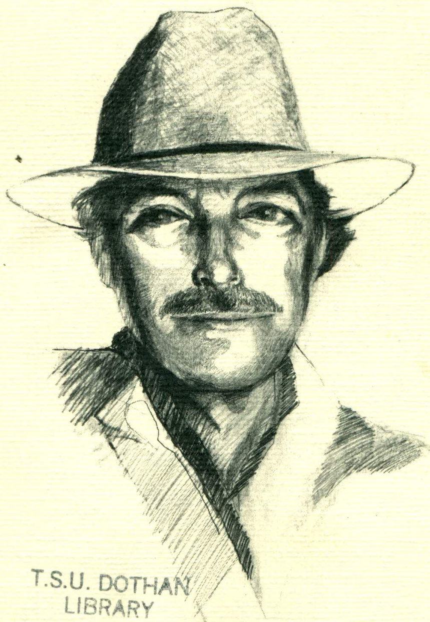
ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW



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Spring 1988 Volume 2, Number 1

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I think writing is continually a pursuit of a very evasive quarry, and you never quite catch it.

—Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs*

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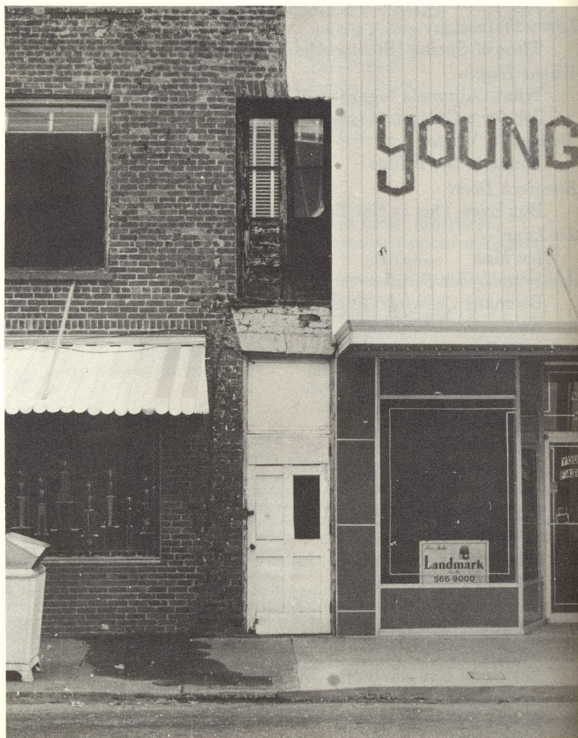


Keith Simms

Three Stories from the Same Day

Joe Colicchio

When I left the house this morning it seemed a lot earlier than what it really was, 9:30. Things usually start getting hot and white around here by then, but this morning had the kind of coolness that's usually gone by eight. Mrs. Finzini was just hanging out her clothes. Over her hedges the sheets and towels were rocking back and forth, and the pulley was squeaking so you could hear it a block away. Things were slow. There was a breeze rustling the trees and there was lots of shade. Normally, it would have been a perfect morning for sitting out in front of Clyde's with Franny and Mo, reading the sports, drinking a container of juice, talking and wrestling and waiting around.

Even though we're a lot closer to the fall, it was almost like spring, and as I walked towards church, it seemed more like Easter than anything else.

After the funeral, I took the silver incense burner and the incense out to the yard behind the rectory, something the altar boy always does, and I was kneeling down, burying the incense in the incense-burying dirt, looking up through the alleyway between the rectory and the church at all the people, kids I was in school with as well as adults, all of them milling around out front like cattle. I was thinking very sad thoughts about Jeannie. I was picturing the way she looked not long ago when she was alive, and picturing what she would have looked like in her school uniform this year. I was feeling lucky, too, about being here in back where I could think by myself and put things where they belonged instead of being out in front milling with the millers when I felt someone tapping me on the shoulder. I looked up and there was Mr. Simmons, all red around the nose and eyes, standing over me about to hand me a five dollar

bill because that's something he thought you always gave to the altar boy after a funeral. I said, Mr. Simmons, thanks but I can't take the five dollars. It's not allowed. Take the money, Monk, split it with Chuck. I said, I can't, they stopped giving money out at funerals a year ago. We only get money for weddings. He knelt right down beside me even though he was in his black suit. Okay, then, think of this as your wedding, he said and when he couldn't find anywhere to stick the fiver in among all my altar boy robes he wedged it down my shoe.

I could hear him sobbing and see the trembling in his back, but I couldn't see his face because of the way he had his chin tucked in against his chest. He put his hand into the hole I'd been digging in and he started digging. He reached into the burner and pulled some incense out and started burying it, hiding his face all the while.

There was something about it that kept me from feeling anything. You'd think I would at least have felt this way or that, sad for Jeannie or Mr. Simmons, or even plain scared or upset, something. But all I could do was lean away and watch. First at Mr. Simmons, red and trembling and digging so carefully when there was no reason to be. Then I looked up and through the alleyway again, at all the people dressed up in front of church, in groups talking or drying their eyes or walking in circles, but they weren't like they were real people at all—they were like they were made of thin air.

I jumped up when I heard Father Vincent calling me from the sacristy. I stood to go over there but didn't know what to do with Mr. Simmons and the burner he was still playing around with and the five dollar bill in my shoe. I made like I had forgotten about the money. I tapped Mr. Simmons on the shoulder. I've got to go, I said, can I have the incense thing? He put his hand on my shoulder and stood up. Don't forget your wedding money, he said and pointed down at the bit of green sprouting between my black shoe and white sock. I pulled it out all folded like it was and put it in my pocket. Mr. Simmons put his hand on my shoulder. Yeah, yeah, oh, yeah. My girl is dead, he said. He put the cap on the burner and handed it to me. I guess I should be out front, he said. I guess that's where I should be. What am I supposed to say to them, what? I'm sad but relieved in a way. Wouldn't it be truer to say I'm relieved but sad in a way? You think that's what I should say, Monk? What do you think I should say? I thought a minute. I said, I don't think there is much to say. Truer words were never spoken, he said.

Father Vincent called me again and Mr. Simmons told me I better get going before I got thrown off the force. And then he told

me that he felt sick like there was the poison of sin all through him and he told me that he was going out front with the mourners because he more than anyone needed their prayers.

As I was hurrying up the steps to the sacristy, very carefully holding onto the silver burner, Mr. Simmons yelled to me. If you notice any more mistakes that the Good Lord's made, Monk, you just let me know, okay, and I'll see what me and my man can do about fixing them.

There were only four cars in the processional that went from Saint Paul's to the Holy Name Cemetery in Harrison. In the first car were Jeannie and the four men in black uniforms who carried her casket. In the second car, a long, silver-grey Chevy, the only one that wasn't black, was Mr. and Mrs. Simmons. In the third car was Father Vincent and Chuck and me. And in the fourth car, a station wagon they got when I was in second grade, were seven nuns, including Sister Ellen.

As we pulled up to the gates of the cemetery, the first car stopped and the driver spoke to a man in a pale blue uniform inside a white booth who gave him directions. The driver made a left onto a winding road, Jeremy Lane, and we followed. A minute later we made another left onto Saint James Place. I thought it was odd that they put names on all the roads like that and wouldn't have been surprised if they put addresses on all the tombstones—in a way it reminded me of a time we went to visit friends of my mother's in Bergen County.

We drove off the road and onto a field in back which was less crowded than the other areas since it hadn't been lined with rows and rows of gravestones yet. There were two men in tan uniforms with shovels, waiting.

The four men in black—one of who I recognized as Joe McGill's drunk nephew—got out of Jeannie's long car and moved around to the back without saying a word. They opened up the back part and grabbed the handles of the short casket and slid Jeannie out. They carried her over to the two men with shovels and placed her down next to the hole there. Nobody said anything. In slow motion, everybody gathered around and folded their hands on their bellies—except for Sister Angela Thomas and Sister John who folded them right up under their chins. Father Vincent told Chuck to grab the gold bucket with the Holy Water and he cupped the back of our heads in his hands and led us to where we should be, right behind the casket.

The seven nuns stood across the hole from us. Up at the head of the hole were Mr. and Mrs. Simmons with their hands folded but

with their bodies pushed up against one another. They'd look at the sky and huff, then straight ahead and huff, then down to the ground and whisper or pray. But they'd never look at the same place at the same time. It was as though their heads were on some kind of hinge which made one move up as the other moved down.

Just as Father Vincent was about to start, another car pulled up, a beat-up little Dodge, and out came Wake Parish looking like hell on a bad night's sleep—which was very unusual for Wake who most of the time looked more like an altar boy than an altar boy does. He hadn't shaved and he must have showered and gotten his hair wet but not shampooed because it was all greasy and shiny without being clean. He had his hands in his pockets and the collar of his shirt turned up like he was chilly even though it must have been near eighty degrees by then. He was wearing a red arm band, not a black one like you'd expect he might. You could see that Mr. Simmons was upset about his being there.

Wake didn't look at anyone when he came over. He stood at the empty side of the grave, opposite the nuns, and hung his head so we'd ignore him and continue. But as much as I tried not to think of Wake in any bad way, there was something about him. Not that he reminded me of an evil man on the loose, more that he reminded me of an evil man on his way to the gallows. But I knew Wake wasn't evil—if anything he was too wound up about good and right.

Father Vincent opened his prayer book and nodded at the four men from Jeannie's car who picked her up and laid her in the hole. Father Vincent began the prayers. Sometimes he'd look in the book and read Latin and sometimes he'd look up and around and talk in English. He nudged Chuck to hand him the Holy Water sprinkler, but Chuck was too stiff to move. Chuck was even more of a nervous wreck than usual. His face and neck had turned shining red. His sideburns were all wet and came to a point, and a stream of sweat ran down his cheek through the little bit of blonde peach fuzz that was all glowing and swept in the same direction. Father Vincent had to reach over and take the bucket out of Chuck's hand and give it to me. He held the sprinkler up in his right hand and was about to spray the casket when he caught himself and put it back in the bucket. He made me and Chuck switch sides and started over again because you're supposed to take the Holy Water from the altar boy on the right side, and I guess he didn't want to take any chances for Jeannie's sake.

We all stood there watching and listening as Father Vincent talked and sprinkled. Hands in his pockets, Mr. Simmons turned and walked away, toward the woods. Wake Parish watched him. He

brushed something from his eyes and straightened the sleeve of his shirt. He turned and, the same way Mr. Simmons had, started walking towards the opposite woods.

They both got back a few minutes later. Mr. Simmons took up his position next to his wife. Wake stood behind the nuns, rocking side to side, every once in a while his red armband shining from between their black shoulders.

Father Vincent ended the service with a moment of silence followed by the sign of the cross. As soon as it was over the four men in their black suits, Joe McGill's drunk nephew leading the way, hustled over to their car like there was some place they had to go to in a hurry. The seven nuns moved right up to the edge of the hole and knelt down. They pulled out their rosary beads and went at it. Wake threw his arm band in the grave then genuflected and left. Mr. and Mrs. Simmons came over to Father Vincent and they all stood there talking, both of Father Vincent's hands and one each of theirs together in the same grip. While they were doing that, me and Chuck wandered around reading the gravestones looking for the ones with our own or our parents' first names. Chuck was doing a little better than before, but every once in a while he'd get these terrible shivers—like you sometimes get when you're taking a pee, but worse—that would almost throw him to the grass. The first time he did it, I shivered too, cause I was embarrassed for him, but it must have been contagious because after a couple on purpose I wound up shivering even without trying.

When we came back they'd all left, the seven nuns and Mr. and Mrs. Simmons, and, except for the corpse of Jeannie and the ghost of Wake Parish who I felt would never leave these woods, all who were left standing around the hole that was going to be 10 Saint James Place were me and Chuck and Father Vincent and the two men in their tan uniforms leaning on their shovels.

Breakfast in Donutland

Every Tuesday morning for her sanity, instead of making it herself, my mother lets me go down to Donutland for breakfast. It works out good for both of us because it's a change for me, coming in the middle of the week like that, and it's a change for her, too, and keeps me from getting on her nerves too much. The only rules were No Coffee, No Coke, and if I was late for school, even once, the whole thing was off.

Yesterday morning was Tuesday morning. I had to bring the milk bottles down so I went the back way and was cutting through

B&J's when I bumped into Cotton Parish, Wake's brother, at the door. Even though him and Wake are brothers, they're like day and night. Cotton got his nickname because of his hair, like cotton candy only not so pink. He said he was glad to see me and said Where are you going, Monk? To Donutland for breakfast, I said. And he said Let's run. That's another thing about Cotton. He always runs. Not very fast and not because he's in a hurry, but just because he likes to. You know he's not in a hurry because if he sees you on the avenue or something he'll always stop to talk. And once he gets your ear like that you might as well forget it for the next fifteen minutes, because, my father says, all the while he's running with no one to talk to he's thinking up things for the next person he meets. When he leaves he turns and says Solong like it's one word and gives a little kind of flip wave and within five steps he's off running like he's run since he was a kid playing over in the courts, his hands bouncing up and down in front of his chest and his head bobbing like the fake poodle in the back of the Caruso's car.

We didn't say a word to one another all along our run to Donutland, not until we sat down and each ordered our muffins. Behind the counter was Mrs. Gullace, Franny's mother. She's a widow and even though I wonder about it a lot I've never figured out why.

Dave the owner of Dolph's came busting in through the door like a cold white wind, his coat still half on him and half already hung up, and him huffing and puffing and coughing and bent over trying to rub the stain out of his pants. How is it all this morning, Dave? asked Mrs. Gullace. Yes, it's fine. Coffee, said Dave, skim, no sugar, and a jelly and would you please, please, Terry, give me extra napkins this morning, all in one breath.

I tapped Cotton on the shoulder and nodded my head towards Dave to make sure he knew what I thought was so funny. So anyway, Cotton said, how's Wake been, Monk? I said I don't know, he doesn't come in as much anymore. You're his brother. Cotton laughed and raised his bushy eyebrows at that and the hairs on his head seemed to stretch out a little as though they were laughing, too. He said Well, how was he the last time you saw him? When I said I couldn't recall in particular, Cotton split his muffin and said Think, Monk, it's important. No, he said. I mean, well, it's not important, don't think about it or worry about it or anything, it's just for my own information. Well, I said, I guess the last time I saw him was about a month ago and he got real mad at me for scatting some dumb dog. Yeah, I know, said Cotton, your dad told me. What did you think about that? he asked. To tell the truth, I said, you don't

mind my saying so, do you? No, he said, I'm asking, ain't I? First, when Wake got so steaming mad, I was afraid he might wack me. Then when he started running down the street chasing after the dog I thought maybe I really had done something awful like he'd said. But ever since, whenever I think about it mostly it just makes me worry about Wake.

Mr. Knopf hasn't been in yet, has he, Terry? asked Dave, patting the jelly off his mouth with such precision you would have thought he had a mirror and could see just where the little red balls were. No, no, relax, Dave. Have more coffee. Here, have more coffee. Thank you, he said. And give me some more napkins, too, please, thank you. Mrs. Gullace did that and came back over to Dave with a wet cloth and dabbed jelly off his shirt collar while Dave sat there like nothing was going on, drinking his coffee on the other side of her two arms.

What do you think about Wake, I said to Cotton. I worry about him sometimes, too, he said and his head started bobbing just like it did when he ran. Has he yelled at you, too? I asked. Oh, yeah, he said and looked at the front window. We've been yelling at one another. Well and what do you think? I asked. His chest flattened out and he said Just finish the chocolate milk, Monk, and this surprised me because I had gotten the idea that the whole reason for him coming with me here was to talk about Wake, and we had started to, and pretty well, I thought, and now all of a sudden, he didn't want to. He just raised his eyebrows and It's not your worry, Monk, he said.

So how is it, Dave? asked Mrs. Gullace. I haven't seen you all week. Oh, very bad, he said. We should be doing fifty-percent better this time of year what with school back in. We've got a new style of Chino slack, all sizes, men and boys, four colors, he said and held up four fat, white fingers. I'm selling them cheaper than anybody else in the city. He looked at me and Cotton and said, Nine-ninety-five and looked back at Mrs. Gullace who just leaned on her elbow and grinned. And Fruit of the Loom underwear, Terry. Nobody wears Fruit of the Loom underwear, anymore. What's the matter, Fruit of the Loom gives you plague? he asked and looked over at me. I wear Fruit of the Loom, he said, so do my boys. I wasn't asking about the business, Dave, said Mrs. Gullace. How are you, Dave, that's what I meant. How's the heart. It's not good. I saw the doctor. I'll need another operation, soon, he said, but he's very young, I want a second opinion. I trusted his father, I don't necessarily trust him. We used to do much better, Terry. You remember. This avenue used to be as good as New York. When the hell is Mr. Knopf going to get here?

It was 8:30. I said Oh boy, Cotton, I got to get going. Fine, he said, let's blow. Cotton paid for mine and I thanked him and wished Mrs. Gullace a Good morning and nodded my head at Dave who made a dirty face when he looked at my black pants that had Woolworth's written all over them.

Outside, Cotton said I'm going this way, Monk, down to the A&P. Now don't worry about Wake. He'll be okay. Just keep an eye out, though, and let me know. If I had a couple of minutes I would have asked him what he meant because I got the feeling he thought I understood something that I didn't, but I didn't ask because minutes I didn't have. I said Sure, Cotton, see ya, and we turned in opposite directions and started running off.

Catch with my Mother

Tuesday was my birthday. I was eleven. I got a pair of Converse, a football, a globe with tan oceans, and clothes. Not bad. Getting presents is still fun and I have a feeling it will always be, but the adding on a year part all of a sudden doesn't do much for me anymore.

I came home from the courts early today. I was all excited about playing with my new ball and breaking it in, but it was one of those days when all anybody wanted to do was fight. It must have been a full moon. I was going to head right upstairs but to my surprise my mother and Mrs. Simmons were sitting on the top one of the concrete steps that led into the house. It was a nice day for late October. The temperature must have hit sixty during the afternoon, but by five o'clock it had cooled off pretty good. There'd been lots of lazy, white clouds floating around all day, but now with the sun getting low over the three stories on the Central Avenue side, all the clouds in that direction had pink bellies, and their higher parts—which climbed straight up like rocky mountains—had turned a more wintery grey shade.

My mother and Mrs. Simmons sat there in their sweaters, both of them with their hair pulled back. They were eating from Mrs. Simmons' bag of pistachios and all around their lips and all on their fingers had turned red and so had the lap of Mrs. Simmons' dress where they were putting the shells. They were talking but not really doing their usual gabbing. Talking slowly. I figured it wouldn't hurt to stay down for a while.

I thought that if it was anything worth listening in on my mother wouldn't let me hear, so I had to figure out a way to do it

without her noticing. I started playing football with myself. I'd start at the Nelson's gate, about five yards to their right, then toss the ball high up in the air, run after it and catch it five yards to their left. Once I caught it, I'd turn back upfield, I'd fake and I'd juke, jig, mister, and jag, once in a while throw a lateral to myself, spin and jump, break a couple of tackles and eventually wind up in the end zone to their right where I'd catch my wind and start right over again. I know this all sounds pretty easy, but I'm not such a good catcher that I didn't miss any, and I spent more time crawling under cars than I did zigging and zagging, juking and jagging.

As the breeze picked up and kept getting cooler, they got closer and closer, talked softer and softer. They leaned their heads in and down like a pair of birds with their eyes on the same bit of food, once in a while bobbing in agreement. I kept running back and forth, and even though I was spinning real close to them and lateraled to that side every time, I wasn't having much luck picking up any information.

By twenty past five I had been under the LoBue's pick-up four times, under Dick's station wagon three, and over B&J's garbage barrels into the Pavone's backyard twice. I smelled like a quart of Seagrams and felt as grimey as the half a grocery bag trapped under Dick's front tire. One time I spun too close and tripped over the bottom step. I waved to my mother and Mrs. Simmons as I flew by and scraped my knee when I landed. My mother said What in the world are you doing, mister? Come over here and take a rest. Oh, I was just practicing, I said, there's a game Saturday. Hate to, mom, but, yeah, you're right, a rest might do me good.

No sooner did I sit down than Mrs. Simmons got up to leave. I said to my mother So what were you and Mrs. Simmons talking about? Without blinking an eye, she told me. The Simmonses are going to be moving, she said to me like I was a five year old. I said Oh, yeah? She said Mr. and Mrs. Simmons, Mr. Simmons especially, are too broken up about what happened to Jeannie. I said So they want to get away from here. Exactly, she said. There's too many reminders in the neighborhood. It hurts too much. They want to put it behind them if they can.

I felt real sorry for them. Mrs. Simmons didn't look all that bad, but Mr. Simmons had become a real wreck. He looked dirty and grubby half the time, and sad or bewildered all the time. He looked like a man who you'd read about had just died. My mother said They're moving far, far away so there aren't reminders about it all the time. You can understand that, can't you? Oh, yeah, I said, I can understand it. But something seemed not so kosher to me. She was

talking to me like I was too much of a little kid, being too willing and agreeable about the whole thing, like this was her way to get me to pull my sniffing nose out of her grown-up business.

By this time the temperature must have been down in the forties. The pink had turned to purple and there was less of it and more of the grey. My mother sat there hunched up with her grey sweater buttoned all the way to the top. Her arms were crossed and her hands were up inside her sleeves holding her elbows. She sat like that, rocking back and forth, a chilly red in her cheeks, her hands cold and old and red-looking, too—but smiling a smile that made her mouth tighter instead of wider, like a smile is supposed to.

So I said What are you smiling about? She said Are you looking forward to Halloween? I said Yeah, sort of. What's it to you. She didn't bother to answer. What are you smiling about, I repeated. She said Let's play catch. I said You can't catch. She said I can so. I'm quite a good catcher, she said. She lied. In a pig's eye, I said.

She wasn't a good catcher and she wasn't a good thrower, either, which meant I spent more time than ever crawling under cars. But my mother just kept flinging the ball and smiling like she was a little simple. Whether she threw it ten feet away or right to me, whether she caught it or just watched it sail past her head, she kept smiling the same simple smile. She said Go deep, so I went deep and she threw the ball clean over the Hoenikker's milk truck. The ball landed in the middle of the street. Just as I got to it, it took one slow tumble right under another car and I had to go crawling again which she seemed to get quite a kick out of, even though normally she would have been very upset about how dirty I was getting.

As she saw the ball tumble under the car, her smile switched from being a simple one to being a wise-guy one, to being a typical mother's smile. Like she had known all along about my sneaky little ways and thought they were very cute. As she kept throwing and smiling and just having a fine old time, I kept getting more and more suspicious because she always thinks I'm at my cutest when she's just gotten one over on me.□

Time of Spring (Spring Again)

Larry McLeod

In the old returning need
The ache in what we variously call
Mind, heart, soul, spirit, body
The woods come soft and tender
In an April dawn
Water goes the way it goes
Birds insist upon life
Again this year

Again I want to throw a baseball
Back to the boy
Who still wants to play so badly
Sometimes I open the picture album
But there is no picture of me
In the time where I wish to be

In the song of a bird
In the slow incessant touch of light
In eye consuming blossoms
A beautiful girl in white shorts
Turns the corner into a crowd of boys
A chorus of whistling
Her legs smooth and soft
Her breasts perfectly balanced
In this light

In her eyes it all comes alive again
I am a stone in the dark in memory
And yet feel again this time of spring
Whistling as loud as bird or boy.

What California Means to Me Part 14

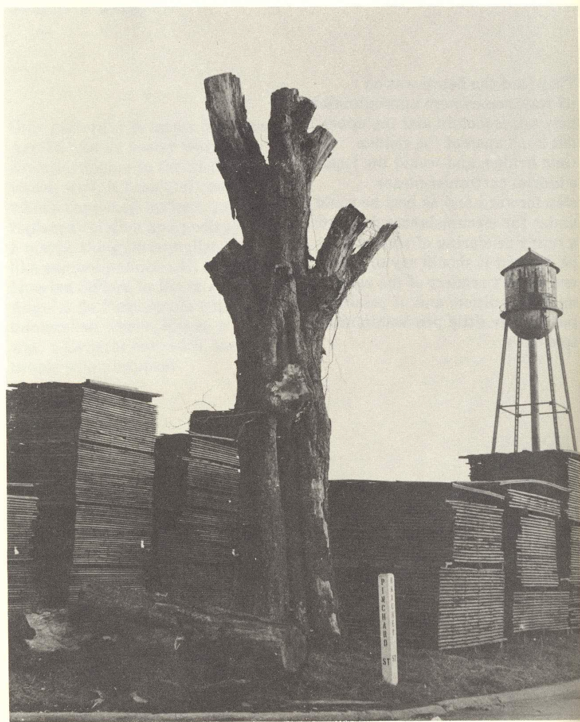
Wayne Hogan

Only yesterday it seems Matthew
Arnold told us poetry would
replace religion in the modern
world, well, it hasn't, of course,
what's happened instead is religion's
replaced religion and poetry's ever
a maybe thing, minimalist . . .
like sunny-by-the-sea El Pueblo de
Nuestra Señora la Reina de los
Angeles de Porciuncula (sunny L.A.) is
minimalist, where, like in a
war, a General once said, there are
people who disappear.

Job for a Cartoonist

Wayne Hogan

They said the bomb was on
its way, somewhere approximately
between Honolulu and the upper
left-hand span of the Golden
Gate bridge, and would the local
editorial cartoonist please
step forward and as best he could
under the circumstances do them
a funny rendering of what all
he thought it should say to
tomorrow's readers of the early
morning edition, and, if possible,
put a zingy little pro-isolationist
spin on it.



Keith Simms

Hume in the Fifties

Thomas A. Wooten

They will be coming by soon now. People line the highway on both sides. It's a narrow, two-lane highway bordered for short distances by shallow red-clay ditches that are dry and brittle this time of year—it has not rained here for weeks but the course we understand is in perfect condition. The road's margins will accommodate only a small crowd but that's all there is—not large enough for small children to be hoisted to their fathers' shoulders. What could they want to see? Two old people waving from the dark interior of a long black car? There are policemen on motorcycles and flashing lights but we're not exactly bumpkins, and the narrow curving highway does yield a wreck with ambulances and police cars every once in a while. They—the old couple—might not be waving either. You really can't see them, there's no way to be sure they're in there at all. But we're all here anyway. Except Father who doesn't come on principle. The principle is unspecified but it has to do with the unreality of politicians. The rest are here, the people from the neighborhood, some I know and some I don't. Amazing that even in such a small collection of houses there can live so many unfamiliar faces. (This is the Fifties. Unfamiliarity of neighbor isn't supposed to exist yet.) I know Mother and Gran, who came out thinking some unnamed movie star is visiting the city seeking escape from an unspecified scandal. You can tell her it's Ike and Mamie but she won't believe you. When Mother complains about Father's lack of patriotism, or curiosity, or simple historical awareness, Gran just looks at her daughter as if she had given birth to a loon. Later she is just as certain and uncomprehending of the other President and his wife passing through the people-lined streets of Dallas. As she watched the news clips over and over she kept repeating, "Why, they shouldn't do that," as if there had been a breach of etiquette.

Mother is wearing a blue polka dot dress and is standing beside me. Her shoulders and arms are bare and freckled and she smells of cinnamon. The smell is probably imaginary because freckles for me always conjure the smell of cinnamon. They do this because since an early age, earlier than the early age of this moment, I've cried long and hard over my own freckled skin and my father has created fantasy after fantasy to make palatable this unbearable condition. ("Pure silliness!" Gran said. "Doesn't he know he's a boy, Will?" she asked my father as if she suspected he had failed to explain one of the facts of life to me, namely, that silliness is a domain reserved for freckled girls.) My father is here in the smell of my mother's freckles, a romantic notion that wouldn't alleviate my mother's suffering one iota if I were to reveal it to her. Her suffering usually takes one of two forms and when she looks down at me and bravely raises the freckled corners of her bright red mouth like a Christmas bow being smartly pulled tight, I know that at this moment she's suffering wistfulness. Wistfulness is for her my father's current manifestation as certainly as for me he is the smell of cinnamon coming off her bare shoulders. When she looks down and pats my shoulder and brushes my hair straight across my brow and takes the glasses from my face, polishing one lens then the other in the pleats of her dress, and puts the glasses back in place, she is minutely adjusting the course of the tiny vessel she and my father launched which is every day frighteningly approaching the waywardness of its male progenitor. Her other emotion is anger but the clear day and light breeze that are outriders of the historic moment have suppressed that.

Across the way, directly opposite us, are my sisters, April and June. (We are all, the three of us, named for months of the year; I am Gus, for August, which even at this age I know could be much worse—I might have been born in December or February. My parents had planned a large family which ended in us three. They had, Gran said, intended to keep up with us by employing the names of the months, the theory being that this limited the possibilities of confusion at least a fraction.) April is seventeen, the oldest, and leaning her whole being at the moment into the muscular bare side of Randy Perlin, her current boyfriend and All-State running back. Her being, in its physical aura, is dark-skinned, delicately-boned and totally anomalous to its kin. Spiritually it is gay and quick and without apparent depth. In truth, her nature is penetrating in the ways of getting its desires. Which is what keeps boys like Randy Perlin interested beyond their understanding.

June is standing next to and slightly behind April. She is

resting her chin on the back of her hand, the top half of her body slouching forward so that the elbow supporting the hand which supports the chin rides into the soft folds of her stomach. It is impossible when looking at June not to assemble her in your mind in this fashion, arranging the pale girl into a structure of angled, awkward and precarious parts. It is absolutely clear to everybody that if we don't perform this operation, if we don't keep mentally assembling and reassembling June, she will collapse. As if to prove my observation, June fans a fly and grazes the head of the little boy, Tim Winton, who's standing in front of her. Grazed, notoriously pugnacious Tim turns and plants his sneaker into June's shin. The sneaker seems to be stuck there, on June's leg, but it is only an illusion caused by the rapidity with which Tim kicks her. It almost looks as if he's trying to unstick himself rather than pound her flesh. This is all over very quickly and unsurprisingly to June, who settles onto the grass to examine her leg, while Tim cuts through the crowd, thinking he's made a bigger impression than he has. Knowing June better would have saved Tim Winton his expense of energy.

This scene came back to me with such force today that it brought with it Tim Winton's name. Before this evening, his name had been lost to me, as had his subsequent history which involved ever more trouble the older he got and ended in Vietnam, a thing I'm sad to say I had also forgotten. But that isn't the point of this story. The point here is that while watching the evening news, finishing my first drink, I saw a man dive through the air at three thousand feet and save a woman's life—well I imagined from the report if not actually saw. This was one of those stories tacked onto the end of the half-hour of death, stocks and corruption that is, I'm sure, supposed to work some alchemical magic on what's preceded it. And in a strange, unanticipated way it did.

A group of weekend skydivers had just left their plane when a man and woman collided. The man regained control of his chute and managed to get it open, suffering when he landed only a broken leg. The woman was left unconscious by the collision. She would certainly die instantly on impact with the ground. But the group's instructor, a veteran of fifteen hundred jumps, saw the accident. Immediately he tucked in his arms and dived—he felt like a bullet, he said later—straight for the helpless woman. With only seconds to spare he intercepted her and managed to pull the lever that opened her chute. Rather than death, she suffered recoverable injuries. Her rescuer was a handsome young fellow who possessed all of the

dash and modesty of a film star who's performed some real heroism that pales any he's acted on the screen. The fellow looked as much like my father as any picture or memory I have of him, even down to the apparently absent-minded casualness of the gestures he used to describe his unbelievable deed.

Now June is just regaining her feet in her characteristically wobbly fashion from the spot of grass by the highway where she's been calmly examining the damage inflicted by Tim's kick. Still absorbed in her bruised shin, half-crouching, she stumbles into the road. Her aim, my guess is, is to get to Gran who will look at her leg and verify, as Gran does about everything not involving scandal, that no harm's been done, it's all extremely silly. June is in the middle of the road as the first motorcycle rounds the curve. It is coming much faster than it usually does when leading the motorcade. The reason that it is coming faster is that it is alone. The motorcade is delayed. Ike and Mamie have not even landed at the airport yet.

Just before the motorcycle can cut the girl down, a figure slices through the crowd, passes between Mother and me—dislodging my glasses and breaking a lens—and tackles the girl, rolling with her body tightly coiled around his own over the asphalt, through the shoulder of the road and down into the dry ditch. Before he stands, blinking blindly into the sun and brushing the red clay from his torn white shirt, I think he is one of the unfamiliar men who've been standing, waiting behind us. But it is of course Father.

Later, standing in a circle of reporters, wearing the torn white shirt as if it might have been inherited from Errol Flynn, Father says he had been sitting at his desk, working on Hume's notion that as there is only one kind of cause so there is only one kind of necessity and growing increasingly irritated with the whole thing. (A reporter asks, Whom? and it takes five minutes for the interview to get back on track.) Mother is trembling and watching a medic apply iodine to June's scratches, which she suffers as stoically as Tim's pounding sneakers. April has attracted the attention of a young reporter, for whom she is filling in details of Father's biography; and Gran and I sit on a bank of fragrant, freshly mowed grass, mowed in honor of Ike and Mamie. Absently running a hand through his long unruly hair, Father says that Hume's denial of any real distinction between physical and moral necessity struck him as so totally absurd—he shakes his head and lifts a hand, welcoming the shared consternation of his audience—he left his desk and

wandered down to the highway where he arrived just in time to save his daughter's life.

Well, now I will tell you the rest, what this means. It means that after that afternoon in the Fifties it became known to us without being clearly known—known to Mother, Father, April, me and even to June and Gran—that the events of that day had turned us from a collection of minor, related, individually propelled eccentrics—that is, merely blood-tied individuals—into a family, people caught up by more than the accident of birth into the web of each other's destiny. I won't say that it meant any of us drastically changed; except possibly in the ways a room changes after a frightened bird flies through the window during supper and bangs itself into a wall or two before finding its way out again—a curious slippage from the norm that's buzzed over briefly and quickly forgotten. In other words, something passed into and something else passed out of Mother. A little ether maybe that changed the proportion of anger and wistfulness and created a concoction a little closer to contentment. It was almost nothing that noticeable, however. Father now paid us all a little more mind, breaking off a portion he'd previously fed Locke, Descartes or Hume, so that we risked a milder, more humorous annoyance when we interrupted him. Gran was largely unmoved, while April, June and I floated along through the years until more useful experience rounded off our sharp edges and smoothed us out into the carpentered innocence of adulthood. I don't think any of us would have identified that afternoon as the moment the tide of our lives changed. And we would have been right not to.

But I will also say this. That while I will not claim a link between a saved skydiver yesterday and a saved little girl thirty years ago and a good-natured skeptic two-hundred years ago, I will claim that when I pick up this phone and dial this number a bell will ring in my wife's house on the opposite coast and my daughter will pick up the receiver as she always does, silencing the bell, and that given my daughter's gentle, stoical tolerance she inherited from her Aunt June and the willful cleverness she got from her Aunt April, she will together with me convince her honey-skinned, practical-minded mother that not to recognize necessity when it calls is just plain dumb and virtually impossible. I will just say this and then... Hello, my darling May.□

But Even This Is Not Enough

Elizabeth Dodd

She stops on the front walk:
nothing but the steady wash of dust
thrown against the mat and windows.
Cars blear past in the crisp light
of October, late in the day.
No one can compete with such clarity.

And then the tiny rituals
of early evening—she pulls off shoes
and stockings, pours a single glass
of inexpensive wine.
And nothing is wrong. She knows
her lover will call tonight;

her mother's doing better since the stroke—
home now, and cooking for herself.
There is nothing profound
in the way dust settles on each
hidden surface, the mild yawn
in her blood as she scrubs vegetables

for dinner. Nor in the way she forgets
to buy a paper coming home, doesn't
turn on the evening news, her house
filled with the listless motion
of food washed, sliced, cooked,
the stove's electric click of low heat.

* * *

He doesn't know how to touch her.
Pans stacked beside her at the sink,
she's busy, hands lost in the violent froth
of dishwater. He's given this woman his life,
but even this, it seems, is not enough.

He loves her. He stands behind her,
speaks into the tiny contour of air beneath her ear.
"What's wrong?" he asks.
"Is something wrong?"
"No," she says, "it's nothing."

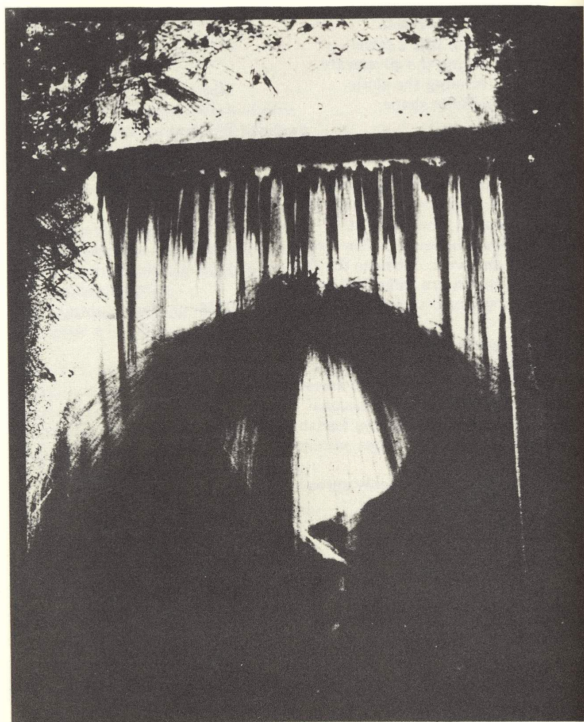
As he touches her breasts
from behind, she lifts a towel
and begins drying the silverware,
one by one, running the cloth
along each definite shape.

* * *

Morning. Nothing has happened
in her sleep. And she decides she can't tell
what she wants, what is right,
what her lover believes in. She dresses
in flannel and wool, drives to the lake
where the leaves are flung into color;
beneath, a subdued smoulder of briar and sumac

scratches across the hills.
She follows one dry streambed,
the low bottom scattered with smooth wafers
of shale, dead leaves and occasional
unbroken geodes. Ahead, two toadstools stand
from a fallen tree, their caps patterned

like grouse feathers suddenly spread
as the bird breaks into flight.



Keith Simms

Ice Man

Joe Lane

The summer I worked for Tony on his ice wagon, I was only fifteen, but tall for my age and at that delicate knife-edge balance where the violence of change from boy to man held both bitter and sweet. It was a time when each day forced new choices as to what I'd someday be.

New to the streets and sounds and smells of New Orleans, I was in a foreign land. I was as shy as I was hard, a cautious country kid from across Lake Pontchartrain and beyond, from the red dirt and slash pine end of Mississippi. Out of habit, I still said sir to my elders, and I looked at hard work as part of the growing up of a man. But I soon learned in the playground across the street, that you best keep these things to yourself.

Tony couldn't have weighed a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet, which is how he was most of the time under the cowhide apron he wore when he was toting ice; but he looked like rawhide bootlaces twisted tight, and he could throw a hundred pound block on his shoulder and swing another fifty from the tongs and go up the narrow, tight-cornered stairways of those big old houses we delivered to on Coliseum and Camp and Magazine streets. And he smelled of wet leather, stale sweat, and garlic. I'd just quit school when he asked if I wanted to work. I didn't ask him what it paid.

Coliseum Street, where I lived, was a quiet place running along one side of a playground in what had once been called the garden district. Thick-trunked oak trees hung with Spanish moss grew from the narrow strip of dirt between the wide brick sidewalks, called banquettes by the old people, and the granite curbs. The houses were big, two or three to a block, old antebellum mansions with carriage stalls in back, and the servant quarters above them

all cut up into small apartments like the one we lived in. Ours was on the second floor in the back where the Negroes used to stay, with a roofed-over walkway and a banister going back to the bathroom and stairs.

The backyard was cemented over where it wasn't bricked, with banana trees growing out of the holes cut in it. The side yard still showed some of the fanciness that had once marked the property. It had been a garden, thick with shrubbery, grass, and big trees. Seventy foot palm trees clustered in the center, forming a small oasis around the life-size statue that had once been a working fountain. The yard, like the house, was closed off from the sidewalk by a strong fence of thick wrought iron painted shiny black and set in granite, the pickets seven feet high and pointed. When they closed the gates at night, you could hear the heavy iron ring all the way in the back of the house. The owner didn't like us in that side yard, but she was a madam in the French Quarter and didn't live there. I went to the oasis a lot on nights when the room was too hot for sleeping.

Outside the window by my bed, the walkway ended in stairs going up into the main part of the big house, and that is where I sat and cleaned my .22 Winchester or traded comic books with my friends. The boys in the playground said there was a whore living beneath us, but I never saw her, try as I might, and she didn't bother us any.

Most of Tony's deliveries were made up the maze of steps that ended at wooden ice boxes squatting over drip pans in houses like mine. But each street was different, and it was not the same on the other side of the playground we called the park. On the other side, on Camp Street, it was smaller houses the people owned, and next to that was Magazine Street. It changed considerably there, with the streetcar tracks set in cobblestone and every other place a grocery store with fly-specked windows, and Italians inside who couldn't speak English and who would sell you cigarettes for a penny each if you could reach the counter with your money.

To the east of those streets lay the river, and the closer you got to it, the worse the houses got. Grass grew wild through the cracked sidewalks when you got near, and weed-grown lots broke the rows of houses, like teeth on an old comb, until you got to the T&P railroad switching yard and the big open field where the circus pitched when it came to town. You could smell the river from there, something from every mile it had come down through the country, and the open space was littered with the rubbers of rushed fucks and sometimes with the body of a tramp. Above the tin roofs of the

warehouses along the docks, you could see the masts of freighters moving up toward Canal Street. Just to the south lay the Irish Channel, the projects; and unless you lived there, you stayed away from that.

Leaving the country, where I'd gone to school and had my friends and caught bream in the mill pond, hadn't been easy, and I'd had to watch my step at the park. Most of them there were older boys who had never worked much, and you had to walk a careful line around them when you were new, and especially if you'd come from the country. But I knew how to keep my talk down, and I could throw a ball and run. In time, I started taking my old, dog-chewed boxing gloves over there, and soon I felt more at home. I had to have one real fight and was sorry afterwards; but after that, things there were not as important.

The job with Tony had come at about that time, and it was a good time. I needed money for clothes and to buy smokes by the pack, and I didn't mind if it was heavy work because that kind of work makes you strong.

Tony used a horse-drawn wagon to haul his ice, one of those with wide leaf springs and rubber-tired wheels, and he had a straw hat with holes for the ears of his mare. He never used the reins on the route; he kept them looped up around the seat and walked alongside, clucking and talking to her. He rolled his smokes from Kite, though I never saw him do it, and there was always one in the side of his mouth, wrinkled and stained brown with his spit. He never touched it, once it was lit, until he spit it out, and his dirty gray mustache was yellowed on that side.

It took a week to work the soreness out of muscles I was using going up those stairs and handling the ice. I didn't go with Tony in the early morning to pick up the load at the ice plant. He would pick me up later on my street, and then we'd start. Most of the places always got the same ice, but sometimes you'd go all the way to the third floor and she would want more. That didn't bother me as much as the places I'd go where some old woman lived with a bunch of cats or a bird, old women whose brown-freckled hands shook when they gave you the change, and who had the sick sweet smell of the place on them. And sometimes there were roaches in the coke bottles on the dirty linoleum floor.

By the middle of summer, Tony seemed happy with me and said he was raising me two dollars a week. I'd been jumping off the wagon at the end of the route, but didn't mind when he told me he could use some help putting the unsold ice away when he got home; not for two dollars a week more, I didn't.

That afternoon, I stayed on the wagon all the way to Tony's house. It was on Prytania Street, slapped up between the ones on both sides so close there was only room to get the wagon in by backing it. They were low houses, one story, with gingerbread up around the cornices and banana trees sprouting from the holes in the concrete. The garage at the back had accordion doors that leaned, and inside were big, lidded wooden chests lined with galvanized tin. Stacks of newspaper, tied with cord, were piled almost to the rafters. It was so full of junk, Tony left the wagon where he boarded the mare. He showed me how to wrap the ice in paper and pack it in tight. He said it would last the weekend like that. Then he started coughing hard again.

He'd started on the way to the house, sitting up on the soft-sprung seat and using the reins for a change, and it had doubled him up. Hunched over, his bony shoulder blades flapped like plucked chicken wings while he hacked and sucked air, his dirty-nailed hand cupped over his mouth. I felt sorry for him then and tried to think of something funny to say, but nothing came to mind. He stopped before we got to the house. When I finished putting the ice away, he was starting again and waved the back of his hand at me. I knew he was embarrassed and wanted me to go.

It was a week later when my life got tangled up. The job was good for me, and I was putting on weight. Even the stairs were getting easier. I was making nearly a man's wage and was hungry all of the time. More important, I was losing some of my shyness. I was starting to look forward to going into those apartments with the wash hanging from the back balcony and the crowded little kitchens with the penned up women, too young to be married, who knew what their loose housecoats were letting you see. They looked hungry, some of them married to merchant seamen never home, some of them with small babies you never saw but sometimes heard and always smelled.

At first I was embarrassed when I caught them looking at the tanned new thickness of my arms when I handled the ice. But when I did, they didn't look away. They looked me up and down like something they wanted to buy. They talked coarse, most of them, and I had learned to grin if I couldn't laugh, when they told me jokes their husbands must have told them. And though the day was fast approaching when I would be an ice man, not just taken for one, I knew little but what I'd heard in the park or read in the books the boys there had. My curiosity was pressing me hard, and I felt things I didn't understand.

I was unloading the wagon into the lined boxes in Tony's garage the day it happened. He had gone in the house with one of his late

afternoon coughing fits. It scared me some, and I had been smoking less and thinking about what would happen to the job if he got really sick or died. I was considering that when I heard the screen door at the back of the house close.

I looked up and forgot the ice I was handling. The chill that shook me had nothing to do with that. The wild face I saw held such a look of disgust, I felt I was seeing her naked. My knees went weak.

Her quick black eyes caught me and held, and there was a shadow of black about her, a darkness of look and purpose that froze me. Colder than the forgotten ice beneath my hand, her eyes raked me like those of a cobra surprised, and a foreign darkness of olive skin and coal-black lashes drew me. I saw a gypsy woman with teeth white as bone, and all the mystery in her dusky face of desert movies and camels and tents, of fortune-telling and casting spells, of stealing things left out in the night.

I dropped my eyes, and it had taken only a token of time to know those things about her because she was there from before, from the fine Canal Street theaters with the statues in the lobby, and from the Sunday night radio music of Scheherazade. And I had a thousand pictures of her stored in my head that would cause me sleepless nights at the oasis.

My first thought when I pulled my eyes from her, was a sadness that Tony's daughter would show such a lack of pity at his trouble. His coughing grated on my ears too, but he was a fair and decent man. She was not, I thought, a good daughter, and someone to be careful of. Still I couldn't ignore the ripe fruit roundness of the woman beneath the summer frock, or the way she stood. She looked as though she had always been a woman.

"He really ought to stop smoking," I said to break the spell. I had to say something. I jumped down from the wagon and slid the block of ice onto my shoulder. The job had taught me it was easier talking to women with something in your hands.

I looked her way again, and her dark head cocked. Her black eyes challenged me, angry that I'd seen the disgust on her face. They were still on me when I went into the garage. I could feel them. She came in behind me so quietly, I jerked when I turned from the ice chest and saw her. She leaned back against a cooler, her arms crossed under breasts that strained the thin cloth holding them. My ears felt hot from the way she watched me, and I felt clumsy. She wasn't tall, but up close she was older than I'd thought. Her waist was small, but there was no missing the way she held her pelvis, no missing the fullness of a grown woman pulling her dress tight across her hips and thighs.

"Christ, he's been doing that long as I've known him," she said

to the garage. "I thought when I married him, he'd of kicked off by now."

I almost let the ice slip off the edge of the chest. That last, she'd said to me.

"You're . . . married?" I felt dumb hearing my own voice.

Her eyes had changed. There was laughter in them that pushed the chill back inside where you couldn't see it. Her head cocked again, and she looked at me like she couldn't believe the difference in what she saw and what she was hearing. Then she straightened her head like she'd made up her mind, and the laughter was gone.

I found myself staring at her face, not daring to look lower, and seeing the fine texture of her brow under the heavy black ringlets. She was Tony's wife all right, as unlikely as it seemed, but she belonged somewhere else by her own admission, and she looked like she'd always be that way. I was glad she wasn't Tony's daughter.

"I've got to go now," I said, turning to close the lid of the ice chest.

"Why?" Her eyes had turned to teasing and, for the first time, I saw the full naked curve of her mouth.

"Well . . . I'm done, and . . ."

She moved like a snake, her eyes so steady on me that she was against me before I finished.

"Tom?"

Her voice was low, throaty low, and I was moved that she knew my name. I wondered if she'd been watching me from the windows of the house the past week.

"You're going to be coming over here a lot." Her small hand was against my sweaty shirt, her blood-colored nails spread like the claws of a cat.

"My name is Teresa." Her face was close when she said it, and I could feel the warmth in her breath on my throat.

"Come back tonight."

I stiffened. Her voice was husky, an evil whisper laced with something deep inside that left me no room for backing away.

"He goes to bed right after supper and sleeps in the bedroom up front so he won't wake me up with his coughing. Just come in here and wait."

She was excited, talking the way little girls do when they are running the play. I felt the urge to run, to get free of her. But instead, I stood rigid, ready to bolt, my back pressed against the wood of the cooler by the warmth of her body. I felt flushed, painfully aware of the places she was putting her hands. It had been enough with her thighs touching me and the weight of her woman's breasts against my chest, and I knew she could feel my excitement

against the curve of her belly. Her hand was on me, fluttering at first, her eyes hot and showing surprise when she squeezed me with her long, painted nails.

"Jesus!"

"Ouch!" I yelled out. Then, sobered by the noise I had made, I straightened. Tony could have heard. I put my hands on the flesh of her upper arms and pushed her away.

"I'll be here," I said, my voice hoarse, and ducked past her toward the door. There seemed no other way.

My head buzzed on the way home, and I kept my hand in my pocket most of the way. It had been too much, too rich to digest all at once. My senses had been scrambled, but I could still feel the way her soft breasts had flattened against my shirt where it stuck in the hollow of my sweaty chest, and I could still feel the give of her thighs, smell the woman sweat of her body. I broke into a run the last few blocks.

I ate supper quickly and went into the park. It was early, and I hadn't made up my mind for sure. I sat in a swing and smoked my third cigarette of the day and watched the bugs in the bright fuzz of the street lights and the flash of the small bats, up from the fruit boats on the river, that dove through after them. It occurred to me that I might be better off if I just took in a movie or hung around. I felt too tender, too tuned to the warm night, too choked with energy. My body was liable to get me into trouble. I could feel the new weight of my arms and thighs and shoulders from the heavy work, the powerful push of blood in my groin at just the thought of Teresa, but I was frightened. It took another cigarette to admit it was of her and not of Tony.

What I was considering was grown man stuff, fighting, cutting, and shooting stuff, and there were laws about those kind of things, some written and some not. And I had been brought up around people who would be the first to flush out anybody who broke those laws. Yet I knew my fear was more from the cold mockery those dark eyes were capable of and the use she might put me to. There was trouble there, for she had the darkness of the black witches of Congo Square, the chicken-bleeding, voodoo-chanting craziness that worked its magic to no man's good. And the devil himself had shaped the hot flesh on her bones.

When I finally stood and walked off toward Tony's, I smelled the magnolias from the trees over on Saint Charles Street, and I smelled them all the way.

The street was empty. I ducked up alongside the house and moved like a shadow into the garage and back into the darkest corner of that charged-up place. I waited, afraid to smoke, and

watched the patterns of moonlight on the concrete floor. They slanted in through the dirty windowpanes at the end and walked across the sawdust and old newspaper and drew dirty pictures on the dusty upholstery of the old settee.

The patterns were about an hour old, and I had calculated there were close to 9000 newspapers stacked there when I heard it. I stiffened, ears straining.

Again! I was on my feet, heart pumping. It was near the door, just outside, then briefly silhouetted as it melted inside. The sound, the soft rustle of slippers, stopped just inside. She couldn't see yet, but I could; I watched her, excited by my advantage. She stood like a dog on point, her head extended, her hands protectively in front. My loins flushed with blood. She had the smell of soap on her almost as heavy as the magnolia, and she looked smaller than I'd remembered. But she was unmistakably woman in silhouette, and I somehow knew she would be hot and naked beheath the robe.

"I'm here," I croaked. The night was my element, had always been, and her darkness seemed somehow diminished in the shadows of the place. I hungered to run my hands over the dark, smooth clay of her, to put my fingertips to the swell of her breast and feel the nipple, to reach behind her to the ripe curve of her behind and weigh the soft flesh there.

She came slowly until her fingers touched me, and then moved with more force, sending me back a step, putting my back against a cooler. Then she was all over me.

Her mouth was on my throat and I could feel the wetness of her heavy lips. Her slippers scraped softly on the floor, and I moved my leg between the opening of her robe, feeling the bare warmth as she clamped her thighs on mine. It took both my hands in her thick black hair to hold her face long enough to kiss her. When I did, I saw her eyes go white, rolled back like the voodoo sorceress in her trance, and her wet, red mouth was open to me. I reached for her breasts, but it was awkward and, as though scolding me, she took my hands and put them low on her pear-shaped cheeks. Her hands slipped beneath my shirt, and I felt the sharp scrape of her nails on my back. Her breathing got heavy, and she wasn't kissing me anymore. Her face dug into the hollow of my neck and she rubbed herself hard against my leg.

If she didn't stop that pretty soon, it would be too late. My level of excitement was too high, my imagination too vivid. The chance was there, fallen from the sky, the mystery ready to open to me. But it would cost some awful price she'd already set. I knew that without knowing how. I had made a mistake in coming, but there was a way to fix it.

For a moment, I imagined I was a man. I dug my fingers into the soft flesh of her and closed my eyes and ears and pushed back against her, but only for a moment.

She cursed me when she realized what I'd done, and for a moment, I was afraid Tony would hear in the house. But then it didn't matter: I hadn't done any real wrong, not half what I could have, and I could face him tomorrow. I slipped like a shadow from the garage while she was still hissing at me. I would have to brave those hateful eyes again, but she wouldn't bother me anymore. The stickiness would be gone by the time I got home, and I'd wash the jeans in the bathtub.

I didn't know she'd marked me with those nails until the next morning. When my sister asked me about my neck, I lied. Some things a man has to lie about, but I knew I wouldn't lie about it to some of those women in the tiny kitchens with their musky bathrobes and time on their hands—and husbands I didn't know. And I knew some of them were going to ask.□

Beemans Chewing Gum

James Ashbrook Perkins

So much gets lost
In the time we remember

Beemans Pepsin Chewing Gum
Bought by my mother
With the groceries at Schulte and Wisher's
Was handed out stick by stick
From the pack in her purse
As a reward in my youth
For particularly good behavior

Beemans is back
With Clove and Black Jack
The American Chicle Group
Absorbed in the sixties
By Warner-Lambert
Now touring again
Like an early rock combo
Seeking a market segment
Among those who were listening
The day the music died

I buy a pack at Jim Miller's store
Expecting to chew my way into my past

A stained-glass window
"Lo, I stand at the door and knock"
Right above our pew
In the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church
Sitting still through long sermons
Straight against the pew back
My legs dangling in the air
Until my feet go to sleep

Finally the minister blesses us all
With what I am sure is the voice of God
Mother gives me a smile and a stick of Beemans
And I walked with restrained haste
On tingling feet
From the strange light of the church
Into the clean straight light of the world

My mother died in April
I quit the church five years ago
I no longer work at being good
My feet are solidly on the ground
But I still like the taste of Beemans

Racquetball Meditation

James Ashbrook Perkins

I will engage him here—
That phantom adversary
Ezra Pound fenced
With his umbrella
Through Rapallo's streets—
In this large white rectangle
Where I have struggled
To avoid
His small black rectangle

Years of motion
To stay
Motion of years

Many opponents
Victories and defeats
But always one
My even match—
Like my shadow
Under these bright lights—
Mirroring my movement
Returning my shots

Years of motion
To slow
Motion of years

When he finally wins
Let it be here and quick—
My heart exploding.
Let me see
Through the red haze,
As I start my final dive
Into the blackness,
My last shot
Ticking the side wall
Then kissing the corner—
A perfect kill.

The Party

Janet McCann

this party in all the rooms
of the old frame house,
laughter in the high bedrooms
washing out over the porches like light,
over the groups
scattered across the lawn,

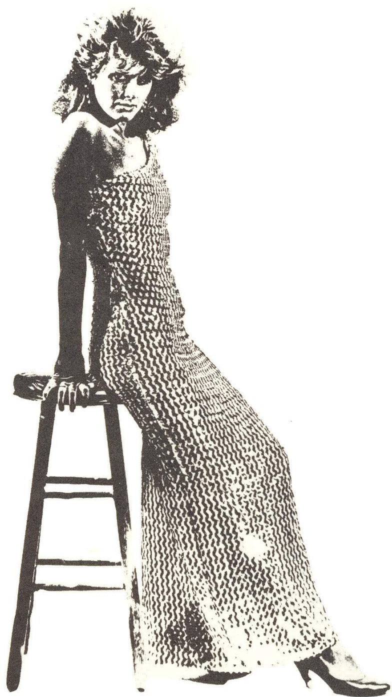
friends sitting in growing shadows
under the bushes in dusk
and all the windows in the house open!

they sit on wooden railings,
on the porch swing, the steps bleached bare,
on all the floors in the house
and in the deep grass.

you might catch a glimpse of yourself
standing in another doorway,
or hear your dead grandfather's voice
in the murmur
next to the forsythia.

in every room a different scene,
but none of them are strange
nor does anyone look up as you pass,
not the girl crowned with braids
or the bluejeaned boy with his hand
on her shoulder. Not the old couple
poring over a map.

it will be much later
when we all go home. Calling goodbyes
across the dark garden,
goodbyes echoing back
from the lawn chairs,
the peeling porch railing.



Keith Simms

Tangled Webs

Robert Hiles

At our first place in Tucson there was a beleaguered cactus in front and a guy who looked like a B. Kliban cartoon in the other upstairs apartment. His potato head had a top curl of red hair and ears that stuck out at odd angles. He stretched athletic t-shirts over his paunch and stood with one fist punched into his pear butt when he pounded on the door for us to "turn down that record player!"

A big wad of keys jangled on his belt. His girlfriend was crippled. She walked on braces and had one of those homely faces which beg for sympathy, though she probably didn't want any. Except perhaps on the nights there was screaming and things crashing and she'd thump on the door at three in the morning for me to call the police or an ambulance.

She'd stand there on the landing, lurching forward on her braces, her shortness all in her legs, her head too big for her body, her teeth too large for her face.

"He's overdosed," she'd pant, or "we've had an accident, call an ambulance." It seemed she should wave her arms, but her disability limited her panic. "Call an ambulance, please." Behind her, through their open door, two pea green sneakers pointed at the ceiling.

He usually came to before the ambulance ever arrived. I could tell by the sobs of "you cheating whore," "you rotten bastard," "you stupid bitch." When the attendants pounded on the door she'd cry "I was scared, I didn't know, I was scared."

When I went back to bed those nights—after peeking around the curtain to make sure the ambulance arrived—Elizabeth would twist uncomfortably and mumble, "They should at least get a phone if they're going to act like that."

Every time it happened, every night he carried her struggling

up the narrow stairs or there were shouts of infidelity and callousness, Elizabeth would squirm away from my arm and sleep curled up, her elbows and knees off the bed.

Some fun. Maybe it reminded her of home. The memories blotting out the reality. It was almost as if she was programmed for the worst. I'd lie on the outer edge of the bed, afraid to get too close. Better not to touch than to have a caress met with indifference.

Elizabeth always went to bed early. She got up early too. I'd pretend I was sleeping and watch her dress in the golden shadows before dawn. A skirt, blouse, jacket. Smart, low-heel pumps. A black ribbon in her long, gorgeous blonde hair. Her hair tumbled nearly to her waist, and would have tumbled further if it hadn't been for her mother. When Elizabeth was eight her mother flew into a rage about something, a gas burner left on or her husband's latest infidelity, whatever. It was common, and before it was over she had submerged one daughter in the bathwater until she fainted, then held skinny, screaming Elizabeth over the toilet bowl and lopped off her hair.

I watched Elizabeth brush her hair five mornings a week, using the brushes I bought her for Christmas. Then I'd hear her click out the door and along the sidewalk by the cactus. Her car purred in the parking lot beneath the bedroom window, then whisked into traffic and was gone.

Myself, I drove a clunker, only wore jeans, and didn't sleep until the birds mocked the dawn. In my work, I set my own hours. I owned one house that I rented out, and I was fixing up another. I also wrote. So it didn't matter if I stood in front of the refrigerator in the middle of the night, wearing sweat pants, eating yogurt, trying to decipher the spastic groans that seeped through the ventilation fan from next door.

I seldom missed them and Elizabeth seldom missed me. It used to be she'd wake at my every turn. That was a long time ago, however, before she took her job to heart, before she became like one of those, well. . . .

One night she must have had to pee or get a drink or something. She had stumbled half-eyed into the kitchen and there I was, pressing my ear on a glass against the wall. I heard faint echoes of "you dirty bastard," "you rotten whore," interspersed with various grunts and groans.

Elizabeth must have watched for several minutes without me knowing it. She was sneaky that way, always wanting to know if I was regular, or where I banked, or if my father ever beat me. Looking back, I can imagine how she would have stood there,

breathing hard through her slender nose, her arms folded across her short, pink bathrobe. She'd push blonde hair behind her ears with an automatic hand. Her nostrils would flare and her eyes harden.

"You're really sick." You could tell she meant it by the quiet way she said it.

I started and she walked away, not even caring if the neighbors were talking about us. She probably thought I was perverted, but hell, how could I be? I was in my own kitchen, and writers need to know all sorts of stuff. Elizabeth said I used writing as an excuse. I thought about all that.

I thought about how much I hated arguing with her too. It made my head buzz and stomach churn, like those modern poetry classes I took in college and didn't understand. I always felt I was in the wrong room, and kept checking my schedule, all through the semester. I got the same unsettled feeling whenever I argued with Elizabeth; it gnawed, as if there was something I was supposed to know, but didn't.

Maybe she just argued for the sake of it, just to get an adrenalin rush. I don't know, but we were usually too angry after we argued to even talk. She said she knew one day I'd hurt her. How can you argue with a mind like that? I even thought about going in the bedroom and teaching her a lesson, but I didn't. I just swept the broken glass from the linoleum.

One day, it must have been March, the Kliban character and the girl were gone. Perhaps they were sucked into some other world when the cartoon axis shifted. I don't know. All I remember is coming home from collecting rents and they weren't there.

The house I owned was a big two-story with a weak porch and bad plumbing. It was a bargain, and I did most of the repairs myself, dividing it into four apartments, covering the holes with paneling, increasing the property value $15,000. I planned to make a killing.

When I came home that day I was pretty stoned from smoking a joint I found in one of my tenant's apartments. She was a nurse and sort of pretty. She had green eyes and red hair, freckles and large breasts. She smiled a lot, but there was something melancholy about it, as if she cried every time she made love. She worked the intensive care unit at University Hospital, about five blocks away, and you would have thought she'd be more callous.

The day I found the joint I also found a picture she had stuck away at the bottom of a trunk, beneath her winter clothes and scrap

books. In the picture she wore her nurse's hat, white stockings, a garter, and nothing else. She was sitting backwards on a kitchen chair in a spot of sunshine. It was probably taken by her old boyfriend, a real ass who burned all the clothes she left at his apartment when she moved. The picture made me itch inside. I had a copy made and got the original back just before she got home.

She knew I was excited to see her, but nothing much came of it. I figured she was the kind who would want the rent lowered or the deposit back, or she'd call, depressed, in the middle of the night. I thought about evicting her, but the rental market was tight.

When I got home Elizabeth was waiting, excited and half drunk. Her make-up was mussed. Her hair was toussled. She said she'd just been promoted to assistant director for development at Video-Tech. She designed advanced communications systems. Systems so instant there's no time for tempered replies, for second thoughts.

"Hey, that's great," I said, and she jumped all over me for not being excited enough. I hated it when she drank because, more than usual, she heard what she wanted, not what was said.

I think Elizabeth was respected, but not too popular at work. The other women could see she was obsessed with success, which means they thought she was a bitch. The guys probably felt threatened by this attractive, intelligent woman, but wanted to screw her anyway.

When the promotion was made formal the next Friday, I met her at a bar near downtown. It was cool and smoky inside, and French doors opened on an enclosed courtyard with a fountain. There were vines on the walls, a gay bartender, and wicker everywhere.

There were also about two dozen people she worked with out on the patio. They lounged about the fountain with their ties loosened and their vests unbuttoned. Never had I seen so many guys who went to the same barber and tailor, and so many women with short, tortured hair and smiles. What really pissed me off though, was that they were younger and doing better than me, and I was just 29.

I sat quietly, picking at the hem of my jeans and drinking beer. Maybe I was pouting a little too. It wasn't often Elizabeth invited me out with her friends. She kept looking as if she expected me to do something stupid. Then someone said something and she laughed, tossing back her head, her long hair shimmering in the late day sun that reached the courtyard.

I felt wretched, as if they all knew the punchline and I hadn't even heard the joke. But there was consolation. I was consoled by the fact that one day they'd all be dead too.

We were the up-and-comers. Especially Elizabeth. She even looked the part, buying a new wardrobe of tailored suits and cutting her hair short, despite my protests. I used to love the way it fanned over the pillow, like a golden nimbus, when we made love.

"You don't have to take care of it," she told me.

"I know that," I said, walking around her, "but who'd you let cut it, your mother?"

"You're sick," she sneered.

"I'm sorry. Your hair really does look nice." She just couldn't take a joke.

I don't think she believed me. She went to the bathroom. She may have cried. I don't know.

That night she cleaned out her closet and threw away all of her old clothes, including her jeans and denim cut-offs. The cut-offs that had just enough room for me to slip my hand up the leg.

She wore them the time we went to Disneyworld, about four years ago, right after she graduated from college. We rode the little train that goes around the park that night. The last seat of the last car of the next-to-last train. It was cool and black and like being on the edge of a ferris wheel, circling all those bright colors and laughter. We were the only passengers, and I knelt in front of her and we made love, chugging slowly around the edge of fantasy.

After she cleaned out the closet, I dug the cut-offs out of the trash bin.

It wasn't long after that we unplugged our phone and moved to a duplex in the foothills. We bought a second TV and got the super cable hook-up with remote control. I suggested a trip, mentioned marriage. She talked about a satellite dish.

We'd sit for hours without talking.

Things were going good though. I even published a story and made an offer on another house. I was writing every day too, using the spare bedroom for an office. The picture of Joyce was on the wall, the dictionary, atlas, and almanac beside the blue typewriter.

The house was single-story, connected bedroom to bedroom, and sat on a rise on the western edge of town. The ceilings were low and the beams exposed, the curtain rods looked like Indian spears, and one living room wall was panelled with rough-hewn wood. The driveway wound through scrubland. There were mountains behind us, and in front we could see the city, stretching to distant peaks. The duplex was surrounded by saguaros, prickly pears, and creosote bushes that had tiny yellow blossoms in the summer.

Under the glowing desert moon, which looked like a child's night light, the landscape looked extra-terrestrial. Odd spiny arms

and fuzzy blobs stood in stark relief against the night sky. Javalinas—mild-tempered wild pigs—rooted among the shadows. There were owls in the distance. Coyotes chased jackrabbits through the brush.

That's when the neighbors fought. At night.

Her name was Marian. She was beautiful. Dark, Madonna hair and eyes. Firm, high breasts. Soft, fine hair on her forearms. She wore peach string bikini underwear, and I always meant to steal a pair from the washline.

His name was Lane. Shaggy dark hair and a bandit's moustache. A cashew-shaped scar on his chin.

We had just moved in and I was sitting by the back door, watching the sun set in an orange corona behind the mountains. A blue Rambler crunched up to their door and when they got out I said howdy. Lane nodded. He didn't offer to shake hands.

I think Marian was a reporter. Lane, I'm sure, played saxophone. We could hear the tortured instrument. O O O O that Shakespherian Rag—It's so elegant. So intelligent.

That's the same sound Marian made when she came. O O O O. Four times. Never more. But for every cry of O O O O, three feet from our bed, there were cries of "you fucking worm, you should die. You'll pay for this! I swear Lane, you'll pay!"

It was a regular performance. At first, we thought they were just rehearsing. A grotesque young George and Martha.

Sometimes things whacked against the wall, but it didn't wake me. I was already listening, hands folded under my head, eyes blinking at the shadows the lace curtains made on the ceiling.

Were they throwing plates, vases, books? Squishing grapefruit into each other's face? Once, I threw a pillow at Elizabeth. Another time I put her over my knee, lifted her skirt, and spanked her. She seemed to enjoy it until she gave it some thought. Then she verbally brutalized me for being violent.

"It's erotic," I told her, "I sort of enjoy it."

"Someday you'll enjoy beating me too," she said, then rolled over to end the argument. I went to the bathroom that night and sat on the edge of the cold, hard tub, wondering what had happened.

I still didn't think I had changed. I did the same things she used to love, except now she said I didn't know the difference between childish and childlike.

Once she laughed when I ate a carnation off a restaurant table. The other night she shuddered when I asked the waiter to bring ice for my Beaujolais.

Do you have to suck the bottom of the Eegee's cup? Do you have to sing so loud? One night she kicked me out of bed for wearing a

Spiderman mask. When she started reading *Forbes* and *Town and Country,* I picked up the subscriptions to *Rolling Stone,* Cosmo, and *Mad.*

There was another crack against the wall and it chased the thoughts. Elizabeth twisted on the bed beside me.

She groaned and whispered, "Those jerks. Why do people like that even stay together? It's disgusting."

Lane boomed, "You goddamn bitch."

I always hoped for something different, with a little more class. Elizabeth and I didn't yell and swear. We'd thrust and parry, sneak and strike. The morons, however, seldom delivered.

Bitch, whore, bastard, scum, worm.

"What about the $600 from when we moved in?" he screamed.

There were the usual sobs, the heaving, the gasped cries, then the smack of a calloused palm against a finely boned cheek.

I could feel Elizabeth tremble.

"My mother paid the deposit. It's my apartment!"

"Goddamn your mother, bitch!"

"Get out of the apartment, now!"

Another smack, a shriek, and Elizabeth doubled up as if she had been whapped in the stomach. I touched her shoulder and she shivered away. I whispered that I loved her, I was sorry, that I'd never treat her like that. She curled into a ball and I returned to the edge of the bed. Doors slammed. There was a scraping sound in the next bathroom. Then all was silent, except for Elizabeth's breathing and the perking of my heart. I was excited and sick. I looked at Elizabeth's back and thought of rescuing Marian.

Had he jabbed the dagger between her ribs, finding the heart and lungs like an expert? Was she lying on the cool bathroom tiles, her dark hair spread out, blood trickling from her mouth?

How I preferred the squeaky warning of the bedsprings followed by the O O O O that sparkled through me. How I preferred physical contact to physical violence. But the last time I touched Elizabeth she said "You can make love to me if you want, but don't mind if I don't participate." I had almost forgotten the exquisite pain of pleasure. We had become water. Totally indifferent, always seeking the easiest path. Elizabeth and I, we needed a flood, like the floods that rush over smooth rocks in the Rincon Mountains and fill clear pools.

> Elizabeth,
> I dream of
> your pink self
> moist before my tongue

the softest touch of
moss
on a baby's fingers.
You
around me
around you
tumbling
into a mirror pool.
Rocks smooth
from thousands of rains
from lovers
fitted perfectly into niches.

It was still in the typewriter when she came home with the newspaper folded under her arm like a riding crop. She put the paper and her keys on the desk and leaned over the machine, reading while she unbuttoned her jacket and stepped from her shoes. At first there was a hint of the forgotten smile on her lips. Then the color drained from her face. I wasn't sure why, but I knew I had screwed up, the way a cat knows fear. She watched the news in silence, ate something frozen for dinner, and said yes and no to my questions. She was in bed by 7:10.

I sat in the living room until the last light had been sucked into the west. Then I gently opened the bedroom door, stepped across the darkness, and sat on the edge of the bed. She was sitting up, I could tell by her breathing. I reached my hand out for her. She shirked away.

In the darkness I could hear her dry lips briefly stick before she said, quietly, as if she didn't want the neighbors to hear, "This is the last straw. You know that's not us. You're sick. I don't want what you've written for others. I don't want the sordid details flung in my face.

"Who was it, the nurse? I don't even want to know. How could you? Don't blame me for being cold about this. . . ."

"But it's. . . ."

" . . . I want you to move out. I've had enough."

" . . . a fiction. . . ."

"I want you out!"

" . . . it's all a dream. . . ."

"Out!"

Like a warped record on a bad stereo, the voice dragged out in an ether dream. A mournful saxophone rag in a tiled subway

corridor. Love becomes hate becomes loneliness becomes longing.

Seven months later.

There's another beleaguered cactus in front of my city apartment. But I return to higher ground.

It's warm tonight. The soft breeze blowing up from Mexico carries the yip of coyotes down from the shadow mountains.

City lights reach up to the stars. Stars glow through the branches of the creosote bush that shrouds the rock where I sit, smoking. The branches are webbed with spidery weavings. They glow in the night.

The night smells like—nothing.

The bedroom light is on in Lane and Marian's apartment. Somehow, they manage. . .

O O O O

. . . but to each his own.

What shall I do? What shall I ever do?

I'll wait.

Elizabeth will be home soon. She'll walk into the bedroom, step from her slip, slide between cool sheets. The bed is beneath the window. Tonight the blue moon will pour over her as she twists into a cocoon.

And I'll wait in this creosote womb, smoking, patiently, watching the black widows weave their traps, just as Arachne wove her doom. I've counted a dozen. A dozen fat, black oblongs, each with eight slender legs, weaving and spinning, branch to branch, a dozen tangled webs.

By morning, there will be only one.□

A Plague of Seasons

Cheryl Ervin Tennent

It has been the same since time
began, ice falling in parts
of the year, melting in others.
Continents come and go
with seasonal variety; mapmakers
will notice a piece of Africa
missing and shake their heads,
erase lines.
One day I will walk
toward your house and find
it suddenly on a different block,
turn around to retrace my steps.
When did this unlucky pattern
of seasons begin?
Birds fly toward collision,
avoid the nest, and small animals
burrow into rolling earth.
Men and women are left to hurry
into the shadow, searching
for midday, for some landmark
in their midst.

Perfect Strangers

Philip Miller

I've known them all my life,
the people I meet on the way
down the street, to my job,
toward some plan they halt
fleetingly as I walk past:
the lawyer across the hall,
the cigar store man,
the woman wearing costume jewels,
jade shadow on her eyelids,
fingernails blood-red,
a thin, snake-link chain
running through her hands.

And I know them only by short nods,
by passing glances,
by the perfunctory salutes
of perfect strangers,
by the way their eyes meet mine,
then turn back
quickly to the world,
half-smiling, a shadow of regret
crossing their faces
at these poised, thrown away
gestures: the barmaid, the milkman,
the cop on the corner,
the woman behind horn rims
waiting as I
fill the forms out wrong.

But they stay with me,
sometimes crowd into my dreams:
the cool-eyed banker,
the firm-lipped waitress,
the boy who throws the paper.
And we are growing old together,
day after day, we meet at bus stops,
wait in line for tickets,
and we never shake hands,
never touch beyond the moment
our eyes meet, catch, shift,
but I know each face
perfectly as my own
as I turn back to a world
grown ever stranger.

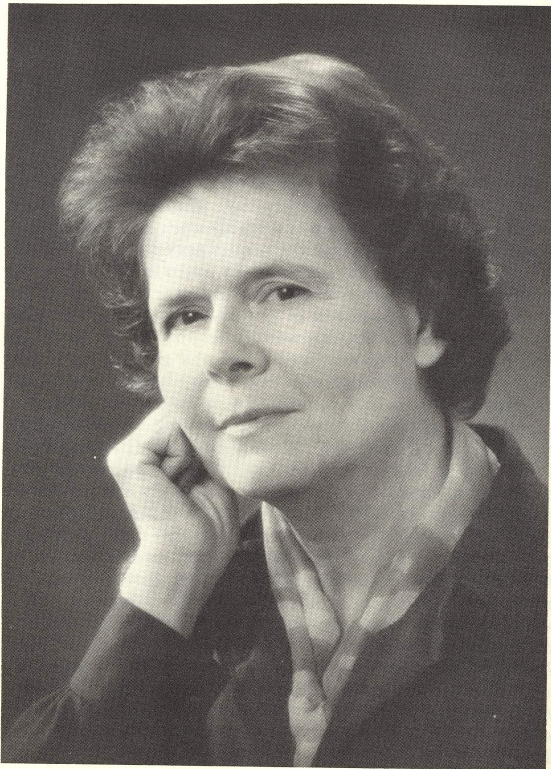
"The Courage to Read": An Interview with Helen Norris

Emma Coburn Norris

The quotation in the title is from Helen Norris's remarks at the 1986 PEN/Faulkner Awards ceremony, where another author surprised everyone by refusing to read his work aloud, offering a stirring aesthetic rationale as the preliminary to his silence. A writer with "courage and wit" was the introduction given by Richard Bausch for Norris, whose turn to appear before the same audience came next. As she rose in the midst of the stillness created by the earlier refusal, Norris opened with her own declaration, "I do indeed have the courage to read," and the grateful audience responded with hearty applause. Norris has often demonstrated this kind of courage. In 1979, for example, she gave up the academic life in order to resume the professional writing career she had begun in her youth. In addition to studying under Hudson Strode and receiving an M.A. at the University of Alabama, she has also studied at Duke; and while teaching in college she was mentor to Andrew Hudgins. Since 1979, her poetry and fiction have appeared in important periodicals and her drama has won regional prizes. With all of these works, she has consistently won awards that bring national recognition. *The Christmas Wife*, her first collection of short stories, and the novel *More Than Seven Watchmen* were published in 1985. The novel was a Literary Guild Selection, following the same designation for her second novel, *For the Glory of God*, in 1958. The University of Illinois Press is also repeating its choice of her short stories for a second collection, entitled *Water into Wine*, to be published this year. But Norris's appeal is not just to academics and critics; her audience constantly grows wider, as evidenced by media interest in "The Christmas Wife." A

dramatization of the short story starring Jason Robards and Julie Harris will be broadcast this fall.

The interview below was generated through a series of conversations in Norris's home in Montgomery, Alabama, in the summer of 1987. At that time we had a number of news-breaking items to start us talking: the television production, the publication of a second story collection, and the winning of her second Andrew Lytle Award.



Courtesy of Paul Robertson.

ECN: I'm excited about having an important writer in our midst, but I'm more interested in how you feel about it.

HN: I'm not important, but ambitious to get better; and I have a few more years left to improve. I still feel that everything I write is an experiment.

ECN: What do you dislike most about the whole process, from start to finish?

HN: The marketing aspect. I don't mean rejection slips. I don't mind being rejected. One might as well quit if he can't stand the rejection.

ECN: Which part do you like best?

HN: The planning of the story is the most exciting part; you don't even have to write to enjoy that pleasure. The first version of a story is amorphous anyway. The real fun is in revising, in making something better. Eudora Welty has talked about this in the same way. When you reach a certain stage in the story's development, especially in longer works, like the novel, the story acts as a magnet, drawing things toward it. What you see or read, you put in; and interestingly enough, the story opens up and makes a place for what you've found. This seems to be inevitable.

ECN: Do you consider this way of working free will or necessity? Is it foreordained?

HN: The excitement is in the fact that you don't know where it comes from.

ECN: Are you saying that something from the outside is involved, something beyond the self?

HN: When things are going well, it seems to be like that. You feel that you are penetrating some veil in making your effort; you are trying to know more than you know. An actor once explained to me how an actor can go over some kind of threshold in becoming the character he plays. The actor is vulnerable when this happens, and the other actors know it; they give him room to follow this lead. Writers reach a similar threshold. It's as if you are pushing very hard against some barrier. You begin to know more than you know, but you don't know how you know it.

ECN: This must be what happens with your male characters. The men I know find it amazing how much you know about men, how convincing your characterizations of men are. This is especially interesting in your characters who are clergymen, as in *More Than Seven Watchmen.*

HN: Empathy is essential for any writer: think of Keats, who

became the bird singing, and his concept of negative capability. Shakespeare, it goes without saying, was the best at this. I remember talking about this with a friend of mine at the University; he was from my hometown, studying writing too, going to be a reporter. He said that he wanted to experience everything. But I told him he couldn't. To return to your question, everybody has always said that women writers "can't do men." My high school English teacher, a very respected man, told us that. He was always referring to "lady novelists" in a kind of condescending way. People forget that many male writers can't do women either. Look at Becky Sharp, for example. For years the critics were not aware of that failing because the critics were men. By the way, originally all my protagonists were men.

ECN: Why?

HN: Protagonists had to be men if they were to be taken seriously. Men have generally been held in higher esteem, especially in terms of undergoing change. Men could undergo a change as a protagonist because they were considered capable of holding on to their convictions, while women were too changeable already. They were not taken seriously, even by other women. I chose male protagonists because I wanted to write about someone who would be taken seriously.

ECN: It must be awfully difficult to learn what it is like to be a man.

HN: Of course it takes effort, but you have to do something that takes effort. Why repeat something easy? Effort is what produces art. Lately, of course, women are considered acceptable as protagonists. There is a new understanding of women that fosters their acceptance as protagonists. Now I make a deliberate effort to use women as characters, and I work on my portrayal of women.

ECN: How did you get started as a writer?

HN: At home through the influence of my parents, who were very admiring of the creative process. So much so that they read *Les Misérables* on their honeymoon in the Blue Ridge Mountains. They encouraged me. I grew up before television; we had no artificial entertainment. We all wrote. We wrote plays and operettas and performed them; we made fudge and sold it. We improvised our own entertainment with our friends. And we were not the only ones in the neighborhood doing this. [Norris is referring to Vaughan Road in Montgomery, a heavily populated area which was once her father's farm.] One family we knew had seven children, all of

whom wrote novels. I can still picture them, clustered around the bed of their mother, who was an invalid, reading their novels to her. Listening to them seems to have sapped her vitals. We would gather after school and on Saturdays and read our novels to each other in the ditch. A friend of mine spent her time in study hall writing her novel, which she read to us for days on end. It was the story of a girl who had a baby. Before she finished the story, someone told her that her novel would never work: the girl in the novel couldn't have a baby because she didn't have a husband. My friend stopped writing and never finished her story. Kids today do drugs; we did novels, and I never kicked the habit.

ECN: When did you write your first novel?

HN: Age nine. I named it "The Milton Twins" after the Bobbsey Twins series. My parents liked mystery novels, and I wrote my first mystery novel at age twelve.

ECN: You were introduced early, then, to the literary as well as the oral tradition. In reading your stories, however, I notice that the rural South shows up in your dialogue. You do have characters who are not educated the way you were.

HN: That dialogue is difficult for me. First of all, because the rhythm, the cadence of every sentence, is important to me. This cadence is what I have to have right. I hear it all as well as look at it on the page. Another difficulty comes out of my experience growing up: I didn't hear the kind of banal, ungrammatical—what some people call "redneck" speech patterns. In a story like "The Quarry," for example, I have difficulty with the characters' voices. "The Christmas Wife" was such a relief, when I could work more naturally with the man's dialogue and his thoughts.

ECN: It must have been the same with the clergymen in *More Than Seven Watchmen* and *For the Glory of God*. Does this seem to be the only way publishers will accept the introduction of God or a religious dimension of life?

HN: It's a curious problem. The trades will not accept clergymen except for the ones who fall. Publishers seem to have to categorize audiences ahead of time, to aim at specific markets and thereby to set limits in advance. I know people whose lives include church, thinking about God, praying, don't you? But even the writers whom I've met at Yaddo and MacDowell ask me about that part of my work. Once, when a young composer friend was struggling over a difficult decision in her career, she asked me for help. When I

suggested that she pray about it, everyone was horrified. Some have even asked me with great curiosity, "Helen, do you really pray?"

ECN: What is it like at the writers' colonies?

HN: The isolation, which is the reason you go, is the most overwhelming aspect of the experience.

ECN: Do you have a sense there of the writers who preceded you?

HN: I've stayed in West House at Yaddo, the same house where Carson McCullers stayed, and in the very same room where Katherine Anne Porter worked.

ECN: Any sense of someone looking over your shoulder? Any voices echoing?

HN: Only in a trivial sense, with trivial topics. I have imagined some of the scenes that we've read about in the biographies occurring there [referring to scenes from Yaddo in the biography of McCullers, among others]. When I'm working, scenes flash into my mind, anyway; but they are not always scenes I can use in the piece I'm working on at the time. Another good part of the experience at the colonies is being able to talk with other writers about what they are working on.

ECN: This must be the best place to do that kind of talking. Could you do much of it in academic settings?

HN: Not really. Academic people have objected to such things as my having written a novel instead of the regular master's thesis.

ECN: Was this for an M.F.A.?

HN: No. I hadn't even heard of an M.F.A. until several years ago. This procedure was what Hudson Strode wanted and convinced the other professors to do. Although I had already completed the full program for the degree, mine was the first to be so used. It was his idea, not mine. Years later, when I applied at Duke, friends told me that my novel-thesis would work against me. This kind of attitude surfaces in academic settings. I knew one professor with mean teeth who would refer from time to time to my "little novel." To me, academics are on the outside looking in, unless they also write.

ECN: Since you've left the academic world, I'm sure your working habits have changed. When do you write now?

HN: Whenever I want to. I also have a house, a yard, friends, and many other kinds of activities. If I were a genius, I would sacrifice them for my writing, but I'm not. I put friends first.

I don't give up things for the writing, but I do give it a lot of time. I get up and write in the middle of the night as well as in the daytime. At night the arresting images appear. In the morning I'm fresher, using the logical part of the brain. In the morning I can stitch the scenes together like a quilt.

ECN: Do you follow regular patterns during the day?

HN: Not unless I'm at a writers' colony; then I write all day every day. Interruptions at home are okay, but I begin to feel guilty if I'm not writing.

ECN: What about reading? As teachers, we've based much of our lives on reading; but isn't there a time when reading isn't enough?

HN: Reading can satisfy the imaginative urge at some point in one's life, for example when my children were little. Children don't like it when you devote your time to writing instead of to them. I've talked about this with the women at Yaddo.

ECN: But children can't stand it even when you're on the telephone.

HN: Or even when you're digging in the garden, when you're doing anything creative. Women are so timed. There are very few years when they can have it all. I've always been a writer, but not a full-time one when my children were at home. I started writing again when my children were in school. Eighteen years after my first novel was published—graduation, publication, and marriage happened all at once for me—I published a second. And then twenty-eight years later, two of my books came out in the same week.

ECN: So the difference is that you kept writing, although not always publishing.

HN: When I got back into it in 1979, it made me feel better—to push words around. I started writing poetry first because I needed to learn condensation. Short stories were easier after that. I follow a classic pattern in my stories: they all have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and include a climax. I write about people and important issues in their lives, about people waking up. As I said earlier, when I write I hear the words; sound is essential. If I can't write with the rhythm I want, I'd rather not be published. I'm talking about not only rhythm, but sounds of vowels, of trochees, monosyllables, and caesuras. This is not a rational process: the symbolism, imagery, refrains, the lyric or musical quality is beyond that. This effect is involved with the passion in my characters' lives. [Norris has written about this for her publishers: "I

intend my stories, as opposed to a current bloodless look at the world, to be full of passion in its radical sense."] I'm not talking about eroticism.

ECN: I want to ask about publishing in light of what you've said about the marketing aspect. Academic presses have gotten a lot of publicity lately for taking on creative works like yours that the big commercial publishers are afraid of [Norris and *The Christmas Wife* were mentioned in a *New York Times Book Review* article in summer of 1987, as an example of success in academic publishing].

HN: Zondervan is known, of course, for religious publications, not novels like mine. I thought *Watchmen* would have made a good Christmas story for a commercial magazine, but it turned out better as a novel. The commercial houses relegated it to the religious area. [The novel won the 1986 Christian Book Association's Gold Medallion.] Other writers also ask about my publishers. At Yaddo, everybody said, "Zondervan?"; and at the PEN/Faulkner ceremony people asked if I like my publisher [referring to the University of Illinois Press]. And of course I said yes. This nomination was the first time a university press had gained such access to this kind of market.

ECN: Besides publishers and markets, I'm still interested in the voices—what you hear in your head as you write, how you create different voices in your stories.

HN: This goes back to my interest in cadence. Prose has to be heard, too. Young people are not necessarily aware of this because so many of them have a hearing problem from listening to all the loud music. The dialogue has to be something I hear. I don't normally express myself the way many of my characters do. I've tried to remember some of the voices from my childhood in order to accomplish this. I can recall a certain kind of circumlocution. Once, when a man who worked for my father came to our house to ask for help—his truck was stalled, something like that—I remember his earnest plea for help: "I'm a little boy lost in the tall grass."

ECN: There's a great deal of sensitivity in your handling of these characters, no condescension. I'm thinking right now of "Money Man."

HN: Some people have found that story repulsive.

ECN: I can't imagine why. It's not grotesque, if that's what they mean. It could have been grotesque, or sentimental; but it has that combination of passion and restraint, that sweet

cleansing pain that wakes your reader up. Bausch's "courage and wit."

HN: With a story like that you have to pinch yourself in because the central character is a little retarded. Establishing the narrative voice is more difficult in that case. You need a particular narrative voice for each story; the earlier you establish it, the better. This is one place where the writer establishes power. He has to anesthetize the critical faculty for the time being. People are moved through emotions, not intellect.

ECN: This makes me wonder who your favorite writers are. I know you have a wide range of interests, but what are your preferences now?

HN: I've always preferred the older writers: Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and especially Chekhov. For sheer enjoyment, I pick up a novel by Trollope; and I like Thomas Mann.

ECN: What is something you've learned about writing from the great Russians you've mentioned?

HN: If I have to pin it down, one thing is that you understand life better after writing. For me, it's a chance to make something out of whole cloth.

ECN: Would you call it a process of discovery?

HN: Yes, as Gide talks about first getting a sense of "loving bewilderment." Writing is always an adventure, and it's never the same.

ECN: This helps me understand how you can portray such a wide range of experience, including pure humor as well as wit and irony.

HN: Is irony a dimension of life, a rhetorical technique, or a perspective?

ECN: Whatever it is, in your stories it's related to that quick, subtle turn you make before the reader catches on to what you are doing: your wit pulls you—and us—back before you get into something that could be too pathetic or emotional. It's kind of Chaplinesque to me.

HN: Of course, "One Day in the Life of a Born-Again Loser" is a funny story, but it's almost a tragedy.

ECN: Even though you use realistic details, many of your characters seem to live in a distant world. The emotional context, though, is always recognizable. Is it the Jungian symbols that create this effect?

HN: I have a story containing a television set. I do use details of modern life. In "Starwood" the editors took out a reference to

Viet Nam. I think it had something to do with the inconsistency with people riding trains. In "The Quarry" a woman digs a hole and performs a ritual, and the quarry itself is probably Jungian.

ECN: Don't forget the well in "The Singing Well."

HN: Those symbols—the caves, for instance, in "Starwood"—help me to get breadth and depth without too many words. But my family and friends often use them to try to figure me out. My son, who was an English major at Sewanee, has pointed them out to me.

ECN: How have the homefolks reacted to your success?

HN: The promise of television makes everybody sit up and take notice. People really think writers are very odd people. They may be right. I got more publicity when I was accidentally locked in the Post Office than I have ever had. That story made the front page, perhaps because of my letter about it.

ECN: Is this "Why I Live at the P.O."?

HN: Almost. People who have never read my stories remember the newspaper's coverage of the incident. Because it happened during the Iran hostage crisis, I called myself a "hostage" of the Post Office.

ECN: Are writers odd people, a la *The Wound and the Bow*?

HN: Well, if you were utterly happy, you wouldn't find it necessary to write. Some kind of divine discontent is necessary; writing may be a way of making oneself content. On a certain level, one writes to make himself feel better. I feel guilty about not writing, but I am not driven. You constantly measure your production against what you think it should be. I once took up watercoloring. It was therapy and great fun, but I had nothing there to live up to.

ECN: You have said that academic life is something you had to overcome. In what way?

HN: I'm thinking about the dominance of rules. This is the kind of influence that has to be resisted. An interest such as mine, literary criticism, can be intimidating. On the other hand, there are academic habits like overpunctuating sentences. I didn't write during my years as a teacher, just as I didn't when my kids were small. Academic papers are fun to write, but they use only one side of the brain. I have an academic side, but it's not my deepest side.

ECN: Where and how do you position yourself as an artist?

HN: An artist is someone who intends art, as opposed to a craftsman who can achieve money and recognition. This

means you never arrive: you are out there alone, judging yourself harder than others do. You know there's a razor's edge between divinity and folly and that you can fall off onto the folly side any time. When you have other motives [than intending art], you don't have this problem.

ECN: How do you feel now about this stage of your life and achievement?

HN: My physical health is good, my emotions sound. All my senses are sharpened; they are true perceptors. I use all five of them in writing: smell and taste particularly. If I can think about it, I can smell it. You have to incarnate what you're writing about, and you can't use ways you've used before. Something fresh from the writer calls forth a fresh response from the reader.

ECN: Where do you get ideas for stories?

HN: Conversations. Conversations with everybody from my friends at the writers' colonies to the young man sitting by me on the plane coming home. I learned about woodcarving from the men who show their work at the craft shows here and from the father of another writer. A friend laughed at my reference to the cormorants chewing up my typewriter ribbon and began to set me straight on cormorants. Then I started research on them for my story ["The Cormorants," in the forthcoming collection]. A young man who was what they call a "ground pounder" in Viet Nam told me what it was like to be there. The Jamesian concept of the "germ" of a story is a good description of what happens. The germ of "Water into Wine" was an experience with a door-to-door salesman who tried to convince me to buy a water-filtering system. People will talk to me—and I listen.

The Alabama Shakespeare Festival: Fifteen Years of Growth and Change

Claire C. and Gerald Morton

The Alabama Shakespeare Festival progressed from being an idea in 1971 to a reality in 1972, its first season. Martin L. Platt, a recent graduate of Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh, became the director of the Anniston Community Theatre in 1971, and in the same year he brought his idea of a Shakespeare festival to the Alabama Council on the Arts and Humanities. Platt received a grant from the Council in the spring of 1972; within a few months, the opening season of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival began with the production of *The Comedy of Errors* on July 12.

Despite a small acting company and technical crew and an unsatisfactory substitute for a theatre, the Anniston High School gymnasium, Platt had planned an ambitious first season, following his opening production with two more Shakespearean plays, *Hamlet* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. Ticket sales of three thousand generated insufficient income to meet the first season's expenses, but attendance and critical reviews indicated an enthusiastic response to a professional theatre, and Shakespeare theatre in particular, in Alabama. Additional support for the theatre came in the form of a volunteer organization which met for the first time two days before the season opened.

Some of the problems of the opening season were solved when in 1973 the Alabama Shakespeare Festival moved to a new theatre, part of the Anniston Educational Park Complex. The move was part of an expansion in many areas of the Festival; the acting company increased from fifteen to twenty-five, the ticket sales rose

from three to five thousand, and the income doubled, although it was still smaller than the operating expenses of the growing Festival. Platt again directed a month-long season which included three Shakespearean and one additional classic play. Following the theatrical fashion of the time, Platt utilized bizarre settings for Shakespeare's plays, including an antebellum South *Much Ado About Nothing* and a rock musical *As You Like It.*

The popular and critical success of the second season resulted in an increase of productions in the 1974 and 1975 seasons. These seasons each included five plays, three by Shakespeare. The audience continued to grow, with ticket sales rising to seven thousand in 1974 and ten thousand in 1975, with 1974 marking the first financially successful Alabama Shakespeare Festival season. In the same year, the Festival hired an associate director, Bruce Hoard, who directed one play in that season and in the next.

The 1976 season was an important one for the Festival, which developed a relationship with Actor's Equity Association. Previously, the Festival had relied on recent college graduates to fill its acting company. Only one Equity actor, Charles Antalosky, worked for the Festival in 1976, performing the title role in *King Lear.* Another highlight of the fifth season was the Festival's *New York Times* review which included favorable comments about both the Festival and its director.

Up until 1977, plays by Shakespeare had constituted the majority of the Festival's productions; the sixth season included only two Shakespeare plays along with three others, one of which was the Festival's first production of a play by a living playwright, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.* In the tradition of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, the Festival produced the Stoppard play in the same season as its Shakespearean antecedent, *Hamlet.* By this point, the Festival had sufficiently established its importance to the state and the region to be proclaimed "State Theatre of Alabama" by Governor George C. Wallace on June 17, 1977. (Wallace's second wife Cornelia had served as Honorary President of the Festival's Board of Governors in its opening season.) The Governor's proclamation, along with the previous season's national critical attention, may have been the major factor in the 1977 season's large increase in audience, from ten thousand in 1975 and 1976 to fifteen thousand in 1977.

The following year saw two major events, both of which resulted in important changes in the function of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. First, the Acting Conservatory Training Program was established:

> . . . the Conservatory was born out of the conviction that the Festival needed to serve the southeastern region by making its educational and cultural resources available to the greater community. It was also created in an effort to develop a pool of professional actors and directors in the Southeast. (Volz 34)

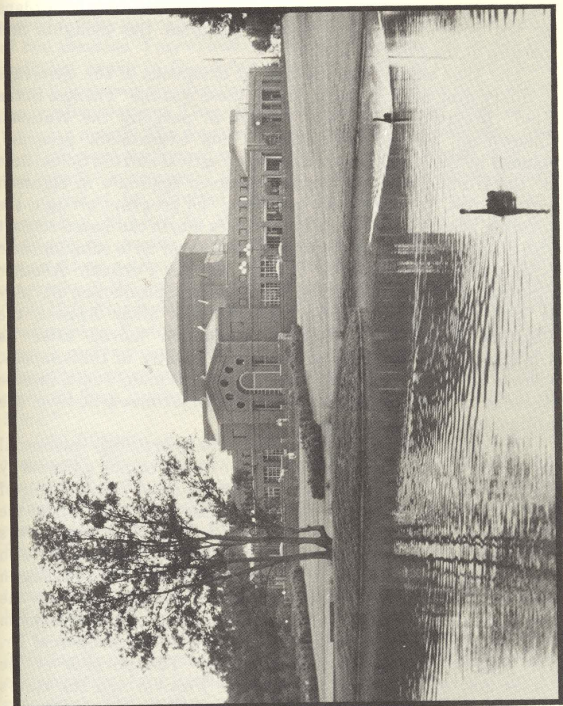
The Festival also expanded its role by touring. The first touring production was *The Taming of the Shrew*, which toured for six weeks in seven southeastern states. The touring program continued until the 1985-86 season, producing one play in addition to the regular season. In 1978, the tour attendance numbered twenty-two thousand, only one thousand less than the regular season attendance; in subsequent years, the tour attendance usually exceeded the regular season attendance. And almost certainly, the touring program brought to Anniston new theatregoers and first time visitors to the Festival's home.

Other new programs were created in 1979 and 1980. The eighth season, 1979, saw an increase in both the acting company and the touring program, which included performances in eleven states. The new program for that season was "Shakespeare Sundays," Elizabethan church services. In the next year, another new program was originated, "Music at St. Michael's." These two programs introduced the public to other aspects of Elizabethan culture. Another high point of the 1980 season was an invitation for the Alabama Shakespeare Festival to join the League of Resident Theatres (LORT), an invitation that the Festival had been working toward for several years.

An important addition to the Festival came in 1981 when it acquired a second theatre, the ACT Theatre in downtown Anniston. This second theatre, with seating for one hundred, was beneficial in a number of ways; primarily, it offered the opportunity for the staging of plays in an intimate setting. The Alabama Shakespeare Festival's first musical, *Oh, Coward!*, was the first ACT Theatre production, and the Festival took the production to Atlanta for its first performance there. At its tenth anniversary, the Alabama Shakespeare festival enjoyed significant popular and critical acclaim; financially, however, the Festival continued to experience difficulty. Deficits had been rising steadily for several years, and fundraising efforts were largely unsuccessful. When in 1981 the Festival's expenses rose to over three quarters of a million dollars, the result was that "local and regional associates of the Festival were less enamored with the ASF's financial and organizational

management" than the public was with the Festival's performances (Volz 51).

A solution to the Festival's troubled finances was found in 1982 by businessman Winton M. Blount and his wife Carolyn. Their solution to the immediate financial difficulties was a contribution that covered almost all of the Festival's outstanding debts; their solution to the long-range problems was the offer of a permanent new theatre complex in Montgomery. Such a complex would allow



Courtesy of Phil Scarerook.

the Festival a much longer season than the four to six weeks to which it was limited by the Anniston theatre, thus giving the .Festival an opportunity to recoup some of the expenses of its major productions.

With its financial future secure, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival began its eleventh season in Annison in the summer of 1982. The Festival offered only three major productions; other offerings included the first Shakespearean play by the Conservatory and two performances booked by the Festival on subscription, one by the Roadside Theatre and another by the Free Southeastern Theatre. In addition to its successful season, the plans for the new Montgomery theatre occupied the thoughts and energies of the Festival troupe.

The 1983 season was marked by expansion of the Festival's auxiliary programs. Notable among these was the "Theatre in the Mind" program which was funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This educational program, planned by the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and the Committee for the Humanities in Alabama, involved seminars in eighteen communities. Through these seminars, the program brought the talents of scholars, directors, and players into broad-based contact with the theatregoers of the state in such a way as to enhance their experience at productions offered by the Festival. Another highlight in the season was the Festival's first production of a play by an American playwright, Bill Davis's *Mass Appeal*; the Alabama Shakespeare Festival production moved after its Anniston run to the Indiana Repertory Theatre in Indianapolis, where it sold out. Finally, for the first time in many years, income exceeded expenses as the Festival for the first time earned over one million dollars in one season.

The final Anniston season, 1984, was enormously successful despite an unpromising start; before the season began, a fire set by thieves destroyed costumes, which were replaced with the help of local fundraising as even in its last summer with the Festival the Anniston community demonstrated a loyalty which in many ways had made the Alabama Shakespeare Festival possible thirteen years earlier. In addition to five major productions, the 1984 season included the Festival's first concert series. Finally, 1984 saw the formation of the Consortium for Academic Programs in association with the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and the election of Dr. Guin Nance to head that organization. The purpose of the Consortium was to bring together the Festival and the state's academic institutions to pursue the mutual interests of both.

Immediately after the 1984 season closed, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival moved to temporary offices in Montgomery to prepare for the 1985-86 season, which would open in the new theatre complex. Pre-season activities included an international theatre trip for Alabama Shakespeare Festival patrons which proved to be a major fund-raiser. The first students enrolled in the Festival's new MFA Professional Actor Training Program, the result of collaboration between the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and the University of Alabama, arrived in the fall of 1985 to begin the two-year program.

In September of 1985, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival moved into its permanent home, a $21.5 million complex consisting of two theatres. Year-round operation, made possible by the new facilities, began in December with production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on the Festival Stage, the larger of the two theatres; the smaller Octagon Theatre opened with *The Glass Menagerie* in the same month. The season included ten major productions, most of which were performed in repertory in the summer of 1986. The two popular successes of the season were Shakespeare's *Richard III*, directed by Edward Stern; and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, directed by Martin Platt. Ticket sales for the first Montgomery season exceeded even the Festival staff's high expectations, setting "a new fourteen-year box office record within six weeks of the printing of the premier winter season brochure" (Volz 122). Along with the support of the theatregoers, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival benefited from the support of volunteer groups and various agencies. This support assisted in funding educational programs such as SchoolFest, designed to introduce students from grades 7 to 12 to the theatre, and "Theatre in the Mind."

The fifteenth season, 1986-87, included the premiere of Tom Stoppard's *Royal Crossing* among its ten major productions. For the second year, the fifteen MFA students offered productions, called New Stages, in addition to their participation in the regular season; those students formed the first Alabama Shakespeare Festival graduating class when they completed degree requirements in the summer of 1987. Shortly after the departure of these graduates, the second group of students arrived to begin the MFA program.

To look at the success of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in fulfilling its purpose during its first fifteen years necessitates some consideration of the Renaissance theatre with which it is so directly concerned. The professional theatre of late sixteenth and early

seventeenth century England was a remarkable phenomenon, essentially unparalleled anywhere else in Europe. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the plays written for the English Renaissance stage was their fusion of the native elements so popular in the Tudor interludes with those of the classical tradition which dominated the university dramas and the theatricals performed at the inns of court. Such a fusion allowed the playwrights of the day, Shakespeare being the preeminent among them, to present the great themes of classical literature in a form with broad appeal. And this appeal, combined with the fact that entrance to the pit of a public playhouse cost but a penny, brought to the theatre a class of citizen—many of them illiterate—who had never before found the works of England's literati accessible. In short, the English Renaissance theatre was such an effective vehicle for the widespread dissemination of ideas and cultural values that Elizabeth I quickly moved to regulate its activities and Parliament banned public theatricals altogether in 1642.

While the education, indeed edification, of the audience may have been secondary to financial success to the dramatists and players of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was a foremost concern to Martin Platt in 1971 when he envisioned a Shakespeare theatre in Alabama. On the purpose of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Jim Volz quotes Platt:

> . . . We are here in a part of the country where Shakespeare in production is almost nonexistent. Almost everyone remembers Shakespeare unpleasantly from high school and college English classes, and what we must do is present Shakespeare in a way which will make these people forget their prejudices. Shakespeare is first and foremost an entertaining playwright, not an oblique poet. He was writing for a mass audience, not a select one. (6)

This passage actually reveals two attitudes, both of which have served to shape the growth and development of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. On the one hand, we see an awareness that the intellectual splendor of Shakespeare's dramas does not prevent their being entertaining scripts. On the other hand, Platt reveals when he says "present Shakespeare in a way" that presumption of which players are often guilty, the belief that the performance is somehow a creation, rather than a recreation of characters, actions, and ideas which the dramatist has already shaped. With Shakespearean drama, in particular, this second notion becomes

especially problematic, for although in Shakespeare's plays we acknowledge, indeed applaud, the universality of character and theme, they are, nonetheless, plays which remain the product of a specific intellectual and cultural milieu and of a theatrical tradition with its own conventions and devices. The successes of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival have resulted from an awareness that Shakespeare was, and remains, an entertaining playwright; its weaknesses from an effort to improve, through production devices, upon his appeal.

The educational dimension of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival surfaced early in two forms, first in the selection of plays and a production philosophy which governed their performance, and second in the structured programs designed to train players and to familiarize the audience with the plays performed and the theatrical tradition from which the plays emerged. As early as 1975, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival presented the sixteenth century play *Ralph Roister Doister* as an apprentice production, and in 1978 ten actors joined the Student Conservatory Program. In large part, these early activities set the stage for the enhanced formal educational role of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. In 1983, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival hired Carol Ogus to direct the Artist in Education program and began with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities the Theatre-in-the-Mind program which has brought the experience and expertise of players, directors, and scholars into a forum for the benefit of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival community. The Consortium for Academic Programs in Association with the Alabama Shakespeare Festival begun in 1984, and the MFA Professional Actor Training Program established in 1985, point to the commitment of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival to continue a remarkably young but solid tradition of educating the public and ensuring a new generation of classically trained players. A perhaps less obvious, but no less significant, aspect of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's educational function is served through the theatre's volunteer network.

Given its modest beginnings, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival of necessity relied upon the energies of Anniston residents who, as did the actors themselves, gave of their time and talents to prepare costumes, build sets, and even take roles in the performances. The much more professional Alabama Shakespeare Festival of today continues to benefit from the volunteers who participate in Will's Guild. In both settings, but most certainly in Anniston, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival has through its

involvement with volunteers provided a splendid educational experience for the community at large. And such intimate contact with the community has assured that the vision of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, to bring to Alabama a much needed theatrical experience, was in a particularly concrete way fulfilled.

Attendant activities such as the MFA program and the volunteer network must stand second to the play selection and production philosophy when we consider the educational role of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, for it is the performances themselves that bring the power and pleasure of Shakespeare to life. Moreover, it is in play selection and production philosophy that the evolution of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival is most obvious.

A comparison of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's opening season in 1972 and that which has been announced for 1988 is decidedly revealing. In its premier season, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival presented four plays—Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Comedy of Errors,* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*; and Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. In 1988, only two Shakespeare plays grace the season of 13 productions, *Hamlet* and *As You Like It.* This contrast documents a trend away from classical theatre in general and Shakespearean drama in particular which has accelerated since the move to Montgomery. An equally revealing statistic is that during its first ten years, from 1972 to 1981, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival presented 52 productions, of which 30, or almost 60%, were of Shakespearean plays, and another nine by such authors as Wilde, Ibsen, and Molière who are decidedly part of the western tradition of great theatre. During the past five years, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival has presented 44 productions, omitting the MFA performances, of which 21, or less than 50%, have been Shakespearean, with many on the level of the dramas written by Noel Coward, who appears to be a favorite with the Festival. Of course, mere statistics do not tell a particularly complete story, nor should a review of these figures stand alone as a statement on the changes in the vision of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. We should note, for example, that the Festival has avoided the mistake of the BBC Shakespeare series and not tried to present performance of such plays as *King John* or *Henry VIII*, which despite the regard we have for their author simply do not make a very satisfactory evening's entertainment. And the emphasis on Molière and Ibsen in the non-Shakespearean selections is well considered, particularly given the superior quality of the 1987 production of *Hedda Gabler* and the almost definitive performance by Greta Lambert in the title role. On the other hand, with the exception of the 1974 apprentice production of *Ralph Roister*

Doister and the 1986 MFA production of Middleton's *The Changeling,* the Alabama Shakespeare Festival has ignored the many splendid dramas written by Shakespeare's contemporaries, plays such as Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and *Edward II,* Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist, Volpone,* and *The Silent Woman,* John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi,* and James Shirley's *The Cardinal.* These are plays which were produced by the same cultural milieu which gave rise to Shakespeare's dramas and have much of the brilliance of his most celebrated efforts. To see other Renaissance plays in the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's repertoir would indicate that the commitment to educating the public about the Shakespearean theatre is a bit more firmly placed.

The debate is constant between academics and performers, whether we do an injustice to a dramatist to stage his plays in such a way as to alter their settings, to edit the language and movement of the action, or to embellish the script by adding music or some other form of spectacle. Certainly no dramatist has had his scripts treated in such a manner more often than has Shakespeare. Generally, such performance embellishments reveal a production philosophy, and in the case of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival this is the case. Martin Platt's initial vision that the Festival should reawaken the public to the entertaining quality of Shakespeare while at the same time educating that public about the Renaissance theatre, led to a rather pronounced degree of experimentation with the productions of the plays. On the surface, giving Shakespeare a face-lift would seem a proper approach to attracting, or perhaps reattracting, an audience. However, the appropriate question becomes whether in fact one is presenting Shakespeare if scripts have been edited, settings altered, music added; if, in other words, embellished production finally alters the play as significantly as it so often does. Again, in a statement by Martin Platt, quoted by Jim Volz, we find an awareness of the potential problem when he speaks of the 1974 season: "This year . . . we have done almost no cutting at all and we have fun with the plays in their period. Sometimes people twist them so far out of their periods that they no longer mean the same things" (22).

What seems to have occurred with the Alabama Shakespeare Festival is that to establish a following that would ensure financial security for the theatre, Platt was willing to make concessions, but concessions that he retreated from as the theatre moved toward its fourth season. In recent years, however, the Festival seems to have returned to that initial philosophy which produced experimentation, such as in the anachronistic stagings of the 1983 productions of *All's Well that Ends Well* and *The Taming of the*

Shrew with their twentieth-century settings, the 1984 production of *Macbeth* also set in the twentieth century, and the 1986 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, again set in the twentieth century. In fact, with the recent performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we note not just a contemporary setting but a stylized one as well. Such anachronistic productions are not simply unnecessary, they are often the weakest Shakespeare productions offered by the Festival, although the 1987 production of *The Taming of the Shrew* necessitates a qualification, for its setting in the eighteenth century, though not true to the play, was consistent with the style of the comedy. The effective productions of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, both the most illuminating and the most entertaining, have been those which remained faithful to the Shakespearean script, such as the 1986 production of *Richard III*. In these productions the excellent talents of the Festival's troupe are not overshadowed by performance devices and directors' experimentation. Ultimately, such productions, staged as their scripts would demand, best fuse the dual purpose of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, to provide both an entertaining and instructional theatre experience.

The Alabama Shakespeare Festival has brought a successful and much needed theatrical experience to the South in general and the state of Alabama in particular. The new facilities in Montgomery should magnify both the impact that the theatre has on the cultural life of the community and the ability of the Festival to fulfill its dual mission: reminding theatregoers how entertaining Shakespeare's plays can be, and educating them about the great theatre of western literature, Shakespearean theatre in particular. However, at this particular juncture in the Festival's development, we sense a shift from its traditional commitment to Shakespearean drama, evidenced by the fact that only two Shakespeare plays (*Hamlet* and *As You Like It*) appear in the 1988 season. Such a small number in a season of thirteen dramas, and the growing importance of plays which might find more appropriate setting in a dinner theatre, raise the question of whether the financial demands of maintaining the new facilities could shift the direction of the theatre finally away from its commitment to Shakespeare and ultimately leave questions about production philosophy moot points.

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Stories of Separation—What Happens to Those Left Behind

Garnett Kilberg

The Musician. By Eve Shelnutt. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1987. 176 pp. $9.00 paperback.

Although it is becoming a cliché to say that a fiction writer has achieved a blend of poetry and prose whenever the prosaic is avoided, it's impossible to read Eve Shelnutt's third collection of short stories, *The Musician*, and not notice that she accomplishes just such a mixture—without its being a mere exercise in avoidance. Shelnutt has said that words affect her physically; in turn, she is able to use words, idiosyncratic images, and unusual syntactic arrangements to affect her readers so wholly that it's difficult to read more than one or two of her stories in a single sitting. Perhaps her style is best explained by a Shelnutt character who imagines telling her mother, an advocate of reading to children, "Words, Momma, eat like sulfur, come out rolled around the motorized tongue, and your children didn't know what to do with the power. I think now that when we talk, we aren't meant to remember our tongues, how, stretched out, their muscles, oars through water, pull our hearts." When we read Shelnutt's stories, we remember. This is not to say that the language makes her stories inaccessible, because there are sixteen fine tales here—complex stories of families and relationships, many of which deal with separation, being left behind, and with waiting in such a way that those not present assume as much importance as those we see. So important are these absentees that in one case, no one at a Thanksgiving meal mentions them because, as the narrator elucidates, there was "no need; they seemed to assemble behind our chairs, changing places behind us as if looking over our shoulders at cards we held, placing bets in whispers."

In "Angelus," the mother's death—which makes the narrator

and her sisters move "like cows at twilight, [the mother's] body a salt lick"—serves as an impetus for the narrator to recall her childhood, a time when if she and her sisters weren't left physically, they were spiritually: "momma, after daddy left us, more or less gave up on us. . . ." This is such a natural state that when Calvin, the mother's caller, makes a house "with fixed screens and two flushing toilets" a real possibility, the narrator and her sisters connive to get rid of him. The oldest sister issues orders from her sickbed so that the other two go "hopping around the gravel drive by [Calvin's] Chevy to [lean their heads in his window and tell him], 'momma still loves our daddy . . . more than anything.' " But even though they dispense with him, Calvin, like the other absentees in this collection, is not really gone because "for momma's sake" the narrator misses him, and envisions "him as shrunken, his back . . . thin as a beetle's arms waving like little legs when the body's overturned." Years later, after the mother's death, at the time the story takes place, the narrator hunts him down and visits him at his nursing home. But this act of atonement does not prevent the sense of being left behind from continuing, for the narrator has been given her "poppa's and his last wife's boy, loaned [to her] for his safekeeping when Libby refused to believe that [poppa had] died on her. She went [the narrator thinks] looking for poppa in roadside bars, T.V. stations, used car lots, the places where in this civilized world anything can happen. . . ." Though the separations aren't over, there is a resolution, one that is alluded to earlier in the story when the narrator says that the only "really plausible enticement" are those things which can't be proven—and how better to avoid the burden of proof than by leaving behind those who expect it?

'Disconsolate"—the story of Irene, a woman so ruled by her son's absence during the Korean conflict, that she is rendered dysfunctional—is almost an extended definition of the word the title bears. The reader is made to feel disconsolate. Irene is so disconnected that "when she [speaks], it [is] as if her lips were a pea pod unzipping to reveal pellets of words lined up separate, and with a life of their own." Avoiding her son's room because it seems to hold "a stranger's privacy," she spends her afternoons wandering from room to room while "the air, in deference, seem[s] to still itself," the only sound "the scuff, scuff of her house slippers and the ringing of the party line." She thinks of being European "since all foreign daughters grew upon their faces at age fifteen that look of repose, history irreplaceable and so essential it was like breath. Their bodies mov[ing] automatically with, if not hope, then the grace of knowing some inevitable truth." But what bothers Irene the most is

Rufus, a hired hand employed to fill her son's place on the farm. Wanting to know nothing about him, she can't bring herself to look at his face; even holding his plate makes her shudder at "the awful intimacy of it." Her hatred of him is strongest when he is alone, "the history she couldn't imagine flitting around him like flies." At the end of the story, Rufus's wife and sons—the embodiment of his history—show up, forcing Irene's mouth open, "all she had wanted to say for months beginning to assemble." Irene rushes at the wife, holds her, "reaching down to beat on her back," only to reveal when she's pulled away that she's achieved the state of being the foreign daughters have bred into them for "on her face was etched a look of pure repose which, so foreign to [those present] resembled ferocity, applicable at any time."

If "Disconsolate" is the most desolate of the stories, certainly "Goodbye, Goodbye" is the most delightful. The absentee in this story is Sukie who—like a "monarch cracking spring's cocoon"—runs away from home. Left behind are the narrator (Sukie's sister), the mother, and a group of well-meaning, if inept, family friends bringing food and offering suggestions. Shelnutt's dialogue in this story is particularly engaging since the characters cannot utter a cliché without making us reconsider the connotation. For example, when the mother shrieks at the suggestion that the father (also an absentee) be called, the suggestion's volunteer says, "it was *just* a thought," making us wonder how "thought" ever came to be so easily preceded by "just." The characters ponder Sukie's whereabouts until clues in the form of hat bills from local stores begin to arrive. The narrator follows Sukie, along with her "swinging box" and a boy in uniform from Ft. Wayne, from one of the stores to an apartment over Renquist's Jewelry where Sukie has been hiding out. Here, the narrator learns that Sukie had to depart or suffocate. Eventually, the narrator, too, will need to leave to avoid the same fate, but not before a marvelous rendering of all the hats, like so many straw frisbees, being tossed from the apartment window, over the canopy, into the traffic below while the narrator imagines herself saying to someone, "a lot of money down the drain."

The most oblique, as well as the most powerful and haunting, of the stories is the title story which deals with a myriad of separations. Pervading "The Musician" with their ghostly presence are the narrator's husband's son (whom he's never seen) and mother (who is dead), the narrator's twin (who is dead), her half brother (who arrives only in photographs sent by mail), and her son who has never seen his parents together on the other side of a room—an

omission which the narrator feels "changed the way [her son] stood, how he held his head, changed even the air in which he stood." Most significant in this complex web, which flashes forward and backward in time, is Juanita, the narrator's mother, who "came in dreams not initially to participate but to stand, a coalescence, at the edge of rooms barn-sized, open on two sides, weeds growing to the floor boards." Through these dreams, Juanita is teaching the narrator "what death, or music meant." It is only when the narrator's husband goes with the narrator to visit Juanita that the dreams cease, a natural occurrence since Juanita is now right there in the next room "sleeping on the couch in her own house." Unlike the way she appears in dreams, Juanita is quite ordinary in real life. Though, of course, it is unfair—as Juanita herself seems to realize at the end of the story—that those we see in the flesh, with all the constraints of the body and of everyday life, are never as powerful as those who, by virtue of their absence, we're free to imbue with the endless resources of our minds.

Though not all the stories work with separation and abandonment, many do, and of those which do, most have an absentee husband and/or father. Usually these men have left their families ostensibly to seek fame and fortune in places like Hollywood or New York, though it's more likely they're really trying to escape the responsibilities of a family to chase impossible dreams, and be able to afford fancy cars and pin-striped suits. In "Partridges, 1950," the father sends a map of Santa Barbara with the radio station where he works circled. In "Family" while the father is off making connections, the mother fills "their days of waiting with trips to Harris by Greyhound [where] the man at the A&P [gives] her bones for the dog. . . ." Before the father returns, the dog manages to become pregnant and have pups which grow to maturity. In "Andantino," a girl sneaks to a neighbor's (one who fills her days waiting for her husband) to hear her father the only way she can, at "thirteen-point-nine-on-your-radio-dial." But sadly, these fathers are almost as distant and detached when they're close at hand. In "Voice," on a visit home the father is quick to notice the neighbors have a phone, a device he can use to keep in touch with the places he'd presumably rather be—Los Angeles, New York, Miami. In "Tutelage," though the father is supposed to be off making his fortune, his daughter, Annie, catches a glimpse of him in the "Negro section of Greer . . . leaning out [the back of his father's truck], selling greens and corn while dressed in his suit coat." Of course these men are spiffy dressers, never forgetting appearances. With nary a trace of bitterness, the narrator in "Renters" notes

when her father and sister laugh that they have good teeth—"hers because she is young and his because he visits the dentist regularly though no one else in the family is allowed the expense." It's no wonder that she, like many of the other characters in these stories, is tolerant of such behavior, because to know these men is to know that they're poised, ready to leave at the slightest provocation—like a request for money for necessities. And none of these characters wants to be the one to provoke such a separation, so dear are the ones who leave them behind. If there's a man who ever reasoned—or worried—that leaving his family would create no void, these stories will make him think again. But there's no need to go to such an extreme to read *The Musician*; what Shelnutt is able to do with language, and what the stories reveal about surviving separations, are reason enough.

Thomas Wolfe Overcome

Alan T. Belsches

Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe. By David Herbert Donald. Boston: Little, Brown, 1987. 579 pp. $24.95.

Before David Donald's biography of Thomas Wolfe, admirers of this North Carolina writer had a variety of smaller and less well documented biographies to consult, chiefly Elizabeth Nowell's *Thomas Wolfe: A Biography* (1960) and Andrew Turnbull's *Thomas Wolfe* (1968). But each of these biographies is limited in its presentation of material. Nowell, who was Wolfe's literary agent, could not speak freely about Wolfe because many of the individuals she discussed were still alive, and Turnbull preferred to discuss Wolfe the man rather than Wolfe the writer. With Donald's biography these limitations have been overcome. For the first time a researcher into Wolfe's life has had unrestricted access to more letters and materials than ever before, he has not had to worry about living Wolfe family members being affronted by what he revealed, and he has tried to create a picture of Thomas Wolfe as a man and as a writer by revealing him in the context of other major American writers in the early twentieth century.

David Donald's background is as a Harvard professor of history and American civilization who has published over a dozen works on Southern history. His *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1960. Donald brings the objectivity and meticulous research skills of the historian to the masses of materials created by a writer whom he calls "extraordinarily brilliant and moving" and yet who also "wrote more bad prose than any other major writer I can think of."

The picture of Thomas Wolfe that Donald's biography creates is that of an intensely energetic man whose appetites, both physical and sexual, were immense and who was able to turn all of his experiences into a prodigious outpouring of words that used his remarkable memory to recount in great detail the events of his life. Donald shows how Wolfe's writings draw from his earliest

memories of infancy in Asheville, N.C., his turbulent youth in his mother's boarding house, the Old Kentucky Home, his education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Harvard, his unsuccessful attempts to become a playwright in New York, his tempestuous relationship with Aline Bernstein, his many wanderings throughout Europe in the 1930s, and from his own difficulty to form the masses of materials that he produced into publishable novels.

Donald carefully traces three major characteristics through his examination of Wolfe's life. He first expands upon C. Hugh Holman's ideas, expressed in *The Loneliness at the Core: Studies in Thomas Wolfe* (1975), of Wolfe's lifelong tendency to turn to older adults to provide him guidance and support. In the midst of the fighting between his parents in his early youth, Wolfe had turned to Mrs. Margaret Roberts, an early teacher, for encouragement. While he was at the University of North Carolina, Professor Horace Williams had become his mentor, exposing him to a variety of intellectual ideas. At Harvard, Professor George Pierce Baker in his playwrighting class attempted to lead Wolfe in paring down the masses of family material he continually wanted to include in his plays. And later in his life Maxwell Perkins, Wolfe's editor at Charles Scribner's Sons, became a kind of father figure to him both emotionally and literarily in helping him shape the manuscripts of *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and *Of Time and the River* (1935) for publication. In his sexual life, Aline Bernstein, nineteen years his senior, became both a mother and a lover for him.

A second major characteristic of Wolfe that Donald carefully documents is his endless telling about himself and his family in his writings. In discussing the genesis of Wolfe's works and his creative process, Donald shows that Wolfe, like many twentieth-century novelists, wanted to write of himself and his own experiences. The antagonism among the members of the Wolfe family and the political events in a booming Asheville become the plot of *Look Homeward, Angel*. Wolfe's wanderings and studies in Boston and New York become the raw material of *Of Time and the River*. And as a result of Wolfe's inability to mask successfully the actual sources of his fiction, his publishers were constantly worried about libel suits. Even the account of his love affair with Aline Bernstein which Wolfe wanted to include in "The October Fair" was rejected by Maxwell Perkins for fear of lawsuits from her family.

A final problem with Wolfe that Donald adeptly handles is the controversy over the number of editorial changes Edward Aswell at Harper & Brothers made to the manuscripts that Wolfe

entrusted to him before his death from tuberculosis in 1938. The manuscripts, running to 1,500,000 words, were in varied states of readiness when Wolfe left on his final trip to Purdue. Aswell was limited by his contract with Wolfe to making " 'no changes, additions, or alterations in the title or text' without written consent of the author," and the executor of Wolfe's will, Maxwell Perkins, felt that Harpers had " 'no right whatever for detailed editing' " of the manuscript. At the time *The Web and the Rock* (1939) and *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) were published after Wolfe's death, Aswell did not admit the extent of his editorial changes in the manuscripts. Only in the collection of short stories, *The Hills Beyond* (1941), did Aswell append a short "Note" that stated he had written transitional passages in Wolfe's final novels. After a careful study of all of the manuscripts that Aswell had worked with, Donald concludes that Aswell's changes in the first work were extensive but still within the rules of the will and dictates of Wolfe. Aswell's changes in *You Can't Go Home Again* were much more extensive and not nearly as easily justifiable.

This weighty and extensively researched biography is easily readable and well documented. Instead of numerous footnotes that could distract the reader, all citations of sources are given at the end of the volume by page and line number. An excellent descriptive bibliography of helpful works on Wolfe is included, and the indexing is accurate. This work is the closest yet to an authoritative biography of Thomas Wolfe and must rank along with Richard Kennedy's 1962 literary biography, *The Window of Memory*, in its accurate depiction of Thomas Wolfe.

Alabama Literary Review
National Young Writers' Contest

The purpose of the Dorothy K. Adams Award is to encourage and reward creative writing at the secondary level. The winner for 1988 is:

Sissy Higingbotham

One Lonely Family

Sissy Higingbotham

As the sun begins to set once more,
The child drops his toy
And thinks of the fun he used to have
When the whole family was together,
And he'd go fishing with his dad
While his mom stayed home
And waited for them
To burst through the door
With stories
Of the one that got away.

Now he shuffles into the house
And flops down in what used to be
His father's favorite easy chair
While his mother watches out
The front window
For her husband's car to drive up;
But all she sees
Is a dusty plastic truck
Lying in the driveway
And a slab of stone mounted
By the old oak tree.

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