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Dust of Snow

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saves some part
Of a day I had rued.

ROBERT FROST

COVER BY LYNDA LANE

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MOUNTAIN CATS
Charcoal
Nancy Estes

Little Bud dropped a crumb in the path of the zigzagging ant who bumped into the crumb, backed away, and went around it. The black spot climbed over the white grains of sand and fell back in line. The line moved under leaves, over rocks, and disappeared into the hole. The file went in and out bumping noses and bumping the bread crumb.

"You keep watching close, Nettie, they get it and take it in that hole yonder."

Nettie put her fingers in front of the ants and felt them tickle her skin as they climbed over.

"Now you watch Nettie, or you gonna miss it. It's ten times bigger than him but he can pick it up. Papa says if we was as strong as him we could pick up a train engine."

Nettie looked up in amazement and said, "You mean a real one?"

"Sure I mean a real one. Now you look, Nettie," he said impatiently, "See him pick up that crumb," Little Bud bent his head over to watch the ant who drug the crumb to the ant hill, crawled in, and pulled the bread in behind him. Then Little Bud saw a bare foot with a big toe that went up and down flipping sand into the ant hill.

"Now you watch how quick them old fellers get that dirt outa their house," as Jimson laughed and watched the ants carry out the dirt. Little Bud looked up at Jimson, the taller of the two, who shoved his dirty hair back from his eyes as he watched the ants. His jeans hung louped in an occasional belt notch and exposed his skin below the belt.

"Didn't even hear you come up, Jimson."

"Guess you didn't with your nose in that old ant hill. I yelled for you to come over to the house. Didn't you hear me?"

"Nope, guess I didn't."

"I wanted you to come over and see the chickens Pa kilt. Have you ever seen one running 'round out his head?"

Little Bud shook his head, "No, that don't sound too good to see to me."

"Heck, you don't know till you seen it," he said as he stooped beside Little Bud. "You stretch them old fat hens' necks cross the chopping block, then hack!" and his fist went down against his knee, "and the head plops off."

Nettie closed her eyes and pressed her fists in them as Little Bud watched Jimson gesturing with his hands as he talked.

"Then you set that old headless chicken on the ground and jump back cause when it starts running, guts gets thrown everywhere."

Little Bud shivered and looked back at the ants who still moved back and forth into the hole.

Jimson shoved his arm and said as he looked up, "You know what guts I mean, them what come outa his neck and are all bloody and red . . ."

Nettie screamed and ducked her face into her skirt which dipped between her knees.

Little Bud looked at the little girl with her hands pressed against her ears and back at Jimson, "Betta not talk about it no more, Jimson, Nettie don't like to hear it."

"Yeah, I'll tell you later when no sissy girl ain't around."

Nettie scrambled to her feet and ran towards the porch. She stood on the bottom step and looked at the boys before she turned and ran into the house.

"Come on, Buddy," Jimson said, "We ain't got time to mess with her. I gotta show you something." As he jumped up and started in the direction of his house, Little Bud stood up slowly and began to follow him.

Little Bud said, "What you got, Jimson, some-

thing I ain't seen before."

"Yeah," and he turned away from Little Bud and looked at the cows rolling in the pond. "That old cow of yours must have lice or something."

"Aw, come on Jimson, what is it?"

"Well, you remember that old bitch cat that hangs around the barn catching mice, the old gray one?"

"Yeah, I seen her before."

"Well, she's done found some old tom and had her kittens in the mule stall."

"No kidding! Boy, I can't wait to see them," Little Bud said as he hurried up beside Jimson. "How many are there?"

"Oh, there's a bunch of them but it's hard to tell which ones ain't dead."

"Dead, what kilt them?"

"You know, old pregnant cat'll go through the fence every time with a stomach full of kittens and kill about half of them before they's born cause she ain't got the sense to know she's bigger than before."

"Oh, I forgot about that," he nodded and said as he put his hands in his back pocket. "They died like flies, huh?"

"Yeah, died like flies and she eat up about half of them." He looked towards Little Bud to see his reaction but he was walking out into the cornfield.

"Crows really got into your Pa's second seeding," he said as he lifted up the tiny shriveled plants. "They got the grain off the end of them all," he said letting the green plant fall between his fingers. "Shoulda soaked the seeds in that black stuff like Papa did."

Jimson stood with his hands on his hips and said irritably, "You can't do nothing but reseed Pa says, that stuff ain't no good after they done pulled it up. Sides they get up before anything, before the sun's up even, don't even see them get it."

"Well if they eat one or two with that black stuff on them they get sick and don't want . . ."

"Would you hurry up, reason I come got you is you gotta see them quick before Pa gets time to rid of them live ones."

"Is he gonna give them away?" Little Bud said as he walked back to the road.

Jimson looked at Little Bud and began a long forced laugh. "Give them away, you think my Pa's got time to waste giving away a bunch of cats." Little Bud didn't answer and followed Jimson through the apple trees into his yard. "Come on, they're in the back of the stable."

Little Bud followed Jimson as they stepped over the sill into the manure filled stable. He squinted as Jimson pointed to the clear straw in the corner, "See yonder they is."

Little Bud walked over and bent to his knees beside them as the mother cat leaped to her feet and stood stiff-legged in the gray mass, hissing at him. As she moved, some of the wet kittens began to squirm and some lay still.

Little Bud said, "They ain't even got their eyes open yet."

"Course not, they was just born. Pa'll get them before they do anyhow."

"We better get them dead ones out of there, huh? Ain't good for the others to be around dead ones."

"They all gonna be dead before sundown; every one of them Pa said."

"Why they gonna be dead? Ain't she got no milk?"

Jimson began to laugh again as Little Bud watched uncomfortably. Then Jimson picked up one of the dead kittens and slammed its head against the stall.

"That's what Pa's gonna do to every one of them," he yelled as he threw the crushed kitten into the manure.

Little Bud looked at the tiny kitten in the manure and leaned back against the railing as Jimson laughed. "Why does he have to kill them?" Little Bud said, "they ain't no bigger than a mole."

"They ain't now but before long they'll be big old howling tom cats and we ain't got no need for them fighting and yelling all the time."

Jimson had stopped laughing and now he stared at Little Bud. "I'll call you when Pa finds time to do it. I gotta go feed up now," he said hurriedly.

"Can I have them, Jimson? I'll take all of them."

"Yeah, you'll take all of them all right and Ma Pendry will send you back with them like them mutt puppies you took and they looked just like her old dog. I'll call you, huh, when Pa gets ready to get them, O. K.?"

"Sure. O.K.," and Little Bud followed Jimson out of the stall, turning away from him outside and heading back to the road.

* * *

Little Bud sat on the end of the pier rolling down the cuffs of his pants and watching the dirt slide over his feet and dissolve in the water. His toes broke through the top of the water, making huge white mounds to the fish below that dived and raced at them. He jerked his feet out of the water and scratched his toes on the edge of the pier.

Late day illuminated all the green around the pond that began to crawl with night life and glow with night flies. In the center stake of the pond a tiny silent bird lit, and moved only its head as it watched the bugs buzz out across the water. Then with a cry, it lifted its black wings and rose into the air. As it swooped by Little Bud, blood red glowed beneath its black feathers. Its flight stopped an instant in the air then it dived silently downward to the top of the water, up again, and back to the center post.

Little Bud's skin began to sting in spots as the cool night air stirred up the mosquitoes. Dragon flies batted against his face until he buried it in his hands. As he pressed the palms of his hands into his eyes, he could hear only the night sounds of the frogs and bugs as they cried to each other across the water. Then the water sounds grew louder as they mixed with a human voice.

His name screamed across the water and fell softly back at him from the other side of the water. He looked to the top of the hill and saw Jimson behind the thin stalks of the day lilies. He ran through the grass to meet him and stopped beside the flower stalks. The day lilies were twisted shut and felt sticky to his hands as he peeled them open without looking downward.

"He's ready, huh?"

Jimson smiled and shifted his weight to one foot. "Yeah, he's been ready. Why didn't you answer me before."

"First time I heard you."

"Well, come on, Pa ain't got all night. Says he don't see no sense in your coming anyway, that it ain't nothing pretty to watch." as he turned toward his house with Little Bud following him.

The boys ran into the yard and crawled through the pasture fence. They slowed down as they saw Jimson's Pa beneath the shade tree where the cows had laid during the day.

"We're here, Pa, you can go ahead." Cravon turned without speaking and stared into Little Bud's face. He shook his head and reached into a cardboard box beside him. As he lifted the blind kitten, it raked his hand with its tiny claws.

"Little feller's scratching his heart out and I can't even feel it."

He stepped towards the tree and gripped the kitten by its hind-quarters. Then he swung the kitten's head into the side of the tree. The little feet pointed downward and the body fell limp in the center.

As he looked up he saw Little Bud's eyes shining in the dull light when the kitten slid from his hand. Then he turned suddenly into the face of Jimson who laughed aloud and handed him another kitten.

"You think I enjoy this, boy, smashing something what can't fight back." He grabbed Jimson's collar and pulled him towards him. "You kill one, boy; see what a big man you feel like then."

Jimson grasped the squirming kitten and flung it against the tree trunk. It rolled down the trunk and lay on its back with its legs moving slowly. His father quickly grabbed the limp body and smashed its head against the tree.

"Just busted him up, made him hurt longer," he said looking at the little body. He lay it beside the other and stooped to pick up his shovel. As he heard Jimson run up the pasture, he handed the box to Little Bud.

"Dump them in the stall on your way back."

Little Bud watched him lift two shovels of dirt then turned to follow Jimson.

Cravon picked up the little bodies and laid them in the bottom of the hole. He sifted the dirt over them until they were hidden from his eyes, then he lifted the clay-streaked clumps of dirt and grass and shook them from the shovel. He stomped the ground flat with his foot and rolled a rock over the grave to keep the dogs from scratching it open.

Jimson stopped beside the barn and looked at Little Bud who was close behind him. The mother cat walked in and out of the stall, looked at the boys, and screamed impatiently and slowly turned to go back in the stall. Little Bud watched her go off to the corner and circle around the dent in the straw. Then she placed her paw on the dead kittens, rolled them over and over, then lifted it away quickly. As Little Bud started walking backwards, the light he was blocking slid in and ignited her eyes into two orange balls. She screamed again at him, as he laid the box on its side in the stall.

"Come on Little Bud, let's get up to the house before Pa gets back. He's madder than heck."

They walked towards the house and turned to see Cravon walk into the barn with the shovel. The beagles howled and crawled up their wire as they walked towards the back stoop. Cravon's wife stood inside the screen with her wet hands going up and down on the side of her apron.

"Ma, can I eat kinda quick, Pa's fretted at me."

"What you done Jimson?"

"Tried to kill one of them kittens but I didn't hit hard enough and Pa got mad."

"Come on and wash up. Little Bud, your grandma's been calling you. You better get on home."

"Yessum."

Jimson slid behind his mother through the screen door. As it banged Little Bud jumped and started running towards the road.

As Jimson's mother turned and went in, her voice muffled behind the door. "Jimson, that boy ain't got the heart to see something like that. What did you take him down there for?"

"He wanted to go, told me to call him." Little Bud stopped as he heard Jimson's voice then started down the road towards home. He rubbed the sand that still hung in the night air from his eyes. The dust was hot and sifted into the air making it smell dry and hot. He heard Ma Pendry beating on the wash tub on the porch and shivered when he heard her mixing spoon grate across the rusty bottom. Then she stopped and there was no sound in the air but the slowly raising and falling scream of the night bugs. Little Bud stopped suddenly as a dusty frog plopped in the dust before him. It stood still a second then hopped away into the grass on the other side. But Little Bud didn't move and looked towards the grass where it had silently disappeared. The July flies screamed louder as the silent frog hopped through them and they buzzed and hissed through the air. Suddenly Little

(Continued on page 17)

Snow Prison

In the places of wide snow wind,
Earth and sky curl an infinite blue nail.
The holly rustles autumn-awkward
Over an iceburned broken trail.
An old bird in the tree, young snowbirds on the crust —
How many times will their voices rust
And scratch the pane of winter?
The window of winter is a tight tear-freeze
That numbs over.
You look through this window or winter —
Empty still, no tarts to steal.
The round breath of children peels
Across the pane in flakes.

Deer dints in the morning, and bird feet,
And strange prints always small and skippy
Through the snow.
What if there was a big moon last night
That made you hear brooms and tinkle-ice
In the pine webs?
Oh, brush it up this morning,
In the ice litter, with the shivery bird chatter,
And throw it out the door.

HEATHER ROSS MILLER

Retribution

On topazed wing,
Toward the alien hills beyond my door
My love alone goes.
Each morn, the wing-whirr,
The scattered feathers
Like autumn leaves
Crazy-quilt my yard.
Each morn, gathering reproachful feathers
Into a bronzed heap,
Forgetting the speck in the topaz sky,
Envyng the alien hills
Beyond my door.
All day,
To sit in thatched chair,
Wings made weak with wind-gray yarn,
To shudder at the ravens' shadowed flight
From the sere field beside my yard.

My love returns,
Bringing me purple thistles,
Braiding them in my hair—
Sweet straw,
To spread upon my floor—
Logs for my hearth.
Puzzled, are his eyes
When stretched before firelight
I asked for blue periwinkle,
Poppies,
Jade grass—
Laughing,
He wraps me tighter in the gray yarn
Of all my days.

My love lies dead.
His hands,
Filled with periwinkle petals;
His eyes,
Jade-green grass-tufts.
On his wings
I fly toward the alien hills,
Beyond the ravens' flight,
The thistles,
The hearth . . .

JOE BROWN MCKINNEY

Ikiru

He was seen there many nights
in the childless shadows
of the playground.
Through the metal mazes
he glided slowly
as slowly as the snow
that fell from the moon.
And one night there
seated, drifting, on the swing
his song stood the shadows still
it fell from his aged voice
as softly as the snow fell
from his hands

The refrain was lost in the silence
but years after the old man
was seen no more
other aged children
returned in the night
to the playground
where there
in white falling shadows
they learn his song.

MARTHA ALICE MILES

Ballad of the Sea

He was but a sailor lad
And she, a maiden fair.
They'd met where the ocean waves roll in
And the sea salt scents the air.

Said he, "I've found my love at last,
In a dream you came to me,
For, your hair is the color of the sands:
Your eyes, blue like the sea".

Said she, "I've found my love at last,
In a dream you came to me,
For, you wear the clothes of a sailor
And you came from o're the sea".

A bad storm raged and days went by
Then news of his wrecked ship came,
She ran down to the deserted beach
And called and cried his name.

She walked along the lonely shore
And looked out to the sea,
Sea-salt tears spilled from her eyes
As she fell upon her knee.

Then with a knife, she took her life—
To sleep for evermore.
Her dying lips murmured the name
Of the one she did adore.

No sooner had she breathed her last,
Than did the sea hold view
The sight of a storm-wrecked, weary ship
And its tired, worn-out crew.

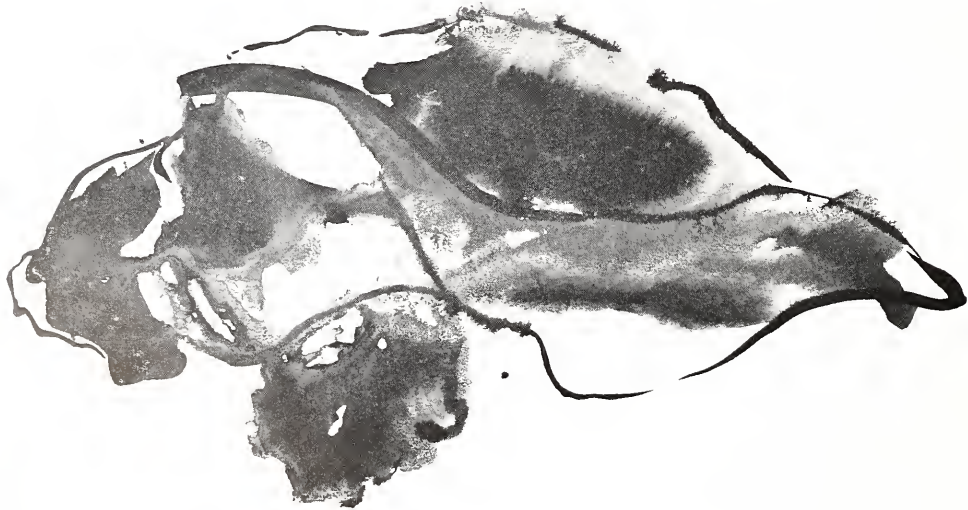
And as the old ship neared the shore,
The sailor lad's heart froze
As he saw his love upon the beach
With blood stained on her clothes.

With a heavy heart, he fell to her side
And took from her, the knife;
He kissed the tears still on her face
And her lips which held no life.

He plunged the knife into his heart
And, at her side he lay,
The sea moved in with open arms
And took them both away.

And, still the ocean waves roll in,
The sea salt scents the air,
The beach where once the lovers walked,
Is now alone and bare.

PAMELA L. PORTER



The whole community said it, and maybe it was true. After what Jennifer did to our fountain, I wouldn't be a bit surprised. She didn't look like a witch, though. Not like you'd usually picture them. You know: long, scraggly hair, warts, a scrunchy way of walking, and ugly as a scorpion. I say this mainly because I hate scorpions; not because they represent the general conception of witchhood.

Jennifer lived down the block from me on Briar Street, but I never saw her very much except at the fountain, a large round one, made out of gray-blue stone, with a small statue forever gargling, in the center. Actually it was a great fountain, with a main jet of water in the middle, coming out of the statue's mouth, and smaller ones around it. This was the only thing in the entire town of Polkville that Jennifer considered worthwhile. Well, almost. She did like one thing even better, but I want to tell you about the Fountain first.

On sunny days, rainy days—no matter what it was doing outside, you could bet even money that she'd be at that fountain. She was nuts about it. She would have to be, the way she'd sit at it for hours on end, her feet in the water, every single day. People used to stare at her, but she ignored them until they finally got disgusted and gave up. After awhile, they even forgot she was there. All but me: I hated for her to ignore me. One day I got so mad that I splashed right on in, shoes and all, and confronted her, eye to eye. Never again.

Looking at her closely, I saw that she was actually sort of pretty. She had straight brown hair, streaked with white, giving her a rather startling appearance, seeing as she was only thirteen years old. Although her face was on the meager side, you didn't notice that when you saw her eyes. They were the best part. Sometimes blue, sometimes black, depending on what she was thinking about at the time.

Anyway, when I looked at her in the eye that time, I saw that her eyes were hollow. Not just around them in a hungry sort of way, but inside. I'd never noticed that before. I guess looking in her eyes is like looking outside through a screen, making your eyes focus first on the close-up little wire squares, and then loosening them up to look beyond at the outside distances. When I had gotten my eyes adjusted to look far inside, I saw my own face looking out, reflected again and again. I know it must sound ridiculous, but I could hardly bring myself to look at her after that.

It wasn't very simple, though, as I soon found out. There was, as I have already mentioned, one other thing that Jennifer approved of in our town. And that, of all things, was my little brother, Jimmy. She started coming over to the house almost every day after we found out that he had cancer of the blood, or something like that. I liked Jimmy okay, but I never had a chance to get to know him very well. He was about 8 or 9 years younger than I was, in the first place, and after he got really sick, we almost never saw each other because he stayed in bed all the time, and I liked to be outside with the others. Besides, I made it a firm point to be elsewhere when Jennifer came visiting. She really did scare me, but she didn't scare Jimmy. Not a bit. He was as crazy about her as she was about him. Of course, it wasn't any love affair, or anything like that, because he was only 7 when he finally died. And he was in bed for the last year and a half he lived.

Can you imagine hearing the same corny story over and over—and enjoying it, what's worse—for

over a year? Jimmy did. I heard most of it as I was going in and out—mostly out—of the house while Jennifer was telling it to him. She'd sit on the edge of her chair beside his bed, with a real earnest look, and would ask him what he wanted to hear this time. It was always the same one.

Mostly it was about a sick boy who, strangely enough, was about Jimmy's age. I think this was the main reason Jimmy liked it so much. He was pretty conceited, for a small kid. She'd go into this long rigamarole about how weak the boy in the story was, and how lonesome it was to lie in bed, day after day. Oh, the way Jennifer described it, he was about as bored as any kid could possibly get.

She'd go on to say that in the town where this boy lived, there was a fountain. Not just an ordinary



FACE
Brush and Ink
Nancy Estes

one like ours in Polkville, but a very special one.

"In what sorta way?" Jimmy usually asked.

Then Jennifer would tell him that this particular fountain sprayed out jets of water that were every color in the whole world. And some not yet known about by modern-day man, she'd add. It was in the center of town, and all the brick walkways led right to it. Every day at 4:15 in the afternoon when all the town kids got out of school, they would gather around the fountain.

"You see," Jennifer explained, "if a little boy or girl would reach into the fountain at exactly 4:30 p.m., close both eyes, and hold his breath, most likely as not, he'd come out with a huge lollypop." This was the part that really got me. Lollypops.

But Jimmy was quite satisfied with it, and would always make her continue whenever she'd stop. She went on to say that the sick kid heard about the fountain, and made up his mind to try his luck. So one day, after his mother had left the house to go visiting some relatives, he struggled out of bed, and slowly crept down to the fountain. Unfortunately, he didn't make it by 4:30, so he had to go right back home. The next couple of times he got to leave home earlier, but he was crowded out by the dozens of kids who were stronger than he was.

This part of the story was embellished on pretty much, depending on how much time Jennifer could spend at our house. Sometimes she'd drag it out way past suppertime, and I'd nearly starve to death before she'd finally leave. One time I got so hungry that I came inside to make myself a sandwich, and that was when I heard the end part.

Jimmy was asking her, "Well, what happened then? Didn't the little kid ever get one?"

And I heard Jennifer answer, "Jimmy, of course you'll find this hard to believe, but listen. One day he tried when it was raining like mad. There weren't very many others there that day—only about five or six, in fact. Painfully, he made his way up to the side of the fountain as the others were taking their places around the side. This time he got a place, rolled up his sleeve, and nervously watched the town clock to see the exact second when it was 4:30.

"He was so excited about having a place and being on time, both, that he forgot how rainy and miserable it was, and that he was feeling very bad indeed. No sir. This was his day. His day to come home with a lollypop.

"The all-important moment came. He stuck his hand into the fountain, where the jets were blue and silver, and guess what, Jimmy?" This was where she always stopped, and Jimmy would prompt her, saying, "You know I don't know, Jennifer. Go on!"

And she'd grin and continue: "When he pulled out his hand, there was a lovely blue lollypop with silver streaks in it. He was so excited that he immediately stuck it in his pajama pocket and walked home as fast as he could. He climbed into bed, and hid his triumph under his pillow. He tried to act as usual when his mother came home, but she noticed that he was all hot and red in the face. She told him that he must really feel terrible, but he didn't think so, because he was too happy. He was about to pop to taste his lollypop, but he waited cautiously till his family had gone to bed.

Even then he was afraid to take it out. He waited a few more hours, until he finally took it out and held it in his hands, turning it over and around, looking at every inch of it.

"It was a funny-looking one, to say the least. Secretly he would have preferred a red one, but he wouldn't have admitted it, not for the world. After he had looked at it for awhile, he slowly raised it to his drooley mouth, stuck it all in, and closed his teeth on it. And bit. Nothing happened. He didn't even taste anything. He bit again, harder this time, but still he couldn't bite it. He tried licking it, but that was no good, because it tasted like anything but a lollypop. He was so disappointed that he threw it down on his bedside table and turned over to cry in his pillow, trying not to make much noise.

"He cried for the longest time. Till his eyes were rough, and too big to fit inside his eyelids. He felt very bad, and was beginning to think that maybe his his mother had been right. His face was so hot that the tears felt cold as they dripped out of his eyes. His head felt like it must weigh at least fifty pounds, and it took so much strength to even lift it. He lay still for a long time, because he was getting scared. After awhile, he turned over on his side and glanced at his lollypop, lying on the bedside table. And then his eyes got real big!" She stopped for breath and inspiration. Jimmy fidgeted until he decided that she wouldn't start again unless he said something.

"Okay, Jennifer. Go on. What'd he see? C'mon, please finish."

She drew a big breath and went on. "The lollypop had melted into the tabletop! Only, the tabletop must have melted too, because it wasn't there either. He put out his hand to touch where it had been and felt a cool flat surface which immediately made him think of a beautiful mountain scene he'd noticed on a postcard that morning. Then he nearly choked, because exactly what he'd seen in his mind was reflected on that space where the top had been. This made him stop and think, believe you me, Jimmy. Then he tried thinking of various other things he especially liked to think about, and they were all shown there too. He propped his elbows on the space and concentrated on his most favorite scene. He was so fascinated by it that he didn't realize at first that his elbows were slowly sinking into the space. Terrified, he tried desperately to pull them back out to his room, but he couldn't because he just didn't have the strength. But in a few minutes it didn't matter, because it didn't hurt, and it was good to relax. Slowly he was pulled into the space, little by little, and everything fit in place. His face wasn't so hot now, nor was his head heavy. Very faintly, as if in a dream, he thought he heard some familiar voice, but only for a moment, and it was forgotten, because just then he noticed his lollypop floating in front of him, and it was red. He climbed on top of it, since it had grown quite large by now, and rode the rest of the way. He kept sinking, but he wasn't worried. Because he had become a part of the scene." She always ended it with those very words, and Jimmy would lie back, content that she had told it properly.

Anyway, the Saturday after Jimmy died, I was walking past the fountain, and noticed a bunch of grownups and little kids milling around it. It took a lot of pushing and all to fight my way in to see what the excitement was about, but when I finally did get a place to see through the mob, I immediately wished I hadn't. It was a gruesome sight: that oily green mess spurring out of the statue's mouth, and the dead rotten flowers floating on top, some beaten down under that horrible surface by the falling plops of oily green blobs.

The crowd couldn't take very much of that, so they all left, with sort of white-looking faces. All but one, that is. Jennifer was sitting in her usual place on the side of the fountain. Just staring.

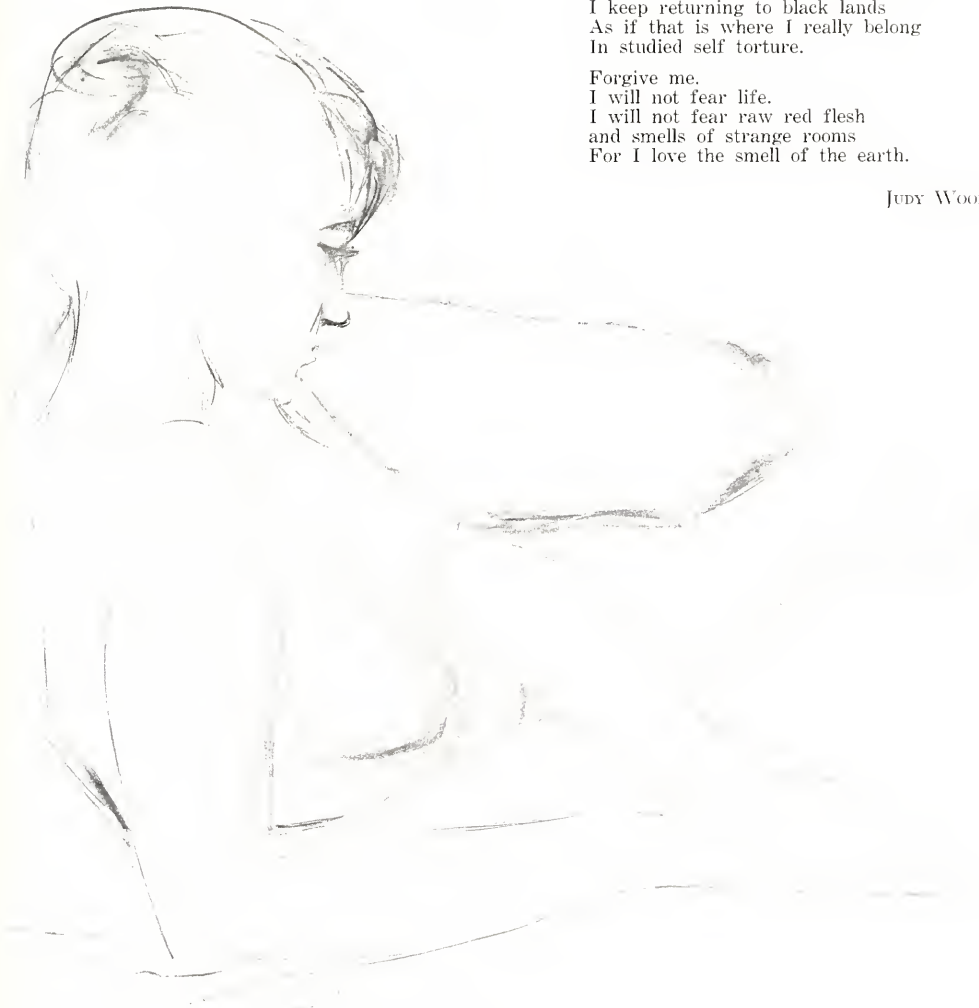
Rafters on sea drifts winds
Lovely playmate
I am shamed
I have wandered into dark hallways
and licked soot off cellar steps
My tears have carried the dirt
with them.
It is dark and the smell of gas
invades my melancholia

Pure and washed grains of sand
Flowing songs in your hair
I need the exquisiteness
of lonely bell towers
high above green lakes.
I need little houses near sand
dunes
With pigeons and songs and laughing
and wonderful legs.

I keep returning to black lands
As if that is where I really belong
In studied self torture.

Forgive me.
I will not fear life.
I will not fear raw red flesh
and smells of strange rooms
For I love the smell of the earth.

JUDY WOOD



The Brass Spyglass

On a rainy attic day,
I found,
Among dusty feathers, gems, and the worn-out old whims
Of worn-out old children,
A brass spyglass.

It lay in the bottom of a trundle trunk,
Beneath the apron of a Dutch doll
That had a fat, frightened face
And wonderful little black, frightened hands.
And a postcard from some Pacific paradise
Stuck out of a patch of moldy redletter booklets.

The old brass had a sour metal smell
And a hard metal luster.
The brown opal glass
Shone shyly:
Like a boy's marble upturned in the clay,
Or a little crescent moon
Upturned in a bucket of dusky water.
I could not really tell,
In the dim rainy light,
If my hands burnt or froze along its barrel.

There is no island galaxy
East of the sun;
No foreign Milky Way
West of the moon.
For that brigantine, yesterday,
Had sailed too soon.

But, like a spy,
I held it to my eye,
And saw and saw nothing.

HEATHER ROSS MILLER

Requiem

The little one comes shyly
Up to the dormer window.
She looks through, then on the panes.
Her small pale breath spreads
Twinkling spider threads
Across the old glass.
"In this room," she says,
"In this old room, my mother slept.
Her dream is still in the bedposts."

Outside the giant oaks waver with evening.
And the little girl watches a little girl ghost
Run out to toss the acorns.

The old blind grandmother nods.
Her faded sunbonnet droops over her faded eyes.

The little one tips downstairs
And out in the autumn yard.
The giant oaks bend and swing
With the pale winds.
"In this yard," she nods,
"In this old yard, my mother ran.
Her game is still in the grass."
Round dust clouds leap along the highroad.
And the little girl watches a little girl ghost
Chase the swirling soil.

"Come back mother," she cries.
And the dust and the dream,
The acorns and the grass
Pass, pass.

The old blind grandmother twitches
With an old blind nightmare.
She shakes her head.
The bonnet falls back,
And she looks up in black
At the little black movements and noises
That woke her.
She finds the snuffbox in her apron.
Then, with a dip in her cheek,
Slips from faded black
Into coalpit black.
She watches the little ghost dance.

HEATHER ROSS MILLER

The Riverside Wife

You come from a long house,
A long stone house of prayers.
River Sundays and muddy barefoot praise
Damned up the days
Of your summer riot.

I don't know that house.
My house was a windmill
Moss-stacked and tall,
A dim green glimmer in the heat.

We look in the book of your house.
The men and their women peel brownly,
And their legends stiffly crack.
You say:

"Grandpa went round on Sunday mornings
To every house,
Knocked on its door with his big blue knife,
And collected his nigger rent."

Your Grandpa wore several white beards,
Not one, but several,
Rippling across his old face like frosty vines.
And your Grandma held a German silver purse,
A grey crushed mesh of vanity.
The cradle, church, and churn had left famine
Where there should have glowed memory.
She was more buttonhook than woman.

Grandma and Grandpa rose
To their river church on their river Sunday
In the green rush of a river-strangled May.
There the hollow wives sat beside their strange mates,
And the ivy twined its starving toward God.

When they returned,
Stiff and hot in the new spring balm of Gilead,
He was calm.
He picked up the poker
And struck her, the wife of his bosom.
Severely, methodically, without passion,
The black soot streaked her pale old-fashioned skin.
She put up her hands,
Like poor old ivory fans
Left over from a masquerade.
Then he left her by the best hearth,
Swept bare of fire,
In the stiff front room where a tall mantel clock ticked stupidly,
And the frozen stares of her children
Stared frozenly out of their heavy oak frames.

He went to his barn,
To his rope that he had thrown up
Over the loft beams
In the cool fluttering early morning.
The field lark sang.
The horses frisked,
Their big veins twitched with the blood-push.
He stood,
Still calm.
Oh, balm of Gilead,
Sweet mint of my father,
Caress me.

You have said these gifts are mine:
The big blue knife, the stiff buttonhook,
Grey German silver, sweet balm of Gilead.
But I say I don't know that house.
In the still early morning,
Let us flee.
Let us take the balm and steep it into sweet tea.
The book of my house is full of blank pages.
No green river riot rages
In the cool clover-white of my house.

When their Sunday is over,
And the muddy feet have stamped out the mounds of their praise,
We can walk on to higher grounds in warmer days,
Through the rank wild green.
Easy, quiet, faintly incarnadine.

FATALISM AND ART
IN HARDY'S
THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

Louise Efirid

"To sorrow
I bade good morrow,
And thought to leave her far away behind;
But cheerly, cheerly,
She loves me dearly;
She is so constant to me, and so kind.
I would deceive her,
And so leave her,
But ah! she is so constant and so kind."
(*The Return of the Native*)

Beyond the mellow sadness of the short prologue poem, *The Return of the Native* conveys an ultimate impression of cosmic futility and naked pessimism with only threadbare consolation. So thick is that consolation and so ominous is the expanse it cannot reach to cover, that one tends in retrospect to overlook it almost entirely. The tragedy of the human situation as portrayed in *The Return of the Native* is set in a world, not of a deterministic Fate, but of an accidental one, although the presentation of events implies a malign tendency in chance. The inhabitants of Egdon Heath are helpless pieces, but they are not set on the chessboard (as Hardy's later characters are) to be checked and slain and laid away by the mature Immanent Will. They are rather placed in a labyrinth and left opening doors—usually the wrong ones. Diggory Venn, ironically the Mephistophelean character in the novel, seems to hold the thread of exit, but he opens doors amiss approximately as often as he tries to re-route his path and take others out. Only the characters who can, like the redleman, accept or learn to accept the course of the thread without attempting to alter it escape the abject futility of the maze. This aspect of the situation at Egdon Heath, though considerably diminished by the misfortunes of the luckless victims of the labyrinthine scheme, anticipates the concept of Immanent Will controlling the destinies of Hardy's later characters. According to H. C. Webster, Hardy's Immanent Will is "a coordinating power, above accident and natural law and Circumstance, that dictates the course of the universe"; and "although it may be merely indifferent and unaware of human aims, it seems malign." Yet when the "human aims" are relaxed and an individual resigns himself to the impotence of the human situation, that Immanent Will tends to leave him *not unhappy*.¹ Intense happiness is not present in Hardy's world, but there is room for some not-unhappiness.

Hardy has wound the plot of *The Return of the Native* on an intricate pattern of circumstance, coincidence, and chance. The characters are moved and checked by unexpected mishaps, unfortunate and incongruous alliances, and unattainable ambitions. One coincidental event or misunderstanding may set off a whole chain of reaction. Had Christian Cantle not stopped at the Quiet Woman Inn, for example, he would not have gambled Clym's and Thomasin's money, Wildevé would neither have known about the money nor won it, the redleman would not have made the mistake in dispensing with it, Mrs. Yeobright would not have insulted Eustacia and quarreled with her, and Clym would never have been in the dilemma that forced the novel to a crisis; and later, had Wildevé not arrived at Alderworth simultaneously with Mrs. Yeobright, the whole schism between Clym and Eustacia might not have occurred, and the unnatural deaths might have been forestalled. Innumerable in-

cidental actions cause portentous results throughout the novel.

In upside down parallel to the role of accident in motivating Hardy's plot is the factor of human will. One of the most reliable ways to assure the occurrence of an event is for the one character or another to wish it otherwise. In the world of Egdon Heath when one is indifferent toward something, it comes about. If one wants something to happen, it almost invariably occurs in a perverse way, if not in the opposite. As long as Eustacia schemes to meet Clym Yeobright, she does not; but when she gives up her efforts, an opportunity presents itself. Clym succeeds in meeting Eustacia Vye when his mother tries to prevent an encounter between them; similarly, he marries her. The general architecture, then, of Hardy's world, while wandering with chance and coincidence, also has perceptible patterns of method. The patterns are traceable to a shadow on the face of Hardy's early concept of Fate, and that shadow is the growing Immanent Will.

Hardy's craft of designing his plots persistently around the dictates of chance becomes obnoxious at times. The irony of Fate turns into hyperbole and grows increasingly less subtle with too large an accumulation of coincidences. When the spectacular threatens to take over, something valuable is lost. At such points as when Wildevé and Mrs. Yeobright reach Alderworth simultaneously without waking Clym (when he had come home only a few steps before them and was sleeping in the front room), Hardy is bordering on the fantastic at the expense of the reader's sympathy.

Albert J. Guerard has pointed out several instances where Hardy's lack of subtlety subtracts from the atmospheric realism of the novel: the "commonplaceness" of Hardy's mind ("haunted but intellectually unsubtle") "betrays itself in a certain doggedness of reasoning and in the fawness and banality of his characters' dilemmas"² and "in the tendency to group characters in highly artificial counterpoint."³ Eustacia and Clym, for example, are so completely opposite that it hardly takes a person of Mrs. Yeobright's intuitive perception to discern that difficulty is inevitable in such a marriage. Hardy has delineated Eustacia in full color early in the novel; it is from her basically passionate, excitement-seeking temperament that her only real dilemma arises. When Clym Yeobright returns to Egdon Heath his whole outlook is so much in contrast to hers as to suggest an immediate incompatibility:

Take all the varying hates felt by Eustacia Vye towards the heath, and translate them into loves, and you have the heart of Clym;

²Thomas Hardy, *the Novels and Stories* (Cambridge, 1949), p. 15.

³*Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹*On a Darkling Plain* (Chicago, 1947), p. 146.

and so far as banal dilemmas are concerned, Clym's is a classic. It is rather implausible that any two people as essentially different as Clym and Eustacia could form an alliance without being somewhat more aware of the implications of their differences. Their marriage serves to indicate that love is based primarily on sex, but their absolutely antithetic personalities make the irony too obvious. Hardy's whole novel centers around a perversely sadistic Fate, and precise, graphic counterpoint does not strengthen the effectiveness of his art.

Thus the craftsman and the poet in Hardy are somewhat at odds: the craftsman of blueprints and didacticism and the poet of drama and irony whose macrocosmic-microcosmic reflections between Egdon Heath and its inhabitants are almost Shakespearean in quality and whose powerful symbolism is the most vital element of a bewitching and macabre realism. Although Guérard recognizes a fundamental absence of subtlety in Hardy's intellect, his observations do not end there:

At the poetic and imaginative level, where he dramatizes human feelings rather than thinks about subjects, Hardy's mind was anything but commonplace; it was capable of tragedy. . . . He was most truly the spiritual historian of the age in his temperament rather than in his formal pessimism; in his pictures of lonely men standing shyly outside the active current of life⁴

The dramatic components of *The Return of the Native* are evident in the scene setting, in the characterization, in the rustic observers and commentators (serving a purpose similar to the chorus in classical drama), and in the symbolic ironies; but these are symptoms of dramatic method in exposition and not deciding features. It is misplacing the emphasis of the novel to pigeon-hole it precisely as drama (as J. W. Beach does, likening the book divisions to acts, discussing the novel in terms of "machinery of action" and unities, and calling the principal characters, Clym and Eustacia, "players of the game of love, drawn together and repelled according to the pagan laws of jealousy, vanity and pique."⁵) One significant point Beach does not bring out is the unity of tone, effected through the atmosphere of the heath. This consistent tone of macabre indifference is infinitely more important to the novel as a work of art than any of the dramatic architecture. The tone is responsible for the quality of nightmarish poetry found in *The Return of the Native*. There is indeed an almost Shakespearean combination of poetic and dramatic elements in the novel that is responsible for its enduring tragic scope.

The interplay of ironies in *The Return of the Native* is an important poetic and dramatic factor—ironies of misplaced affections and ambitions, of situation, of characterization, and of action. Although the counterpoint of personalities in the case of Clym and Eustacia (and to a watered-down extent in the case of Thomasin and Wildeve) takes all subtlety from the ironic situations of the marriages, the basic condition of conflict between human will and indifferent Fate is illustrated in the matches. Clym's and Eustacia's love-blinded wills look toward the marriage as happy consummation of their separate dreams. But as Fate allows, not only are those dreams diametrically opposed, they are unattainable even if independent of the contradictions. Clym wants to teach the world "how to breast the misery they are born to"; but this is what Clym himself has to go a long way to learn, and it is something that no one can teach him, something he must learn for himself through experience and error. Eustacia's dream is passion and excite-

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16.

⁵Joseph Warren Beach, *The Technique of Thomas Hardy* (Chicago, 1922), Chapter IV.

ment. In calculating her marriage she confuses Paris, a possible means to living that dream, with the actual dream itself. Paris might fulfill her ambition for a while; but the nature of her dream indicates that Paris, as a source for satisfying her ambitions will eventually be as sterile and binding as Egdon Heath. In reality she can come as near to finding ultimate expression for her dream on Egdon Heath as anywhere else. The ironies of personality serve to illustrate Hardy's metaphysical concept that if indifferent Fate has not endowed human beings with unattainable ambitions, she at least seems to ascertain that insofar as people have ambitions, they are unattainable.

Other ironies in *The Return of the Native* have the same relationship to a fickle, coquettish Fate as the impossible ambitions and the mismatched marriages. Many instances of ironic situations come at Eustacia and Clym's various meetings. At her first encounter with Clym Yeobright, Eustacia tosses a stone into the pool where Wildeve previously signaled to her. When Clym proposes to Eustacia, many ironically foreshadowing remarks are made: Eustacia acknowledges "feeling sometimes an agonizing pity for [herself] that [she] was ever born" (a feeling which is intensified in the course of the novel so that at the last, both she and Clym realize it in much more awful tones); to Clym's anxious proposal Eustacia says in taunting, "Many a man's love has been a curse to him," and "Sometimes I think there is not that in Eustacia Vye which will make a good homespun wife"; and Clym answers Eustacia's expressed fear that someday their love may cease with, "When we see such a time at hand we will say, 'I have outlived my faith and purpose,' and die." In such instances as these, irony serves in the capacity of foreshadowing.

There is another use of irony seen in the characterization of Diggory Venn. In accordance with his profession and his sinister appearance, he would seem to play a demonic role, as he does to those characters who did not know him before he became a reddleman. And as long as he retains the reddle's "mark of Cain" he is the only disinterested manipulator of events in the novel. The reddleman is generous, unambitious, and unselfish. When he washes and wears away the reddle from his skin to become a respectable human being again, he loses the remarkable aspect which made him not a "Mephistophelean visitant" from Hades, but better than human, and which placed him outside and above the tragic human situation. A. J. Guérard observed that "the real drama of life could play itself only in the detached and brooding mind."⁶ The stain of the reddleman's skin which would seem to give him a subhuman but supernatural power to manipulate Fate actually gives him the only real and satisfying power available to the figures in Hardy's world—that of not being manipulated by Fate.

Hardy's use of irony of action is evident in Susan Nunsuch's burning of a wax effigy. Eustacia is the reputed witch; it is she whom the mother blames for the spell cast on her son. But on the very night that Susan Nunsuch molds a wax effigy of Eustacia to melt over fire and whispers incantations of the witch's black mass, Eustacia is in the torment which leads her to suicide. Here the superstition of the heath exhibits more power than human will in an ironic world of uncontrolled, gambling Fate.

The symbolism of Egdon Heath and its relationship to its inhabitants is one of the most powerful and meaningful artistic devices in *The Return of the Native*. The heath is animated but indifferent from the beginning, "a face on which time makes but little impression." It can be as fickle and as mocking as the Fate which rules it; and it can be as subject to humors as the inhabitants whose lives it reflects. Egdon Heath, as the setting for the tragic human situation, is a universe, both indifferent and responsive, unimpressible and vigilant:

⁶Thomas Hardy, *The Novels and Stories*, p. 119.

The sombre stretch of rounds and hollows seemed to rise and meet the evening gloom in pure sympathy, the heath exhaling darkness as rapidly as the heavens precipitated it. And so the obscurity in the air and the obscurity in the land closed together in a black fraternization towards which each advanced halfway.

The place became full of a watchful intentness now; for when other things sank brooding to sleep the heath appeared slowly to awake and listen. Every night its Titanic form seemed to await something; but it had waited thus, unmoved, during so many centuries, through the crises of so many things, that it could only be said to await one last crisis—the final overthrow. . . .

The untameable, Ishmaelitic thing that Egdon now was it always had been. Civilization was its enemy The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained.

The heath, like Fate, appears to be untouched by human crises; yet it seems aware of them and somewhat in sympathy with them when they come about. The troubled minds of Egdon's inhabitants correspond to the inclement weather on the heath in the same way that storms crash over the aged, wandering King Lear, but for the subtlety. It is as if the people had gazed so long at Egdon Heath that it gazed back into them. In the early portions of the novel the strangeness that shrouds the heath and the main characters, and the vigilance attributed to the heath make the people appear as shadow figures and as offspring of the mystery of the heath. Eustacia Vye, as "Queen of Night," seems both victim and child of the heath:

Egdon was her Hades, and since coming there she had imbibed much of what was dark in its tone, though inwardly and eternally unreconciled thereto. Her appearance accorded well with this smouldering rebelliousness, and the shady splendor of her beauty was the real surface of the sad and stifled warmth within her. A true Tartarean dignity sat upon her brow, and not factitiously or with marks of constraint, for it had grown in her with years.

Throughout the novel the personalities of Eustacia and the heath prove much better matched than Hardy explicitly admits. The alternating turmoils and bleakness of Egdon, its fires, its winds, and its storms are compatible with the humors of Eustacia Vye.

The relationship between microcosm and macrocosm in *The Return of the Native*, besides revealing parallels, often serves, like the numerous ironies in the novel, as foreshadowing. When Clym, after the breach with his mother, goes to secure a dwelling for himself and Eustacia when she will be his wife, the day is vaporous and the setting along the way is ominous:

The wet young beeches were undergoing amputations, bruises, crippings, and harsh lacerations, from which the wasting sap would bleed for many a day to come, and which would leave scars visible till the day of their burning. Each stem was wrenched at the root, where it moved like a bone in its socket, and at every onset of the gale convulsive sounds came from the branches, as if pain were felt. In a neighboring brake a finch was trying to sing; but the wind blew under his feathers till they stood on end, twisted round his little tail, and made him give

up his song.

The weather reflects the unrest in Clym's mind over what has occurred, but it is also a subtle prophecy of the eventual condition inside the house he will share with Eustacia. With similar implications, when Eustacia leaves her grandfather's house on the night she dies, "The gloom of the night was funereal; all nature seemed clothed in crape." As the torment in her mind is intensified, Egdon Heath is rent by a storm. While microcosmic-macrocosmic reflections are not restricted in parallels to Eustacia, the humor of the heath is closely aligned with the state of her mind. Other characters reflect and are reflected upon by the heath, but its behavior is most strikingly congruous with the mental aspects of Eustacia Vye. J. W. Beach stated that the *main* stage of the drama of *The Return of the Native* is Eustacia's mind⁷; consequently, it is artistically fitting that the physical setting of events, Egdon Heath, should correspond to it.

The imagery and symbolism of the macabre aspects of the heath, along with the superstitiousness and the uneducated, "cracker-barrel" observations of the rural country-folk, provide the atmospheric realism for the elements of Hardy's world in the late 1870's. The most significant image or symbol of the essence of that strange world comes midway in the novel: the two chapters of dice games. The fortunes of men in the world of Hardy's reckless Fate change as unexpectedly and as quickly as the gamblers' accumulation of stakes. The raffle is symbolic of the lives of the players, and the fluctuations of luck parallel the hopes and despair of the inhabitants of Hardy's universe. Just as the indifferent Fate seems malign, the observers who appear during the dice game seem mysterious and evil; and to the man who is losing, they intensify despair. The behavior of these spectres is ominously in keeping with the popular superstitions of the countryside:

Wildevé played on with the recklessness of despair.

"What's that?" he suddenly exclaimed, hearing a rustle; and they both looked up.

They were surrounded by dusky forms between four and five feet high, standing a few paces beyond the rays of the lantern. A moment's inspection revealed that the encircling figures were heath-croppers, their heads being all towards the players. . . .

Ten minutes passed away. Then a large death's head moth advanced from the obscure outer air, wheeled twice round the lantern, flew straight at the candle, and extinguished it by the force of the blow. Wildevé had just thrown, but had not lifted the box to see what he had cast. . . .

The glowworms follow; then the heath-croppers return. Fate seems to be pointing to crisis for the unlucky man. The incident of the split die which ends the game is no more fantastic than some of the other incidents in Hardy's cosmos.

Thus the philosophical implications of the entire novel seem to be embodied in these two central chapters. The indifferent, dicing Fate, precursor to the Immanent Will, is exposed here in concrete, symbolic detail. The lack of obligation of the dice to the gamblers is analogous to that of Fate, morally unanswerable to man. Egdon Heath might well be likened to the stone on which Christian, Wildevé, and the redleman, roll their dice.

⁷*The Techniques of Thomas Hardy*, p. 90.



PORTRAIT
Charcoal
Pat M. Faires

Winter Poem

it was then
the hands of August
spotted with the still-warm blood
of summer nights
crept into a winter's day
to rip open my body
and flay it against the snow winds

and it was then
on the clotted snow
that I remembered
August has no hands

MARTHA ALICE MILES



16

LANDSCAPE
Brush and Ink
Larry Low Foster

The Truth Drummer

You clapsed a white birch twig
And gently raised it in your hand,
To and fro, back and forth, again,
You beat the muted drum through all the land.
They gathered about you like dark threads
And you the only pale strand,
Their laughter clawed like thin needles
But still you pounded; still you ran.
The drum became worn, thin and torn
The birch twig shattered and frayed,
And the music, feather-like, silently blew away,
I know, Oh, I know, you are weary, you can no longer play.

PAT MCGEE

La mer lape
doucement
sur la plage
tais-toi
repose
serein
au calme
tranquille
et bois
la beauté
de la mer
et donne-toi
dans le noir secret
à moi, à moi . . .

SUSAN D. CRAVEN

17

MA PENDRY (Continued from page 4)

Bud felt a sting on his cheek and heard the body fall at his feet. It screamed louder and louder and its legs sprawled and kicked in the dust. Little Bud watched it a second and slid his toe over it and felt its feet hit the bottom of his heel as its scream increased. He straightened his knee and his heel crushed into the squirming bug that mashed to sticky blood and a sharp and splintered frame. He lifted his heel and rubbed it into the dust. Then he fell into the dust and scratched the dirt and blood away that stuck to his foot.

He looked into the spread-out body and saw the disjointed legs kick slowly from the mass. In the hot air he could feel how tomorrow's sun would come up and the body would kick slowly as the ants teamed through it, dragging bits of meat and blood back to their hole. The body would slowly disappear until the legs could not move and would fall aside and dry in the sun.

His eyes felt hot as he watched the bug still moving in the dust. Crush it and crush it until the ants

couldn't find it. Spread it under the dust. Hit it again like the squirming kitten with the sticky blood head and kicking legs until it were dead and hide it with dirt. As he pushed dirt towards it he felt the jagged frame hit his skin and he jerked back as the legs kicked faster. He scraped up handfuls of dust and poured it on the bug until it moved no more. He sifted it through his hands until the black body was not on the hot sand.

Then the tub clanged on Mama's porch and the bugs screamed at him from all around. He stood up in the crying air, looking at the sky that was dark and red streaked. As he looked back at the bug's mound, the legs kicked away whiffs of dust and the black tried to move the white. He thought of moving; moving below dirt, half alive, pushing, kicking at dirt—trying to uncover itself, trying, pushing it away from its body that still lived, under dirt, kicking, like the half dead kitten, kicking, kitten, kicking at dust, dirt, wet dirt, wet heavy dirt, too heavy, like the bug, can't move it, the kitten.

He started to run back to Jimson's house but the tub clanged on the porch. He must run to the house

1941-1945

Suffer little children and
forbid them not to come
unto me.

Matthew 19:14

by the screaming beagles, to the barn, tripping and falling in the half dark. The mother cat would scream now and paw at the dead kittens in the barn. They were dead; they were always dead. He ran to the fence, dropped and slid under, and ran through the pasture to the tree. The air smelled of earthworms, of wet dirt. The mound was there somewhere and the earthworms had found it. They would crawl and eat the flesh tonight, while the legs kicked and stopped. He crawled around the trees and his hands touched the wet dirt. The top was a rock that he shoved away before he pulled away the dirt. Digging into the dirt, he felt the clay stick at his nails and his flesh could feel it crawling with earthworms in the night while the kittens kicked. The wet dirt became sticky earth and he raised up a body, then another, but there were no more. He held the kittens in one hand but at the bottom of the hole there was only their blood in the dirt. As he laid the bodies on the ground, he watched the legs that fell to one side as he rolled them. They rolled like the ones in the barn, the dead ones the mother cat rolled. He touched their feet and lifted the legs but they fell limply back and were still. He raised one close to his face in the dark, it spilled through his hand and fell against his leg in the dark.

Little Bud laid the bodies back at the bottom of the hole and carefully pushed the dirt in and set the grass clumps. As he rolled the rock, his eyes sent fast drops down his cheeks. He sat still and the night became still and the flies were distant now.

He sat in a circle of stillness as he heard the tub ring above the flies. The house and the tub were at the end of the flies and he must run through the dark and not listen. Mama would not come for him; she would not leave the house in the dark. He stood and ran into the pasture and his stillness moved beside him through the howling beagles and the flies. He was in the yard and did not stop running till he was on the porch where Ma Pendry grated the tub bottom with the spoon.

"Where you been, boy? Papa and me didn't know what had come of you," she said as she dropped the dripping spoon to her side.

"Over at Jimson's, Mama."

"You get on in and wash up that face in the dish pan. Has he fought you again, coming in with your face all red an cryie."

Little Bud slid into his seat and put his feet on the dogs back. "Where's my plate Mama?"

"In the oven, turnips probably harder than a rock now they been warming so long. Get you a bisquit off top and I'll fix it for you while you get settled."

"Where's Papa?" he said as he handed her the bisquit.

"Out fastening up the chickens."

"He don't like it much after dark, does he?"

"Don't nobody, I guess, like it, what's up to any good," she said. As she pushed open the door and threw out the scraps, the dog trotted from under the table and slid through the crack in the door.

V

This fair blond child of thine oh Jesus, our
Savior, take her to your tender flock, may her
short reach to your love be not unfulfilled, oh
Jesus, let her reach your love.

Amen.

Nettie's mother was there but her father could not be found in time. Ma Pendry told her she could come back home anytime she found fitting but she said Little Bud would stay on out the summer as planned if it was all right and maybe when school started, she'd have enough put away to bring him home with her. A boy needs to be home with his mother but if she can't provide for him, she has to sacrifice. Ma Pendry watched her linger around the grave and look at the stone bought by her old classmates with bewilderment.

The little woman walked to Ma Pendry and leaned against her side, nodding at the murmers of the people as they filed away from the grave. She wanted to touch the stone, to feel its white coldness, as the marble hit her hand. Suddenly Nettie was gone, she would not see her, she did not exist. The trees and grass were a green blur around her and the wet air buzzed with flies; not the day for Nettie's funeral.

As Ma Pendry bent her head towards her, her dirty hat slid forward in her dull gray hair. "You stay home and rest up a spell before you go back to town." When she stood straight again, the hat slid back into place.

"It don't seem a right thing but we can't question." She looked up suddenly at Ma Pendry whose voice moved on the same level.

"I can question, Mama," she said cynically, "I can question the reason for taking that little thing that never hurt nobody." Then she looked at the grave and said, "If only I could find someone to blame but there ain't no way of saying." Then she stopped and said, "That's a bad thing I said," and her words trailed off, "but it ain't fair to me or anyone."

Then she looked up into the face of Little Bud who stood in front of her. He grabbed her skirt in his hands and cried, "I done it, Mama, I done it I think but I wouldn't never have meant it."

Then his mother pulled him to her and pressed him against her stomach. "Don't you worry none, Buddie, you and me gonna get along somehow." Then her features tightened as she looked back at the grave, "Maybe we'll have another one like Nettie." As she heard her words, she shuttered and buried her face in his hair.

Ma Pendry turned and walked towards the road calling, "Let's get on back, we got feeding up and supper."

The supper was without talk but this was as always. Mama stood with her plate on the stove sopping it with a biscuit. She took a bite and broke it, dropping half on the floor with a splat. Every one looked up slowly at the dog who crawled from beneath the table and lapped it up.

Little Bud took up his plate and sat it in front of the dog. He looked up sadly at Ma Pendry and said, "I can't eat no more; my stomach don't feel so good."

The clinking of the forks stopped and all the blank faces around the table stared at him.

"I'm going out on the porch, Mama." Ma Pendry nodded and the corners of her eyes seemed to fall lower as the thin little boy walked towards the porch. Then she looked at the dog licking the linoleum at her feet and muttered, "That little feller don't know nothing about dyin'."

Little Bud shoved open the screen with his foot and waited a second to feel the cool air in his face. He walked onto the porch but he could still hear the sounds in the kitchen. As he pulled the wooden door together; the sounds muffled lower. He walked across the porch and saw Jimson run down the steps and stop and look in the direction of his house. Little Bud stepped quickly to the shadow behind the brick pillar and watched Jimson turn his head and start down to feed up. Little Bud heard the beagles start howling and heard the scrape of the food pan as Jimson raked out their food. He felt cold standing in the shadow, hiding from Jimson. Jimson was with him at the pond too, it was as much his fault except she won't his sister.

As Little Bud sat on the edge of the porch, he looked at the pier legs standing above the mud. He felt as if he had done the same thing before, looking down at the pier, but he could not have. There was always water there and it had never been the night after his little sister's funeral before.

The smoke from the tobacco barns settled in flat lines across the sky as if there were an invisible barrier between its gray and pink orange of the clouds. Rows of bent and broken tobacco stalks spread before him with their pale green suckers glowing in the dim light. Black bats and martins darted from the trees into open air, zigzagged up and down for bugs and silently disappeared. As he jumped from the porch and walked down the slope to the pond, the daylilies hit his side and swung behind him with their orange and twisted flowers falling from their cores. Suddenly Little Bud stopped and saw entangled between the thin green stems another web of the writing spider. He watched the yellow and black body making white zigzags in the center of the web.

As he watched he said, "Are you the same spider," then he stopped to hear his own words and began to laugh as the spider thickened the white letters in his web. Then he screamed, "Did you learn your lesson about building across the path." His laugh moved the bugs in the night air and they began to whirl and buzz around him. His laugh stopped suddenly as he fell to his knees in the flowers and cried with his face in his lap. He rose to his feet and looked wildly down the path to the pond. The twisted flowers reached across the path as he ran to the edge of the pond. The odor of decaying fish rose up from around his feet as he saw the bodies in the faint light. Flies buzzed around them and lifted away their silky flesh through the red glow reflected in the skim of dew.

Little Bud ran through them and climbed onto the pier. He wiped his eyes against his sleeve as he looked out across the mud. It had dried and lay in a web of cracks. He slid off the end of the pier and felt his feet hit wetness as he broke through. It rose over his feet but then the descent stopped where the mud had settled. He walked across the top towards the hole where Nettie had fallen and by Jimson's seine which lay dried in the crust.

Then he stopped and looked into the air. He had heard his name, it was a soft voice—a female voice—weak in the night air—it must call again—so he could be sure he heard it—it was far away and muffled—coming from below the ground—Nettie—it was Nettie—she was calling him—she wasn't dead—quick—her voice was weak—she must call again—the air was silent as he ran across the crackling mud towards the graveyard. As he ran he heard the voice again, it was weaker, she was getting weaker under all that dirt.

The graveyard was dark; the trees wrapped over his head choked the light with a green glow. Little Bud ran to the edge of the mound where they had laid her coffin and he smelled the wet dirt that rose up from the grave. As he went to his knees, the white headstone blocked the last of the red glow of the clouds that seeped under the trees and his face fell into shadow. Digging into the top with his hands, he whispered to Nettie.

"You ain't dead, they ain't gonna blame me no more, we'll show them you ain't dead."

As he pulled away the packed dirt with his nails, he became afraid he would never reach her because

he could not hear the voice now. He jumped to his feet and ran into the dark shed to look for the grave digger's shovel. It lay on a pile of hoes and rakes with fresh dirt matted on the blade. He stepped from the door and looked across the graves and saw only a mass of square blocks among the slanting tree trunks.

He dug away the mound and began to lift the wadded red and blue clay as he went deeper. Little Bud felt the shovel hit the wooden top of the coffin.

"I found you Nettie! I'll let you out." As he pulled the dirt away from the top, it wobbled in the shallow grave. The shovel scraped against the sides as he raked a trench around the box. As he clutched the end of the box and drug it from the grave, the weight inside shifted to the other end of the box. He stopped suddenly as he felt the solid weight and let the box drop from his hands. As he slowly pulled the box up to the surface, he watched the dirt slide from the top. The top was flat and the silver heads of the nails went unevenly around the edge.

"Nettie," he whispered in the silent graveyard. His fingers pushed under the edges but the box was nailed shut. Then he sat and looked at it, rolling it over and tipping it as if it were a turtle that had drawn in its legs.

"Nettie, Nettie, you called me, I heard you, you wanta come out?" he cried as he shook the box. Then he wiped his face with his hands smearing clay across his cheeks. "You ain't coming out, Nettie, you ain't been able to since yesterday." Then he muttered as his head dropped to his knees, "I gotta let Nettie go, I gotta let Nettie go." He put his forehead on the box and said, "Nettie ain't gonna be here no more, she's dead, it can't happen all over and be right and not happen, Nettie's dead."

It was dark and the air was noisy and streaked with moonlight. He didn't hear Ma Pendry come through the trees until he felt her heavy step behind him. He looked up into her face which was spotted with light and marked with dark creases. Her eyes did not fall and her lips didn't move as she looked at the box. As she stooped and pulled the box from his hands, Little Bud leaned back. She slowly shoved it back into the hole and stood above it with a handful of dirt. Her lips began to move at last but she made no sound as the dirt fell from her fingers onto the box. As she began to rake the dirt back in, Little Bud pulled his hands back. She packed the dirt with the shovel and worked to level the mound, laboring with her square body. He felt she didn't know he was there, as she smoothed the grave in the spotted starlight and stumbled back through the trees with the shovel. The shovel crashed into the pile of tools and the door slammed shut and the chain rattled over the nail.

As he stood in the darkness, the wind stirred the trees and the light spots moved around his dark circle in the center. He was afraid to step out, afraid there was not another place of stillness and quietness. Then he felt the moving world coming to him to take away his stillness. Heavy feet began to move towards him as he stood by the grave and Ma Pendry's stiff face blurred as she entered into his circle of stillness.

He leaned back from her bulk as she said, "Come on son, we'll go home now, you've had a hard day."

Her voice was soft and had come to a level he could not remember. She took his hand and pulled him out of his circle. The air became moving and filled with voices as they crossed the tracks to the empty road home.

MILTON



on Life Savers:

“Sweet is
the breath”

from *Paradise Lost*, The Beautiful World, line 1



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