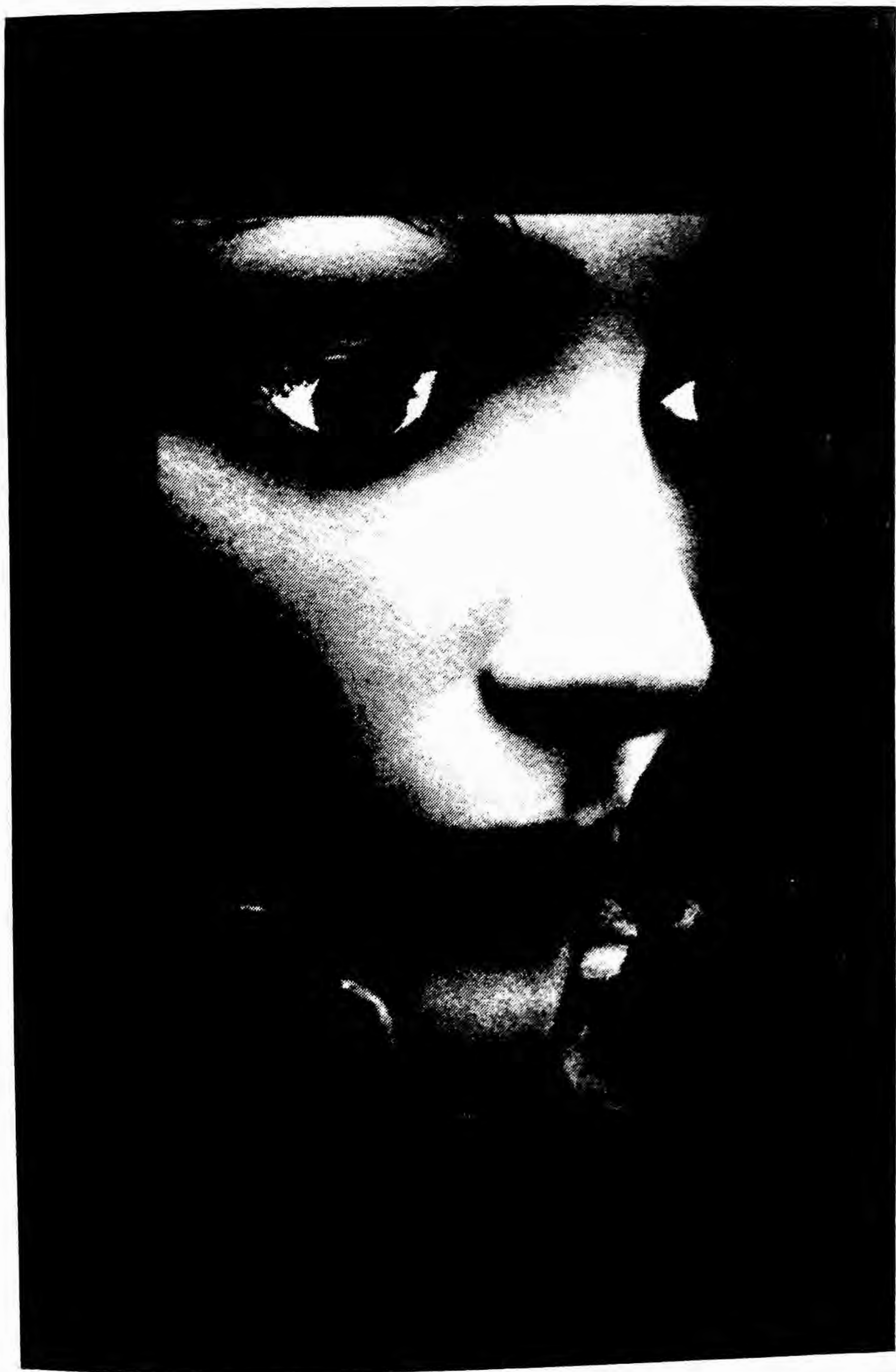
Chris Pichler



Four photographs: "The Nazraeli Series," Black and white photographs.







An Interview with John Updike

This interview, done by T. M. McNally and Dean Stover, took place at the Tempe Mission Palms hotel, in Tempe, Arizona, on the morning of March 24, 1987. We wish to thank Mr. Updike for his generous cooperation.

In their criticism of your work, critics range from praising the accuracy of your vision to criticizing its triviality. How do you see yourself as a writer and what you are doing?

Well, I didn't set out to be a social commentator. I write out of deeper, more childish motives than that, which begin with a wish to make a mark on paper—the perhaps irrational belief, which I began to get about the age of twenty, that I had something to say, that I was a witness of things which somehow should be told about and that hadn't been put into print.

I've led in some ways a sheltered life. I've not been wounded in Italy like Hemingway and I've never fought marlin at sea. I'm a product of the nearly forty years of cold war. So naturally I've written about domestic, rather peaceable matters, while trying always to elicit the violence and tension that does exist beneath the surface of even the most peaceful-seeming life. That is, I think I see human life as basically difficult and paradoxical. Just being a thinking animal puts us into a paradoxical and somewhat painful situation: we are a death-foreseeing animal and an animal of mental appetite; we have a Faustian side always wanting more or something else.

Anyway, I've never felt myself trivial. It's up to other people, I suppose, to decide how important or relevant what I deliver is. Each writer has to sing his own song, has to deliver what has struck him as worth telling.

What are the differences you see between being a poet, a short story writer, and a novelist?

I've explored the genres in that order. I was a poet first. Poetry very much belongs to childish making. I wanted to be a car-

toonist, and from quite young on my love of humor and of things clicking and jumping and squeaking and talking led to an appreciation of so-called light verse. I began to write light verse at about the age of fourteen and have remained something of a poet ever since. I've tried also to write poetry that isn't light, or that says what seems to me to be true and interesting about the world. It's a satisfying thing to write a poem that you think works; it begins and ends rather quickly, often in one sitting. It has a neatness, an inbuilt order that we like. Somehow something deep in us likes looking for order, a completeness that composes well.

Short stories are something more, really; something that takes most of us several days if not several weeks to write. I didn't begin to write stories seriously until I was midway through my college career. If a story goes well, you feel it has a beginning, middle, and end, and in some ways, within its own terms, couldn't be better: I mean it couldn't click shut better.

I never saw myself as a novelist until my mid-twenties, when it seemed to me that this was the challenge in front of a so-called creative word person in the Twentieth Century: if you couldn't attempt a novel, you weren't really playing in the major leagues. This sounds a little false as I say it. I'm aware of Raymond Carver, Isak Dinesen, and a number of others who have done quite well without ever leaving the short story form; but it seemed to me something that I should try.

The novel is a little like living. You don't know what's going to happen from day to day. You have the general direction and a sort of general hopefulness that something nice will happen each day, and you sit down to it in that spirit. Novels have a slightly unsettling arbitrariness. I mean they could have gone some other way, very possibly, and be just as good or even better, but they do harden into the shape they take. You do your best by them and try to move on to something else.

What are the determining criteria for what becomes a poem and what becomes a work of fiction?

You don't always know, of course. Some things that begin as poems work out only as short stories, and some things which try to become novels maybe should have been poems. But in general it seems fairly clear that a little tingle or even a very small shiver, but a *distinct* shiver, should produce a poem if it's going to produce anything. And in the short stories—I don't

write as many as I used to—the shiver is somewhat broader and often takes a twist or two of manipulation. There has to be some corner you turn in a short story. And in a novel you have a number of corners that have to be turned.

A novel begins with a wish to make a statement of a fairly large order about the society. It may not seem large when it's delivered, but it seems large to the writer. For example in *Rabbit Run*, one of the impulses was the observation that the small city landscape I had come out of was littered with the unsuccessful later lives of heroic high-school athletes. At least there was something in the American society which led a lot of young men to peak at the age of eighteen, and left them really with nowhere to go but down; and this seemed an observation worth somehow embodying.

You also wrote a poem about an ex-high school athlete.

Yes, I did. In fact I worked that idea all three ways. It also was in one of my early short stories, about an ex-basketball player, called "Ace in the Hole." So I've been lucky with my ex-basketball players. I really wasn't one, either, although I did, obviously, handle a ball and shoot a lot of baskets. In those days, in Pennsylvania at least, there were an awful lot of baskets up on telephone poles and above people's garage doors; and so we all were exposed to the glamour of basketball and the beauty of it.

I went to a lot of high school basketball games, too, and still remember the smell and the sense of excitement and the mixture of the sexes and the cheerleaders out on the waxed floor with their sturdy, young legs and short skirts. It was a kind of romance, and it was something of what being an American meant to me: the ability to get turned on by basketball.

And *Couples*, a somewhat later book, had behind it a general sense that all of the old institutions which used to keep people in their houses and in their marriages had broken down, and that what had grown up instead was a kind of intensity of camaraderie, which led often to adultery and to the breakup of these homes. But I wasn't thinking this was altogether bad; I was saying that a kind of institution had evolved out of the decay of the other institutions.

Other than the obvious reason that most people think of you as a fiction writer, why do you think your poetry for the most part has been ignored?

Well, let's put aside the possibility that it might deserve ignoring. I think people who decide what is worthwhile poetry

are by and large people who have devoted their major efforts to it. And somebody who writes poetry on the side is from the start looked on with suspicion. It's taken quite a while, for example, for Melville's poetry to emerge from total insignificance to where it now has a standard place in the anthologies. And Hardy, too. Not that I'm Melville, or Hardy, but anybody who writes a lot of prose is viewed as a prose writer and his best self will be searched for there, and maybe found there. That might be a wrong supposition. In truth the needs of my career, of supporting myself and putting my best self forward most fully, have led me to write more and more prose. And in a way I've abandoned the robes of poet. But I'm not ashamed of the poems, of course. In fact some of them I like quite well. But they were certainly written at odd moments: often on vacation, an airplane trip. I'm not sure this is the way Yeats wrote poetry.

What is the relationship between imagination and personal experience in your poetry and your fiction?

My poetry is often quite impersonal, and may suffer because of it. I rarely put my most ardent and suffering self into it. Maybe my early light verse inhibits me, but the poetry tends to be observational. The short stories are probably the most me, the most autobiographical, because you can have even an uninteresting life and have short stretches of it that can be cut into short stories, with a little twist. Almost always there is an extra twist. I mean you slightly exaggerate, you sometimes combine experiences, you often combine experiences you had with ones you didn't have. But the short stories, on the whole, are the least fantastical. They're almost like scrapbooks to me now. I'm old enough to have forgotten ways in which I once was, so that the whole experience of raising small children, for example, is quite far behind me, and I read with amazement that evidently I once knew all about it. And I must have, because I did have four children.

The short stories were a kind of running letter to mankind about my inner adventures, my domestic adventures; whereas the novels almost always are in some large part fantastic. There has to be something to make it interesting for me to spend the months or the years with them. There must be a kind of leap for me.

My first novel, my first published one, was about old people. I never write totally without some personal hook; I had lived

with my grandparents, so I knew a little bit about old people—how they smelled and talked, their cadences, and enough to feel the poignance that a whole world dies with them. It's not just that they die, but they carry with them accents and memories and ways of construing reality that won't come again. A sort of extinction of the species goes on all the time in the generations. So I felt I had some authority to write a book about old people. In *Rabbit Run*, without having been that guy who never left Berks County and the home town environment, I still knew the landscape and I knew the way attitudes broke down, and what people said, or thought I did. The novel was an attempt to imagine what it was like, what it would be like to be him as a young adult—one of these basketball heroes that I used to idolize. A book like *The Coup* I wrote in part because I wanted to say something about Africa and about the world, but also in a way I wanted to go to Africa. So, it was sort of my way of taking a trip.

I think unless we're going to become slaves to the autobiographical or only write one vast autobiographical book like Proust, or several vast somewhat autobiographical books like Joyce, the American novel must force its imagination outward, try to stretch it as much as possible without losing that urgency of the person writing it, that personal urgency which makes a book alive.

How would you define American fiction?

There is certainly a distinctive American vein. Just for a matter of survival and trying to plot your own life, you have to do some thinking about American writing. I majored in English, and when I say English I mean the Metaphysical Poets, the Victorians, and I didn't really read much American writing in college. So I've had to kind of slowly attempt to educate myself in the likes of Hawthorne and Melville, and in fact I came to Tempe with a novel by William Dean Howells in my suitcase because in a month I'm supposed to give a lecture on him.

He's had a very instructive career: an American writer who was preeminent in his day, and who has distinctly faded now. The novels are quite readable and part of the fun of it is to (A) enjoy them, and (B) try to locate what makes them not terribly important now. But he was also trying to cope with this problem—how to be an American writer. And there was no doubt in his mind that one should deal with American materials and get

away from the English models; get away from Sir Walter Scott, get away from Dickens, get away from Flaubert and face the American reality. Howells did try, and I think the Howells way one hundred years later still has to be our way. We must try to write about ourselves, and write about a continent and a social system which in some ways is still wild. There is something improvised about the American way of life and American art. When you look at what we view as our own classics, you're struck by how peripheral they are to ordinary experience. I mean, how many of us go on whaling ships? Hemingway also was a great avoider of the American landscape; he did not like to write about what went on inside the American home. The Great American Novel hardly takes place in America at all.

That certainly doesn't seem the case today in fiction with its trend toward hyper-realism, especially in the short stories.

Yes. Post World-War-II American writers have tended to stay home at last. I think there was a way of looking at America as late as the Twenties: either the writer like Hemingway left and wrote about charming European cafes and bullfights and everything in fact that was not American but appealed to him and entertained him; or the writer like Sinclair Lewis stayed at home and wrote critiques of the awful banality and suffocating hypocrisy and religiosity of American life. So when Lewis faced the music, he faced it from above; he faced it from a sort of superior position saying this isn't me, this is what I'm avoiding or looking down on. My feeling is that if America and its manifestations aren't worthy of being written about now, they never will be. A writer like Bellow certainly can't be accused of avoiding America reality; that Chicago of his is so alive and so much Chicago it could only be Chicago. Indeed the American Jewish writers have been very willing to embrace their local reality.

My perception of the American writer's difficulties is that he lacks that sense of an embracing society which enables him to write easily about other people. The English, for all the rigors of their class system, seem to have wonderful imaginative access to each other, so that in Trollope or Henry Green or even the contemporary British fiction—however pale or babbling it might seem—there is a wonderful ease about putting people on paper and making them talk the way they do. Whereas for Americans, we're locked into our life histories in an unhealthy but in-

teresting way. I guess the flip side of this is that we write more honestly about the little we do write about. There is something about our sense of what a person is that compels us to be more searching. But if you're going to have an extended career as a writer, I think you do need to try to be empathetic and, in a way, playful.

In contemporary American fiction, what do you think are the differences between a work from the East and a work from the West?

I'm not sure I've read enough to really answer the question with any real intelligence, but my impressionistic answer would be that the basic violence that is part of the American reality is more accessible here in the West. And it's even true of California fiction; the West Coast you would think is a fairly settled coast now, but even there—I'm thinking of Nathanael West—lies a scary sense of there being a scorpion under any leaf and of violence breaking abruptly, and of lives breaking against Nature. Fiction of the East is a little more padded, has a little more greenery, a little more illusion of safety in numbers and safety in an established and long history. But the West is closer to the bone of American experience. Here in Arizona the quality of the landscape has to it this feeling of being very thinly covered and temporary, like it all might be blown away; it's a subjective sensation. The East has, of course, the Atlantic, which isn't a very wide ocean, and the East has looked toward Europe often. I think you can kid yourself that you're a kind of branch of European literature more in the East than you can in the West.

Recently, a good many younger writers have been published: Jay McInerney, David Leavitt, Amy Hempel. What kind of effect, if any, do you think these younger writers will have in shaping fiction?

Well, I've read some and not all, and I just finished reading a long short story by a woman called Deborah Eisenberg who for my taste is one of the best of the youngish writers—but they tend to be a little less young than one thinks. At least they're in their thirties and not their twenties. I think it's a lot harder to get a career going now than it was. In my generation there was a number of us who published a lot, by the time we were thirty, for good or ill. I don't want to harp on the economics of it all, but I do think it's harder now to take writing seriously. When I went to college, Eliot was firmly on his throne; one had no need to defend writing as something worth doing. Now I think

anyone who sets out to write must at some point wonder if it is really not sort of a dying little dead-end. The Gutenbergian age is in its twilight: why should I be doing this for an American audience which basically doesn't read anymore, just flicks on the tube or whatever else it does—goes out and has a beer?

Some of these new writers are very good. There's a strong sense of their coming out of very unsettled upbringings. The presence of stepparents or split families is almost more the rule than the exception now. There's also a kind of geographical wandering, people who have been a lot of places and haven't really put down roots anywhere, so that the America you see is an oddly generalized glittery America of parking lots and supermarkets that could be anywhere. This is the way they see it and this is where their lives have led them, so you can't quarrel with it. But it does make it harder for them to be warm. You think of the warmth that Faulkner's able to generate from a moldering old corner of the South, but in contemporary fiction there's a funny, shallow feeling of "So what?" And the "So what" extends even to "So what if my boyfriend and I broke up? So what if it turns out I'm gay and not straight? So what if I lose a job?" These things seem to happen almost as if on a TV screen. You don't feel they're so much happening *to* the people as happening outside of them.

So the traditional warmth and empathy and caring that leads us to enter fiction is not easy to generate. I read somebody like Carver—who of course is no young writer, he's about my age, but in a way he belongs much more to the younger writers now than I do—and his work, in spirit and prose texture and even in feeling, is sort of exquisite: his stories are like highly polished porcelain pieces. Every word is worked over. Under the seeming colloquial casualness there's this terrible craft. But you often wonder, "Why is he telling me this?"

As for Jay McInerney, I've read only *Bright Lights, Big City*, which seemed to me fine, as long as you were on this sort of stoned, disco-to-disco level—a life going in funny directions and no direction. When at the end he tried to pump a little warmth into it, it felt phony in a strange way. That is, the very wish to make you care about it made you care less.

Frederick Barthelme is a writer I read because he appears in *The New Yorker* and because he seems to me the master of a kind of glazed hardness: his fondness for describing the way the restaurant tables look; and the way the women are dressed; and

the wonderful scary way the hero can never make a connection with these women, all of whom seem to be kind of on the make. These women are still alive in the old-fashioned way, throwing themselves at this man, this narrator who's scarcely alive and can't often respond sexually, and certainly not emotionally.

But the young writers are each different. You can't generalize. Although many of them seem to share a fear of saying too much—of having too many adjectives and volunteering too much information and a fear of trying to steer you emotionally until there's something faintly repellent about the surface of the story. Obviously these young writers are interesting, and I applaud them for having been led into this venture of writing when so much would seem to mitigate against it.

Your work explores taboo, especially sexual taboo. What is the place of taboo in modern fiction?

Modern fiction, at least from Cervantes on, to some extent is trying to bring out the intimate life of the individual person, and part of that is his sexual life. And so I think it natural that fiction has again and again seemed to skate near taboos. There isn't much left in this day and age of triple X films and triple X books, and after respectable fiction like *Ulysses* and *Lolita* and *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. My own criteria is that we describe whatever we feel exists but it must exist: it must be somehow mixed in also with the other parts of being human. In my rendering of sex I try always to present it in the full context of the social embarrassment, the awkwardness, the unease, the rumbling stomach—the general human mess that these taboos are woven into. Freud said some very nice things about taboos, of course; he said that if the old ones break down people have to construct new ones just to make sex interesting.

For every movement, there's a counter movement. There is, of course, a very strong puritanical reaction in this country—Arizona's probably no stranger to it—that would put us back into Victorian clothes and Victorian mores; but also within fiction itself. Each fiction writer has to do something he feels hasn't been done before. And certainly I don't see much specific sex in the younger writers. My generation, and the one generation before, was keen on breaking sexual taboos in print, but I don't think it is viewed as an artistic frontier now.

I don't know what's going on in writing courses, but what I feel in the younger writers is their interest in seeing how much

they can imply and not say, on every level. The art of implication, the art of delicacy: there's a frightful delicacy now that goes with minimalism, isn't there? You often read a story and say "What happened?" That seems to be what interests the younger people who I read instead of spelling it out or shocking grandma or any of that stuff that used to interest me, maybe *does* still interest me, since it's hard for an old dog to learn really new tricks.

Where do you think the strongest poetry and fiction is being written?

On the theory that enough butter gets in the middle of the sandwich anyway, I've looked abroad for inspiration, away from America and American writing. I've read people like Calvino and Grass and some English writers whom I've really admired like Murdoch and Spark; and the Latin Americans I've gotten into, not as heavily as many have gotten into them, but I have read quite a lot of Garcia Marquez—and Mario Vargas Llosa and Machado de Assis. I think Latin Americans are in some way where Americans were in the nineteenth century. They really have a whole continent to say; suddenly they've found their voice; they're excited about being themselves and their continent and their history. And that's a great weapon in the armory of an artist, to be excited by your subject.

I was chastised when I was in Paris last April, scolded for always saying I wasn't aware of anything interesting coming out of France, but it is true I'm not aware of much. I think criticism in France has become almost the all-devouring art. Roland Barthes was in his way a jolly life-enhancing figure, but Deconstruction doesn't have much in it to encourage a creative writer because it says that everything you say is not that at all anyway. As for Germany, I think it is a country—a language, really—that has a lot to work out still, and there is good stuff coming out of there. *Perfume*, for example, by Patrick Suskind.

The formal problems that were of interest to me when I was young were exemplified by Robbe-Grillet and Donald Barthelme, who were trying to reinvent what fiction could do, to make it look different. But that has kind of run its course now. There were some wonderful formal experiments made but I feel it's rather exhausted. You can still write a book with some trickiness in it, but you can no longer write a book just because it's going to be tricky. We're post-experimental in a way.

The American writers who still excite me most are people like Bellow and Roth and Cheever and Salinger and Malamud—writers who meant a lot to me when I was young. I suppose we're all in thrall to people who got their thumbs on us while the clay was still fairly moist. The older you get the harder it is to make a dent, so that although I can certainly admire the younger writers, I'm less apt to want to steal from them than I was from Bellow. I mean you read a page of Bellow at his best and you think, "My God, nobody's ever written like this. Nobody's ever put those things on paper before." So, I guess I'm still reading fiction in hope of finding things there, news about life, news about what it's like to be alive in a certain place.

There seems to be a debate in your poetry as well as your fiction between the infinite nature of the spirit and the finite nature of the body. How has this debate changed over the years?

It's a large way to look at it and we may be approaching an area where psychoanalysis and not self-analysis is what's called for. I don't quite know why and I don't know why my poetry has taken the exact form it has. Religiously, I was raised as a Lutheran in a county where Lutheranism was taken for granted; just like anything that's taken for granted, it didn't seem very important. But it was worked into my system so that when I left this world I found it was a part of me that I didn't want to let go of, couldn't let go of—I was scared without it, frankly. So in some way I've remained a religious person off and on, kind of a lackadaisical Christian, but a Christian nevertheless and certainly it's figured in the writing.

You wonder in a way—why write about people if they're just bundles of neurons and cartilage and going to live and die like a set of chickens in the yard? I guess it does seem remarkable to me that we are inside these bodies and these appetites, and a lot of the fiction is about a certain strangeness here. My early novels were framed in terms of animals; that is, *Rabbit* being a kind of impulsive darting creature and the *Centaur* being a horse person. *The Centaur* is very much about this being half spirit and half body, or being caught in an incongruous physical frame. Not just incongruous but of course painful: death is painful, toothaches are painful, love is painful; so much that our bodies ask of us is painful.

I don't know if I've changed an awful lot. Or enough. I should

change. We all should change. One thing that's given me courage in writing has been this belief that the truth, what is actual, must be faced and is somehow holy. That is, what exists is holy and God knows what exists; He can't be shocked, and He can't be surprised. There is some act of virtue in trying to get things down exactly the way they are: how people talk, how they act, how they smell. So I have felt empowered in some way to be as much of a realist as I could be, to really describe life as I see it.

I'm not ignorant scientifically, but there is something in the way people have always written, from the Bible on. We are used to this dualism in our fiction. We feel like spirits to ourselves as well as bodies. So, yes, it is hard for me to write I suppose without some sense of that dualism there. It makes life interesting. We seem to be biune, we seem to be double in some odd way. We are witnesses to ourselves, too. We witness our intimate and helpless acts except when we sleep.

I really never set out to be a Christian writer or theological writer. I'm just trying to announce with a sense of wonder and surprise that I'm here at all. It has always struck me as slightly odd that I'm me instead of you. There's a tendency to view most writers—especially when they come to Arizona State University or some such worthy place—as founts of wisdom who know something and who are in there writing away trying to say something; but often they are creatures of wonder and surprise, and they're talking to themselves. I mean, you write as much out of ignorance as out of knowledge, as much out of surprise as out of any conclusion you've reached.

What do you think of the popular spiritual movement, as represented by Shirley MacLaine, which among other things believes in freedom from guilt?

Yeah, I think I believe in freedom from guilt too. I see myself described in reviews, and not always in friendly reviews, as a descendent of the anguished Puritan whatnot. As I say, I was raised a Lutheran and Lutheranism is of all the Protestant sects that I know of the least interested in guilt. It's interested in faith. I didn't think I grew up with a sense of guilt. Most of the things we do in an animal way are probably forgivable, and we must forgive ourselves for growing pubic hair, having smelly feet, needing haircuts, and the rest of it.

What do I feel about Shirley MacLaine? I think her creed fits

our general wish to be easy on ourselves. And there is this enabling thing about any faith that the pragmatic American tradition encourages: anything that gets you through the night, as Frank Sinatra said, shouldn't be ridiculed. What she says sounds to my prejudices pretty fantastical and ridiculous and needlessly ornate and pointless. There's a kind of horror: Asiatic cosmology taken seriously really is terrifying—terrifyingly endless, terrifyingly senseless. Nevertheless, you have Shirley MacLaine herself, who is very charming on talk shows, very crisp and seems in many ways to me superior to the slightly needling, mocking interviewer—Mike Wallace or somebody else. I mean when she's up against Mike Wallace, my sympathy is always with Shirley MacLaine and reincarnation and whatever else enables her to be warm and relaxed and amused and a lovely woman. And her ideas are tied in with her loveliness in some way that seems essential to her. I don't mind.

Perhaps America is especially prone to guilt because we don't have a lot of institutions with which to get rid of it. There's nothing you can do to get rid of it the way confession used to work or should work. Participation in any large ritual or communal ceremony in some sense relieves us of our individual burden of guilt.

I think there are other problems to being alive than guilt. Maybe our age is less guilt-prone than it is anxiety-prone, and not just in the sense that the atom bomb might go off. We are in some deep way scared by how unthinkably small our place in the universe is, just how fragile the planet is. We're almost creatures of gossamer, aren't we? We're just barely here at all. Certainly all the teenage suicides these days are an amazing thing to me who was always so afraid of death. To rush forward and embrace it—I just can't imagine what's going on in their minds.

In the poem "Humanities Course," from the *Carpentered Hen*, you write about "'crucial figures' in The 'pageantry' of 'Western thought.'" What do you see yourself doing within the pageantry of Western thought?

The poem was written with some resentment against Harvard. Harvard took me, a raw youth out of Pennsylvania, and did expose me to this pageant and made me to some modest degree an educated man, but I resented the process. I felt that it was frightening to be educated and in some way I lost something

very essentially me. So the poem is meant to be satirical and I don't think I saw myself as enrolling in that pageantry, but now I wouldn't mind enlisting if I could think of a way. My aim is to witness the life of America in the second half of the century as best I can, and to keep my mind open more or less: to be open-eyed, and open-minded.

I'd like to try to do a kind of Emersonian self-exploration; that is, take my life not as the raw material of fiction, but as some kind of essential datum delivered to me, to write about being me in a way that would write about the problem of anyone being himself or herself. I'd like to say something about self-consciousness.

In a *New Yorker* review of Emerson's work you wrote about a coldness in Emerson that you didn't like. Is that what happens when you are looking at yourself? You develop a coldness in your view of things?

I think Emerson, to his credit, was facing his own feelings. One passage I quoted in that review, to some people's irritation, was an interestingly frank set of remarks about his own response to grief, his son's death. He found that for all of the initial passion, after a while it didn't matter as much as it should. I think what he said of himself is true of most people.

William Dean Howells as a young man went and interviewed these New England literary giants when they were all still alive. He sat with Emerson for an afternoon and came away with an impression of coldness and distance. Of course, Emerson was on the verge of a long senility. I suppose he had Alzheimers, as we would say now, and he did have an extended dotty or absent-minded period. But I think there was always something detached about Emerson; and it might be true of the American character in general. I think if we look in ourselves with honesty we will find this Emersonian coldness that he spoke of.

Emerson was not only talking about his own coldness but about the something brutal in the American way of life. And foreigners feel this way when they come here; they see all the homeless and the bag ladies, and the Communists never get tired of showing pictures of it on their television, because it is the other side of American freedom: you are free to succeed and you are also free to fail. I think we as Americans should recognize that bums are as logical an outcome of our wonderful freedom as millionaires.

We suspect we haven't asked the most "groping [and] "truly interesting questions that one asks oneself, "¹ so we'd like to leave the last questions to you. What questions are you asking yourself?

Well, the questions one asks oneself are almost the best put of course in the form of fiction, of dramatizing aspects of your own self and taking an impulse and turning it into a person. That manipulation of the alternative that we all have within us is the most creative and honest thing we do.

I'd like to take a breather eventually. Writing is so much a part of my day; I've structured life so I don't do much else, really. I mean I'm not a teacher. So it'll be hard for me to let go of the writing habit, but I think the best use of my ability would be to let go of it a bit and try to regroup my alternative selves. I'd like to do a little reading, also. I wish I understood American history better.

I was one of those people who was brought up to believe, and saw no reason to doubt, that this was the greatest country in the world. I felt very lucky to be born an American, and I've carried with me all these fifty-five years that uninvestigated sense of being happy to be an American. But then I happened to be young when America was unquestionably the most powerful country in the world, and engaged in a very just war. Now we are becoming more and more one nation among many.

I'd like to look at our past in some intelligent way through reading. My reading has tended to be either directly for a book that I was writing or else a book I was going to review. This is not an intellectually ideal way to live. I'd like really to be more of a reader than I am and not just a reviewer. I'd like to work against my addiction to type, my addiction to appearing in print; I'd like to try to make myself into a slightly wiser person than maybe I am.

¹John Updike, Introduction, in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Seventh Series*, ed. George Plimpton (New York: Viking, 1986), xiii.

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