Writers' Forum

Spring- 1968

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Twenty-Fifth Writers' Forum

Coraddi

April - 1968

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

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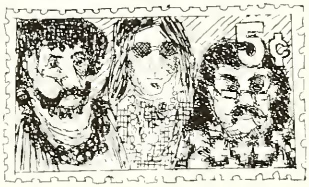

Printing: Greensboro Printing Company, Greensboro, North Carolina.

CORADDI, the fine arts magazine of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, is published four times during the school year by the students of the University.

Manuscripts and art work may be submitted to **Coraddi**, Room 203 Elliott Hall, at any time during the school year. Manuscripts should be typed and the contributor should leave his name and complete address. Art work is not returned through the local mail and should be picked up in the **Coraddi** office.

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The seven short stories printed in this issue were selected from twenty-six submitted; the thirteen poems, from two-hundred and thirty-nine entries. Submissions for this issue were received from eighteen states, and from ten colleges and universities in North Carolina. The material printed in THE TWENTY-FIFTH WRITERS' FORUM CORADDI was read and selected solely by the **Coraddi** staff. **Coraddi** assumes full responsibility for all decisions made.

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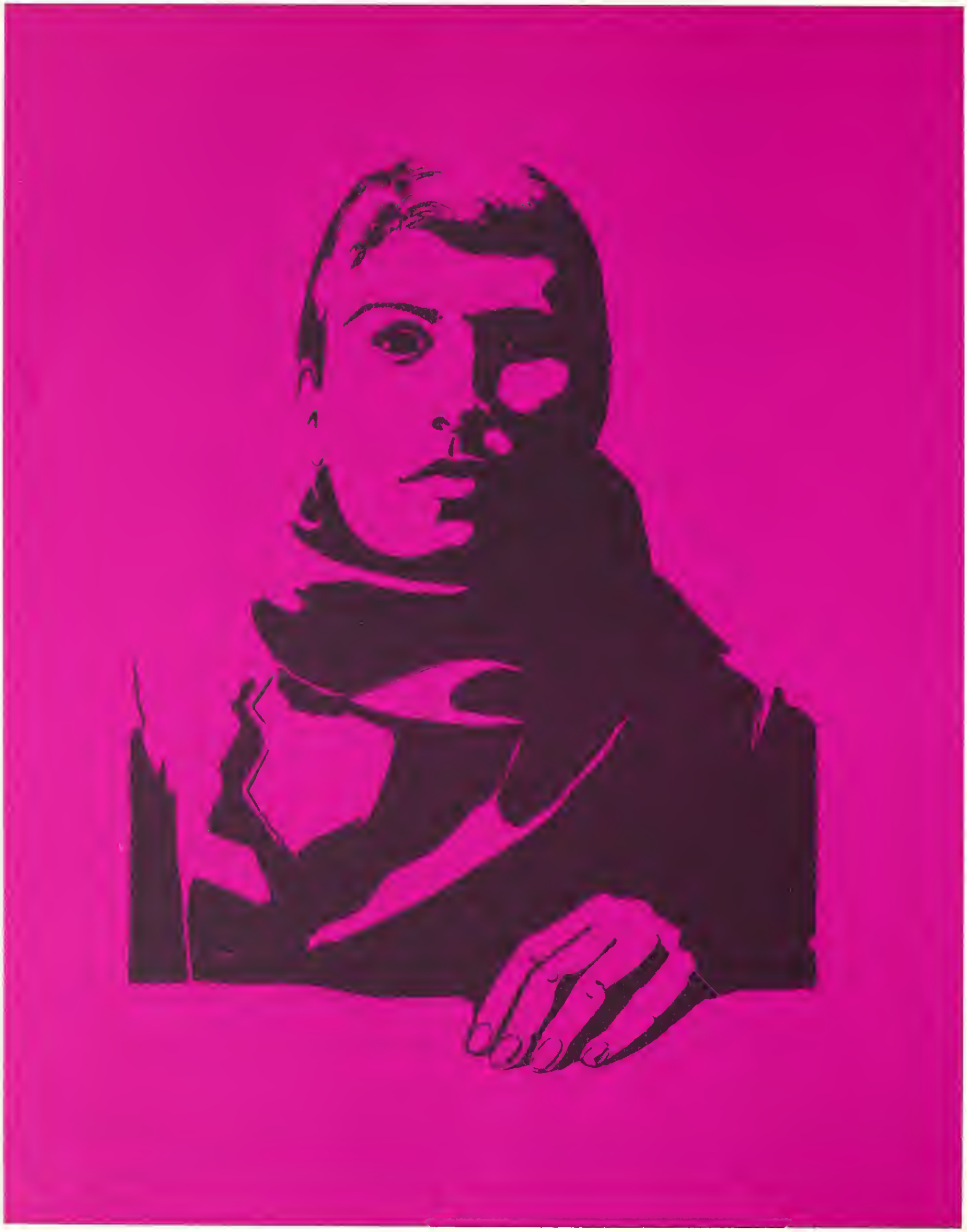


A DAY AT THE ZOO

Elizabeth Pinkham

Mike took the shiny new badge with *City Zoo* printed in gold across its top and pinned it to his green uniform just as his wife called him to breakfast. He stepped back from the mirror eying himself critically, turned to view himself from the side, and threw his chest out further. It was a fine-looking uniform, that was for sure.

He and Mary sat down to eat. "There's another long article in this morning's paper about the zoo, Mike. The Director estimates at least 15,000 visitors today. Oh, and they've even got an aerial photograph of it—in color! I thought it looked like a garden in a valley—really, I'd forgotten the buildings towered around it like that."

Suddenly Mike set his empty cup down and, while Mary refilled it with steaming coffee, stretched toward the counter to pick up the newspaper. Turning the pages, he found the full-page, color spread on the zoo and stared at it silently. Getting up, he went to the counter, smoothed out the paper, and beckoned to Mary. "Here, Mary, this section on the right is where I'll be working. You see this dark rectangle on the east side? It's the only gate for the public. In the middle of the zoo there's a refreshment stand under some old trees. I heard one of the keepers say they weren't going to sell anything but soft-drinks for awhile; no telling what kind of mess they'd have with food. A gardener was telling me the other morning that not a bit of the fence around the zoo will be showing in a few years because they've planted so many trees and bushes along it." Mike returned to the table, drained the last of his coffee, and patting his stomach said, "That was a mighty good breakfast, Mary. I guess I'd better get going now. I'd hate to be late my first day on the job." Picking up his walkie-talkie and his lunch, he kissed Mary good-bye and left.

All over the city, in tenements and fine new homes, families were talking about the opening of the zoo. It had certainly taken long enough to get it ready for the public — several years, in fact. Supposedly, it was an experimental zoo designed to give people as great a feeling of freedom as was possible. Most of the animals were not in cages, but large, fenced-in tracts. Some of the larger species lived on islands in a series of ponds — the public, of course, would not be aware of the underwater fences close to the shores. Near the back of the ponds a small section had been set aside in which such common American animals as deer, rabbits, turtles, and goats were allowed to roam freely, unseparated from the public by fences so that children especially might touch them. The whole idea behind the zoo, according to the Director, was to let the people come as close to Nature as possible. It was his personal opinion that too many cages and fences defeated any zoo's purpose, that man himself was a part of Nature and should be permitted to commune with it freely.

For the past month now the mass media had been advertising the opening and explaining the zoo's philosophy and rules. As a result, this morning thousands of children were wildly eager for their parents to take them to see the exotic animals that had been on TV for weeks, and many of the parents felt themselves also attracted by this idyllic garden in the heart of the city.

A stout woman hurried to the bench at the corner of Nineteenth and Elm, her large black handbag flapping wildly, and sat down beside a tiny old lady who stared at the other for a moment through her goldrimmed glasses before recognition and relief crossed her face. "I thought I wouldn't make it," puffed the portly one. She looked around quickly to make sure no one was watching, winked, and pulled a brown bag from her purse, whispering conspiratorially, "Peanuts."

"Peanuts? Oh. Oh! But you know we're not supposed to feed any of the animals, Agnes. The paper explained why—if everybody fed them they'd get sick."

"Now really, dear, one bag of peanuts won't hurt a whole zooful of animals. Besides, I'll probably be the only person there with—." The braking bus drowned the rest of her sentence and when it roared on again the two ladies were as one.

Mike and the other zoo guards stepped out into the sunlight from the administration building after their final briefing and headed for their posts—the big gate would open in fifteen minutes; after that there'd be people everywhere until four-thirty. Mike's job was to patrol a section of the wide walks between the different tracts making sure no one tried to feed or otherwise harm the animals, giving directions, and in general being prepared for any emergency.

The zoo was strangely peaceful and silent after his ride through the feverish morning traffic. Off to his left Mike could see the glinting waters of the nearest pond and three giraffes moving stiff-leggedly in front of the blowing trees on their island. His section of the zoo lay between the ponds on one side and the east fence on the other as far north as the entrance gate. The animals in his tracts, mostly African grazers such as gazelles, impalas, and zebras, were greedily munching mouthfuls of fresh hay and didn't pay him any attention as he walked past. Of all the animals, only the two ostriches unnerved him—their long, naked necks and penetrating, beady eyes reminded him too much of snakes. Looking around, Mike saw that everything was in a state of readiness — the grounds were spotless, the animals sleek and good-tempered — the arrival of the public would climax years of preparation.

As soon as the gate was opened, families poured in and before long the zoo was filled with people. Two boys, one around ten years old and the other a couple of years younger, with their shirttails hanging out over their slacks passed Mike, eying him surreptitiously. "I told you we could get in without any trouble, stupid," whispered the older boy. "Now let's find those ostriches. We'll have to keep a close eye out for that guard, though." The younger boy made no answer but followed his friend silently — he still couldn't believe that ostriches really ate bottle caps, but when he'd dared question Bill about it the older boy had bet him he didn't have nerve enough to come to the zoo to see. He didn't want Bill to think he was afraid. His heart kept jumping, though — he was sure that guard had seen through their shirts to the caps bulging in their pockets.

The boys continued down the path looking left and right for the ostriches, passed two women near one of the fences watching the hesitant approach of a gazelle, and turned off onto another path on their left. One of the women reached into her large handbag for more peanuts to lure the gazelle closer to the fence. "I just love deer, Martha; they are so graceful and have such big, soft eyes. That's it, come on now."

From a distance Mike saw her feeding the gazelle, and for the tenth time this morning had to approach a visitor and explain the zoo policy about feeding the animals. Meanwhile, the boys had spotted the ostriches cooling themselves in the shade of a tree. "Tim, go see if the guard is coming," Bill ordered his friend as he pulled several bottle caps out of his pocket. "And don't run or he'll suspect something."

In a minute the little boy returned with his report, "He's standing there talking to those two old ladies we passed a few minutes ago."

"OK, here goes." Bill expertly flipped a cap through the fence. Turning over and over it flashed in the sunlight before hitting the ground with a tiny clink. One of the ostriches flicked its eyes, then turned its head as another cap soared into the air and fell. As the caps continued to rain down, both birds hurried over and, to Tim's great astonishment, began gobbling up the metal caps. "All right, smarty, now do you believe me?" Bill gloated. When Tim made no answer, Bill suggested with a condescending air that they get a soft drink and take in the rest of the zoo.

When Mike joined several other guards at the administration building for lunch he was still shaken up by his discovery forty-five minutes earlier that one of his ostriches was very ill. He'd immediately sent for the zoo doctor over his walkie-talkie, standing by completely helpless until he had arrived. Fortunately, the doctor had said the bird would be all right in a few days, but Mike felt guilty because Dr. Stephens was sure someone must have fed it a foreign object. Well, he would just have to be even more alert from now on, but he couldn't be everywhere at once.

The other guards were having their problems too Mike learned, particularly the ones near the refreshment stand. There were some people who preferred to throw their trash on the ground rather than in the barrels beside the walks. The real problems, however, were those kids who took their paper cups, stomped on them explosively, and then sent the flattened cups skimming into the pond waters. The maintenance men would have quite a job cleaning up such a mess.

By closing time Mike was thoroughly disillusioned by the behavior of people in the mass. His section of the zoo had not escaped littering; even some of the shrubbery planted here and there along the walks had been trampled upon by careless feet — the leaves were already withering on the broken branches. He followed the last of the crowd and came up behind two of the guards from the other side of the zoo. One had his hand on the other's shoulder and was saying, "Look, Joe, this is the first day the zoo's been open. You've just got to expect things like that. After the novelty wears off we won't have such big crowds — there were just too many people . . ."

"What's wrong, Joe?" asked Mike.

"Joe's still a little upset because somebody stepped on one of the turtles in his section and smashed his shell to pieces."

Mike turned and watched the last of the crowd go through the huge gate. Suddenly he had a wild desire to rush over and slam the gate behind all those people and lock it forever.

THE WATCH

in memory of Diane Oliver,
killed May, 1966

Sylvia Eidam

On the mantle squats the little clock
where a precious yellow bird
darts in and out, chirping dissonance;
we gathered here cannot discern
a "yes" or "no" from nonsense time.

We must believe, we must believe . . .
the pious black face intones

Each face imprinted with a clock
though each tries not to tell the time.
The hands go groping on-ward,
like blindmen, trying what lies next.

Our beloved, in whom we had all faith . . .
the old voice modulates

We interrogate the hours
as they push by, a dumb throng,
these hours mute as bells
without their clappers or children
minus tongues.

We must believe there has been no error . . .
the glistening head uplifts

Our tongues tick falsely on; time unleased
is no time at all. Belief, like this,
has need of certain, simple tones:
We cannot simplify your death.

THE FLOWER OF THE FIELD

All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is
as the flower of the field. —Isaiah 40:6

Lorraine Norwood

There were no bachelor buttons, no cornflowers, no rusty tin cans—only a battered wood-gray stall perched on the corner of Charlotte and Oak Streets. The passers-by wondered at her absence and in the offices across the street, secretaries filled their coffee cups and rolled her name across their pointed tongues.

Barring rain or snow, she had always been there. At 8:00 in the morning she would rumble into the vacant lot, always scraping the gears as she parked the pick-up truck next to the sidewalk. The flowers she pulled from the truck's gaping mouth were homegrown and were not a horticulturist's delight but they were neatly wrapped with newspaper and wire, and their colors seemed far more alive than any hothouse variety.

Seated beneath the slight overhang of the stall, she would wait for the young mothers to arrive. Breathless from grocery shopping and morning errands, they would sometimes laugh or snap angrily as she handed them the flowers which would decorate the evening dinner table. The old women came in the afternoon. Walking singly or by twos, they would tap their canes against the sidewalk and exclaim at the beauty of this and the color of that. They bought only twenty-five cent bunches for these, being the smallest flowers and thus the first to wilt, provided the women with an excuse to return in two days. Twittering like caged birds, they made their way carefully up the sidewalk to the rest home two blocks away.

Today a summer wind had blown in from the south, across the mountains fifteen miles distant. Warming the inhabitants of the valley, it had moved through the vacant lot, blowing trash against the edges of the stall. It was Wednesday and the young mothers frowned as they drove by . . . no flowers and guests coming for dinner. The old women grew angry . . . no excuse to walk this week and two more days to wait. The Flower Lady was always there. Except today.

She was a tall woman, born of a stock of mountain-bred men and their sturdy wives. Small brown eyes hid among wrinkles of skin and when she smiled, brown-stained teeth appeared. She was an old cronie and she knew it. She delighted in her pioneer ancestry and in the fact that she was mountain-born, mountain-bred, and as stubborn as a jackass.

Her house was as solid as she and almost as old. The neighbors and her husband had built it, using the very trees which covered their small five-acre tract. They had finished the house in August and in October of the same year, her son had been born in the front bedroom. The midwives had come early that day and as they hustled from kitchen to bedroom they had laughed at the nervousness of her young husband. But their laughter stopped at the bedroom door. The birth of the first child was never easy. It seemed as if the baby had refused to enter this world. He had clutched frantically at the darkness of the womb and it was not until evening that he had wearily surrendered himself to the hands of a waiting midwife. He was a beautiful baby and she had loved him from the moment they had placed him in her arms.

But that was long ago. Her husband was dead now, his strong body crushed under the wheels of a train at the Asheville freight yard. Her son had grown to manhood and had been drafted into the Army. Now he was stationed on a war-torn peninsula and the letters had stopped over a month ago.

It had been a month of flower-laden days and an empty mailbox and worries hidden behind a brown smile. Her customers had no right to know her private thoughts. Why should she bother to explain? The young wives brought her tidbits of their domestic problems and the old women regurgitated ancient sorrows, yet she could not and would not say to them, "My only son is in Viet-Nam; I'm afraid, but I know the Lord will bring him back to me." She packed away her worries as she packed away her flowers at the end of a good day.

Tuesday afternoon she had smiled as a small boy bought flowers for his mother's birthday. He had looked at her as her son had — swollen with the pride of his own gift, yet embarrassed at the thought of sentimentality. She had felt something jerk inside her as he handed her his quarter, and it was then that she decided to load the truck and leave early. The flowers had smiled in multicolors as she locked them within the panels of the truck, but she didn't smile back. She felt too tired and too old.

The panel truck moved like a weary animal along the curves of the Leicester Highway. Why were there no letters? A month and not a word. Perhaps he simply had no time to write. The truck swayed as she angled into a sharp curve. Perhaps there had been a raid on the airbase. Perhaps he had been . . . no, he was strong and brave. He was a mountain boy. The Lord looks after mountain boys.

The surrounding mountains closed in upon the hills and the hills closed in upon the asphalt. The two-lane road was choked into a one lane gravel driveway. The tires pushed aside stones like forced laborers at the county prison camp. She shifted into second gear. David had been a good boy—even when he was bad, he was good. Every morning he had trudged the length of the driveway to the yellow school bus waiting below on the asphalt road. The mouth of the creature would devour him until 3:30, when, disgorged, he would run swiftly past the deepening shadows of the woods and into the broad yard bordered on the road-edge by a spiked-iron fence. He was a good boy. He had the quiet sureness of her ancestors within his genes. He was . . . the pick-up jolted into the back-yard shed . . . but he is, not was . . . he is.

Something was wrong. The back door was open. She shut all the doors and windows before she left each morning. She heaved her body onto the back stop and opened the kitchen door. David smiled.

The "Hi, Mom," she didn't hear for she was already burrowed in his chest. He was a little thinner, his cheeks were a little hollower, and his eyes had lost their shine, yet he was still her son and still her husband's namesake. He laughed at the high-pitched excitement in her voice; her frantic gestures to seat him, to feed him, to touch him. He put his arm around her and quietly asked for no more questions.

"Mom, all I want is some cornbread, a bottle of milk, and a little peace."

As he ate from the plate she set before him, his eyes ingested each corner, each crack, each artifact in the room.

"Nothing's changed much, has it?"

"No."

"Oh, you repainted the kitchen table."

"Yes."

"And I noticed you put Dad's picture on the mantelpiece."

"Yes." She sat opposite him, her bulk settling over the ladder-backed chair, her hands folded tightly in her lap.

"David, I'm not going in to town tomorrow. No, now don't look at me like that. One day won't matter. I've saved my money and one day won't hurt that much. Besides this is special. We can set here and talk about everything you want to."

David washed the glass and plate and unconsciously opened the towel and wash cloth drawer. It was filled with silverware.

"Mom, I can't talk. I just can't. I don't know how to explain to you to make you understand. I'm just so tired, Mom, and I want to sleep."

His words were carefully manipulated on his tongue as if they had to be formed before they could appear. His hand touched her gray hair. He kissed her forehead.

"Thanks for the cornbread, Mom."

The next day, Wednesday, he spent with her roaming through the fields and outbuildings of their land. She waddled into the barn, David's long legs following close behind, and as they fed the chickens, they laughed at the jealously among the hens and the strutting pomposity of the rooster.

"You better watch that rooster, David," she laughed. "Why, he's had fire in his eye ever since the day I poured a pail of dishwater all over him. Now that you're home, he just might decide to try you out for a round or two."

David gave the rooster the meanest evil eye he could conjure, but the animal merely fluffed its feathers and strutted away indifferently.

They walked among the neat rows of flowers she had planted. Vigorously she pointed out that the snapdragons had bloomed at least five times this summer, and he nodded and questioned about the aphids and Japanese beetles which had plagued them so often before. He dared not tell her that she was becoming much too old to drive the pick-up, that her legs were now patterned with varicose veins, that someday the mountains would creep upon her land and gradually extinguish what remained. No, he dared not tell her. She would have been offended at the very thought of age. The women in her family had lived long lives and she was no exception. He watched her pluck dead leaves from the stalks of gaping dahlias.

My mother, he thought. My mother, a gray-brown sunflower. Never leaving the sun. Always rotating to catch the greatest warmth. He shivered. The evening was cool for August.

David turned on his side and crooked his elbow underneath his head. The bedsheets stuck to his moist skin and he realized that he had been listening intently for night noises. He held his breath. The house was quiet. Outside, the flowers breathed their gases into the night wind. In his bedroom, David wiped the sweat from his forehead and turned on his back. At supper, she had asked him to come to town with her in the morning. It was a small decision to make, requiring only a yes or no answer, yet he had been too stunned to respond. She wasn't commanding him to join her. It was his choice. He had said no. She had asked why. He had said no again and she had turned toward the dishes in the kitchen sink. He couldn't tell her that in battle he hadn't been afraid; he had watched his buddies dropping around him, yet he hadn't felt fear because he had no time to think. He didn't have a yes or no choice. He had been conditioned too well. He couldn't tell her that town meant decisions and people and endless questions. A slap on the back. How was it over there, old boy? Yeah, we've heard about them Asian women — they got it all over our buck-toothed mountain gals. People are stupid, he thought. His eyes closed. So damn stupid.

August passed quickly. In the mornings he helped her load the truck with flowers he had cut and wrapped the day before. After she had gone, there were the breakfast dishes to wash and the chickens to feed. One day he had cleaned out the barn and the back-yard shed. Another day he had trimmed the hedges around the front windows. But always in the afternoons he would walk past the barn into the fields beyond their boundary marker. The field weeds parted for his feet and as he jumped across over-grown gullies, blackberry bushes scraped against his jeans. The single pine tree, a cornfield, a gully again, and then the stream — he knew the land by heart. As a boy, he had spent long hours damming up this stream. He had hunted for crayfish here, and sometimes at night, he and his father had gigged for frogs. A path sprang from the mudbank and disappeared betwen two birch trees.

On these afternoons, David would follow the path to its final end—a bald hilltop overlooking the valley. Here he could be away from the imprisonment of the spiked fence surrounding the front yard. He could turn around and see only sky and blinding sun and Indian summer. There were no decisions to be made here. No flowers to be murdered with his pen knife. No wet newspaper and wire clutching at his hands pulling him deeper into rusty tin cans.

Lying on the ground, listening to worms burrow beneath his ears, he would know that he couldn't stay with her and he would understand why, but he also knew that she would never forgive him. Her people had always been quick to judge, but never quick to forgive. Their feuds had lasted among families for generations. When the opportunity came he would tell her. But not now.

On a cool afternoon in early October, David had stretched flat against the earth, and had fallen asleep. Someone shouted his name and he turned. A girl. "Here I am, David," she said. "Look." Lightning shattered his eyes and a shock wave set him sprawling. Her mouth screamed yellow blood and he couldn't reach her. He was drowning in yellow and no one would save him. Children with black hair and slanted eyes jabbered at him in a strange language. Stop it, he screamed. Stop it! The liquid turned to sunflowers and David woke to afternoon silence. Gasping softly he ran until he had reached the house and had shut the kitchen door behind him.

At supper he had laughed as she related an amusing story about the mayor and his councilmen. Then she had laughed as he told her about a buddy he had known in basic training. Soon a contest of verbal one-upsmanship arose between them and while they ate they swapped tales that neither believed. As they washed the dishes, they talked about the weather.

"You're gonna have a cold hard winter this year, "Mom," David said.

"Uh-huh, Grandaddy used to say that when the squirrels ran with their tails straight up, we were in for a long winter and a lot of snow. And every squirrel's tail I saw today was standing as straight as a Southern Baptist."

David wiped a plate and stacked it in the cabinet.

"What are you planning to sell this winter?"

"Well, I figure we better cut some holly and spruce pretty soon. That always sells good right before the holidays begin."

"Mom, listen, I won't be able to help you cut this year."

She glanced at him and then pulled the plug from the sink.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Well, I saw an ad in the paper today." He folded the dishtowel and placed it in the silverware drawer. "They need mill workers at the Canton paper mill. I thought I'd apply."

She looked at him with wounded brown eyes.

"What's wrong with staying here and helping your own mother? I know that having a mother who sells flowers on the street ain't much but it's a lot more'n some people got." When she was angry, her speech slipped to the twang of mountain colloquialism. "We been doin' fine so far and I don't see why you want to go traipsin' off to Canton and leave the very house you were born in. You can't leave, David, you may be a man but I'm still your mother and as far as I'm concerned, I can . . ."

"Mom, sit down." David placed his hands on her shoulders and she sat. "Now listen to me, and listen hard. I've been away too long. I've seen too much and I've heard too much. I know too much now for my own good. It's like when I was in high school and I wanted to get into the 'A' club, remember?"

She nodded. "You always were a smart boy," she said.

"Mom, listen please. It was my one ambition to get into that club. All the 'best' people of the school were members. I worked hard at my grades and I tried every tactic I knew to impress people. Well, you remember I was asked to join that club and I said no. And I said no, Mom, because one day I stayed after school to help them decorate the gym and I saw the inside of that club and I didn't like it. I had seen too much, Mom, do you understand? Now it's the same thing—I've found out too much for my own good and I can't stay here any longer. I know I'm tied to the land and I'll stay tied to it for the rest of my life but don't you see, I was born in that front bedroom and now I'm dying in it!"

He didn't wait for her answer. Her eyes told him that she didn't understand. As he backed the pick-up out of the shed, he noticed that his hands were shaking. Gray-brown sunflowers have no brains, he thought.

College Street was almost deserted except for the pick-up truck and the few cars parked in front of the Shell Bar. David sat half-hidden among the smoke and darkness of a back corner. Every few minutes, he would return to the bar, pay for another beer, and retreat to the privacy of the back booth.

"Mind if I join you?" The woman slid into the seat opposite him.

Black eyes, black hair. Can't these Vietnamese women ever leave a guy alone? A man can't even have a beer in private anymore.

"My name's Susan. What's yours?" she said.

A black-eyed Susan, he thought. Ya might know it. And she's even fatter than the sunflower. But, of course she eats more rice. And she gets all her exercise indoors.

"Listen to me, my pretty fat-faced flower: early to bed and early to rice makes a girl healthy, wealthy, and fat."

"What!" The woman was evidently insulted and David realized he had spoken aloud.

Her mouth opened. "Are you crazy or somethin'?"

It was dark in her mouth and David wanted to hide inside but the room began to swirl and he couldn't reach her. He shoved his glass from the table and jerked to his feet. The woman screamed and yellow blood ran from her mouth. The bartender reached for the telephone and dialed the desk sergeant at the City Police Department. Pin the man down, the sergeant said, and we'll send the wagon over.

He sat on the edge of the cot and with a resolute fold of his hands, he decided to give them only his name, rank, and serial number. The walls are brown, he thought, because I've seen them. There is another cot across from me and a sink on the brown wall. And straight ahead there are bars and beyond those bars there is another brown wall. Sometimes the guards walk up to the bars and ask questions but I won't answer them.

"David, your mother is here to see you."

A guard had said that. Don't believe him; it was all a trick. She wasn't his mother. She was wrinkled and ancient and her eyes were slanted. She was squatting on the ground and she rocked back and forth, back and forth.

David's mother sat next to him on the cot. "David," she whispered, "David, listen to me now."

What was that she had said? A black-haired boy was cradled in her arms. Back and forth, back and forth. What was she speaking? Vietnamese. Back and forth — he slept against her wrinkles. She rocked her body across the earth and cooed in his ear. Don't cry, she said. Don't cry, she said. Don't cry.

Ken Wilson

when at nine
I grew a long affection
for colorful but impractical philosophies,
Benjie, the boy across the street,
freed the colored jockey
that held his address
in front of the house.
he painted him
many
other
colors.
at the same time
and before our eyes,
veterans, slow like trees,
took over the town
and Benjie and I
hid
in thick cardboard boxes
that once held washing machines.

FOR MY BROTHER

Barbara Laird

Our father would have lived for both of us:
Squalled with less innocence.
He looked at five or ten from sixty,
Scorned our pain of green from his imagined harvest.
How he loved and won, when he and we were losing.
Our father, what he knew,
And how he hated us (himself before he knew).
Love made him angry.
He had candy pockets, lifelong games, jokes.
Our performer, our old gramaphone,
Still running, running.
Our father, who are we?
Don't ask him, not again—
Leave him with his children.

JOHN HULBERT

the diver

". . . who, in her nipple and lip tight pink leotards
and from a heights of four million light years
is diving, bathed in the light of the great comets,
through the constellations listed in your programs,
(of which there are still a limited number of copies
being sold on a first come first serve basis)
in a jacknife position, into this damp rose . . ."

the fanfaring snare drummer, at the end of a month,
suffered a stroke. the ringmaster put out an eye
with his whip. the bears broke loose and the crowd
faded home to sue. the circus folded, packed up
and trained off for waukeegan, snapping giraffes
at every low bridge. the old rose shrivelled
and the earth tilted off a degree.

the concert

the flow had been unbroken for an hour or so
but now, as he called for a crescendo
men and women coughed behind his back
drowning out the sound
he turned at once
to face the hall, the music at his heels
dissolving in the weep of strings
he turned
again, poised for silence
to see his assistant, score in hand,
leaving the stage, could not remember
what was being played
clutching the baton
in desperation he kept time to a simple waltz,
metronome for eighty men without instruments
who, unseated, talked amongst themselves

SACRIFICE

Sue Baugh

"Move that post five feet left . . . LEFT! That's it!"

Rob's voice carried across the road to the farm house, and Kay looked up from her stove to see most of the hired men working along the far side of the cornfield. She thought it odd they would stop harvesting to lay a new fence line.

Rob was standing curiously, uncharacteristically still, one arm braced against an old twisted oak. The tree shadow threw him into stark relief against the white, featureless sky, and the angular lines of his body gave the afternoon a sense of purpose focused around his men. They were digging post holes, their bodies jarring with every downward stroke of the scoop. At a distance their faces became one face; to Kay it had always the same look of patient resignation as though while working on the land they had sacrificed something to it; so it seemed natural to assume they also felt the deep, mysterious link between Rob and this land, a link sunk deep in the past and source of the inexhaustible energy that burned in him a steady, unquenchable flame. Their son Wade had once told her, "Dad's eyes are the fiercest. You can *feel* him looking at you sometimes." Rob's father Joe Hazard had had something of the same look, even in death. Vitality, but more than that. To Kay, city born and raised, there was something a little blind and ruthless in it, harsh as the land itself.

The telephone startled the quiet and, slipping a ham into the oven, Kay pushed the extra chairs in the dining room out of the way to answer it.

"Hello, Kay?" a voice at the other end said. "Eric. Is that brother of mine around?"

"He's across the road, but if you'll hold on—"

"No, no, that's all right." He sounded a little relieved. "Just wanted to tell you ol' brother Jim and I will be along in about an hour if that's giving you enough time."

"Yes, but just the two of you?"

"No, Jim's little woman is coming along, but you know Helen and Rob never did hit it off right. She's too much of a big city girl, I guess." He laughed, the sound hollow in the phone. "You know how that is. I wouldn't trade her in on any of these country girls for the world, but Rob . . . well . . . you know how these things are. Say, is Wade going to be there?"

"No, he's still at Ames. I finally talked Rob into letting him go for an interview with the dean. After all, it's Wade's last year of high school."

Eric's voice became more serious. "What do you think, Kay? Will Rob let him go to college?"

"I don't know. It's too early to tell."

"Well," Eric bounced back, "maybe we can help a little. There's a little business Jim and I want to talk over with him. Maybe it's better right now that Wade isn't around. Might make it easier."

"Yes, it might. He hasn't been very willing to talk about things since his father died.'

Eric was silent a moment, then, "I guess you've been wondering why we haven't been out since . . . well . . . since that time, being only forty miles away like we are—"

"Please don't feel you have to apologize. You have a perfect right to come out when you want. Give my love to Helen and the children."

"Sure, sure . . . it isn't that we didn't want to. It just didn't seem right, you know what I mean? Well, see you in about an hour. Try to get Rob in a good mood," he laughed. "We city folks have to stick together."

She put the receiver down slowly, feeling as she always had when talking to Rob's brothers, of something in the past moving between them, but she had never been able to define it. She shrugged slightly as though putting that shadow behind her. A warm breeze drifted through the open windows, drowning the smell of him with the pungent, acrid odor of cattle and crushed corn stalks, dust, the dry grass. She started across flat, Iowa prairie to the hills rolling back along the horizon. They looked very soft in the white, October sunlight. Until a short while ago they had been part of their neighbor Issac Harrison's land, but now a large "For Sale" sign stuck out from one ridge.

She and Wade had often walked those hills, sometimes just to get away from the farm for awhile. She liked to sit in the warm grass and hold the long sweep of horizon in her gaze when the farm dwindled to a handful of buildings, the house and barn, the chicken coop where she kept her Bantam hens. Wade would look at her thoughtfully, the same dark hair as Rob, the same stubborn set to his shoulders, but the eyes deeper somehow.

hazel like hers, and even there away from the tightly fenced cornfields and cattle herd, even there Rob was with them.

"—and I used to come out here for a few weeks in the summer, my aunt lived in Grogin," she would tell Wade, "before I had to start school back in Chicago. That's how I met your father. I was going out with a young professor my aunt knew and our car broke down right past the farm house there. Your father came along with a hay rack pulled by the biggest pair of horses I'd ever seen in my life. I thought him terribly goodlooking and very strong holding those horses with just the frayed reins in his hands. The young professor couldn't stand animals and Rob almost left him by the car. It was a long ride to Grogin, and when it was over, I had decided not to see the professor again."

Wade would laugh, pulling at the tough, prickly weeds, then grow serious.

"Mom, Joel Harrison is going to quit school next year. Can I? I'll be sixteen in August."

She had asked carefully, "Don't you want to finish and go on?"

"I don't know, Mom. Dad didn't."

"Things were different with him. There was a depression then and no money for school. It was all they could do to keep the land; you've heard your grandfather talk about those times."

"If it was so hard, why did they stay?"

"I don't know . . . the land gave them a kind of purpose, I suppose, something to hold onto, keep the family together."

"Then why did Uncle Eric and Uncle Jim leave? Why didn't Dad go, too?"

She had brushed the dust out of his hair to hide her confusion. Hazard dust, she thought. It gets into everything.

"So many questions. It's all very complicated. Besides, you forget I wasn't raised on a farm so I can't really tell you why. It's something you'll have to ask your father."

He had thought about that for a moment, then looked intently at her with something in his eyes she could only describe as fear.

"Mother, do you miss living back in Chicago? I mean, if Dad was to sell the farm or something would you want to go there and live? Do you . . . do you really like it here?"

"Of course I do. As for going back to Chicago, well, that would depend on a lot of things, most of all your father."

But there had always been a separate part of her that maintained itself inspite of the years that had passed. The people here were so different from those she had known, they had taken on the direct, blunt coarseness of the land and even some of its cruelty, sacrificing all else as irrelevant. But Wade was not like that, and it was then she had decided the boy had to get away. The power she felt driving Rob frightened her a little, and in the end she was afraid that that very inarticulate quality would defeat her.

Now in the warm kitchen with the memory of that day strong in her mind, her eye was drawn to one ridge where tiny markers clustered beneath the dry, rustling oaks, there where little more than four months ago they had buried Rob's father. The wind rubbing against the house seemed to have a strange questing note as though the hot, dusty afternoon, the fall day itself was looking for something.

A rap on the window made her jump and she turned to see Rob holding up a yellow chick to the screen. Kay went to the door.

"A lost Benjamin, how on earth did he get out of the pen?"

"There no mark on him," Rob said. The chick's tiny wings fluttered wildly in his hands. "Must have worked a hole in the fence."

Kay followed him around back to the pen. Too many of the Bantams had been run over during the harvest season, and Rob had finally built a high, strong wire fence to keep them in.

"Eric called just a while ago. They'll be over in about an hour."

He smiled thinly. "Better get the Napolean brandy out. That's the first thing Jim'll ask for."

He opened the gate cautiously, and Kay peered over his shoulder.

"The poor things don't like being penned up; no wonder they scratch under the wire," she said.

Rob didn't answer, busy keeping the other chicks back. As he set the stray down, its mother ruffled her feathers and flew at him, pecking savagely at his hand. He jerked back with a grim laugh and closed the gate.

"Damned cocky little things." He searched the fence carefully. "There, by that stake, they've broken through. I'll have to patch that up. The next thing you know they'll all wind up with their damn necks broken."

A sudden prickling of anger made Kay glance sharply at him.

"I'll take care of it. I can put cardboard there until tomorrow."

"If they can get through a fence they can get through cardboard."

He did not look at her when he spoke, staring at her hens with the same critical eye he had when looking over a badly laid fence line.

"I said I'll take care of it," she retorted.

"Kay, that wire's sharp as a razor, you'll cut your hands."

"There's nothing so terribly hard about fixing a wire fence. You act as if I've never done it before."

He turned to face her. "I don't want them running all over the Goddamn yard."

"They're my chickens and they can damn well go where they please!"

She jerked away and walked quickly into the house, going upstairs to their bedroom. The flare of temper had brought tears to her eyes and only made her madder. He can always do this to me, she thought, stubborn, stubborn, stubborn. Sometimes I could just . . . oh, if only he'd

(Continued on Page 19)

(Continued from Page 16)

bend a little . . . let Wade go to college. He has to. I'll make him some way. Her face in the dresser mirror was splotched with red, and she wiped away the tears. She picked up her hairbrush, then stopped and looked at her face again. In a moment she was twisting the hair up, framing both cheeks in soft wings of brown. She began humming snatches of an old tune. Downstairs the back door closed.

"Kay!"

He was standing at the bottom of the steps; she could tell by the way his voice echoed slightly, the tone insistent, demanding. She did not answer.

"Kay!"

The whole line of her body stiffened. Let him yell his lungs out.

"KAY!"

"Oh what!" Damn him.

He came up the stairs and stood for a moment in the doorway, watching her. When he moved quietly to the dresser, his presence seemed to make everything in the room superficial, almost frivolous. She felt only the steady, intense gaze of his eyes on her face.

"I haven't seen you wear your hair that way for a long time. It looks good on you."

She put in the last hairpin and stood up.

"I'm glad you like it," she said, the words flat, toneless.

If he asks me now do I love him, she thought, I'll slap his face. When he said nothing, she started past him, hearing a car honking insistently in the driveway, only his arm shot out blocking her way and he kissed her, pressing the length of his hard body against hers, nothing gentle or tender in the movement, and as suddenly he released her. She was left standing alone in the room, not knowing if what she had felt had been an expression of his need or a slap in the face.

When she came downstairs Eric and Jim were already in the house, and Rob was asking,

"Ah . . . no," Eric said. "She had to buy one of the kids a new dress. You know, junior prom coming up and they can't wear the same dress twice. You know women," he laughed.

Jim's wife, Madge, followed them, shaking the dust from her skirt. A fine pale film covered all of them and made their clothes look old.

"Kay, how good to see you. Oh, I *like* your hair. You know you ought to get into town more often, my word, it's been ages. Rob, don't you think she ought to get out more—" she turned, but Jim had taken him to the window.

"Take a look at the new car. Got it in Des Moines on my last trip. Damn dust makes it look three years older, but she's a beauty, don't you think so?"

"Business must be pretty good—"

"I'll tell a man it is." Eric interrupted and took Rob in tow. "If I showed you our stock report right now—well, I'll just say they're damn good."

"How 'bout a little drink before dinner?" Jim asked. "You still have that brandy around?"

"In the cupboard," Rob answered.

He glanced at Kay, but she turned quickly. "I'll get it for you, Jim."

"No, no," he waved her away. "I'll take care of it. You just take it easy, Kay. We're only family."

Madge handed her a green and white bakery box. "This is just a little something for dessert. I hope you haven't done anything yourself."

"No—the pastry is lovely."

"It ought to be," Jim chuckled. "Hell, Madge sent all the way to Springfield for it. Wolferman's or some damn thing. The best money can buy, she says."

Eric had taken Rob to one corner of the room and was talking quietly, intently, punctuating his sentences with a stiff jab of the finger. He had grown heavier, and his thinning hair, brushed straight back from the forehead, emphasized the evasive, almost frightened look Kay had seen in his eyes.

"I hardly ever see Jim anymore," Madge laughed. "He's always off at some kind of convention or meeting. You know he's even thinking of getting a plane and learning how to fly? I'd be scared to death—"

"Rob, where the hell are the brandy glasses?" Jim interrupted.

Rob looked up. "In the chest there."

Rob's gaze had gone past him to Kay. She felt out of breath as though these people were rushing through time at a terrific pace, but what was it they pursued? It slowly came to her that not one of them had mentioned Joe Hazard's death, that they were acting as if it had been little more than a shadow passing over their brilliant lives and in fact seemed to have freed them from some claim of the past. Rob held her gaze levelly, letting her know she had not been forgiven, and what she saw in these people he saw also and perhaps thought was in her. She was the first to look away. She refused to believe it, any of it.

"I tell you," Eric said as he pushed his empty plate away, "These youngsters grow twice as fast as we did. What's Wade now, eighteen? God," he shook his head, "hard to believe. I was telling Issac Harrison the other day that I wouldn't be surprised if Wade wasn't leaving for college one of these—"

"Pass the pastry," Rob said.

For a moment Eric hesitated, then picked up the plate, glancing first at Jim, then Kay. The dinner had gone quietly enough. Outside it was beginning to grow dark, the sun hanging just above the hills. Kay could see it through the window partially blocked by Rob's shoulder. He had said little during the meal, but Kay had caught the lightning, intense glances he threw at his brothers. He seemed content to wait. When his gaze met hers it was hard and blank and she felt shut out as only Rob could make her feel.

Eric went on doggedly. "Hell, the boy's got a good future ahead of him, maybe the best chance of us all. Things are changing so fast now a man needs more than just the three R's to see him through. The future—that's what we've got to think of now—the future and how we're going to meet it. You can't deny small farmers are getting hit pretty hard nowdays—you've got to have something else working for you."

"The stock market has shot prices all to hell and back," Jim said, twisting a fold of napkin in his hand. Youngest of the three, he was taller and thinner than Rob with a face perpetually flushed and excited. "Corn futures are down four and a quarter and milk has fallen farther off than last summer."

"I didn't know you still kept up on that, Jim," Rob interjected.

The other ignored the remark with an effort. "You can't deny facts, Rob. Diversification, okay, maybe you could swing that, but it takes the kind of capital we haven't got. You have to clear government subsidies, hire lawyers to keep the tax boys off your back, juggle market prices and futures—the whole thing is more risk than it's worth. Hell, you got to think about the future."

"Just what do you mean?'

Rob broke another pastry and looked first at Jim, then Eric. Kay was only half-listening to Madge's description of the latest production by the Grogin Little Theatre. She could feel the tension becoming heavier, something speaking of old wounds and antagonisms.

Eric cleared his throat uneasily and hunched forward on the table.

"He means things are changing even here. Why, Grogin city limits could be out here in another ten, fifteen years. There's real opportunity in this town. Wade could . . . start in any one of the businesses here. Maybe get away to business school, learn management. There's no limit to what that boy could do. And you, Rob—well, you know we've always wanted you to come in with us, still do. Hell, there wouldn't be a firm in the state that could touch us!"

The buried enthusiasm in Eric caught fire and seemed to leap across to Jim. The younger man leaned closer and the two framed Rob with their eagerness.

"We're already into government fertilizers, but hell, that could end up just a sideline. Eric and I are pretty well set up in the distributing end of things—no more Goddamn middlemen. Things are changing so damn fast we could expand right into plastics or international oil or worldwide distribution of nitrogen compounds—who the hell knows? That's what's so great about it, Rob, the future, the future. You don't have to stay here. Damn it, Issac Harrison had fifty more head of cattle and thirty more acres than you and he's folded up, busted flat. How long do you think you can buck the change? Eric and I are on something that could take all of us right to the top of the industry. You've got Kay and Wade to think about, well . . ." he realized in time he was going too far.

Rob dusted the white confectioner's powder from his fingers and pushed the empty plate toward Kay. A wild hope in her kindled by their words made her turn to Jim.

"Really, you exaggerate. Things aren't that gloomy, and besides, Wade knows he isn't tied here." She looked at Rob, but he was studying his brothers carefully.

"All right, what's all this leading up to? What is it you really want?"

An awkward silence fell. Again Kay caught the hint of some knowledge, a secret she had been trying to learn about all of them. Rob seemed to be looking through his brothers into something buried in the past. What was it he saw? she wondered.

"Well . . . you can't go on the way things are," Jim said, twisting the napkin into a thin rope. "I mean not . . . well, damn it, all this has been on its way out for a long time. We thought that after Dad—"

"What he's trying to say, Rob, is that it would be better all the way around if we put the land up for sale and got the best price for it while we can."

Kay saw Rob move slowly back from the table and heard him speak so slowly, the fury blazing out of his eyes.

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

Eric half-rose from his chair.

"Now just a Goddamn minute, you listen—"

"I've listened and heard nothing but a couple of paper businessmen talk about the future when it's written on a credit plan you can't even pay for. You and your damned stock market prices and corn futures—"

"Rob!" Kay cried out. "Don't!"

"—you don't know a damn thing about this farm because you ran out on it before you could learn. You ran out on a lot of things and I'll tell you why. It wasn't the crop failures or the work or the hunger we had because we'd had that before and it wasn't all this crap about farming—you ran out because you were afraid of Joe Hazard and you were afraid of this land—and you're still afraid of it!"

Kay could see that dark and mysterious power barely contained in Rob, crackling around them as though the room had filled with all the strength the others had somehow, somewhere lost, and it seemed to her that the land had closed its hand around the very power they had sought to gain.

Jim jerked to his feet.

"Damn it all, do you want to end up like Issac Harrison?"

Strangely the anger lessened and Rob's voice was almost quiet.

"You can stop worrying about that. I bought his land this morning."

For a moment there was absolute silence. Kay could only stare at him.

"You did what?" Jim fairly howled.

"The soil is right for soy beans, and their price per pound is a little over double that of corn bushels," Rob said ironically, looking at Kay. He glanced up at Jim. "Two and a quarter to be exact."

"Of all the damn-fool—"

Rob stood up slowly. "I think you'd better get out."

When their car had turned down the dirt road, Kay found herself staring through the motionless pall of dust across the flatlands where the hills were barely visible. They were his now, soon to be fenced in. The darkness increased rapidly until the flatlands melted away taking with them trees, empty corn fields, fence lines as though they had vanished with the light. Beyond the circle of the glaring yard light, there seemed to be nothing, the light pushing back that darkness as though afraid of it. Rob stood behind her in the room.

"The rest of them, I knew they didn't understand, but I always thought you were with me, Kay." The voice was hard and flat.

She turned. "How can I be, Rob, if you keep shutting me out?"

He didn't answer.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" she asked.

"You knew when I got the money we'd add on "

She remembered then he and his father talking, late at night, sometimes on the porch, other times in the living room while she, upstairs, helped Wade with his homework. Their voices, vibrant, deep-pitched had become like the murmur of the land itself talking quietly in the night. She remembered then never really listening, never really understanding.

"It kind of takes the heart out of a man . . ." he hesitated, then his voice came again, stronger. "What is it, Kay? The land or something else?"

She didn't answer.

"Is it the money?"

"No . . . no, it's not the money. I never thought we would make very much farming. I only kept the Bantams so there would be something bringing in a little extra—"

"Goddamn it!" the pride in him shocked Kay out of her lassitude, "If you think we're that bad off I'll eat every Goddamn one of those chickens feathers and all!"

"Don't you shout at me!" She was trembling. "And don't you touch those chickens. I've put up with trying to carry money from one month to the next, worrying about Wade's schooling and how I'm going to make his clothes last another six months he's growing so fast, always trying to keep back some money so you could get another damn machine for your damn corn but not minding that, not really, because it was all part of living out here and I'd made my choice. It was you, Rob, shutting me out that I couldn't stand, and now you say I don't believe in what you're doing. How can I when I don't understand it, when you act as though I didn't really belong here? What is there between us, Rob? It's there like the land—how can I make you see it, that it's different with me and different with Wade. He ought to have a chance to get out—"

"He doesn't even know what he wants."

"Did you at eighteen?"

"Yes. Wade's got to understand—"

"Understand what?"

He had gripped the back of a chair, the shoulders hunched forward, his eyes blazing at her across the distance between them, and for the first time, the power in him seemed to struggle with itself. He looked down at his hands curved over the wood as though finding in them what he wanted to say. When he looked up at her again his gaze was calmer.

"Understand something that makes a difference . . . Kay, if I could explain it . . ." he stopped and after a moment, "When I was a little younger than Wade, right about the time the Depression started, it was a good spring and we gambled everything on a new hybrid corn somebody had just put out. We knew the price wouldn't be much, but we might be able to get enough increased yield to break even, so we planted sixty acres of it. That summer it didn't rain for two and a half months. You could see the corn shrivel as it came out of the ground. We lost all of it, do you understand, Kay? We were beaten flat. There was no question of starting a second field, and I remember my father . . . we stood out by the field getting ready to plow it all under, and he turned and looked at me. He said, 'That corn's not us. It's not ever going to be us, you understand?' Do you see, Kay? It was something . . . I don't know . . . something I saw that Eric and Jim never did. We lost, yes, but it gave something back . . . I knew what I wanted to do. I've always known."

She listened with a growing sense of fear, hearing behind his words the sound of other voices pressing close around them, voices from the land, and she felt uncertainty slowly replace her belief about Wade, about the future. Those other voices, insistent, sure, would ask, "What do you want?" and she would have to say, "I don't know, not any more. I don't know."

She glanced suddenly out the window as though catching some movement in the darkness, feeling she could not stand to have that question asked and almost before she realized she had moved, the back door was open and the warm, quiet night received her. A large oak shaded the hen coop and Kay stepped into its shadow, hidden there from the back door where Rod had followed her and stopped. Her hands automatically opened a sack of dried corn and scattered it like gold coins on the ground inside the pen. There were no chickens there to eat it, and after awhile she stopped and felt the tears spilling over. Defeated, but how? She looked up into the darkness. A soft, dry breeze stirred the life around her with a rustling whisper, the searching whisper of fall again, always on the prowl for something. Out there in the darkness a boy coming home, but to what? The wind had a new note, telling her of that strange quest of October, of life seeking the center of things, hundreds of leaves cast off and returning to the earth, only the center being that gave them life remained eternal. She listened and it seemed she could feel Joe Hazard very close to her, a strong, earnest presence touching every twig and leaf and blade of grass, every animal and man with a strength carried from the hills, and telling her that nothing was ever lost but the promise of a man.

She let the last of the kernels fall from her hands. Sacrifice and pain, for what? Some promise buried in the land and they were part of it and everything they did was part of it even if it was nothing more than a man standing out by a wasted corn field or laying fence lines and digging post holes one by one under the fall sky or a boy lying on a hillside still with the promise in him.

She could hear Rob's footsteps and then felt the tension ease out of him, his strength enough to live what she could only partly accept. They saw the headlights from Wade's car sweep across the house, and to Kay it seemed the two of them were carried forward on that fragile beam toward some distant point in time where she hoped with a blind, maternal longing the future would no longer need their sacrifice.

A READING BY PUBLISHED POETS

David Greer

In a large room waiting,
read to by three poets and a nun
(she betrayed us later
by writing like a nun should),
my eyes fixed on golden hair,
a strange shining color
falling ragged on the neck.
The poets and the nun
sat behind a raised table
waiting their turn to read
each gravely considering
their fingernails and their hands,
everything but the reading,
they knew each other well.
I caught one slyly
scratching his neck to cover
the glances at his watch,
timing the idiot who spoke.
I hoped for a sudden ending,
an explosion or a fight,
thinking of the night outside,
tracing the uneven edge
where the hair fell on the neck.
As the last poet read
the room grew close around,
the knife words of a poet
can bring you sharply to a place.

PORTRAIT OF MY UNCLE

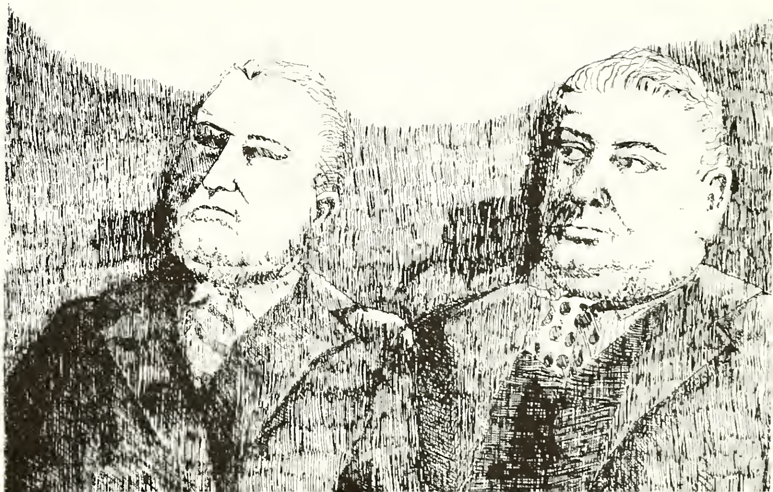
Frederick Chiriboga

My senile uncle sat
unshaven every afternoon
I can remember
on the same bench of the same park
eating seedless tangerines
from a paper bag
because they're easy to digest.
        (His bathroom cabinet contains
        a shaving brush his parents
        must have used
        to paint his crib with
        and eight assorted brands of laxatives.
        He once cried quietly,
        a blue rose crushed under his cane,
        because he'd heard on television
        facts about cross-pollination,
        mutations and the seedless fruits.)
My uncle eats seedless tangerines
and stares at setting suns
in their unraveling nests of easy orange
        with the affected apathy
        that haloes crippled millionaires.

(UPI)

Abel Hill

Christ Mohammed Buddha came to
Hadleyburg last week
and he
looked around him on the square
and no one even
noticed him
till he took down
his pogo-cello
played a few bars   sang a song   brought rains
and lightning
cured
the broken statue   converted the mayor   and
let school out
then
Christ Mohammed Buddha
looked around him
smiled his
flowery smile
and quoted from Kahlil Gibran.
The people ate dirt
said Amen and such as that
and when he left they
set up stands
and sold each other rags and bones
and plastic pogo-cellos.



JANICE

James Quinn

They have a place at the Fair where you can get water, and it's under some trees". I said, "C'mon everybody, Y'all come over here and get out of the sun." The older ones did, they came over and looked at the water pump and nodded, and stared at me. Some of the younger ones kept standing in the sun, looking at the Ferris Wheel. I had to yell at them because I couldn't leave the ones under the tree, or they would go off again. "Y'all comon over here under the tree. It'll be running tonight and y'all can see it then." Two of them looked at me. "It'll be lit up tonight. Now god-damn it bring those others overhere." They all turned and stared at me. People were passing by and they looked at us. The older ones were staring at the water pump. I walked over where it was shady, and laid down on the grass. Janice leaned against the tree. She had blonde hair and was scratching her elbow. "Damn it all to Hell" She looked at me and said. "My goodness, my goodness ,my goodness."

Last year I brought them here and I just had to take care of the older ones and a nurse and some other orderlies had the rest of them and I never yelled. I said "Come over here, or go over there." They just looked at me and they understood. That was my first time, but they had been brought here so many times that they (the old ones) followed the route that they had always taken and I had followed them and said "Keep out of Folks way, keep out of other people's way, and C'mon over here." And they had listened to me.

The colored people knew them because they had seen them every Friday at every Fair, and they didn't care if they were from the Mental Home. The white people never saw them. Friday was for Colored people and for the people I brought. It was easier last year. I just had the old ones.

When we started back, I sat at the back of the bus so I could watch them if they tried to put their arms out the windows. The old ones never did, they just sat and stared at the floor, or out the window, unless they saw something that they really wanted to see, and then they would turn their heads to watch it.

Last summer we passed an old one-legged colored man who was standing in the cotton field whipping a mule and after we passed him they all got up from their seats and came to the back of the bus and watched him till he was out of sight. This trip it was too dark to see anything so they just sat and coughed or stared. Janice sat at the front of the bus spitting at cars as we passed, but she didn't have her head or arms out of the window, so I didn't say anything.

When they got off the bus, some of them stood and waited and some of them cried because it was dark and they were afraid. Mr. Dykes tried to pull the cigarettes out of my pocket when I was getting off the bus. "Mr. Dykes, I'm getting awful tired of that, Damned if I'm not. You can't smoke, Now just quit it."

He held his head down, and got off the bus. Janice came up and put her hands in her back pockets and looked at me. I said, "Hi Janice." She looked at the letters on the bus. I said, "You better get over there with your group."

She put her fingers through the straps of her overalls and walked toward the group of little kids who were sitting in a bunch waiting for their nurse.

By the time I got in the building, some of the old men were getting ready for bed and some of them sat on their beds or on the floor staring at the wall or the ceiling or at themselves. I yelled, "Mr. Elzy has his pajamas on backwards." He was standing at the end of the hall and two or three of them looked at him and laughed. He looked down at the front of his pajamas. "The hole goes in the front, Mr. Elzy" He looked up at me and one of them yelled, "Mr. Elzy squats to pee." Some of the others started yelling, "Elzy squats, Elzy squats." The old man went back to his bed and laid down.

That night an old woman sneaked into the nurses bathroom and scalded herself to death with hot water. Another orderly was talking to me about the time when he was in the army and had gotten drunk, when we heard her scream. By the time anybody got there, she was lying in the tub dead. The other orderly helped me pull her out of the tub and I said, "I'm glad it wasn't Janice or one of the kids."

They wouldn't let the young ones come to the funeral, just the old ones that had been friends of the old woman and just the friends that wouldn't cry or be upset when she was buried. I could see Janice standing in her window watching us. I told one of the people there to go tell the nurse that she was watching the funeral from her window. When the men started to shovel dirt on the coffin, some of the old woman's friends went and kneeled at the grave and started throwing handfulls of dirt on the coffin. The men backed away and leaned on their shovels and one of them lit a cigarette. He held the pack toward me and I told him that I couldn't smoke when I was working. When the funeral was over, none of them would leave the cemetery. They just went as far as the little gate and stopped and stared at each other and some of them sat down and leaned against the fence and looked at the others. The nurses didn't understand, but I knew and I said, "Look everybody. See, I'm leaving first. I'm the one that will die. C'mon everybody. C'mon, I'm the one that will die. C'mon, Y'all C'mon."

The next afternoon I was looking after a group of old men who were standing bunched together watching the highway and I saw Janice standing away from her group. She had her hands in her back pockets and was looking at me. I left the old men and went to where she was standing. It was cold and she was wearing a sweatshirt, blue overalls and high topped shoes. She bent down to tie her shoelace and I brushed a leaf out of her hair. She stood up and put her hands on her head. "My Goodness" she said. I put my hand on her shoulder and said, "You look very pretty today Janice. You really look pretty. Your overalls are pressed, your hair is combed, you really look nice." She looked down at her shoes. I said "Your shoes are polished." She pulled up her pants leg and showed me her wool socks. I looked back at my group and they had begun to wander down the hill. I yelled, "Y'all don't wander off now." They stopped and looked at me. I looked at Janice, she was watching them. Her nurse came to get her and I told her that she had better get Janice a warm coat because it was going to be getting colder. The nurse told me that it was her job to worry about Janice. I left them standing there and went back to get my group together in time for supper.

After we ate that night, Janice's nurse came to my table and told me that after I left her with Janice that afternoon, Janice had run away from her and climbed a tree and wouldn't come down until suppertime. She said that Janice had perched on a limb and ignored her until the supper bell rang and then she climbed down and ran to the cafeteria.

We took them to the country on Saturday because it would be their last chance to go out while the weather wasn't too cold. When they got off the bus they began to wander down to the little creek in the hollow and me and the other orderly had to run to catch up with them and make sure that none of them jumped in. The old ones stopped and stared at the water and the young ones started jumping up and pulling leaves off the trees. I saw Janice walking through the trees carrying an arm full of red leaves. An old woman went over and took the leaves away from her and threw them in the creek. Janice stood there for a few minutes watching her and then she started looking for some more leaves. I watched her gather another arm full but the nurse told her to throw them away. I said "Y'all stay away from that water now. It's slippery on that bank." They looked at me and one of them started walking closer to the creek. I ran over to him and he stopped and looked at the ground. "Now what will I do if you fall in that water? You know what, I'll have to pull you out and I'll get mud all over my uniform. Is that what you want, do you want that?" He looked at me for a minute and turned around and walked back to the group.

Monday morning, Janice was not in her building. After we searched all of the buildings and the grounds, the police came and stood around leaning on their cars and talking to the head nurse. At lunch time they ate in the cafeteria. The patients watched them take their trays to the nurse's table and watched them eat and talk with the nurses. Some of them sat and stared at the food until the policemen left before they started to eat. Later that afternoon the police brought some men from town and we went down in the woods around the home and spread out to look for her. I went by myself, away from the others and found her sitting on the railroad tracks that ran over the Talahale Creek. She was patting two big dogs that were lying on each side of her and saying, "My goodness, My goodness." The dogs looked up at me and she kept rubbing their heads. "My goodness", she said.

I said, "Janice I love you and I was really worried." She quit petting the dogs and brushed her bangs off her forehead. She looked at the water and stretched her legs out. I sat beside her and lit a cigarette. The water flowed very fast under the bridge and some limbs were hung on the piers, trying to get loose. "I knew you would be here," I said. She rubbed the dogs' ears and started patting one of her feet. "I knew you would and I was worried because I understand you and I know you and I know what you think." It was getting colder and the dogs nustled close against her legs. I pulled up her pants leg. "Do you have your wool socks on?" She scratched her knee and looked at me. One of the dogs barked and we looked down the creek and could see some men coming along the creek bank. One was a policeman and he saw us and waved. We sat on the railroad and watched them come toward us.

The Sunday Janice died there weren't many visitors because it had been so cold and cloudy that everyone thought it might sleet. One of the old ones woke up early that morning and was lying in bed awake and heard the nurse tell me that when she was a little girl the weather had looked this way and it had snowed in the afternoon. The old man got out of bed and looked out the window. He looked at me and said, "It snowed when I was a little boy too".

I put on my coat and took my coffee out on the porch and sat on the steps and watched the smoke coming out of all the chimneys. A few drops of rain began to fall. I looked at my coffee and a drop of rain fell in it and I looked up and saw Janice. She was walking across the yard coming toward me, kicking her feet, wearing her over-alls and an old Navy coat. When she got to me she put her hands in her pockets and looked at the sidewalk. I said "Hey Janice", and she sat down beside me and looked at her feet. I lit a cigarette and said, "You look nice this morning but you forgot to comb your hair." I handed her my coffee and she took a swallow and made a face. "Janice, you can't come out early in the morning by yourself. Its going to really rain and you don't have an umbrella and what you're going to do is wind up in the hospital and then I won't have anybody to talk to anymore. What will I do when you're in the hospital sick with a cold? There won't be anybody but old man Cooley and old man Dykes trying to steal my cigarettes, and old man Elzy putting his pants on backwards". She looked at me and took another drink of coffee. She said "My goodness." It started to rain harder and I put my coat over her head and walked her back to her building.

After lunch it got colder and started to sleet while we sat in a ward and drank coffee and looked at a newspaper. A colored orderly came in and told us that Janice had fallen out of the bathroom window of her building and was dead. We sat there for a while and smoked but we didn't talk about it. They had finished eating and began coming back to the ward. I said "dammit all, y'all! You know you can't have food in the ward". They stared at the floor and held the cookies behind their backs. "Mr. Dykes, where did you find that cigarette, now goddammit you throw that thing away". He stuck the cigarette in his pocket and bowed his head and started crying. I looked at him. "I'm sorry. Janice is dead Mr. Dykes."

After all my people were in bed and the other orderly came, I bought a pack of cigarettes and walked outside. For a little while I sat on a bench and smoked and watched the highway. There weren't many cars passing so I got up and walked to the cemetery. I sat down and leaned against the fence and smoked cigarettes until I decided to go get Janice. I had forgotten to wear my coat and it was getting colder. Before I went to get her I went over and started the bus so it would be warming up.

I didn't have any trouble getting in the morgue because the door wasn't locked. The lights were on and she was lying on the table with a sheet over her. She was on her back and her legs were spread a little. I raised the sheet and looked at her face. Her mouth and eyes were closed and she was very white and her head lay to one side with her hair lying over her face. I took another sheet from a hamper and wrapped her in it and carried her to the bus and propped her on the seat and propped her shoulder against the window to keep her from falling over. I drove off the school grounds and onto the highway and drove slow because the roads were slippery.

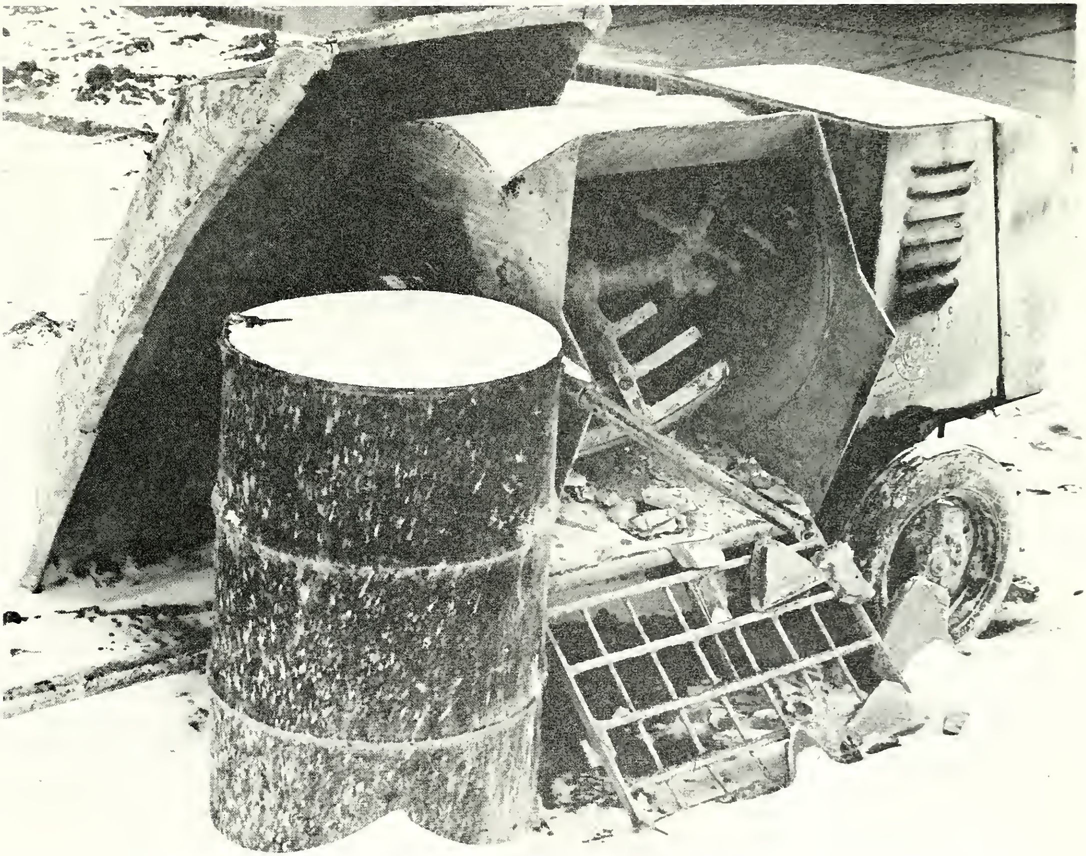
I drove around the county until morning and when the stores opened I went in a curb market and bought her a white ribbon. After I tied it in her hair I drove slowly to the fairgrounds. It started to snow. I turned on the windshield wipers and looked at Janice. Her head was twisted to one side and I started to stop and straighten it but decided not to. When I pulled into the fairgrounds it was already white and it was snowing harder. I stopped the bus and lifted her out and when I was carrying her across the snow her ribbon fell out of her hair but I stopped and picked it up. I carried her to the Ferris wheel and put her in the seat. I couldn't start the machine and I got in the seat with her and put my arm around her and retied the ribbon in her hair. It was light now and snowing harder and me and Janice sat in the Ferris Wheel watching it snow. I saw a little colored boy standing under the trees, holding an umbrella, and watching us.

They (Janice and Muddy) pushed the old woman (Big Mama) down the gravel road in her wheel chair and they had to go very slowly for it was dark. They put her on the railroad track and stood back to watch the old woman who sat in her wheel chair quietly and waited for the train.

"What train will it be Muddy?"

"The Gulf and Ship Island, I think."

"My goodness," Janice said and she was nine then and that was three years ago.



A PLACE IN THE SUN

Margaret Hoffman

In the spring,
When the LARKS were nightly lighting by matches,
When the full sun was dawning in morning glories,
Mud puddles and Madison Avenue traffic,
Mrs. Brown planted tomato seeds.
Mrs. Brown, who was past sixty and looking like a grave lily,
Who baked pineapple-upside down cakes
For the Y.W.C.A. charity bazaar,
Lived on Lantern street and other laments
Found in lost winds.
And once upon a year after the April dirge
Of frost and frostless fading nights,
Mrs. Brown polished the silver spoon in her mouth,
And the town polished Mrs. Brown
By selecting her as "Most Important Personality"
For making and taking unofficial offices . . .
And for tradition.

In the summer
The tomato seeds sprouted.

In the autumn,
When the leaves fell in hollow husks,
Like discarded chewing gum wrappers,
Mrs. Brown did the same.
Now, a long time during a fevered Friday,
Mrs. Brown was told to "Go To Hell"
Which she reluctantly accepted two weeks later
By plummeting down the upstairs staircase,
A half-empty burlap sack
Bulging on the last step of the first flight,
Which she wouldn't have accepted
(Because Mrs. Brown planned to remain immortal
One way or the other,
Like everyone else)
Unless she had known that everything would remain the same
Which it didn't,
Because:
Nephews and cousins choked on the silver spoon,
And Mrs. Abbeyton, the tax collector's wife,
Was selected as "Most Important Personality,"
And someone else baked upside-down cakes
For the charity bazaar,
And the coffin rotted,
And in the summer
Mrs. Brown sprouted to a tomato plant.

THE CRICKET'S LAMENT

Richard Lebovitz

I wait in a tuft of grass
at the foot of the steps

listening to the rocker
creak on the porch.

Every night she rocks
and sings low hymns;

her voice has the timbre
of rain in a can.

I wait in a tuft of grass,
and while she dreams,

I repeat her hymns.

Father O'Connell, Mass at 75
"I would like to forget that God creates
a monsignor out of nothing."
up
falling
up again
the light being missed
skies night stars skies
the mist being bright and falling
drunk in his cup
blood on the altar-stone
I am, my body, too old to play at Christ
and still too young to die

Thomas Rabbitt

CECI-NUTS FOR FLOR

Tony Fragola

The man and his wife always appeared together selling their roasted ceci-nuts at every church festival, which, in my neighborhood, came as invariably as the summer months. I can still see the old man swirling the nuts in the sand-filled cauldron with his wooden oar. Later his wife scooped up the nuts with a sieve and piled them on a table in front of her. Then she put the nuts in bags of three sizes: ten, fifteen, and twenty-five cents.

Every parish gave a feast or bazaar in honor of its own patron saint. There was the Feast of St. John the Baptist, St. Anthony, and St. Peter, but the feast that I always waited for with growing anticipation was the Feast of Our Lady. The church was only a block away, so I could go each of the four nights. It began on Thursday and ended on Sunday. Each year I watched the men close off the street with wooden horses and set up booths in the parking lot next to the church. When the preparations were finished there would be gambling booths of chuck-a-luck, dice, blackjack, and assorted wheels of fortune. A ferris wheel and a merry-go-round were always brought in. Some of the remaining booths were used for games of skill that were usually unprofitable and others for selling food.

Each year I went to the Feast with my grandmother. She knew everyone, and seemed to know everything about them. Gram didn't go more than one or two nights, usually on Friday or Saturday. When I tagged along with her, I was happiest. As she went to each booth to visit with her friends, I would listen to the Sicilian dialect. Watching them, I felt that I belonged to a very special world—complete and full within itself. And I listened attentively, not quite understanding everything, yet delighting in the sounds of the strange language. After leaving each booth, she would fill in the details about the people, so that they became indirect friends of mine.

"See Donna Marcantano, la," Gram would say as she pointed someone out. "Ha due figli, two boys," and she would hold up her fingers. "Uno, a lawyer, altro, maestro, teacher. Nice family, Capisci?"

"I understand" I'd say, a little annoyed that she had to explain it in such an elementary way. Gram never knew how much dialect I really did understand.

She would tell me who was sick, whose daughters just had babies, or who was getting married, and what kind of people they had been in Sicily.

Gram didn't like everyone. She positively hated Mr. Tancredi. She wouldn't say why, but repeated that he was a bum, a "boom" as she called him. And Gram wouldn't go within sight of Maria Lucarelli, who, Gram claimed, had once given her the evil eye. "Il malocchio, il malocchio," she muttered when Maria's name was mentioned.

Like most Sicilian women, Gram was fascinated by dolls that had a religious or symbolic meaning. One year there was a booth that sold nothing but dolls. Many of these dolls were miniature replicas of the Virgin Mary, and these dolls had elaborate headpieces and hand-made dresses of white satin. They usually held a rosary or a bouquet of flowers. At this stall there were also two male dolls, dressed in medieval knightly costumes, complete with spears, shields, and visors.

"Say Gram," I would ask, "what are these for?"

"Quelli sono cavallieri."

"Knights," I replied.

"Che cosa?" She didn't understand the word.

"Guerrieri," I tried again.

"Bene," she exclaimed, and proudly gave me a slap on the back with the full force of her square body and thick arm.

"What are they doing here?"

She explained that these ancient knights were good Christians, and they fought against the pagans, "i Turchi," who tried to capture Sicily. (Gram called all non-believers Turks.) Then she told me that the feasts were even older than "i cavallieri," and that they had been going on for "mille anni," at least. Her mother and father had gone to them, and their mother and father before them, all the way back to the time of "Cristo." She had even said that "i cavallieri" were as old as Sicily itself. Now Gram lies once she begins telling a story, or more precisely, she exaggerates to an overwhelming degree. Yet I relished listening to her stories. There was always some element of truth in them.

After making the traditional round of visits, Gram stopped to greet the ceci-nut man and his wife. Gram waited until eleven o'clock to do this. Then they were almost finished for the evening.

"Eh, cupari, cumari Cavallo, come state?" my grandmother would bellow. The man simply looked at her and raised his eyebrows. His wife would stop her work, smile, wipe her hands with a towel, and chat briefly with my grandmother.

"Chi è," the woman asked as she smiled at me.

"Mio nipote, Nino."

"Nino eh. Nice boy." The woman smiled. I didn't know what to say. Besides, I wasn't expected to participate in the conversation.

The ritual of this first introduction was repeated every year. On the way home, I had asked Gram about the man and his wife. She explained to me that they all came from the same village in Sicily, which was located on the last plateau below Etna. Gram, the Cavallos, and other villagers had left after the volcano had belched up its gaseous, bubbling liquid. The lava had seared their land and had hardened like an encrusted scar.

Still, something puzzled me. They seemed as familiar as relatives, yet they were not.

"Hey, Gram," I said. "What does cumari and cupari mean?" (I knew that the words meant godmother and godfather, but they weren't godparents of anyone that I knew.)

"Ma!" Gram's right arm shot up, her fingers were outstretched, and her arm waving back and forth as though she was asking deliverance from such an ignorant child.

"Well, how am I supposed to know?"

She knew that she had hurt my feelings, so she calmed herself. Cumari and Cupari, she explained, meant that the people were highly respected friends of the village. And in this country, Gram and Mrs. Cavallo even belonged to the same church organization, as did all the women of the village. They called their group La Ausiliaria Societa di Linguaglossa. Societa was the word that they used for club or organization. but it had even a stronger connotation. The word was appropriate, for in addition it signified their own close-knit community. What they actually had done was to transplant the roots and basis of their old society into the soil of this country. Situated on the last plateau beneath Etna, the village had been inundated by a glowing tongue of lava that had nearly destroyed it. To show their respect for the volcano, they named their town Linguaglossa to honor its destructive potential.

Besides the social functions, an integral part of the Societa was gossiping, so my uncle Rosario delighted in translating the club's name as "the society of big mouths."

Now that the question was explained, I wouldn't be satisfied until I had asked another, but knowing my grandmother, I was almost afraid to ask it.

"Say Gram," I stammered, "uh, well, why does he always sell nuts?" Her hand shot up again, but she laughed this time and slapped me on the back.

"Senti," she commanded. I listened attentively. Then she told me how his father had begun the trade. Naturally, cupari Michele had taken over when his father became too old. He had learned from his father to fill the cauldron with sand. Each nut was surrounded and buried and actually roasted by the heated sand. Since the sand was constantly stirred, none of the nuts settled on the bottom and burned. The movements and rhythm that Cupari Michele used to stir the sand were the same as those of his father. Cupari Michele had learned from his father that without the sand the nuts on the bottom would burn and the ones on the top would be raw. His father had stressed that the nuts had to be roasted gradually and evenly if they were to be enjoyed and sold, and Cupari Michele had learned his trade well. In Sicily, Cupari Michele had faithfully attended every church feast. During the week he would climb the slopes of Etna and bring back firewood. He then dried and roasted the nuts. Everyone respected Cupari Michele. He never missed a day of work and he was a good provider for his family. Later he had married Cumari Maria and the two had become inseparable, like two hands working together towards a common goal. Then came the earthquake, and the terrible boat trip with the people packed together like sheep. Here Gram became silent. The trip and her early days here were painful, and she would not talk about them. I said no more. After a few steps she spoke again. She asked me if I wanted to help her make macaroni the next day. I said yes, but my mind wasn't thinking about making macaroni, which was usually great fun for me. Instead I was thinking about some unseen village in Sicily, where fuming Etna still ruled the island and dictated the fates and lives of the people.

II

When I returned alone to the Feast, my favorite habit was to eat the endless supply of food while I watched the men gamble and listened to the women gossiping was they ate and sold the food they had prepared in their own kitchens. I was thin when I was ten, but I ate like a boy with a tapeworm—one that was particularly fond of spicy-hot Italian foods. There was Mrs. Rinaldi's baked lasagna, Mrs. Angelli's fried peppers on little loaves of bread, and Mrs. Fiore's cookies. The Angelli family supplied pastry from their bakery—especially those cream-filled connolies. There was also pizza from the Sardelli bakery—just so they wouldn't be outdone. Pizza always was my favorite; pizza with cheese, or anchovies, or mushrooms, or sausage, or with whatever I wanted. (Whenever I saw Mr. Sardelli, I told him that he made the best pizza on the North Side. He liked to hear that.) I ate the thick square pieces as I meandered through the maze of stalls and booths, until I was gorged and my money ran out. Occasionally I would forsake my gluttony to plunk a quarter down on chuck-a-luck or dice, but as soon as I lost, which was almost always, I felt hunger pains. I winced at the thought of what I could have eaten instead—especially steaming hot meatballs packed in little loaves of bread. No matter what though, I was sure to save enough money for a fifteen cent soda. Only a combination of ceci-nuts and orange soda could soothe my burning palate.

Except for the thirty-five cents I had put aside, my money usually ran out at eleven—two hours before everything closed. Then I would go to the place where cupari and cumari set up their ceci-nut stand. They lived directly across the street, which was so narrow that it was actually nothing but an alley-way.

They would set their stand on the sidewalk across the street from their white house with the glass-enclosed porch. Since the lighted area ended four or five feet in front of them, they stood in the shadows. Most of the feeble light reaching them was usually blocked off by the throng of waiting people.

There was a flight of concrete steps beside their stand. Sitting on the steps, the looming shadows created by the wood fire beneath his cauldron flickered about me. He seemed to be swallowed in half-shadows. Gypsy-like, he stood bent over the cauldron. The dark baggy pants and loose-fitting tee shirt he wore made him look very thin. Glistening from sweat, his face looked narrow and lean, with jutting cheek bones and long, straight nose. Nothing moved but his arms. They were thin but knotty; the bulging veins of his forearms looked ready to burst as he stirred the nuts. I watched him, transfixed by his flawless, rhythmic movements. He never smiled, and I don't remember ever hearing him say anything. His steady rhythm had a hypnotic effect. My body became loose, relaxed. My thoughts gradually drained. The only noise he made was the hollow thud of the oar regularly hitting the bottom of the cauldron. After the thud, a new cycle began. There was also a constant swishing of sand, as it rose and fell, rose and fell against the sides, regulated by the well-guided oar, like recurrent flow of ocean waves.

His wife was a pleasant contrast. She was always smiling. There was nothing stupid about her smile, nor fawning; it simply was good natured. She was a heavy, well-rounded woman, built in the tradition of her country. Her arms were thick and bulky. I could even see the underside of her arm shake as she scooped the nuts into the bag and sold them. Her movements were slow. She usually wore a cotton dress, a print pattern on a white background, with a black leather belt. Her hair was totally gray; his was still black.

When working, she, like her husband, was all business. Even though Cumari always found time to socialize with my grandmother, she had little time for useless chatter. There were always people waiting to buy a bag of ceci-nuts. I watched the two of them until I could no longer stand the burning sting on the roof of my mouth and on my tongue. Then I would jump off the steps and be first in line. I had cultivated that sting all night. The procedure was always the same. I fidgeted in front of her and squeezed the money so tightly in my hand that I could feel the edges of the coins sinking into my palm. When ready, she would look up and say, he all the while working, "che vuoi?"

"A bag of ceci-nuts."

"Quanto?"

"Fifteen cents."

I gratefully took the bag and began my final walk around the Feast. At first I would just hold the nuts, enjoying their warmth spreading through my hand. And the nuts were sure to be warm. I never jumped off those steps until he had just finished roasting the last batch of nuts for the evening.

Then slowly, so slowly that I was conscious of every exaggerated gesture, I took the nuts and began eating them, one by one. Ceci-nuts are extremely dry and bland. I chewed them, keeping them in my mouth until they became soft and mushy. The pulpy mass soothed my burning tongue like cool mud on a bee sting. The nuts lasted a long time. Usually I could walk around the whole feast until it closed for the night, watching the die-hards at the dice and chuck-a-luck games. After the nuts were gone, I completed the ritual by buying two orange sodas. The first soda barely washed away the dry, roasted taste of the nuts. The second one tingled and burned. After this I went home. By then even the ceci-nut man and his wife would have covered their equipment and left for the evening.

III

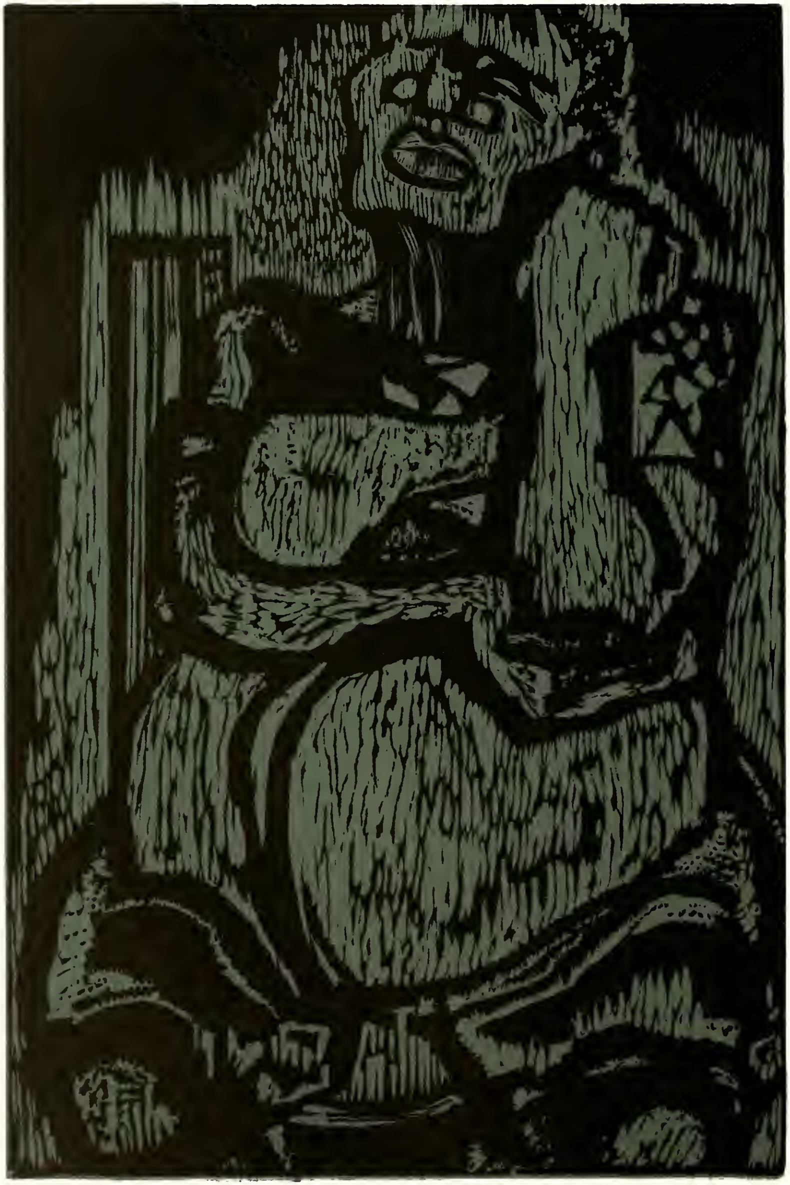
This ritual lasted until I was fourteen. In late August the feast came again. As usual I began eating and wandering through the maze of clustered, loud-talking people. The men and women in the stands bellowed their favorite incantations. Early in the evening I passed the ceci-stand and noticed that the woman was not there. I felt uneasy, but I thought that she would come later. I returned frequently to check. She didn't come. Everything else was exactly the same. The man, the cauldron, and the wooden table with the mound of ceci-nuts were there as aways. It didn't seem right, her not being there. The man himself moved deftly. He roasted the nuts, filled the bags, and made change with no apparent difficulty. He moved from the cauldron to the table next to him. Half the time he filled the space where she had always been. I made mental pictures of her standing there as she had done every year. Now there was only darkness illuminated by flickering light, except when he stood in her place. She never came. Often I wanted to ask him where she was, but I didn't really know him. My grandmother could call him "cupari," but I did not have that privilege. And each time I found enough courage to ask him, I felt as though I were breaking an unstated but understood rule. I had been taught not to ask questions that I had no right to ask. I felt that I had that right, but I didn't know why. I anticipated a disdainful silence as a reply, and I was afraid, so I waited until the end of the evening to buy the nuts and asked no questions. The nuts still soothed my palate. But I didn't go home happy. I even watched the ceci man carry his things home. I noted a new expression on his face. He looked tired; painfully, visibly tired.

The next day I visited my grandmother. She was washing underwear and brown stockings. A washboard was braced against the side of the tub and stood in sudsy water filled with clothes. The hollow, metallic sound of her heavy hands scrubbing the clothes against the board drowned out my feeble hello. She barely noticed me.

"Hey Gram. You know the ceci-lady?"

"Cumari Maria, Si." She kept scrubbing.

"She wasn't at the feast last night. Is something wrong?"



"Eh," she spurted as she stopped momentarily and brushed away a lock of hair that had fallen in her right eye. "Mori."

I had never fully accepted the possibility that the woman had died.

"You're kidding."

"Ma!"

"You sure?"

She didn't answer. She simply turned her head towards me, cast a quick, glaring glance. The corner of her mouth was twisted up. I knew that it was time to leave her to her washing.

From then on I passed the ceci-stand and thought of the woman. I began spending more time just watching the man stirring the sand and listening to the hollow echo of the oar as it banged the iron bottom.

As the church grew more prosperous and the older women became fewer, the church brought more food. Home-made specialties were slowly disappearing from the stalls. The high-pitched, piercing beckonings of the old Sicilian women were replaced by younger, more sedate ladies. (Mr. Sardelli had become too old to run the bakery. He sold it. The pizza was never the same.) The store bought food was good, but more bland. Since my mouth didn't burn so much, the orange sodas lost something. I didn't know exactly what it was, except that my throat didn't sting as I gulped down the soda. I bought my ceci-nuts every evening, and I watched the man drag his utensils across the street to his home. Once I came close to asking him if he needed any help, but I felt embarrassed and didn't ask him. I practiced saying to myself, "hey Cupari Michele, want some help," but I thought Gram might disapprove my intruding.

One year the ceci-man was no longer there. Again I went to ask Gram, because she always knew of births, deaths, marriages and funerals. This time she was in the kitchen cooking. She wore a white apron the baker next door had given her. Pots of simmering food were on the stove. I watched her bent over the stove, stirring the pots with a wooden spoon, occasionally raising it to her mouth to taste the sauce and sample the macaroni. Her back was towards me. I watched her for what seemed to be a long time.

"Hi Gram."

"Come stai?" she asked, briefly turning to greet me.

"All right . . . say Gram."

"Che fai?"

"Nothing. Just thought I'd say hello. Say listen Gram."

"Vuoi mangiare qui stasera?"

The smell of the food was too rich for me that evening. I wasn't hungry then.

"No thanks Gram. I'd better go on home. My mother's already got supper on. Forse domani."

"O.K." I knew that she was disappointed.

"Say Gram, did the ceci-man die?" I finally blurted.

"Si, sei mesa fa, non sapesti?"

He had been dead six months and I hadn't known. I remained silent. Because of the silence, Gram sensed that something was wrong. She finally turned, put her hands on her hips, and looked at me. A few seconds later she wiped her hands on the apron and came to me in her quick, agile manner. She sat down and drew me close to her, holding my shoulders in her strong hands.

"Senti Nino," I listened. I didn't even try to say anything.

"Cumari e cupari erano cosi, like this." She made her right hand into a fist with the index and forefingers held straight out and closed together.

"When she die, he no happy." Gram shook her hand.

"Quando cosi, non è bene." She held up the fist, with only the forefinger out this time. She twisted her hand in quick, expressive movements. Then she smiled. "Now they like this, come prima." The two fingers were together again. I smiled. I knew that for the old people death was also fulfillment, completion. I had seen the couples bickering, cursing one another, stop talking to each other for days, but I had also seen them gay at weddings, sad at funerals, and fiercely proud when another grandchild had come along. (Cumari and cupari had lost both sons in World War II.) A wife or husband was not happy alone. When one died, the other faced life stoically and waited patiently.

"E meglio cosi, better, capisci?"

Then there came a moment when nothing was said. I sensed a stillness in my grandmother, probably coming from her own longing.

"Hey" she yelled, so as to break the trance. "Vai, vai a casa," and she motioned for me to leave.

"Lasciami stare in pace."

"O.K. Gram. You're right. I'd better go home."

"Mangia qui domani, O.K.?"

"Sure, what are you fixing?"

"Lasagna," she said as she started toward the stove. I had one more question to ask, and my desire had to be satisfied.

"Say Gram, what'll happen when all the old people die? I mean, you know, like cumari and cupari. What'll happen then?"

"Ha," she snickered, and with a wave of her hand added, "fini, no more, good-bye George."

I had to chuckle. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I'll see you tomorrow," I yelled back as I dashed out the door. I was running down the flight of steps in a hurry to get home and eat supper. Gram was already stirring her pots.

WOODCUTS

Anna Wooten

1. Mr. Dan is dead now
But it shall be long
Before I forget
How late upon a winter afternoon
The yeoman-sun let fly shafts of slanted light
Through the window
To where the old man lay
Curled like a boy
soft and S-shaped in his
slumber.

2. Pumpkin-faces,
Happy, pumpkin faces
And harvest moons round as cheesecakes.
Once I saw him look across the cornfield
At the setting sun
The stubble on his chin brittle
As the blunt butch-haircuts of winter hedges
At their first frost.

Michelangelo Buonarroti: Pieta Rondanini

Robert S. Gwynn

God! I have borne ingratitude too long
To suffer now. My vanity is spent
With youth and time, but I do not repent
The carving on the Virgin's belt. If wrong,
At least my shame is there for all to see.
And Julius? His debt remains unpaid;
His church will be his glory. This I made
Despite the tightness of his purse. My fee?
No, that was not my point.
For I have won
My fame: *David* now scans the walls, his eye
Like *Moses'* flames aloud the warriors' cry.
Yet I cannot revive a fallen son
And hold the mother's sob to flesh and bone—
These things transcend mere images in stone.

SEPTEMBER, 1957

Frank Tota

You see them running around everywhere: the successful people, people who swim upstream all their lives, have some kids, then die to complete the joke. All the while you watch, just sit around and watch, while you try to figure out the vital force that drives these vital people. They always move, always smile, as they go about fixing their front porches or their kids' teeth. And while you watch you notice that the smile, like the new front porch, or the new set of teeth, just doesn't fit right.

But you keep watching, go through high school, win a few team letters and still can't say what the hell is going on. The successful people, the day-in-day-out clods, will just motion you to wait until you're older. That's when you learn what counts. You listen and wait and watch and graduate from high school and find out that the only important thing is to realize there is no important thing.

You take a job in a boatyard, diner, gas station—it doesn't really matter and you keep watching. You learn that the more you know the less you understand, that you're better off scraping boats, frying eggs or pumping gas than chasing commuter trains or raising kids.

For me it was the boatyard. Even as a kid I'd always hung around boats and I'd've been happy to spend my whole life fooling around with boats—if it weren't for the girl.

I tried hard to forget her and took a job at Hecht's Marina. Then, in the first days of autumn, our boatyard was a circus of human activity. All around me, the successful people, clean people who didn't have to work on boats, skinned their knuckles on sandpaper and winced when flecks of old paint blew into their eyes. They didn't have to be there, working on their own boats, but to them, I guess, it was some sort of fetish. While I worked, I watched them as they scrubbed down decks and removed the cabin bedding and life preservers for winter storage. They were always running somewhere, always rushing to and from the yard, always returning with their station wagons and bratty kids.

She was one of those people and I knew she would be coming down the hill to see me before she left.

Around three-thirty I looked up and spotted her swaying down the hill. Like some sort of overgrown Tom Sawyer. I looked away quickly with the hope that she didn't see me there. As matter-of-factly as possible, I continued scraping the bottom of the big sedan cruiser drydocked in Hecht's and she kept swaying down the hill toward me.

She saw me. I knew she saw me. In that soft, wide-eyed swaying way of hers she noticed me under the boat and then quickly, almost innocently, threw her vision 'way beyond the yard out to the wave-sudsy bay where a few diehard boaters clung to their crafts.

But Labor Day had passed. The summer twitched and died during that frantic weekend, when sweethearts clung together, clasped hands and attempted a human bond capable of defying the calendar. The calendar won.

City people seeped back to the city. Weekend sailors called Hecht to have their boats drydocked for the winter. It was that time of year. A time when deck varnish, after a season of constant sunshine, blistered and flaked, while engines stammered on fouled, pitted plugs. Sails gave way at their stitching, tired of resisting the wind. The boats with their splintery booms and chipped props, their fraying line and dock-scarred hulls, in their dumb way realized the truth their owners wanted to overlook: the summer was over.

In mountain resorts, dude ranches, lakefront, family areas, and at slick-seashore, Martinied "in places," overdressed secretaries with unruly, fat-matted thighs and molting, pot-bellied junior executives meshed nicotined fingers and promised to keep in touch during the winter. The summer's end ritual, the Labor Day parting, had been celebrated by thousands of people in thousands of summer places, while owners of the resorts boarded up the windows for fear of early hurricanes.

I couldn't lose sleep about the end of the summer season. Other people, their problems, just didn't bother me. I had my own.

You see, she was coming down the hill to say goodbye. Over near the toolshed the sound of the power-belt sander biting into old, copper-bottom paint obscured her initial greeting, so that, almost vexed, she flexed her chin as if annoyed and called again, "Hello, having fun?"

Her smile unveiled a patch of whiteness that months from now I would see dancing in the glint of every paneled beer glass in every seaside dive I drank in.

I tried to act casual and finally managed a limp, "How are you?" all the while digging the putty knife deeper into the accumulated beard of matted moss and barnacle.

"Gee, that boat's some mess," she continued. "You must really like your work. You'll be at it all day."

I ignored the reference to my work and tried to kill time by talking about the boat.

"Yeah," I said, "the guy who owns it hardly uses it. It just sits and rots at its mooring all summer long and collects barnacles and other crud. Never goes anywhere. The guy doesn't know about boats, a real clod. Take a look at that rear canvas. Gulls did that."

"It's all shredded up," she agreed, while she added her bit to the small talk and shook her charm bracelet lightly. She was really grown-up. A big girl now.

"Yeah," I added, nodding toward the boat, "the guy never rode out to check up on it. Just let it sit and bob around. You should see the deck and gunnels—all screwed up. See those dents just above the splash rail? A few little stinkers even rammed the sides with their runabouts. Great sport. Old Hecht chased a few away with his power skiff, but they kept coming back. If I'd caught them I would have run them down."

We both went silent.

She looked down at me, then away toward the bay, then said, "I'm going away tomorrow." She said it as if telling me something I didn't know already.

"Oh yeah! Gee, I almost forgot. How's the packing coming?"

"You know Mom, the way she packs. Well really, you'd think I was packing for the North Pole or something. She just had to take me shopping—extra sweaters and all—she swears I'll need all that heavy stuff for the winter. And she has Daddy pretty sore, too. He really has a canary every time Mom hands him more luggage to pack. He keeps screaming that the car won't hold all that junk."

Daddy upset again? A pity, a genuine three-dimensional pity.

"You taking the highway up there? There's a lot of troopers on that road."

I almost started talking about the trip a few of the guys took right after graduation when the cop nailed us at eighty-four miles an hour. We stayed a few hours in the Headquarters Building 'till Eddy's old man came and paid the sergeant and after yelling for a while, told the whole bunch of us to get the hell home.

I wanted to talk of that trip and of the wild times she and I and the whole gang had in school, or at the beach, or just hanging around town. A few weeks ago we all lived on a swirling day-night, day-night, merry-go-round of drive-ins, cold beer, and rugged clean beaches where the only tragedy was an afternoon low tide. I remember how the first hot day in June—the day when everybody who cut school—got sunburned, and before each summer rain the sandflies bit. But it was in that last summer, just after graduation, that I found someone I didn't want to lose, yet I kept my mouth shut and never told her.

I knew that you can't keep a girl forever with beach parties, cold beer and a fast Chevy. When you're just kids, a sail board, a jug of wine on the dunes are a lot of laughs. But I knew she deserved better. She knew where she was going; she somehow found something to aim for and I wouldn't be a drag on her.

It was all so simple, so damn simple. A couple of stupid weeks separated us from the summer and kept me from telling her what I felt about her all along. I wanted to tell her now, but I knew better. The gang of seniors had graduated, laughed through a final summer and dissolved. Classes were over and for the first time, after twelve years of schooling, I was just beginning to learn.

I found work in Hecht's yard and she was going away to college where she belonged. I wouldn't try to hold her.

"I said goodbye to all the kids yesterday, but I had to see you before I left."

She continued, "Before I left . . . well . . . I sort of think I should return this. I don't think it's right for me to keep it anymore. I mean now that I'm going away to school and all."

Through blurred vision I saw her holding what looked like a sink washer. When my eyes cleared I saw what she held.

"No, keep it," I told her, "I want you to keep it."

"But it's your school ring. You worked hard for it."

I didn't want to answer. I wanted that boat to fall off its cradle and squash me, her too, just to keep me from making an answer. The puffiness and the twitching under my eyes began to increase again.

"You should take it back, really. In a while you'll give it to some other girl."

"No, I don't think so. Look, I wouldn't be able to wear that thing again. It would knock me off balance . . . make me walk lopsided."

We both forced a laugh at this joke, but I noticed that her laugh seemed stale, out of place here, among drydocked boats at summer's close. Three weeks, two weeks, two years ago when we first dated, the laugh always worked. At the beach, in school, her laugh meant summer, warmth, sunshine, a brand of vitamin D you can't buy in bottles. Now her laugh stirred memories that should have left with the Labor Day weekend but instead lingered and pestered: ill-mannered guests that didn't know when to leave.

The laugh finally tapered off and months later I would search stupidly for that laugh in every easy pick-up that hung around the local bars.

When the laugh ended, it was followed by a silence that couldn't be bridged by small talk. We stood there avoiding each other's eyes—not like in the movies. Hell, in the movies something happens, people make promises and smile and the audience leaves happy with a bellyful of buttered popcorn. But we just stood there while all around us the station wagon families worked on their boats, blared radios and set loose in the yard packs of romping pedigreed dogs and spiteful, vandalous kids.

I took the whole scene in. So did she. Looking around at the people, their boats, and some abandoned, ragged skiffs provided a good excuse to remain silent and not to face each other. Often on the beach we just watched alone in the drizzle, never tired of the infinite variety of ways the tide could rise and fall.

I tried a clumsy way to end this mutual torture session. I slid beneath the boat and nearer the keel. I played Tom Sawyer again, pretended that the rudder of a Matthews sedan cruiser could be more absorbing than the soft, wide-eyed girl beside me. She then spoke. In those certain heavy moments when I didn't want to speak, she would always say something to fill the void—nothing profound—but something to lend me a strength I didn't have at eighteen and still don't own. I lacked the power, maybe the guts, for speech and could only splatter ambitious heaps of matted moss and barnacle across the legs of the already dirty dungarees. And maybe the salt water and motor oil caused the damp dungarees to cling and feel natural, a part of me, a second skin. Maybe the filthy dungarees were the one part of my appearance that would look filthier and smell oilier when walking next to her fancy clothes and white gloves. Or whatever the hell girls wear at college.

"I'll write you from school and tell you what's doing. You still want to keep in touch, don't you? I mean, even though I'll be away."

"Sure. Sure, I'll write now and then, but I don't think I'll get much spare time. Old Hecht said he'd teach me the whole boat business if I stuck around a few years and worked hard."

"Don't you ever, ever in your life plan on going to that Naval Design School?"

"No," I answered, "I doubt it. This place suits me fine."

"But the future, think about the future. You just can't hang around the boatyard all your life."

"Hell, what if I want to? It beats wearing a shirt and tie all the time, and getting stuck with a mortgage over my head."

"You don't care about *us*, about August-" she asked, as her face quivered and then jelled into a hard mask.

"Kid stuff! That was just kid's talk. You shouldn't have taken it so seriously."

I knew her long enough to sense that she wanted to run away and cry to her Daddy. I'd turned the trick.

But she held her ground and continued. "Then you never cared for me, is that it? You were just having fun and bragging to your friends."

"No, not that. Hell, please don't think that. I was always wild about you, and I know you want me to better myself, but I'm not sure."

"About me?" she suggested.

"No, about anything."

She forced my hand and I'd give her the whole pretty story. I wanted to cushion her and keep the truth to myself, but now she was the big girl who listened while I spoke.

"I don't know about anything. Yeah, I know about things like water-ski lengths, dry rot damage, clam beds and that big Chevy over there. But when I look beyond that there's nothing. You know what I mean?"

"I know you're a child, a mere child," she snarled while the stupid sun smiled above us.

"Listen to me 'till I'm finished, please. Then you can leave. I look around and see people making money to raise kids and then die while the kids grow up, make money, and raise more kids. People are running around, I tell you. They're looking for responsibilities like some sort of treasure hunt. You understand? I won't be swallowed up. You're a sweet kid, but I won't get swallowed up for you."

"What *will* you do with your precious life? Hang around and rot like that boat behind you? Get a few dents and some crud and just bob around?"

"Yes, if that's the way you call it, then fine. Next summer, if you ever go slumming, stop off at the beach. You'll see me there, just riding in and out with the tide, with all the other driftwood. But don't ever start a collection—I'd look lousy hanging on a wall."

I stood there shouting these words at her and saw her wearing the old coarse school jacket, my jacket, which had a roughness to it that could only amplify and contrast the smoothness it sheltered. At that point I wanted to hold onto her forever and apply for that stupid Naval Design School: I had to apply.

"Look," I added, "I'll go up to school one of these days and find out about getting into that Naval Design place. You'd like that, wouldn't you? I could get in for the spring term. With my boat experience I'll whiz right through and really make it big. That would make you happy, wouldn't it?"

I'd done it. Made a big damn fool of myself and we both knew it.

"Would it make you happy to be a big success? she finally asked.

"I don't know, I really don't know."

It was over, all over. Her eyes got sloppy and I personally don't remember laughing. Her Daddy was right about me, I guess. So for her sake she was going away to school and I was staying here in town in Hecht's yard where I belonged. Her grasp on my arm was desperate, final. She mumbled something about seeing me during the Thanksgiving vacation, while I stood there dead still like the cruiser behind me, stood still even while she smeared a kiss, which, like her laugh, seemed out of season.

I knew better than to put a hand on her. The summer had passed, had died, and I knew even, then, that summer feelings were summer feelings and shouldn't be hauled out during the fall.

She spun, then ran, then trotted, and finally eased into her sway, halfway up the hill. Her sway was never forced, never practiced. It was just something natural, belonging to a girl that meant more to me than all the schooling, all the sermons, all the good times in the past eighteen years. But she just kept swaying up the hill and out of my life.

I turned to look at the boat while I wiped the sandpaper dust from my eyes. Both eyes by now, were puffed up. No use watching her anymore. She wouldn't turn around to wave or stop or to get overly gassy. She just kept swaying and wouldn't turn back.

The sandpaper dust kept blowing through the yard, staggered between the boats and then swirled around some clod trying to start an outboard engine out of water. Cabincruisers jammed the floats while their skippers argued about who was going to get hauled out next. The FM's continued to vent twenty-year-old clarinet solos: the kids and dogs blended into one annoying glob: the ever-screaming powerbelt sander kept digging into old paint. I told myself that her visit was just a break in a long afternoon, a chance to goof off. Then, picking up the putty knife, I slumped under the Matthews and continued my job.

By night fall the boat was scraped clean and as I finished scrubbing the salt-spray off the decks, catwalks, cabin tops and cockpit I knew that this boat must be refurbished and seaworthy by spring.

Another day of work done I started up the Chevy and headed up the same hill she had traveled on a few hours earlier. All the way up the hill, the idea of that naval design place became more important. I told myself I had to get those application forms the next time I passed by the old high school. Maybe in a few weeks, when the work tapered off I'd put on a necktie and ride up there and see the place for myself. It shouldn't be a rough school. With my interest in boats I could breeze right through, become a naval architect. She'd like that, I guess.

I could be a great success. Wouldn't even bother to give professional advice to old Hecht. The girl and I could move away then, maybe travel all over the world, designing ships and always having each other.

I had to make it now.

Yeah, sure.

A DAY OF TRAVELLING

Laurence Goldstein

I had been very lucky in hitchhiking that morning. Just after dawn a Fiat stopped me while I was still walking to the main road outside Salonica, gnawing on a hunk of bread with an appetite sharpened by days of steady diarrhea. It was my favorite time for walking, before the sun made itself a torture and the mind settled correspondingly into worn-out reveries and dreams. The slat-board houses off the road looked cool and privileged in the orange glow, and far-off the date trees moved in my rhythm as the wind blew them fitfully about. Those lonely mornings are what travellers live for—they all admit it—so I was even a little unhappy when a car stopped alongside and what was clearly an invitation came through the window.

Even for a Fiat in Greece the light-colored car was horribly disfigured by sand scars and changing weather. Long scratches ran along the lower half like a design, criss-crossed and rubbed out by other scratches. But when I bent down to pick up my pack I noticed the tires were good, and there were at least no signs of collision, no deep dents or new body parts.

So I accepted the ride, explaining to the driver with idiot hand signs and German expressions all Europe still remembered that I knew no Greek. He nodded indifferently and began driving, probably assuming I would signal to get out when he came to my destination. Since I was on my way to Istanbul I was willing to go as far as he would drive, a strategic mistake that demonstrated my inexperience at travelling even more than my age of seventeen years. After a while he began to talk, in Greek, very slowly and distinctly as if that would make me comprehend.

"Englander?" he asked after a futile series of questions.

"America," I said, and his eyes widened.

"Amerika," he repeated. He looked at me over again, particularly my pack, shaped like a laundry bag and stuffed with dirty underwear. I wondered if I were in any danger. With a friendly smile I pulled from the bag a copy of *The Odyssey* I was carrying and held it up to him. "Homer," I said. "Odysseus."

He glanced at the book and back to me. "Amerika." He turned to the wheel with a new caution.

Farther up the road he pointed to a partly finished house on the bank of a barely discernible river and then to himself to make some connection. I nodded and said "Ah" with dutiful interest. Encouraged, his conversation became faster, always with exaggerated hand motions, the longer he drove. I responded by intuition, trying sincerely to understand but always baffled. Gradually he fell silent and we watched the scenery pass with what seemed a real community of spirit. I pointed to tiny villages at the top of distant hills and he supplied their names. Whenever we passed any building of new construction or some sizable industry he smiled and spoke exultingly. The closer we got to Kavalla the more excited he became so that I guessed it to be his own destination. I was curious to see this harbor city myself, to swim once more in a body of water under the Mediterranean sun, and glut my now raving hunger with stacks of fresh fish and new curried rice.

But instead I dozed off just before we entered Kavalla and slept comfortably until the traffic of Alexandroupolis slowed the car down and woke me. My driver intimated he was going past Alexandroupolis although the name of his destination was lost in the midst of his explanation. I nodded agreeably at everything he said and finished the bread in my pack, along with some dried-out cheese rolled in a paper towel. We drove in and out of unsublime mountains, scrubby, white-chalk and apparently destitute of life. The sun was intense enough to be bothersome and I removed my light sweater, leaving only a white T-shirt on with my levis and sandals. The Turkish border was only a couple hours away and I hoped my chauffeur would take me to it. There was little enough till that point, and communication between the two of us was so slight for all I knew he might have been going to Instanbul like myself.

But a few dozen miles past Alexandoupolis we drove upon a construction project, and even before he turned off the road I made the connection and realized this was dead-end. It lay on the falling slope of a dried-out hill unprotected from the sun, now at high noon, and utterly remote from any touch of civilization. Unlike long desert stretches which tempt travellers by the grandeur of uniform barrenness, this region was pocked with weeds, bushes and trees I couldn't identify, as well as hills blanking out whatever waste or village may have lain beyond. My driver looked at none of this, but drove fiercely off the road into the midst of a group of workers sitting on large boulders. I heard the car scrape on piled rocks as we approached.

I was introduced around as "Amerikaner" by my driver, who was evidently describing me as a good friend of his, a tribute he probably thought he deserved for his generosity. As clearly as I could I begged for a ride to the Turkish border, reluctantly choking down decorum, and hoping that the honor of driving an Amerikaner was as profound as it seemed. My former chauffeur for some reason was through with me and began talking to what seemed to be the foreman at some distance from the workers themselves. Everybody talked a long while in front of me, their brown and burned arms slackly motioning to me for appeal, their eyes shyly turned away if I watched them. I thought of offering money, but had been sneered at so often in Europe for attempting bribery that I kept silent. They talked interminably, perhaps of me, perhaps not, until I sat down near-fainting on a convenient boulder—I hoped that might arouse their pity.

Finally two men got up and started walking toward a battered cargo truck facing up the hill. I knew this movement had something to do with me, but nothing was said, so I remained where I was. They got in the front, pulled the truck onto the road, and waited. I pointed to them and myself, and the others nodded. Joyfully I threw my pack over the sides and clambered over the boards into the back. The truck jerked forward, throwing me down upon sacks of dry cement. Why the cement was there I couldn't imagine since the ground levelling had scarcely begun, and there were certainly no facilities for building. Years ago somebody had put sacks of cement in that truck, I thought, and nobody had bothered to take them out since.

Within a few miles the loose white dust had covered my body, sticking adhesively to the perspiration. The bouncing rhythm of the truck cut holes in my stomach, sending waves of pain up into my chest. I breathed deeply through my mouth, over the side, to prevent inhaling the dust which the sun caked on my face and limbs like a heat mould. Absurd fantasies of death reeled through my mind: death by heat prostration, death by skin suffocation, or, not least, sudden attacks of diarrhea in which I mortally shit out my guts. Imagination was always a strong quality of mine.

In the midst of my dramatizations we came upon a plague of flies, as if we had crossed the border of some insect kingdom. They were smaller than the American house-fly but absolutely fearless. Thousands pounced upon me, charging into my eyes, up my nostrils, down my shirt. Keeping my mouth tightly shut I swatted them uselessly, screaming obscenely in my mind with fatigue and disgust. "I'm at the breaking point," I thought. "I deserve to go mad." Ten minutes later we passed the other border and the flies disappeared. I couldn't even see when I looked back. I wiped my face with an old towel, wringing the dead flies off and smoothing out the white sweat. I tried to think of Istanbul, recall its history, the notes on it in travel books. That city would make this hideous suffering worthwhile, would balance my overdue account. I tried to concentrate on belly dancers, but it was too hot, so instead I watched the infertile, parched fields pass by mile after mile, without life.

A short while later we entered a dreary village I later discovered was named Agonakion. Half in ruins, half petrified by years of powerful sunlight, the village was built almost completely parallel to the road, although there didn't seem to be any stores or restaurants to serve motorists. Boards and mud held up the yellowing houses, without windows, in one-story simplicity. No people were to be seen until we drove into what must have been the central square — granted that dignity by a kind of all-purpose market facing away from the road, plastered with signs for bottled water, wine and gasoline. A dozen or so men were sitting or leaning around the market, all dressed in some shade of white, all watching us intently as the truck pulled off the road and into their midst. None of them moved.

The driver motioned me out as he and his companion went inside for a drink. With motions more easily comprehensible because I expected them, he indicated that this was the end of the line for me. I would have to get another ride to the border—it was very close. The two of them shook hands with me and then drifted into the market. I wiped off cement as casually as I could, giving the villagers a big smile that was not returned. "Deutsch?" one of them called out. "Amerikaner" I answered. They may have been impressed, I didn't watch. They couldn't think much of me, flaky pale as the Angel of Death in clothes unfit for any traveller worthy of the name. I bought three bottles of water and drank them quickly, still under the eyes of everyone present. The whole scene began to seem sinister, with an aura of possible evil. I imagined them cutting my throat and sneaking home with my underwear after hurling my body beyond the village limits. My stomach was still throbbing, either with pain or hunger, I couldn't decide which. I bought some bread and began to eat ravenously, always with an eye on the road few cars used it; the ferry was an easier way from Athens to Istanbul, more scenic and less dangerous. Automobiles in the interior were rare, and those natives who had them were too prejudiced to enter Turkey anyway. I expected a long wait. I bought some durable pastries from the market, stuffed them in the bag and wandered along the road till out of sight. On the outskirts of town, where the few houses seemed uninhabitable I sat on a pile of stones and waited for a car. To pass the time I pulled out *The Odyssey* and desultorily scanned the adventures of Ulysses, his shipwreck, Nausicaa, Calypso and his conversations in Hell.

I lay in the sun for what seemed hours, lazily wiping the sweat off my face every few minutes with dirty undershirts. No cars had passed, only a motor driven cart to collect produce in some fields outside the village. To torture myself I thought of American comforts: clear tap water, air conditioners, and highways packed with new automobiles. I remembered how necessary it was to leave all that behind and turnabout my life. Digging a hole for no reason—I had done that when I was a boy from the hard despair of continual satisfaction. This was where it all led, a hot desert, stomach pains and raw skin. I moaned out loud to break the silence and forced my mind on Istanbul.

But the sun was too intense. I felt close to fainting time after time, and my scorched eyelids shocked me almost into insensibility whenever I touched them. There was absolutely no shade on the road, but I had been noticing a small wooden shack a little off the street opposite to where I lay. The sun had declined just enough to cast a slight shadow over the house facing the road. With a zealous bound that surprised me I leaped across the road and fell back against the front of the shack out of the sun. I knew if I sat down I'd be asleep in an instant, and the thought of missing a ride in that creepy village filled me with religious terror. I leaned into the thin greyness, imagining a sharp drop in temperature, while the uniformly white house hunched over me like some bizarre gravestone. The comfort seemed exquisite and even in my several agonies I remember smiling with a desperate kind of pleasure.

As I stood there gasping for cooler air, wooden shutters next to my head were pulled back softly. Not having the energy to step forward I continued to lean, watching the road, and waiting for whatever would come. I had accepted fatality so far that a rifle coming out the window would only have reassured me.Instead a young girl, my age perhaps or younger, put her head out and gazed at me, a foot or two away. Her face was cruelly marked by some disease, welted by thick red blotches and clots of pus. Her eyes were hazy brown, focussing and unfocussing in a stare while her straight stringy hair clung to her damp face. Impolite, I ignored her as if she had no right to intrude into my place of refuge. I looked back at the road without a word or a glance in her direction. The difficulties of communication, I excused myself, would just embarrass us both. Nothing happened for a while— I supposed she watched me all that time, how I wiped my face self-consciously, how I brushed my pants, sighing with pain whenever I stooped over. Finally her head disappeared back into the shack. I trembled with sick relief.

A moment later she appeared in the window again and thrust in my face a pot full of some white creamy substance I took for cereal. It looked inedible and I cringed from it with apparent distaste. Smiling at her, I shook my head and made signs and frowns to indicate stomach trouble. She looked stunned, then sad, then sympathetic and finally invited me by gestures into the house. The prospect of shade and a chair promised more than the empty road, so I lugged my bag and myself into the small dwelling, making elaborate signs of gratitude as I did so. There was only a general room, no visible toilet and very few furnishings. A large bowl of fruit sat on a splintery wood table in the center and this was quickly offered me. I chose a melon slice and the girl ran off to wash it and put it on a plate. Her ashcloth dress draped her body like a lampshade, revealing excessively thin calves and cadaverous arms bristling with hair. I sat on the only chair, a shaky, badly-planed one near the bed, and gingerly bit into the melon, worried about my stomach and the fruit's cleanliness. The girl stepped out for a moment and returned with an old woman to chaperone us. This woman approached me immediately and flung several Greek expressions at me which I answered with a shrug. The girl explained my ignorance.

"Espana?" the woman asked, noting my heavy tan and moustache.

"Amerikaner," I answered wearily, and watched their excitement with dull pleasure.

The girl humbly offered me more fruit and I took a large apple. She ran to wash it with her head turned back toward me. I still felt miserable inside and considered seriously for the first time the horrid possibility of staying in Agonakion that night. It would at least be more comfortable and safer than the road. I could enter Turkey under better conditions and I was pleased at the ethnic situation under which I would pass the evening. Even if communication were impossible it would be a cultural experience to remember. I decided to stay unless I were noticeably encouraged to leave.

The girl sat on a mat at my feet and ate the white stuff greedily while I munched the fruit. The old woman, having confirmed my ignorance of Greek, moved to the other side of the room, her back to us, and began to knit. I dived into my bag and brought up a dozen or so photos of my trip through Europe that Spring. I had considered photo-taking too juvenile for a serious traveller and sold my camera in Rome after having one roll developed. The girl was thrilled with the pictures, banal shots of myself posing with the gargoyles, in the Colosseum, on the banks of the Rhine. I called out place names as she studied each photo with a kind of awe. I could see her teeth were hopelessly decayed, ground down and yellow almost every one. Did they have a dentist around here, I wondered, or did the allpurpose doctor just blunder about teeth as well? I looked again at the girl's face, ravaged by some infection a penicillin shot would probably have fixed in an instant. Medicine was the best of American progress; in a sense it kept a person healthy so that he could seek elsewhere the pleasures that progress made impossible. I was lulled then by a sense of privilege, feeling myself lucky to be the product of two worlds, free to pursue the benefits of both.

The girl gestured me into a dirt alcove behind the shanty where a pail of water sat waiting. Embarrassed, I waited for her to leave before taking off my shirt. She remained, watching, with a kind of defiance. I took off the shirt and began horse-bathing, involuntarily moaning with pleasure as the cold water burned into my skin. The girl simply refused to leave, so I left the bottom half alone, signalling my gratitude to her as best I could. She half-bowed, starting uncertainly at me and running her hand over her face, trying to conceal it, I thought, but only calling attention to its scars. I imagined her hearing the Greek myths as a child, before whatever infection it was had overtaken her, sitting under the table while some old woman, like the one in the other room, spun out fables of innocence and beauty. How would she have understood the Mediterranean legends of her own people, living here in Agonakion where no water defiled the sun. I watched her look at me, each of us damnably silent, and I fancied she was rehearsing what she had once heard about young beauty, about America, about the world of photographs and rumor.

So the afternoon faded away; I listened at first for a motor on the road, napped for an hour, listened some more, and then gave it up. Around dusk the old lady brought in a bowl of rice with bits of beef mixed in, and I made a mental note to leave some money concealed where they would eventually find it. It seemed to be assumed I would stay that night and the old lady, after laying some new sheets on the bed, disappeared from the shack. I don't know if she lived there or not. Would the girl have lived there alone then? I never understood any of it.

My memories of the evening are just a single pictorial scene: myself in a chair reading *The Odyssey* by candlelight, the girl on a mat at the other side of the room, knitting. Every time I lifted my eyes I found her staring at me, unblushing, invariably pointing to the fruit bowl when she caught my eye. My stomach ache had indeed dwindled to a raging hunger and I ate their food shamelessly, like a common tramp. I felt awful about it, and imagined Arcadian groves of fruit trees near Agonakion to solace my gluttonous guilt. The girl encouraged my eating, however, acting pleased whenever I chose another item. I was entertainment that night; without a radio or TV, phonograph or books she deserved any delight she could get. By insane gestures and antics I relieved my own boredom and created euphoric happiness in her. She looked through my photos a hundred times, repeating their locale each time to my applause. She smiled with strong looks of gratitude when I spoke—it was eerie, precivilized. I held the experience close to me and brooded over its mystery while the candles burned down and faint sounds of male conversation drifted in from the street.

Finally I became too tired to read, too bored to do anything but sleep. I signalled my intention to the girl who quickly arranged the unusually luxurious sheets. After she left the room I undressed, washed again and crawled into bed in my underpants. The shutters were open and warm breezes slipped in and out, leaving the room fragrant with an agricultural scent. I thought again of Istanbul, imagining Oriental minarets, mosques and sprawling outdoor bazaars. Timidly, I thought of belly dancers and veiled maidens with shiny eyes stepping gracefully from marble palaces.

I lay there for twenty minutes perhaps, dreaming myself into a fatigued sleep when I heard the back door open again. The girl glided into the room very suddenly, stopping at the table by my bed. She was dressed in a white, wooly-looking nightgown, like an all purpose sheath. I turned my head and said "Hello" but she didn't answer, merely stood there in the darkness, shining in reflected moonlight. A premonition passed over me, one I wouldn't accept and kept distant by rational attempts to guess her reason for being there. I heard her breathing and I heard the wind answer her at the window, as if by conspiracy. That was all I could hear, and suddenly I felt afraid—of her, of this village, of anything that might happen to me. I turned my face back toward the wall, queasy, angry at my opportunities, and hoped the girl would go away. Instead she stepped toward the bed, unaware of my feelings, imagining me delighted, grateful perhaps—and more besides. I know what she thought then. I recognized my own ambitions.

She lifted the sheet and started to lie down. I restrained her, pushing her back gently, muttering "no no" apologetically. In the faint light her face was lovely, unscarred, with a kind of classic beauty. She looked pleadingly, and whispered words in a soft, lustless voice. She kissed my hand against her shoulder and caressed my arm, whispering again and pointing toward the neighboring house. She sat on the edge of the bed, sliding my hand down to her breast as she did so. I began to tremble, but with a feeling exactly opposite to desire, with a fear that would have made me useless even had I wanted her. I could have argued skillfully, I knew so exactly what to say—and that she would have sympathized and understood. But in that foreign place I could only repeat a monosyllable, maddeningly, without excuse. She began to cry a little. "A trick," I thought but didn't believe it for an instant. She buried her head in my chest, weeping—for what? For the virginity she thought I would manfully carry off, or for the pathos of the moment, our need to re-enact for ourselves the old stories? I don't know. I've never understood.

Finally in desperation I pushed her away forcibly, saying "No" in a loud final voice, hoping to scare her by the volume. She hovered over the bed, drawn back and forth over me like a snake by her contradictory desires. She stared with disbelief. I looked away. She ran out with a loud sob I felt as a reproach. The air was fragrant now with perfume, sweet it seemed, more tantalizing than any I ever knew. I wondered where she got it, where it came from—whether some travelling peddler or perhaps that market "downtown." Where would she get perfume? I considered it with genuine seriousness. But that couldn't last—I began to think about what I would do. Meeting her the next day was out of the question—I couldn't do her that injury as well. I drew on my pants, socks and shoes. The silence was enormous and I scuffled around just to make noise, trying to distract the misery I felt as a disease running in my chest, up and down my legs. Why had she wanted me so much? Why couldn't she treat me like a stranger? I was all dressed and ready to go. I turned down the sheets and smoothed them over, looking behind me all the while in fear she would sneak up on me. I opened my money belt and dumped all the Greek currency I had on the table. I would walk to Turkey that night where American money was safer than Greek, and if I needed Greek money before the border it would serve me right for not having it. I picked up the bag and opened the door. I wanted so much to find the girl and explain everything to her, or leave a note perhaps—I could have justified myself so well.

On impulse I took the photos out of the bag and left one behind on the table, myself with the gargoyles; she had liked that one particularly. Whatever use she put it to was all right with me. Perhaps she would tear it up—that was just fine. The air outside was warm and fragrant. With only an undershirt I began to follow the road out of Agonakion, but then I reflected that a white shirt would make me visible from a distance. Robbers might see me, or some kind of animal—even a horse would be dangerous on the open road. I put on a dark cotton shirt. The fatigue was gone; I still moved in an energy of terror, down the road toward a silent mountain I knew was Turkey. A hundred times that night as I walked I reconstructed the scene in my imagination, wondering if I had done right I kept asking myself questions and reaching the same conclusions until morning when I reached the Turkish border.

I found another American there, delayed overnight by a passport mixup. He gave me a ride in his Renault to Edirne, where we had a rich breakfast and talked of Istanbul.

The Annual Twenty-Fifth Coraddi Writers' Forum

Critic's Panel

Cone Ballroom April 3, 1968

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Literary

SUE BAUGH is a graduate student here from Crystal Lake, Illinois.

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