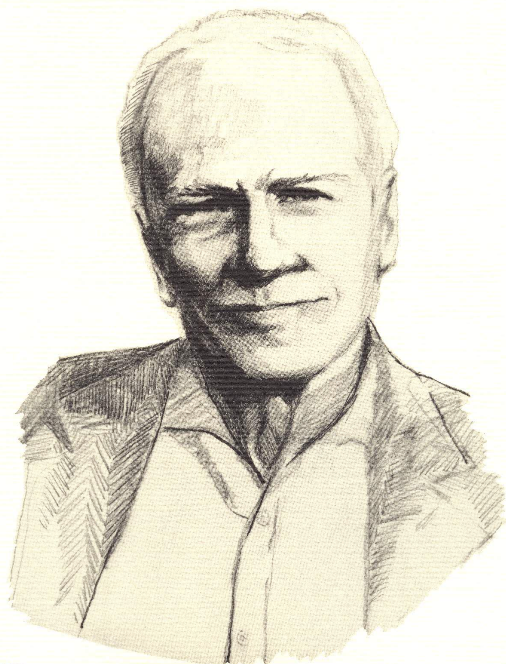
ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW



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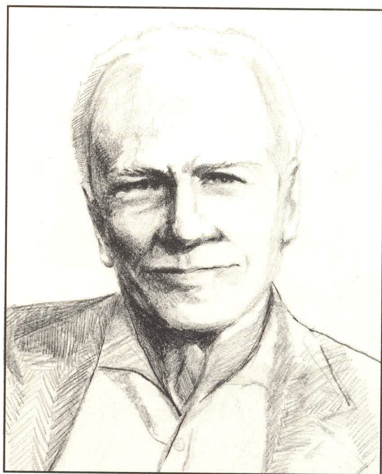
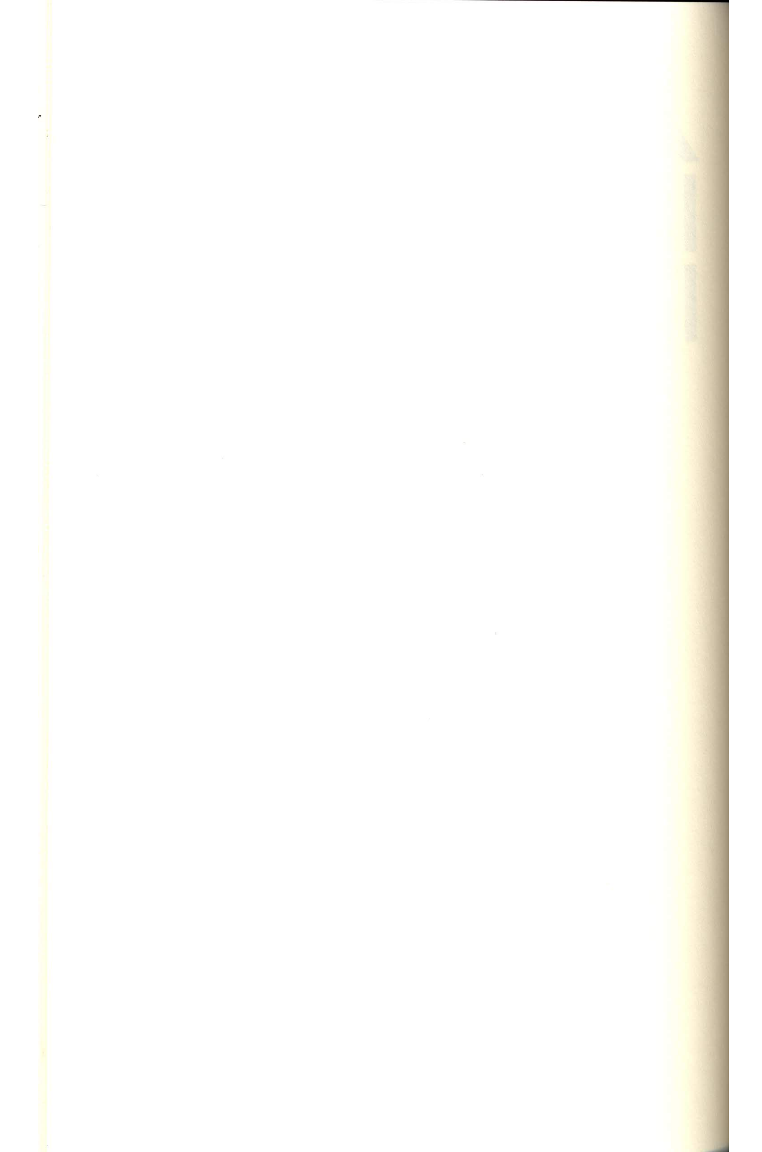


Walker Percy



Being a writer in the South has its special miseries, which include isolation, madness, tics, amnesia, alcoholism, lust, and loss of ordinary powers of speech.

—WALKER PERCY

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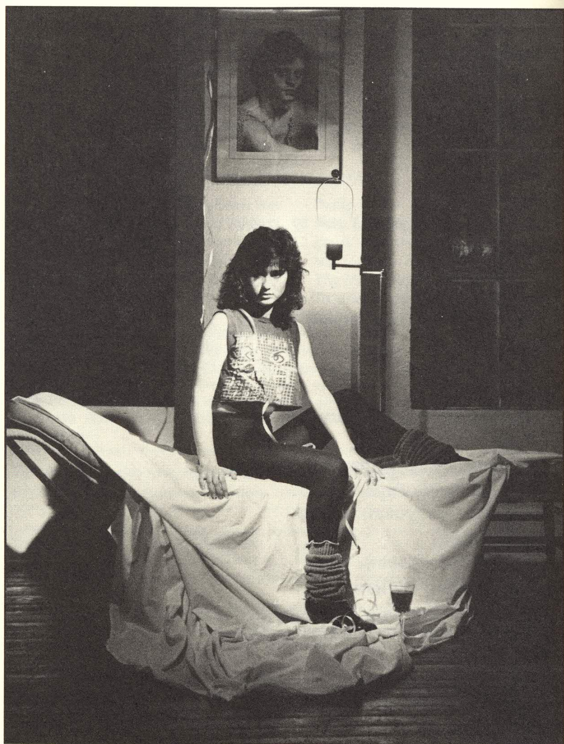
Contents

A. Manette Ansay
March ❧ 1
Rick Shelton
Farming Shelby County: A Dream (poem) ❧ 6
Pete Fromm
Eulogy ❧ 9
Thomas D. Burkett
Keeping Time (poem) ❧ 17
Donald Mangum
Service ❧ 19
Joanne M. Riley
First Book of Alone (poem) ❧ 24
Kerry Dolan
Plans ❧ 27
Jeff Arnold
Pausing for Fences (poem) ❧ 38
Ed Peaco
Systematic Desensitization ❧ 41
Martha Mattingly Payne
City Flowers (poem) ❧ 49
Michael Evans
Oyster-Man (poem) ❧ 51
Benjamin Buford Williams
A Violet in the "Sahara of the Bozart": Sara Haardt Mencken and Her Writings ❧ 53
J. F. R. Day
The Dinosaur and the Critics: A. N. Wilson on C. S. Lewis (review) ❧ 63
Thomas Larson
Codrescu at Large (review) ❧ 67
Mickey Pearlman
Interview with Shirley Ann Grau ❧ 71
Janet L. Smart
Woodland Treasures ❧ 75
Contributors ❧ 83



Sergei L. Shillabeer

March

A. Manette Ansay

I stare out of the window at the black March fields. Bitter frost angels decorate the glass, and the windshield wipers are frozen beneath a layer of ice. We're going too fast, my husband Raymond clenching and unclenching his fists against the wheel. He gets nervous driving at night, especially during cold weather. The car could stall out here on the backroads, and what would he do with me then? I tell him not to worry. I tell him he can dump me by the roadside, the way people do with puppies.

Raymond has a full head of shocking red hair, and a carroty beard to match. His face has a chubby, clownish look about it, the sort of face that no one wants to take seriously, although Raymond is an unflinchingly serious man. When confronted with a problem, he lowers his head and charges it like a bull. I grew up on a farm, and I know how bulls are. In spring, when they get their craziness, they charge trees and shadows and ghosts; sometimes they charge a wall of the barn until the wood splinters away and they're left with nothing but a ragged, foolish hole.

Cancer, Raymond instructs our friends, comes down to mind over matter. You have to learn how to fight it; you have to accumulate weapons.

He has bought dozens of self-help books, the two-for-one paperback kind, and each night after he's helped me to bed he perches in my wheelchair and reads to me about positive thinking, relaxation techniques, and miraculous avocado-grapefruit diets that will give me the zest of a twenty-year-old. He writes away for cancer cures he finds advertised in magazines, and every day our mail is cluttered with pamphlets on meditation, healing crystals, Swedish rolfing, and the Power of Prayer, all of which he puts on our nightstand and says that I should read.

Today I've been at my mother's, watching the bird feeder outside

her kitchen window. I stay with her on weekdays while Raymond is at work. There's not much there to do. I leaf through old issues of Modern Maturity; sometimes I knit, or if the TV has something good I watch that. Mostly I just wait. Mum comes in every now and then to ask do I want anything? is there anything she can do? Her voice is low, almost a whisper, like she's murmuring to a child she believes to be asleep.

This morning I saw strange warblers at the feeder, bright yellow migrants I didn't recognize. There were also rabbits. I saw them eating bird seed that got knocked down from the feeder. I never knew that rabbits would eat seeds, and I watched them for quite a while. But when Raymond asks what I've done today, I shrug and tell him 'nothing'. His questions make me angry because they come out of his books. *Show an interest in the patient's activities.* Raymond never showed any particular interest in my activities before I got sick.

I didn't lose my legs all at once. It happened gradually, the way you catch a cold. At first you're not certain that anything's wrong. Then you wake up one morning and it is. By then it's too late to do anything. You just have to make the best of it. You have to wait it out, no matter how long it takes.

The doctors were quick with answers. They stuck needles in my spine that sent me reeling away to Michigan and a friend I'd known there once. When I woke up it was over, and they told me to go home. I waited for them to say something more, but nobody wanted to say anything. What now? Raymond finally asked. One of them pushed a handful of prescriptions into my hand; then they gave us a list of other doctors they thought might be able to help.

But none of them say anything new.

The last one talked about multiple *growths,* and when I finally told him to just say tumors, he smiled. Raymond instantly lowered his head to charge; the doctor, however, whisked lightly away, and I saw Raymond's clenched fingers fall like petals from his hands. After that, he started buying books that, three months earlier, he'd have scoffed at. He started to use his Good Host voice whenever he spoke to me: a polite voice, certainly warm, but a voice that does not allow anyone to break through.

I pull my coat down over my knees, and squint beyond the headlights. The road we're on goes tunneling between two walls of hard-packed snow. Raymond hunches his shoulders, tucking his neck deep into his coat; he reaches for the heater, but its already set on high. Wisconsin winters bite deep to the bone. Autumn fades

early to a dull grey cold that seems to seep from the air itself. By December, deep snow has spread its white night across fields bordered only by distant, dark trees sharp as screams.

"You warm enough?" he asks me. His voice is carefully disguised. But I know he is tired by the time he picks me up; he's worked all day, he wants to rest deep in his own solemn pool of thought. "Don't pester me," is what he used to say when I tried to talk to him after work. Now it's strange to hear him in my old role, struggling for conversation.

I've been mad at him all day. This morning he informed me over breakfast that my cancer was probably the result of a death wish I've had since I was small.

"Our bodies are amazingly sensitive," he quoted proudly, "so sensitive that they can transform psychological stress into gross physical disorder."

I lifted my bowl of granola and herbs and shattered it like an ornament. Raymond's face spun with dismay: he'd sent away to Mexico for those herbs, they were rare and very expensive.

"What the hell'd you do that for?" he gasped. None of his books had prepared him for this, though I could see him flipping hurriedly through the pages in his mind. I wheeled away into the bedroom and sat with my hands pressed hard against my mouth. Within minutes, he was at my side, holding a cup of hot oatstraw tea.

"Drink this," he said in a voice that trembled with control. "To calm you down. Tension is hard on your immune system."

Raymond, I wanted to say, Oh god, Raymond! Instead, I drank the tea.

The road bends around a hairpin curve and Raymond checks his speed. "There's a blanket in back if you're chilly," he says, and his voice is smooth, professional. I want to slap those sickly words from his tongue.

Instead I look out at the road. It's a void here in the country after sundown. There are no street lights, no distant yellow rectangles of windows, no curious headlights from other cars.

"Look," Raymond suddenly says. "First star! Make a wish!"

There's a bright speck hanging low in the sky. He wishes hard, leaning forward in his seat. If he wasn't driving, he'd probably close his eyes. Lately, Raymond throws his loose change to the wishing well at the mall, and he even tosses a pinch of salt over his shoulder when he happens to think of it. He'd always laughed at superstition: he used to tease me because I liked to go to Mass once a year on Christmas Eve.

I narrow my eyes to watch the star. I remember being a little child, and thinking that the stars were the many eyes of God. Each time someone died their soul would travel up to heaven to becoming another shining eye. I picture myself shivering in the dark winter sky. Suddenly, I am hating God, a violent helpless hatred. The star seems to brighten; astonished.

The rabbit jumps out in front of the car, a shattered instant of frozen eyes, then impacts even before Raymond says, Oh. It makes a dull thump, like cracking your spine; not at all uncomfortable. I open my mouth and a crushed, dry voice says, "What did you do, aim for it?"

Raymond looks at me strangely, then pulls over to the roadside and switches on the hazard lights. He looks back down the highway, but it's too dark to see.

"It wasn't my fault," he says. He is shaken. I remember him hitting a raccoon two summers ago when we were coming back from up north. He'd winced, but kept on driving. The hazards wink in the darkness.

"Maybe it's still alive," he says. He looks over at me hopefully.

"No," I tell him. "You nailed it."

His mouth collapses. Then he clears his throat and says, "We should go back and look for it."

"It's dead," I tell him. "It *felt* dead," but he turns the car around. The hazards click, undisturbed. They remind me of being a child, when my mother would turn them on just because I liked them.

A lump in the road: it is the rabbit, its head flattened like a skid mark. Probably its back was broken. Raymond pulls over beside it.

"At least it died quickly," he says, and I think about how stupid that is, like when people say to me, At least you have your sight, At least you're not deaf. There is no such thing as *at least*. When it happens to you, it's nothing less that terrible. I know he's waiting to be forgiven. But I do not say anything.

He stops the engine and gets out of the car, leaving the door wide open behind him. The wind laps up his footsteps; I am shocked by the cold and call out to him, but he does not come back. He walks over to the rabbit, arms slashing wide stars in the air. And suddenly he has grabbed it and thrown it out into the fields. I do not see it fall. I am watching him as he stands, spot-lighted by the headlights, his face turned toward the darkness.

I am numb. The cold eats away my fingertips, murmurs at my ears.

When he comes back to the car, his face is wide open, choked tight with all the things he cannot say. At this moment I know he will do anything for me, and that it will not be enough. ❧

Farming Shelby County: A Dream

Rick Shelton

This dream is a dayfull
or more. I see myself standing
then walking a length of leather
behind the great red flanks
of a draught horse. Scottish.
It would be Scottish—Clydesdale.
The land I walk turns gray and gold
as the Highlands and a stream
of speaking pebbles glistens with salmon
at the bottom of my field.

The plow I guide is platinum,
aluminum, some such, I ordered from Colorado,
where they save a horse's effort
with the physics of gears. This plow turns up nothing,
no instant treasure, leaves the living soil where it is,
cracks the hard pan instead. Appropriate
technology runs in my veins; I am doing it up right
with cover crops: alfalfa, rye and clover;
rotation—one year sweet potatoes, Kentucky Wonders the next.

Row after row I go, the horse's hoofprints
sprouting limas and cantaloupe, sweating
and singing, back and forth across my farm,
across the fertile bed of an empty lake
my grandfather dammed to make a buck.
This is not easy, not easy, I sing,
and the horse looks back at the lush acre
plowed since sunrise. My eyes burn
with sweat and again I know the disaster

of weather: too much of one or the other,
sun or water. I don't care. I sit
under the big sweetgum, the horse unbuckled
in the shade, and watch the farm spin
through my thoughtful plans,
the gentle tracings of a morning's work.

This is hard, this is hard, my catching breath
sings from the shadows. I know
this humid, river-wrapped Alabama kicks
at my heart, but my sons step the furrows
like blown dandelion. They hand me
pitchers of iced water laced with mint
my wife has plucked from the garden.
Their names are a chant I sing
in the face of drought or flood.

The afternoon slides away under
the heavy horse. We are up again,
bound to the last row with the quiet
cords of yearning. It is harder to keep
my eyes ahead, the furrows running straight.
I glance at the last swath of green rye
hugging the fence line. The smallest
clods punch my boot soles. *Don't get ahead
of yourself, dream or not; pace is everything
a good farmer needs.* Darkness is falling, and
the sweat drifts from my skin; the weight
of the day's work rises in a cool mist.
Off the horse's bowled back steam rises.
All the animals sing out at the sun's going
and then go silent.

Over two mountains, Oak and Penitentiary,
Birmingham roils in a frenzy of rush-hour light,
casting sharp shadows my way. They call
to me with the voices of fast food drive-through
speakers, ordering chicken nuggets, cheeseburgers,
salad in plastic. I answer, the crystal taste
of mint at the back of my throat, *Tomorrow
the bean rows and strawberries will be dappled
with sun. I have what you need.*

Carolyn K. Grigiss

Eulogy

Pete Fromm

"He's never sicced lawyers on us before," Kagan said, opening the long envelope his wife had handed to him. He unfolded the stiffly creased letter and took a sip of his drink. He could feel his wife watching as he read and he lowered his face so she could not see his eyes.

He folded the paper again and took a drink. "He's dead, Beth."

She started to get out of her chair but Kagan waved her back down. "My brothers will be ecstatic."

"Kagan!"

"He was the meanest man alive, Beth. Now he's probably the meanest one dead. I suppose I should call my brothers."

"I'm sure they know."

Kagan shook his head. "I just got a letter saying my father's dead, Beth. A letter. Not a phone call. He's already buried. This," Kagan waved the letter, "is about his will. He put it in his will not to let any of us know of his demise until all arrangements were taken care of. To the bitter end, Beth, that's how he was."

Kagan looked at his wife for the first time since he opened the letter. "You know what he left us? Me, I should say. Patrick and Tom got nothing. His moldy, old wooden canoe and his fishing rods. I suppose that's my punishment for sending him the annual guilt letters."

"Those were probably the only things he had left that meant anything to him."

"Well, they don't mean anything to me."

Kagan stood abruptly and paced to the end of the room. He turned and held out his empty glass. "Do you want another?"

Beth shook her head. "How are you going to get the canoe?"

"I wouldn't take it if it was delivered."

"It will be the only thing you'll have from him. The only thing our kids will have from their Grandpa."

"They never even met him!"

"I never met him. In eight years. That's pathetic."

"Count yourself lucky. He'd have hated you too."

"Kagan!"

"See? You take it personally too. It's hard not to, isn't it? But don't. He hated everybody."

"Stop it!"

Beth stood up. "Kagan, I read last year's 'guilt' letter. You left it on the computer."

"You had no right."

"You don't hate him, Kagan. You never could, no matter how much you tried. Why is that something you need to hide?"

"He never answered a single one of those letters, Beth. Never. Not one single one."

"But you wrote them."

Beth smiled at him and held out her glass. "Mix another while I pack for you. You can visit Tom when you go through Minneapolis."

Kagan took her glass and stared into it. She turned down the hall for the bedroom. "You had no right to read that letter," he called after her.

Two days of solid driving from Seattle to Eau Claire. One thousand miles a day. The night layover in Glendive, Montana. It was how he had always made the trip home when he was in college, when his mom was alive. And once the year after.

He remembered how his father used to meet him out front, charging across the lawn as soon as he saw the car pull in. His mother always stood just outside the door and called for them to come inside where it was warm. And,no matter how tired he was, they would always stay up talking late into the night.

He did not plan to stop in Minneapolis. Tom hadn't lived there when he used to make the drive. But he jerked the car onto his exit at the last possible second.

He had just stepped out of the car when Tom rushed out of the house. "'Bout time. Beth said you'd be in by noon."

Kagan wished she hadn't called. "Not as young as I used to be on the highways," he said.

Tom's family was collecting around them on the lawn. Kagan shook his brother's hand and said, "Dad's dead, Tom."

"I didn't even know he was sick."

Kagan smiled. It was an old joke about their mother, a famous funeral attender. She would go on about a relative they had never

heard of before, fretting about how she would get to the funeral. Their father would lower whatever he was reading and say, 'So and so? I didn't even know they were sick.' He'd said it so often she'd stopped scolding him for it. It always made the boys laugh. But the joke was the only pleasant allusion to their father they made that evening.

As he had known they would, Tom and his wife refused to let Kagan leave before morning. Tom's wife had shooed the children away when Tom continued to tease Kagan about coming for the canoe. And, when the talk turned ugly, she left too.

"I think we could have tried harder, Tom."

"You don't know a thing about it, Kagan. You were already off at school. We still had to live with him. So don't give me that tired old line."

Kagan bowed his head and nodded. "I know. But I can't forget how he was before."

"That only makes it that much worse. Can't you see that?"

Kagan shook his head, not because he didn't agree, but out of helplessness. "He snapped when Mom died, Tom. He was out of his head."

"Please, Kagan. Don't try to guilt me into anything. You hated him just as much as the rest of us, when it was all said and done."

"I know."

Kagan snuck out of the guest room long before dawn. He left a note he didn't mean, saying he'd stay longer on the return trip.

When he reached Eau Claire he did not follow the familiar route to his home but drove directly to the lawyer's office. There was more handshaking, and when Kagan asked the lawyer about the canoe he answered apologetically. "The canoe is in my garage. We had to move it out of the house for the new occupants."

There were more surprises like that. The lawyer wasn't allowed to say who owned the house or where the money for it had gone. If Kagan hadn't known his father he would have suspected a swindle. But he had not been taken unawares by the limitless bitterness for years. He kept shaking his head though, as he followed the lawyer to his garage.

They tied the heavy wooden canoe to the racks Kagan had bought in Seattle. The lawyer found the rod cases and Kagan put them in the trunk without opening them. The lawyer came from the garage one more time with the paddles and a canvas Duluth pack that looked one hundred years old. "These were not specified, but

this is all full of fishing and camping paraphernalia. I couldn't see what good one would be without the other. You don't have to take them."

Kagan threw the pack in with the rod cases and took the paddles. "I don't have to take any of it," he said, slamming his door shut.

"Thanks," he said through the open window, wishing the door hadn't closed quite so hard. "Thanks for everything." He put the car in gear and, just before driving away, asked, "Is he buried with Mom, or is that a secret too?"

"He was cremated, Kagan. He didn't say whether I should tell you that or not."

"Oh, for Christsakes. Well, where the hell are the ashes?"

"I'm sorry, Kagan. That I can't tell you."

Kagan's tires squealed as he shot out of the lawyer's driveway. "You son of a bitch," he shouted, beating his fist against the steering wheel. If his dad was still alive, Kagan could just about kill him.

He drove around Eau Claire aimlessly. It was too soon to get back on the road, but he had nothing else to do. He hadn't been here in ten years. He drifted through the town, finally turning away from the street he grew up on. He turned north accidentally, but held the course until Eau Claire was behind him. For the longest time he would not admit where he might be going.

Kagan was surprised to find that the dirt track was still there. His father was even stubborn enough to fight off the trees' relentless siege. He followed the long, slow curve through the hardwoods and stopped at the tiny strip of white sand at the edge of the lake. He surveyed the lake from that strip of sand and then struggled singlehandedly with the canoe the way his father must have done until he died, at sixty-five.

Before pushing off Kagan dropped the rods into the bottom of the canoe. The cases rolled back and forth on the dark, glossy wood of the ribs. Finally, Kagan struck straight through the tangle of bushes at the edge of the lake and stooped. He came up with the raspberries he'd known would be there, and he picked until he had handfuls of them wrapped in his handkerchief. He dropped the handkerchief into the Duluth pack, which smelled as mildewy as ever, then pushed out into the lake.

"Like riding a bike," he said out loud after putting the canoe through its paces. He laughed, for the first time since leaving Seattle. His father's last bitter trick had backfired. He was going to enjoy this.

He pointed the bow straight across the lake and put his back into the paddling. He didn't care if he would have to pay for that later.

When Kagan entered the left hand bay on the far shore he craned his neck, searching. He looped the canoe around for another pass, but still could not find what he was looking for. He paddled, much more slowly now, into shore.

He nudged the bow of his father's canoe against the sand and listened to the waves hiss away along the small stretch of beach. He did not move for a moment, then stepped carefully over the side, taking the Duluth pack with him. He pulled the canoe up and lay beside it, using the pack as a pillow.

Clouds drifted up from the south, reflected against the far end of the lake. Kagan reached above his head and fumbled in the pack. He found the raspberries and set them on his chest. Still gazing into the clouds on the water, he sucked the first one into his mouth. He rolled it on his tongue then bit down, closing his eyes to hold the taste.

With the sun red-black against his eyelids, and the old taste in his mouth, Kagan let the warmth of the sand work through his shirt and the fall breeze eddy across his chest and legs. Over the small, grassy knoll behind him, just before the dark pines took over, was where the abandoned lodge had been. The one he had looked for from out in the bay. Kagan thought of its long, forbidding logs and boarded windows. They had all been very young when his father first showed the lodge to Kagan and his brothers.

Kagan ate another raspberry but it didn't taste as good as the first one. He flattened a lump in the sand with his shoulder. Years and years had piled up since he'd last been here. Or since he'd last seen his father.

The lodge was visible from the left bay, about a mile off, but it melted back into the trees if you didn't find the right spot. Thompson's Lodge, home and hideaway for Chicago's gangsters—as boys, that'd been all they needed.

When the canoe had eased onto the sand that day, and the towheaded boys had splashed and struggled until their father pulled the boat ashore, they'd been off to inspect the building. Kagan had found the one window with the faulty boarding. Their father came up the hill with the enormous Duluth pack and smiled at them, all lined up, Tom pointing up the hill, not daring to speak. He knew what they had found. "Maybe we should see if they left any of the loot?" he suggested.

The decision to sleep in the lodge had come later, out of necessity. Rain had spattered across the lake with the dusk and they'd moved

through the window following their father's flashlight. He swept the mouse droppings aside with his poncho and guided the spreading of the sleeping bags.

They'd set up near the base of the stairs. The dim, flickering light of the two candles took over for the usual camp fire. The dampness of their smokey clothes and the musty, rodent smell of the lodge mingled. Soft scurryings and sharper taps and gnawings encircled them.

After dinner Kagan asked his father if he was done percolating. Their father's smile was lost in the darkness of his shadowed face. His quietness was traditionally broken around the camp fire. The stories were 'percolated' with his after dinner pipe and poured out to them once it was dark enough to be scary.

He cleared his throat and said that he couldn't talk without a fire. Kagan and his brothers whined and pleaded until he agreed that the candles could count this once.

Kagan's father's eyes roved about the room, settling on the stairs behind his sons. Taking a deep breath, he began, and the story wove its way through the flickering light in the rough bass that Kagan had vainly hoped would come to him when he grew.

The boys followed the echoing voice along the walls of the lodge into the dismal void beyond the candles' reach. Each log's shadow leapt and quavered as the candles guttered.

But it was the stairs the story revolved around. And, when the madman entered the story, living on the second floor with whispered hints of daggers and axes, the stairs pressed down on the boys until they all leaned toward the candles.

His father's quiet, deep voice rumbled on. He sat back and his face became completely hidden in shadow. Soon he had the grizzled, wild man, dripping wet from the storm outside, easing his way toward the stairs. The collapsing, rotten stairway, leading up the black hole of the lunatic's abode, crushed down upon the boys. Suddenly they knew he was coming down those stairs for them.

Their father made it impossible for them not to hear each footfall of that descent, and the low, unearthly cackle, and the swish of the final blow through the dead, stale air.

Finally they had all glanced back to the stairs at the same time. Their father had been waiting for that moment. A bellowing, insane laugh filled the lodge and the room was turned into something worse than black as the candles were doused. Without a chance to move, Kagan had been knocked sideways, engulfed in impossibly strong, hard arms, the breath squeezed from him in a gasp.

Kagan opened his eyes and squinted against the brightness of the beach. He sat up and brushed the sand from his back. He remembered his father relighting the candles and soothing Tom, the youngest of them. The attack had been in fun, he'd explained. He hadn't meant to scare them that badly. It was just a ghost story.

Kagan started to laugh. He'd have to go home through Minneapolis now, just to thank Tom for crying at that awful moment. It had stopped their father's attack and Kagan, who had been too old to cry, had been saved the embarrassment.

The short laugh died out on the quiet beach. Kagan plunked a stone into the water, breaking apart the reflection of the clouds. He knew the spot from the left bay as well as his father had. The lodge was no longer there. Kagan knew he should go up the hill and find out what had happened, if it had burned, or been moved or whatever.

Kagan ate another raspberry but it was dry and seedy in his mouth. He picked himself up from the beach, not bothering to brush away the sand. He was stiff already, from that little bit of paddling, and the trudge up the hill was longer than he remembered.

He came to the great open square in the trees. He could still make out the foundation lines and he pictured how tightly the branches must have closed around the lodge. There were still bits of blackened metal about, and sodden lumps of grey ash. Some of the trees bore blackened scars along the lodge side of their trunks. It all looked fairly recent, but he felt certain his father had known.

Kagan kicked at an ash pile and tried to remember that quiet rumbling of his father's voice caught up in a story, but the other came back—the cutting edge of that beautiful bass, sharper than any knife. And Kagan remembered how, starting even before their mother's funeral, he had slashed and slashed until his isolation was inviolate even to Kagan.

He realized, as he had at the time, that it wasn't them that his father had struck at, but at himself. He had cut himself off from everything that reminded him of her. Her children included.

But knowing that hadn't helped. Kagan turned away from the empty hole where the lodge had been and walked back toward the beach. He settled the pack into the canoe and pushed it away from the shore. He looked once more at the grassy slope that just hid the lodge from view, then walked across the clean sand and through the water to the canoe which was now his. The small wave ridges on the bottom held his weight without giving away, stinging his numbed bare feet.

Kagan backed off shore and spun the long canoe toward the

fleecy clouds that continued to drift up from the south. The rod cases rolled slightly on the canoe's ribs. He paddled away from shore, keeping his back to the lodge's beach.

Kagan put his paddle down suddenly and picked up one of the cases. Even as he fumbled with the threaded lid, Kagan pictured the glossy layer of yellowy varnish on the bamboo splits, knowing that his father would never have let these slip away from him. And when the rod slid out and he peeled away the felt wrapping, that's exactly how they were.

He found the reel case in the Duluth pack and though his hands were shaking now, he threaded the line through the guides and made his first cast in ten years, short and awkward, and he could see his father smiling at that.

The canoe drifted in the spot where it had once been possible to see the lodge and Kagan made another cast and watched the flyless leader as if something could still come up to it. Now Kagan could see the lodge and he could see his father standing by it. He knew where his ashes were and he knew the canoe and the rods were not one last cruel joke. He gripped the cork butt of the rod more tightly, feeling the rough spot where his father had stuck the flies, and he made one more cast, toward his father and his lodge, and he smiled. ❧

Keeping Time

Thomas D. Burkett

In the newsreels time marches on, parading
four beats per measure.

The universe rotates to three-quarter time
in *2001.*
Man and nature hesitate,
accelerate into kaleidoscope swirls,
balance order and chaos
on the tension of tuned strings.

We celebrate this grace in time
in glass-globed anniversaries
and stately grandfathers:
spinning weights and whirring gears,
swaying pendulums,
measure out the dance of hours.

The watch I wear
stamps out time in jackboot blinks,
second by second.
No pulsebeat here,
no delicate changes in tempo,
no monument to eons of fossil andante
and the excited allegro of thought;
nor even the pauses and swings of our lives—
the dizzying spin toward experience
and the long, slow circles of restraint.

Sergei L. Shillabeer

Service

Donald Mangum

I hate a mouse. Always have, always will. Nasty things get in your attic and breed, leave pellets all over the house. I've heard they will nibble your fingers while you sleep. And need I mention the bubonic plague? Mind, I would not have them or any or any other animal suffer unduly. That's why Vera and I use only the spring type trap. Banana scented glue boards? No thank you. How would you like to die glued to your lunch? And I won't even go into how the poison does them in. Ask me, clean snap of the neck is the kindest thing. Now, one of life's little surprises is that I would attend a funeral service for a mouse.

Bless Vera's heart, she wants me active in my retirement years. So what happens that first week when I take a six pack and fire up the tube for a little pro ball, and Vera walks in and sees me there on the Stratolounger? "Noble," she says, unplugging the set, "get in the car." She pours my Old Milwaukee down the drain, and the next thing I know I'm standing in a True Value holding a shovel and a hoe while Vera writes the check.

Back home, "Pumpkin, it's September," I say to Vera in the corner of the yard where she wants a garden. "Your timing's shot to hell," I say.

"It's your sixty-fifth September is what it is," she says. "You think for one minute about poor old Morgan kicking it for sheer uselessness at sixty-nine, then tell me *timing*. You've heard of fall gardens, haven't you? You eat turnips, don't you? Broccoli? Cauliflower?" she says. "Rutabagas."

Which is only for starters. Over the next few months, we paint the house, change the wallpaper, add shrubbery to the front lawn, so while the rest of the neighborhood goes more and more rental and so need I say to the dogs, we're beginning to look like something out of a TV ad for the Republican Party.

Vera reads to me from a magazine article called "Our Forefathers, Ourselves," by P. Harrison Goldigger, Ed.D.: "The sense of self that derives from a familiarity with one's ancestral heritage is essential to the holistic well-being of the American otherwise awash in the currents of a contemporary culture of fleeting fashion." We take a night class in genealogy at the community college in tracing your family tree. We do a little research, and I figure, Lord help a sense of self that derives from horse thieving, moonshining, and the slave trade.

One morning I'm on the roof cleaning out rain gutters, when I see something you don't see every day. It's December, cold and bright, and our neighbor of only a couple of months, a fat man with artificial legs, sits in the middle of his back yard, wearing only swimming trunks and apparently talking to a tree. Then I see that what he's really talking to is a squirrel, which after a few minutes, he coaxes to come down and actually take something from his hand. Vera and I have wondered about a little boy who stays over there on sort of an off-and-on basis. We've seen different people bring him, and a week or so later, someone comes to get him. I come up with a joke about the fat man's being a little squirrely and not all there and make a mental note to use it when I tell Vera.

One day after I've spent all morning hanging martin houses all over the yard, knowing perfectly well they'll be full of sparrows inside a week, Vera says she has a surprise. I tell her I don't want a surprise, I want a nap. We drive across town to a house where this woman about four hundred years old sits coughing and smoking a cigarette on the front porch. Vera introduces herself as the one who called about the car. The woman kind of wheezes something and points the way around the side of the house.

In the back yard, there is a nineteen fifty-seven Ford which I have seen modern art sculpture look better than. "You were saying how it takes a room full of computers to work on the cars today," Vera says. "I thought, here's just the thing to fiddle with in your spare time."

Instead of saying anything at first, I make a show out of running my hand over the hood before lifting it and pretending to be interested in the engine. I look at Vera and kick a flat tire. Then I walk over to where my wife stands, rubbing my chin and looking at the ground. "Well, I'll tell you, Vera," I say. "Truth is, a large block of concrete would sooner provide transportation." This is maybe not the time for sarcasm, but sometimes you surprise yourself at what you will say, and then keep saying, knowing the damage you're

doing. "Sweetheart," I say, "a stick of dynamite could improve this automobile."

Vera goes back to our car. I follow, thanking the old woman on the porch. I know I should apologize, but it's like there's this little part of you that is evil and cruel, and it comes out just when you've about forgotten it's there. "I'd like to know what you had in mind in the way of spare time," I say. "Maybe you were thinking of the breathing spells between finding our roots and trying to have House Beautiful in a neighborhood that's in a nose dive, where we don't know a soul anymore and probably should have left when there was still any property value to speak of."

Vera is crying, and I am wondering how it will be possible to go home. I have this vision of Vera and me playing bingo in Saint Petersburg, and I want to cry myself.

"Vera, honey, do you want a dog?" I say. I am worried. For days, my wife has been reading Scripture and sorting through old belongings.

"Remember the last one," she says. The year we were married and found out we couldn't have children, we got a dog instead that barked all night, shat in the floor furnace, bit my mother, and then disappeared, all within a week.

"That was forty years ago," I say. "I think dogs are different now." Vera doesn't say anything. She just stares at an old pair of high heels she's holding and then tosses them onto a pile for the Goodwill Industries. "It's just a thought," I say.

One morning Vera decides to stay in bed, says she may have pulled a muscle in her back and wants a day off her feet. I bring her breakfast and some photo albums she asks for. I have my own breakfast in the kitchen, where I also map out plans for a spring garden, thinking maybe seeing something grow will help Vera to feel better. Then I run to the store for a carton of milk and a *McCall's*. Back home I turn on the television and flick around from one game show to another for about two minutes before turning off the set. Then, maybe we'll take a trip, I think. Maybe Vera would like to see the Grand Canyon, or we could look into one of those tour groups. I close my eyes. Maybe we could just get away for a while.

The door bell wakes me from a little cat nap. I go to the door, and there's my fat neighbor leaning on a cane and smiling. "Name's Homer D. Brown," he says. "Go by Homer D."

"Noble Smith," I say. I shake his hand, being careful not to push

or pull in any direction. "You're our neighbor," I say. "Come in."

He does this mechanical waddle into the living room and sits. I keep my eyes above his shoulders until he taps his artificial knee with the cane a few times. "Long story there," he says and sort of chuckles. "Has to do with three women, one irate real estate agent, and a high velocity tour of the Mojave Desert. Aircraft were involved," he says. "Remind me to tell you about it sometime."

"I will, Homer D.," I say.

He looks around at the living room. "Well, you have certainly done wonders with this place. It's a genuine inspiration is what it is," he says. I've about decided he's just come to chat, when his expression goes serious. "Noble," he says, "I've been meaning to pay a visit anyway, but the fact is we've got a little problem now, and I need to ask you for a favor." Here it comes, I think. God knows what I'm in for with this character. "Concerns my little pal over there," he says. "You may have seen him. Sort of a semi-relative. Parents aren't much good, and he stays mainly with me now. Great little kid. He's about five and a half." He stops talking for a few seconds and just stares at the floor, like somewhere down there is the bottom line. "Noble, he had this pet mouse that meant the world to him. Named it Sir. Can you beat that for a handle?" He laughs. Homer D., I think. "Well, Sir died sometime last night."

"I'm awfully sorry," I say, and I'm thinking, give the kid a cockroach. Ought to cheer him right up. What has this got to do with me?"

"Our problem is here," he says, slapping his legs. "These here prosthetic devices are true technological miracles. They will perform for me most functions that yours yourself serve. However, digging graves is not one of them. Of course, having the boy do it is out of the question."

"You want me to bury the mouse," I say.

"A near bull's eye," he says. "Just dig a hole—the rest I can handle. Take you all of thirty seconds."

"I'll meet you in your back yard in five minutes," I say.

I go back to the bedroom to change shoes and tell Vera the whole story, thinking maybe she'll get a kick out of it. Instead, her brow goes all tense, and she listens like I'm pointing a gun at my head as I speak. "That precious little boy," she says. I am on my way out the door when Vera says, "Noble, wait." She rubs the sheet between her fingers and says nothing for a minute. Then, "Noble, let's have a service," she says. "A memorial service for the little mouse. You could say a few words."

"You want me to eulogize a rat?" I say. "Are you out of your mind?"

"We could dress up," she says. "Then after the burial, have snacks over here. A little reception for the boy. I'm going to call the man now and see what he thinks. What's his name?"

I tell her, and she is out of bed and on the phone faster than you can say Jack Robinson. It's obvious from her side of the conversation that Homer D. thinks the idea is wonderful, and that I might as well put on a suit.

I can see what's coming. If I know Vera, that kid will always be over here getting into everything, trampling the garden, asking a zillion questions. Vera will have me making kites, throwing baseballs, hanging around in toy stores at Christmas, and together they are going to drive me to distraction. ❧

First Book of Alone

Joanne M. Riley

My children are dressed for Sunday.
We walk the polished aisle smelling of old hymnals
To a pew about halfway to the altar.
Light bleeds through color and all the saints
Pity us. Still, I hold up my head,
My ceremony of alone. We kneel.

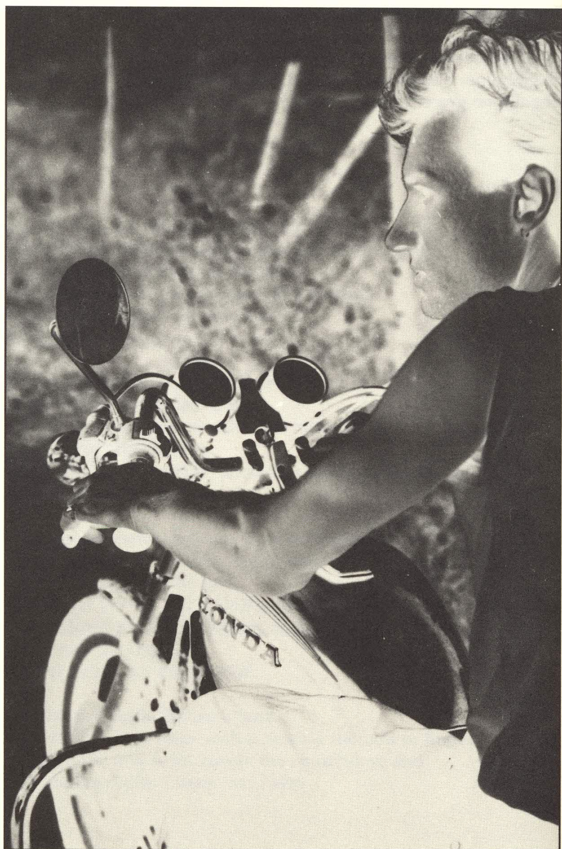
Prayers start to rain. Readings march out
While only the candles listen.
Then it begins, the slow ache, the humiliation,
As my eyes take them in:
The couples side by side, shoulders touching familiarly,
And the similar children.

I have no husband, no man. I am no-hope-old.
My girls sit on either side, lost in their own yearnings,
My beautiful girls who look
A whisper like me and a lot like no one.
I've no hand to join in blessing them,
No gospel, no creed
And certainly no communion.

Slowly, as always, the tears form.
At first I can stop them with a passing thought or finger.
But then the love is too much: the church-love and
The memory love. I weep and weep

And the younger girl asks: "Mother, why are you crying?"
And louder: "Mother, why..."
The older one leads us out.

Outside, I can breathe. We get in the car
To go home. Like every Sunday, I gain a few prayers,
But still no grace. I envy even Eve.



Danny Bryan

Plans

Kerry Dolan

My father always had a plan and this time it was place mats. Every thirty miles we stopped the car at a diner off the highway and showed his designs. My mother waited in the car while Cindy, Charly and I went inside. A motherless family, that looked better. We tried to look sad, yet responsible. Lonely but hopeful. These weren't place mats like anyone else's; he'd spent three months on the trivia, on the riddles, on the connect-the-dots that turned into Chile. This time he had a feeling.

We were moving now, to Pennsylvania, where there was nothing but corn and Quakers. We didn't want to move, leave New York, but my father's company, Arnot Envelopes, was relocating to Allentown. That's how he got paid, fixing envelope machines; but there was always a plan, not like the other ones, a plan that might deliver us, strike us rich, and move us to L.A.

Allentown. My father said it was named that because all the guys in town were named Allen. Allen O'Reilly, Allen Minkowitz, Allen Jubaruba. We took turns naming all the Allens who might live there. Then we got bored with that and started a game of License Plates. It was a '66 blue Comet and I sat in the back seat, on the hump, between Cindy and Charly, because I was the middle child and the skinniest.

I saw a California, a Connecticut, a Louisiana.

"Tenne-thee," said Cindy, who was nine. Someone at school had told her she looked like Cindy Brady, so now she wore her hair in blonde pigtails and spoke with a lisp. We all found her annoying; even my mother refused to humor her.

"Shut up," I said.

"I don't have to thut up if I don't want to. It'th a free country, ithn't it?"

"Stop it," said my mother. "Speak correctly." She was holding blue rosary beads and saying a decade as she always did on car trips.

We'd never had an accident, but you never knew when fate might catch up with you. There was the time her cousin Mary, the ex-nun, fell out on the highway. Her door was unlocked, it popped open, and she just fell on out there. A van ran over and cracked her ribs, killing her instantaneously. She was sleeping though, my mother added, always needing to soothe the truth, so maybe she didn't feel it as much.

The story got to me. Now in cars I did my own sort of praying. I couldn't stop checking the locks: my mother's lock, my father's lock, back and forth. I had to check them exactly the same number of times, or else one, the neglected one, would fall out. And it would all be my fault.

"What are you *doing*," said Charly. I'd been swiveling my head left and right, left and right, a private ritual I didn't think anyone would notice. "Cut it out, you're driving me crazy."

She made me lose count—which one had I looked at last? My mother or father? Which one would die?

"Alath-ka!" said Cindy. My father stared her down in the rear-view mirror; none of us had ever actually seen an Alaska.

"Oh yeah, which one?" he said. "What color was it."

"Red," she said. "A big red car. It went that-a-way." She pointed in the opposite direction.

"Oh that's too bad," he said. "I guess the rest of us won't get to see it."

"Nope," she said. "Am I the winner?"

"Yeah," we all said, sick of this game too.

"So, whaddyou wanna play now," he said, looking at me.

"I don't know."

"O.K.," he said. "Say a guy—let's say his name is Skip Weaver—say Skip murdered someone on one side of the international date line then jumped over, real fast, to the other side where it was an hour earlier. Would his alibi hold?"

"No. Of course not," said my mother. "That doesn't make any sense."

"No? Whaddyou think?" He eyebrowed me in the rearview mirror.

"No—well it was complicated," I said. I leaned forward and thought a moment.

"You see Skip was in love with a woman named Lola, a nightclub singer—"

"What nightclub," he shot back.

"The Lucky Star. It was in Morocco. He loved her but—"

"O.K., Charlene, you have to finish."

"I don't want to play." Charly was staring out the window, twirling her hair. Since she'd turned sixteen she was always bored.

"You have to," I said.

"Why do we always have to play a game? Always. I'm sick of it. Sometimes a person just wants to think, you know?"

"He loved her," said Cindy, "but she was dying of... something really bad."

"No, you ruined it," I said. "She wasn't dying."

"Yeth she was."

"No, the problem was she belonged to a gangster named Micky. He was... a gunrunner in Morocco. She didn't love him—she loved Skip—but he ran a pool hall and wore a pinky ring and she had to go out with him."

It was June and we'd rented a house by a lake, in a town called Dix Hills. None of us wanted to go. We tried to get excited about a house, a lake, something new. It would be a fresh start, said my mother, who thought she might like trees and water. If we hate it we'll leave, said my father, lighthearted, as though it were just an adventure in the long life of adventures. Then there were the placemats—there would be less competition here than in New York, he said. Not as many restaurant chains, not as many creative guys. It would be a long summer.

Girls, girls, he was surrounded by them. He had no one to play baseball with, no one to light a fire. I was the closest thing—not-quite-a-girl because I had imagination and collected sports cards: hockey, baseball, football. But even in my collecting I was a girl. I didn't care about RBIs or touchdowns; I cared about feelings. I kept the cards in shoe boxes, where the guys could all live together, in guy-apartments. They threw parties and were never lonely. Then I arranged the cards on my bed and imagined love affairs. Fran Tarkenton and me (not myself but an older, jauntier version) in Shanghai on a gondola. There was mystery, too—we were pursuing a killer named Rex all over China. There was time for love and time for suspense.

So, when we lived in Queens, he joined the Big Brothers and started adopting little boys, boys without fathers. He'd take them to the circus and buy them popcorn, to Mets games and stuff them with hot dogs. When they got too old—when they outgrew him—he traded them in for a new little boy. They always came over our house on Sunday, and ate too much ravioli, two pieces of chocolate cake. We

weren't allowed two pieces of cake; we were Catholic and had to learn the beauty of denial. They gulped down a big glass of chocolate milk that left a moustache above their lips. They took his spare quarters for pinball, never remembered his birthday.

It was always sad when they outgrew him.

"You're getting sick of me, aren't you, Billy?"

"No, Mr. Mullaney."

"Dave, call me Dave."

"Dave."

"C'mon, you can tell me. I can handle it. You're sick of me, aren't you?"

"No, I just wanna go out with my friends."

It was always the same—when they turned twelve, thirteen, they wanted to hang out in school yards, not see a double feature of "The Green Slime" and "The Thing With Two Heads" with my father.

So he'd get a new one and break him in.

"Timmy, what would it be like if you lived your life backwards, day by day getting younger until you were a baby, hmm?"

"Gee, I don't know, Mr. Mullaney." Timmy was only eight, skinny and had a voice like a little girl's.

"Dave, call me Dave."

"D-dave," as though he'd get in trouble. "I don't know."

"Well, what do you *think* it might be like, Timmy."

Timmy just shrugged.

"Don't you have any imagination, Timmy?"

That was always his complaint; they never had enough imagination.

It was a sad house by a sad lake. Even when we moved to the country we couldn't do it right. The walls were wrinkled, the floors creaked and sagged, the white kitchen light had moths and shoo flies buzzing round it. Pennsylvania bugs, we weren't used to them. In New York, bugs didn't fly. When they crawled they didn't seem so bad. Here they backed us up against the sink till my mother rescued us, took off her heel and smacked them. She smashed three bulbs that way. "I'm sick of these damn moths," she yelled at my father after the first week. She almost never yelled.

"It's not my fault," he said. "I didn't want to move here."

"Let's not start this," she said. He wanted to quit when his company announced the move, but she cajoled him, said we weren't going to be a family without a job. Said we had to think about the

future, about sending the girls to college, though Charly wanted to grow up to be a rich wife and Cindy, a soap opera star. He hung his head, sulked his hands, gave in.

Envelopes. Our house in Queens had been full of them. Envelopes of all kinds: manila, pink, note-size, letter-size. We never had a problem with mail. We could write anyone and know it would get there: Aunt Frances's thank you note, Mary, my ex-best friend who moved to California.

Now in the mornings he left at six-thirty, in a navy uniform, with a paper-bagged sandwich. He made a cup of instant coffee, poured right from the sink, before he left. You could tell he didn't want to go, his wrists hung limp and his face, gray. He drove to Allentown while the rest of us had nothing to do, no responsibilities. It was summer. There was no school, nothing to do all day but walk around. I was twelve, like a girl in a novel. Charly got a job selling hot dogs at a stand by the beach. I met her there every day, stood by the counter where the metal was hot and full of ketchup stains. It wasn't really a beach, just some sand they put around the lake to make it look real. Charly wore a white uniform and her hair up in bobby pins. She sweat only a little, and when her bangs flew in her face she wiped them casually, like a pretty summer girl.

Cindy burned in the sun and stayed home with my mother, who vacuumed twice a day. Cindy spent all day watching soap operas and pretending her Barbie dolls were lovers, illicit lovers, who twisted their heads when they kissed, the way they did on television. My mother started knitting a sweater for my father from a book she bought at Woolworth's, though even by August she wouldn't have it finished. I turned red-and-brown and blonde in the sun. After two weeks Charly had fallen in love with a lifeguard named Tony. When her shift was over she stood by his station, wrapped her legs around the tall white chair and shook her pony tail. He loved her too. He had muscley arms and slicked hair, and a gold cross that hung right next to his whistle. I would never meet anyone here, I thought. No friends, no one to talk to. But there was always the hope, when you were in the sun, that things might work out.

Before the place mats it was coupon clutches. He set up business with Uncle Joe from New Jersey, put machines in our basement in Queens and ran off hundreds of red coupon clutches, wallets with alphabetical listings by product. "A treat for every housewife—functional and elegant, too" was how they advertised it in the local paper. My uncle put up the money while my father was the creative

consultant. Cindy, Charly and I had to carry shoe boxes full of them every day, to sell in the school yard. Then we spent our afternoons after school stuffing the wallets with free cards — with pictures of Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman, with a joke card (What did the big flower say to the little flower? Hi bud.), with a coupon for five cents off Green Giant niblet corn. It was a bust. My uncle lost all his money, rolled up his sleeves till his mean elbows showed, and stopped talking to my father.

We spent a silent afternoon packing up all the coupon clutches in boxes, piling them in a corner of the cellar. "Well, it *was* a stupid idea," said Charly, then he smacked her and I started crying, then he smacked me too. We finished packing and then none of us ever mentioned that plan again.

Friday nights we couldn't eat meat, just grilled cheese or tuna casserole. My father came home from work, with greased hands, and a half gallon of chocolate and pistachio ice cream. He said it was a surprise, a Friday treat, but we always knew which flavors he'd bring home, they were his favorites. It was the best part of the summer, the best part of living in Allentown. He was never grouchy from work, just distant, his mind already in his workroom downstairs, readying his plans. He was drawing a new picture of a seal with a ball bouncing off its nose. His hands grabbed the food on his plate without even looking at it. "What was that?" he'd say, sometimes when he was finished. On days when my mother got creative, fettucine from a mix, she'd sulk when he didn't notice. Then they'd have a fight and we wouldn't have milk shakes before bed.

After dinner my mother set the bills and cancelled checks on the kitchen table, keeping notice of ones we'd paid and shaking her head over the figures, her eyes a glare in reading glasses. She was the rational one, the bookkeeper. Whenever my father got a bill in the mail his feet did a little scamper dance, as though he'd just seen a waterbug. "Hon-ey!" His fingers let go of the envelope as though it were on fire.

But she bored me then, she was so . . . literal. She couldn't make things up and she never lost control, not like my father. When she was upset she went and sat by the window with her rosary, then came back out, surer, with shoulders that weren't afraid of the world. My father was afraid of everything — of money, the woods, rude waiters. He always had feelings — too many of them — he couldn't shut them off. He stood by the formica, twitching, scooping up roasted peanuts till the can was empty. I never learned from him how

men were supposed to be; I thought they were the nicer ones.

Nights Charly climbed out our bedroom window to meet Tony at the beach.

"Don't tell Mommy, O.K.?" We shared a room and Cindy slept downstairs on the couch.

"I won't."

"Do you think he's cute?"

"You already asked me that."

"I know, but I just wanted to hear it again. Do you?"

"Yeah," I lied.

She always wore her swimsuit, I didn't know why, maybe they swam in the lake then made love rolling in sand. Maybe they licked the sand off each other's bodies. One night I snuck down to the lake and hid in the bushes that lined the road. There were seven or eight people—couples—sitting around a fire. One boy was playing the bongo drums, another a guitar. There was Charly, lying in between Tony's legs, her gold heart necklace blinking in the light. Purple halter and white shorts and legs... so clean and tan, right down to the ankle, with the rough spot that made it better. I could see why men fought wars, lost hearts and limbs for a leg like that. Tony was sick, lovesick. It was like a fever. He'd do a dance, he'd climb a trellis to be with her.

When Charly came home, at three or four, she peeled off her suit and in the light, the night light, she was the perfect girl, the girl everyone wanted, the girl I would never be. And she didn't even know it, just stared at her reflection in the fork at the dinner table, flipping her nose up and down, picking her chin.

"I hope we never have to leave here," she said, whispered, knowing I was awake or maybe just confessing to herself.

Charly said everyone in town laughed at him, going in and out of diners with his designs, wearing polka-dot ties and a bald spot. He's pathetic, she said. Everyone knows it, Mommy knows it too.

I didn't know it then. I remember being ashamed only of his tic, a honking noise he made when he was bored or distracted. "Your father," said Barbara Nelson. "He makes funny noises." All my childhood friends made fun of it, beeped their bicycle horns in imitation of it. He honked and then his eyes would twitch, but never in syncopation. I knew my mother loved him because she never flushed, just punched him when he went out of control, like during the homily at Mass. I wanted him to die when he did it. It brought up

every bad feeling I'd ever had, myself, my shame. We were clowns, we'd never fit in anywhere. We were frauds.

But pathetic, I couldn't believe it; he was my father. I was sure he had talent, it's just that it was free-floating, not anything you could pinpoint. He was a wasted vessel of talent and the world—the real world, not heaven or whatever was in the sky—would never hand him a paycheck, never clap him on the back.

Wildflower Trail, 2.5 miles. He got the map out and we tried to read it by flashlight. His safari hat kept tumbling over his eye; they didn't have his size in stock. We were lost and should have been home hours ago for dinner.

"Where do you think we are," he said, "here?" He pointed to the left side of the map.

"I don't know, what does the compass say?"

"I can't read these things—Northeast? Which way did we come from, North or South?"

"I don't know, I think South. Maybe."

"God," he said, and folded the map.

"Well, we're not really lost are we?" I said and laughed. "I mean, we're not going to be eaten by bears, are we," pretending not to mean it. I was supposed to feel safe with him but I didn't. He could fix televisions and broken fans, draw cartoons and design model buildings. It seemed that he knew everything, just that everything he knew was useless.

"I don't think so," he said, then, as we walked along by flashlight, swerving trees and forging a logic to our path by the moon or luck, "Don't be like me," he said. "Don't be like me."

We went on wilderness trails and got lost. We talked to the lake and looked at it; but it wasn't like the ocean, when we drove to Rockaway Beach and you could see out forever, all the way to England. We bought a compass, a bird-watching book, safari hats, binoculars. We didn't know what to do with ourselves, all this... nature. Just what could you do with nature? It sat there, you looked at it. I wanted to go home, to New York, and play stoop ball. I missed the feeling of bare feet on hot cement, of when you stepped on a tar spot by accident but it felt good, too good almost, and sticky. Playing the game where you walked in and out of the cracks, and seeing the specks of glass lit up like diamonds.

But we were here now and July was almost over, summer was half gone. I went down to the lake every day and met a girl named

Molly, with red hair. "Shall we be friends," she said. "Would you like to come over for tuna fish sandwiches?"

She had to mind her younger brother Biff, Biff with the freckled nose who rolled himself in towels to keep from burning. Yes, I said. She started teaching me how to do the backstroke, and how to hold my head underwater for forty seconds without dying. We'll have so much fun together, she said, and I thought, well maybe I will like it here.

Every Halloween in Queens we cleared out the cellar and made a little stage of cardboard. All the little kids on the block lined up to pay a quarter and see "Dave's Horror Show." Over the years we'd collected masks, good masks, with warts and big noses, with hair of silk. My mother wore a black gown and wig, and white powder on her face — she was Frankenstein's bride. My father was the combination emcee and Frankenstein. We turned out all the lights except for one spooky green one. There was a trap door on the floor of the cellar where Frankenstein kept his victims; my sisters and I would crawl out, with ketchup squirted over tattered bedsheets, with monster masks on. We were the Living Dead. All the kids screamed and said Put the lights on.

For the second act we were to dress up as a ghost, a ghoul and a goblin. A ghost was easy; we got an old sheet from the linen closet and cut out slits for Cindy's pale eyes. A ghoul was harder for Charly — but then we decided on a black cape and wig, and white chalk makeup. She looked ghoulish, like a grave robber. But a goblin — just what was it exactly? "It's kind of green," said Charly. "It's silver," said my mother, sure: yes, goblins were silver. "It's silver and it has dozens of arms and it flies through the air," said Cindy. What kind of costume was that? Kind-of-green sounded better. "A goblin is whatever you want it to be," said my father. So I made it my own, draped in gold, green and black, with a striped tail and six silver arms. It was my own goblin.

They lined up all day to get the best seats. For the quarter we gave them lemonade and black jelly beans.

Then he came home one day, without his uniform, with just a t-shirt and a carton of cigarettes. He slammed the screen door while my mother was frying fish sticks. It was August, a Friday. Cindy and I were playing Go Fish at the kitchen table, waiting for him to come home because we knew he'd bring ice cream, and then after the ice cream there'd be games, Charades, maybe, or Clue, where she would

be Miss Scarlet and I'd be Professor Plum. Or the game where he started a story and one of us would have to finish it. Games that would go on all night and never have to end.

"Don't get mad," he said to my mother. He sat down and started knocking the carton against the table.

"What. What did you do," not even a question.

"I quit."

"You *quit?*"

"Yeah." He kept knocking the carton. Cindy kicked me under the table and I kicked her back. My mother wouldn't say anything.

"Well?" he said.

"Well what? What do you want me to say?"

"I'm sorry," in a weak voice.

"What about the rest of us? Do you ever think of anyone but yourself, Dave?"

"Don't be mad. Honey, please don't be mad at me." He started to cry. My mother kept flipping the fish sticks, harder now, so that grease was flying all over the stove. I couldn't look at him like this, it was the worst kind of feeling, where life had no order and nothing was safe.

"What are we going to do," she said.

"I couldn't take it anymore. I'm not living to do that."

"What are we going to do," she said.

"Look, I'll find something. I've been thinking about working with little kids. Maybe the place mats will come through, I don't know."

I could see out the screen door to the lake, and I knew it was a stupid lake, ad I felt foolish for thinking this would work out because nothing ever worked out, that was life. Lurching from one thing to another, that was life. There was never any ground beneath you.

Charly cried for three days, said she'd carve Tony's name on her wrist, said we could all go without her, she'd stay and become a waitress. Then Tony said, "Well, maybe my mother is right, we are kind-of young, why don't you go and we'll write every other week?" Every other week, I hate him, she said.

The days before we left, my father sat at the kitchen table with an atlas. My mother still wasn't speaking to him, but I knew that this time, too, if he sulked and suffered long enough, she'd forgive him. It was hot—too hot to stay inside and pack boxes—but my father fixed us pitchers of black cherry soda and iced coffee, mixed together. There was always another place to live in, he said. He drew lines on

the map in different colors, marking off the possibilities. There was Ohio and Virginia and New Jersey. On the map they all looked good. ❧

Pausing for Fences

Jeff Arnold

Waiting for Mike to tighten the wire,
I heard the creek gurgle.
For three days we had sweated and cursed
wire and posts over steep hills
to fence ground long loved,
and mostly missed the murmur of creek
and gentle smile of wildflowers.
But then, in the failing light
I had time to hear.

It had been whispering its secret message
all three days, I'm sure,
and as long before as I can fathom
earthly eternity,
but not to me.

This new fence was a sudden necessity
that broke our quiet ordinaries
and brought us to quiet fever,
blended our several ways
to common purpose.
We told good stories, ate in fellowship,
but mostly worked, together,
and, in near dark, tied the last wire
on a well made fence.

It will stand, most likely,
through several snows, with little help.
Trees will fall, cows will crowd, time will tell,
but for many springs
fence fixers will walk it proudly.

Before that, we will go back again,
though probably not together,
and walk those hills to see our work.
In the bottom I will pause
and hear the creek, alone.

It will speak of creation, perhaps,
and small peace in a busy world.
I will be soothed, almost,
unto renunciation.
But I will look up, and remember
I helped good people do good work
while the creek whispered on awhile
without me.

Carolyn K. Grigiss

Systematic Desensitization

Ed Peaco

Duane Dyer could see how one thing led to another, from curing his stuttering to cheating on his wife. It was a matter of him taking things too far, but he thought everything was worth doing and that his biggest problem now was what to do next. He had spent his summer nights having an affair with his neighbor, until she put an end to it when her husband switched to the day shift. Duane began the therapy for his stuttering earlier in the year, at the same time Max Headroom was popularizing the impediment with his own network television show.

Duane's wife, Sue, an air traffic controller, worked nights, while Duane worked accountant's hours, which made the affair possible. She never noticed any change, because she always was busy with her own projects. She would come home pumped up from her shift at the control tower, as if energized by the glow of her radar screen. Immediately she would plunge into some venture around the house. Although they had an agreement never to interfere with each other's sleep, early one muggy morning she began refinishing the furniture. Duane was awakened by the whir of the electric sander. He opened the door to the garage and confronted a wood-dust mist. "I hate all the furniture in our house," Sue said, hunched over a tabletop. "All the surfaces are scratched."

"Shouldn't you be doing that by hand?" Duane asked.

Until he met Wendy Thomas, Duane filled his time alone by playing racquetball at his club and by reading books about revolutions—the French and Russian were his favorites. His game got rusty; his books remained piled on a dusty shelf.

His stuttering never had been serious enough to cut him off from the rest of the world, but the fear of stuttering had tormented him for years. He would refuse his words in anticipation of those he could not say fluently, as if he were madly paddling a canoe to avoid

dangerous boulders in midstream. It had become a joke at the office, with people jumping in to finish his sentences, or to mimic Max Headroom. "So-so-so-sue me!" was Norman Carter's refrain, which would demolish anything Duane was trying to say. Norm had the rhythmic head jerk down, too. Duane, who rarely watched television, never grasped what was going on.

At home, his stuttering was not a problem. When he had trouble speaking, Sue would stand over him and offer silent, placid encouragement. It was no big deal, and yet it was everything, the foundation of their marriage. He felt free to display his imperfections; she felt free to display her patience, which she reserved only for him, when she reserved it at all. He wondered how things would go, now that he was without his most palpable imperfection.

Duane's psychologist, Grantz, had told Duane not to expect a cure, "per se," for his stuttering, but there he was, not stuttering, at least not much, and not worrying about whether he might. Only Duane called it a cure, because it allowed him to feel that a horrid part of his past had been exorcised. Since he was a child, Duane had been to speech therapists who told him how to practice moving his lips and tongue. Grantz put them all to shame. "Your stuttering is a learned response," he said. "We probably will never know what the response is to, because that would entail digging into your childhood for answers that aren't accessible. But we can work on unlearning the response." The therapy is called systematic desensitization, a technique used in treating phobias, Grantz said. The patient masters his affliction by encountering it in increasingly stressful but controlled increments. He asked Duane to make a list of ten uncomfortable speaking situations that would cause him to stutter, and rank them in order of increasing stress. Number ten would be the worst fear imaginable, in Duane's case, making a speech in a packed auditorium. When Duane flinched at this thought, Grantz said, "Maybe you won't have to climb that far up the ladder." Grantz gave Duane a mission: "Begin with lowest item on the list. Put yourself in the situation and do the thing you're afraid of doing—intentionally. Produce the stuttering, listen to yourself, observe the reaction. When you're convinced you've mastered the situation, move up to the next one." Once they drew up the list, they tackled the first item in Grantz's office by calling auto repair shops and checking the price of a t-t-t-tune up. "You see, nothing really happens," Grantz said. "They're just waiting for you to finish. No problem. If they give you trouble, you can handle it." As for Duane's unplanned stuttering, Grantz offered no prescriptions. "Don't feel pressured to change

your behavior. Just concentrate on the exercises," Grantz said. Already, Duane felt relieved. He buried himself in the process of unlearning, reporting to Grantz each week about his rapid progress through the list:

2. Butcher: "T-t-t-two pounds of ground beef, please." (No problem.)

3. Police officer: "W-w-w-which way to Walnut Street?" (No problem.)

4. Locker room chat: "N-n-n-nice backhand." ("G-g-g-great ceiling shot" was the mocking reply. Easily ignored.)

5. Client: "Th-th-th-that would be a savings of f-f-four percent." (Double take, questioning look, but, finally, a slight smile of gratitude.)

6. Small group of strangers, three women eating Chinese food at the fountain outside his building: "S-m-m-mells good. Where c-c-can I get some of that?" (A laugh, a scowl, a blank stare. "You gotta be kidding," the scowler said. More trouble than expected.)

7. Business lunch: "F-f-filet mignon." (Piece of cake.)

8. Larger group of strangers: "H-h-h-how do you know it's done?" (Grantz talked him into attending a one-night wok class at a supermarket. Duane found the astonished stares unpleasant; he was the only man.)

9. Presentation at the office: "It's not s-s-s-something we've tried b-b-before, but it's the d-d-direction we ought to be moving in." It was a watershed experience, revolutionary. Norm stood up and applauded energetically. Duane couldn't tell whether Norm had caught on to the therapeutic exercise, but Duane loved for the outburst. Then Norm said, "So-so-so suit me up. I'm ready to play!" before the director told him to shut up. When Duane found that he could endure even that, he felt unburdened, fearless. His subsequent stuttering blocks seemed anticlimactic; the overwhelming importance, the anxiety he had attached to them vanished. The next day, Norm presented Duane with a videotape of a Max Headroom episode. "Time you checked out a kindred spirit," Norm said. Duane accepted the tape with faint thanks.

Immediately Duane became more outgoing. He couldn't help noticing the unfamiliar figure in shorts and a bikini top, watering her garden on summer evenings in the back yard behind his back yard. With an elbow resting on the chain-link fence, he met Wendy. She and her husband, Vern, had just moved. He worked at the post office and she was looking for a job. "Vern works nights, and I just sit around and go crazy," she said.

"My wife works nights, too," Duane said, staring at her glistening belly.

"Want to come over for a drink?" she asked.

"I d-d-don't think so," he said, feeling the first wave of stuttering anxiety since the office display. He tried to shake it off; Wendy didn't seem to notice. "Maybe we could get together sometime, all four of us."

"I don't know when," she said. After that meeting, Duane took care to position himself in the back yard in early evening, when their spouses were gone. He often found Wendy across the way, coaxing him. He came over several times, once to start her lawn mower, once to admire her zucchini vines, again to taste her zucchini casserole. He always retreated quickly, resisting her invitations to enter the house, and, later, fantasies inflamed, wishing he hadn't. He was concerned about how it would look. Gossip was rampant in the neighborhood, and back yards were like open theater.

They discovered each other one night when the electricity went out on the Thomases' block. Wendy passed through the gate in the back fence and knocked on Duane's door. She was wearing a long T-shirt that stretched to her knees and covered whatever else she was wearing. She asked for a candle. "The power was off on my street. It's dark all over," and, tilting her head and smiling, added, "I saw your light." On the authority of this explanation, which she made enticing, she stepped inside. Duane was surprised at how easy it was to begin cheating.

After that encounter, Duane always was the one who ventured through the gate. Using Wendy's bed made her feel safer; she wanted to be there in case Vern called. He was possessive and always wanted explanations. Wendy and Duane had a system. She kept the back light on until after Vern called on his eleven o'clock break. Then Wendy would shut off the light, a signal for Duane to come. He would creep into the sparkling night, faintly lit by occasional lights left burning in the neighborhood—yard lamps in the next block, dim lights in bedrooms and bathrooms, and lights shining brightly in unoccupied kitchens and dens. He would sneak into the no-man's land of facing back yards and become aware of a neighbor's insect-killing light, a lurid molten violet, crackling with each dispatch. He had to be wary of the neighbors. Often a light would switch on and a door would open, perhaps to emit a cat. Duane would be pinned down on the open lawn, freezing in a crouch, a love commando. It was thrilling. Once, when Wendy shut off the back light and Duane began his approach, she suddenly turned on the kitchen light and did

a striptease as Duane scrambled for cover. The neighboring houses were dark, Duane noticed with relief; the show was just for him.

Duane never had taken much interest in other women until he met Wendy. He was satisfied with Sue's slim body, proud that she did not have to work at being slim and pleased that she did not have to resort to trendy cosmetics. With Wendy, on the other hand, Duane frequently was surprised at how striking an ordinary woman could look with a ninety-dollar perm and a little mousse, a thought that only increased his fascination. Though Wendy's demands on him were strenuous, Duane felt free. She was the first one with whom he did not share the lumpy baggage of stuttering.

When the end came, it was not especially turbulent. Wendy broke the news: "Vern's going on days next week. It's been in the works, but I never said anything, because it wasn't definite until now. He wants to start a family."

"Understandable," Duane said.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Well, I'm just wondering how long you can keep your hands off of me." He adopted sarcasm as he grew edgier.

"You better worry about yourself first. What are you going to do?"

"Lots of things. Go back to playing racquetball. Refinish the furniture." He wanted to thank her, but Wendy was doing a good job of being aloof.

"I thought we would be screaming at each other."

"We would be, if what we had wasn't so, so recreational." He kissed her goodnight. "Be seeing you," he said, forming a smile that left him as he turned into the darkness, startled at once by emptiness. What would he do with himself? He could do anything, he supposed. Could he have as much fun with Sue as he had with Wendy? He once did and still could, if Sue would lighten up. What would he do with all those free nights, looming like raw material to be strip-mined for personal development? Chances are, racquetball would not do. He could work longer hours at the office, where he never had been as good as he could be, because of his impediment. Now there was nothing to keep him from excelling. He had no impediments he could think of. He could get into management, but that always seemed boring. He could start his own business. What business?

To distract himself, Duane put Norm's Max Headroom tape into the VCR and tried to watch. It was strange—television executives with British accents, a petulant adolescent computer whiz, and a

young man outfitted with electronic gear, apparently the hero, with an American accent. Max Headroom seemed to be a minor character, with occasional spots of jerky epigrammatic techno-babble. He appeared on a screen, against a background of modulating parallel lines, now horizontal, now diagonal. The animated head didn't stutter, exactly; rather, it repeated certain words and movements with computerized speed. Duane found Max annoying and switched him off. He flipped through a book on Marat that was overdue at the library, and nodded off.

He awoke with the shock of Sue's entrance. "What's this blip I'm detecting on the couch?" she asked. She tossed her purse in an easy chair and flipped on the light. Typically, she was invigorated and he was groggy. He arose, squinting, and embraced her. He kissed her on the neck. "How nice it is to have someone to come home to," she said. He couldn't remember the last time he had tried to wait up for her; it was clear she was enjoying the attention. "Why so affectionate?" she asked.

"Don't know."

"You must be hiding something."

"Probably."

"Well, save it for tomorrow. I'll put you to bed." She helped him off to the bedroom, and he was asleep before she tucked a sheet under his chin.

Duane awoke with new energy the next morning, which was Saturday, their day together. They hadn't planned anything, and he was scanning the events listings of the morning paper. As he read, he turned on the Max Headroom tape. Now he found Max easier to take. "Hi. Welcome to the big time. This is Max Headroom and welcome to the b-b-big time television." Duane was fascinated, even though he couldn't follow the plot because he had forgotten what he had seen the night before. "If you're watching me, who's watching Network 23? — a network with a great future behind it." Duane went to the kitchen and made a pot of coffee. It was nearly eleven. Sometimes the smell of coffee was enough to wake Sue up. On his trip back from the kitchen, he looked out the window and saw Wendy and Vern on the deck. Wendy was wearing a bikini top and shorts, as usual. Duane thought about their times together, how quickly she would remove her minimal clothing, how eagerly she rendered herself his to explore. He hadn't felt guilty about his affair until now, when it was over. He remembered Sue's smile the previous night when he unexpectedly kissed her. For the first time he regretted having betrayed her. He noticed that his emotions, dissociated

from the thoughts that provoked them, were not unlike the stuttering anxiety he had mastered. Could he master these new bad feelings as well? He had a reckless desire to confess — but maybe not so reckless. Maybe he could confront what he dreaded, under conditions he could control, in a manner he would find comfortable. He went to the bedroom and nudged Sue. "Get up. Come out and watch Max Headroom," he said.

"Max Headroom? Good grief. OK, I'll be up in a minute."

He went back to the television and backed up the tape to a good part. He finished with the paper, having found nothing, and tossed it aside. When Sue appeared, he poured her a cup of coffee. "What service," she said. "You're buttering me up for something. I just know it."

"No, I just want you to watch this." He turned on the tape, which he had set up for a Max spot:

"And d-d-don't forget, if you can't hit a three-iron out of a bunker, change your grip!"

"So this is Max Headrom," Sue said. "It's nonsense."

"That's right, but it's great nonsense," Duane said. He took the coffee pot back to the kitchen, pausing to look out the window at Wendy. Now she was sunbathing. He could see sections of shiny flesh between horizontal slats of the deck.

"What are you staring at?" Sue asked.

"Nothing."

"The hell you aren't. You're staring at the neighbor who always prances around in her swimsuit."

"No, I'm not," Duane said. "Well, yes, I am."

"I knew it. I've seen you out in the yard staring at her. You know, it would be really embarrassing if she saw you. And I'm sure her husband wouldn't like it."

Duane knew this was his opportunity for mastery, and he trembled at the thought. "You don't know the half of it," he said. It was a reckless thing he was doing, climbing the ladder by leaping to the highest rung. He tried to remain composed. "Her husband works nights, too," he said, willing a light-hearted leer. "Wendy and I have been seeing each other for months, creeping around at night while our spouses were hard at work."

"You even know her name?"

"Well, of course, why wouldn't I? Adulterers sometimes exchange names."

Max Headroom interrupted with a mindless aphorism: "Don't let the bedbugs bite. Sleep on your feet!"

"You're crazy," Sue said. "You've been acting stranger and stranger ever since you started going to that shrink. He fixed your stuttering, but I think he warped the rest of your brain.

Another burst from Max: "If at first you don't succeed, clear your screen and try again! Try again! Try again!"

"Who, me?" Duane said, hamming it. "I never felt so good in all my life." He had to remind himself that, to Sue's way of thinking, nothing ever was particularly wrong. He listened to himself and watched Sue. He accepted his last remark as essentially correct. She smiled and stared at him as if he were some kind of nut, gleefully telling teasing lies. That was good. She did that when they were getting along. No problem. ❧

City Flowers

Martha Mattingly Payne

Carrying flowers home from the grocery
In a brown bag
In New York City
Is like a dream for me
Who sits alone
In a rectangular house
In a sleepy Southern suburbia
With a doctor for a husband
And two retrievers
For company.

Not that I don't love them, I do;
They feel soft
And lick my face
When I hug their necks,
But Kathleen Turner romances her cat Romeo
And Sigourney Weaver fiddles on
A violin, and each lives alone in
A penthouse near Central Park where
Always lie
Flowers in a brown bag
On a marble countertop.

Yet I have flowers too—
Roses my husband sent me
Last week,
Six red ones he ordered
To thank me for enduring a month of
Spouseless nights and spoiled dinners.

Then why do I long
To buy a bunch of cheap daisies
In New York City
And to carry them home
In a brown bag?

Sigourney just tosses hers there on the counter
By the self-frying eggs,
And though Kathleen took hers sailing
Down Madison Avenue,
She dropped them along with Romeo
When Michael kissed her.
But I keep giving my roses preservative
And clipping the stems diagonally
Under water
And hoping all the buds will open
Before the necks lose tone.

As another velvet petal drops to the checkered tablecloth,
I bend to stroke
A golden-brown belly,
And click on only to hear
Oprah the thin
Proclaim that women in the nineties
Can have it all.
Instead, I pluck a thorny stem
And rock it to sleep
Where I find peace in the perfume
Of wild, golden daisies.

Oyster-Man

Michael Evans

This morning, standing naked
by the upstairs bathroom window,
I watched an old oyster-man

pole his narrow boat
through the meandering tidal stream
behind your parents' house

Wide-legged, feet set to the steady rhythm
of water under boat, he moved
with the grace of his ancestors, slowly

pushing pole down to deep silt
then raising it again, high like a vision.
Now, the season three weeks old

by calendar alone, we come out here
to winterize the pool, rake leaves
from its bottom, drain water from the pump.

It is our ritual, of sorts, our distraction
from the merciless month to come, the same
cold question always between us: *How long?*

How long? In this October heat, salt
stinging my lips, I try to remember
when oysters are good,

the rubric my mother always used
after the big supermarkets took over
our town, offering year-round

foods she knew could not be right.
Only in months with an "r" in them
she said every time

she pulled a pint from those barrels
brimming with ice set out in aisles
next to the meat freezers.

I wonder if the oyster-man needs ways to remember:
a rhyme to tell the length of months,
a calendar for the day, a watch?

Work done, you sit across the pool from me,
bare feet skimming water the last time
till spring. With evening, the oyster-man returns

and somehow in this light it all makes sense,
the way we can continue on like this,
the way he has lost his age,

how his body measures only the passage
of this stream, arms steady from years of touching
bottom, his hands the color of the water.

A Violet in the "Sahara of the Bozart": Sara Haardt Mencken and Her Writings

Benjamin Buford Williams

Among the literary flowers that bloomed in what H. L. Mencken referred to as "The Sahara of the Bozart"[1] was his future wife, Sara Powell Haardt of Montgomery, Alabama. In her brief lifetime of thirty-seven years, Sara Haardt published one novel and more than three dozen short stories and essays. At her death she left sketches for a second novel and plans for a collection of shorter pieces to be called "Southern Album." Also among her literary remains were several completed stories which would no doubt have been published had she lived.

Sara Powell Haardt was born in Montgomery, Alabama, on March 1, 1898, the daughter of John Anton and Venetia Hall Haardt. Her paternal grandfather had migrated to the United States from Otterberg, Bavaria, in 1842, and settled in Montgomery, Alabama, where he married Sara's grandmother, also a native of Otterberg, on November 29, 1848. Sara's father was the tenth child of this marriage, and Sara was the first of five children, four girls and a boy (*One Hundred Years* 18). The Haardt family were Episcopalians, and Sara was baptized in St. John's Church, Montgomery, on July 1, 1898 (Mencken, Preface xiv). She was educated in the city schools until she enrolled in the high school program of the Margaret Booth School for Girls[2] in 1914, the year of the school's founding. She graduated from this private school on May 24, 1916 (Mayfield 24–26).

In the fall of 1916, with some financial aid from her maternal grandmother, Sarah Powell Farrar Hall, Sara Haardt enrolled in the freshman class at Goucher College, Baltimore, Maryland. She entered and won the freshman short story contest with a piece titled "The Rattlesnake." The story was published in the April, 1917 issue of the Goucher literary magazine *Kalends*, and soon thereafter Sara was listed as an "editorial assistant" on the magazine. Over the next

three years she became a regular contributor of prose and verse to *Kalends*. Her grandmother, Sarah Hall, died in November, 1917, which Mencken writes, "greatly reduced her resources, and she had to live very economically. For a while she made a little extra money by serving as the college postmistress" (Mencken, Preface xiii). In her junior year, Sara was editor of the Goucher yearbook *Donnybrook Fair,* and in her senior year she was editor-in-chief of *Kalends*. Between her junior and senior years, she became actively involved in the suffrage movement and served as chairman of the Alabama branch of the National Woman's Party. With several ladies from out of state, Sara demonstrated at the Alabama Capitol in a vain effort to persuade the legislature to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment. In the spring of 1920, Sara Haardt graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in history from Goucher (Mencken, Preface viii–xiii).

Sara Haardt returned to Montgomery after she graduated, and for the next two years she taught at the Margaret Booth School. She began sending her prose and verse to national magazines with the hope that some of them might get published. Her first success in a national publication came when *Bookman* put her poem "White Violets" in the January, 1922 issue. This five line poem reads:

> I laid hot thoughts of you
> Between cool petals of white violets
> That grew pale-lidded in a hidden place,
> And knew their scentless breaths would leave no trace—
> Like crimson roses breathed upon. (439)

She was offered an instructorship in English at Goucher and returned to Baltimore in the summer of 1922 to take the position and to pursue graduate work at Johns Hopkins University (Mencken, Preface xv).

The bulk of Sara Haardt's college fiction had "concerned itself with faraway places" and romantic subjects for which her talents were ill suited (Manchester 235). Back in Baltimore, she began to explore the rich material in her Southern background, which ultimately led to establishing her as an important new voice among Southern authors (Mencken, Preface xv). In July, 1922, she published her first piece of prose, "Strictly Southern," in the *Reviewer,* a literary periodical edited by Emily Clark at Richmond, Virginia.

In the spring of 1923, Sara Haardt, who had just turned twenty-five, was introduced to the famous author and editor Henry Louis Mencken, a forty-two year old bachelor (Stenerson 234), who had just made one of his lectures to the Goucher girls.[3] Mencken was impressed by Sara's beauty and intelligence, and in a letter to his friend

Philip Goodman he wrote that " 'It greatly astonished me; I always thought education ruined the complexions of women' " (Manchester 232). In their first meeting Mencken also remembered that Sara had submitted a story to the *Smart Set*, the magazine that he and George Jean Nathan were then editing. He had obviously rejected the story, but he encouraged her to send him some more of her writings (Bode 281). On August 17, 1923, in one of his earliest letters to Sara Haardt, Mencken offered the following criticism of one of her stories and of her style:

> I have a feeling that the center of gravity of the story wobbles — that it is about the mother one minute and the daughter the next minute. Take a minute and prayerful look at it, and see if you can't pull it together better.
>
> Incidentally, get yourself cured of the quotation-marks disease: you have quoted every fourth phrase in some paragraphs. It is a clumsy device, and unnecessary. Ruth Suckow had it, and I had to use an axe on her to cure her. (*Letters* 256)

Mencken's comments in this letter seem to be about Sara's story entitled "Miss Rebecca," which he rejected. However, he accepted and published her "Joe Moore and Callie Blasingame" in the October number of the *Smart Set* (Manchester 235), the last issue of that magazine that he and Nathan edited before they launched the *American Mercury* in January, 1924 (Stenerson 3).

Just before Christmas in 1923, Sara Haardt was stricken with tuberculosis, and in February, 1924, she was hospitalized in Maple Heights Sanitarium near Baltimore. Mencken was a frequent visitor and a constant correspondent to Sara until her discharge from the hospital in September. Sara returned home to Montgomery to recuperate, and remained there for more than a year. During her convalescence she decided to pursue a career as a free-lance writer with the encouragement of Mencken (Bode 283-285). While she was in the sanitarium, Sara had revised and sent her story "Miss Rebecca," which Mencken had turned down, to the *Reviewer*, where it was readily accepted and published in July, 1924. Mencken was to admit later that Sara's "Miss Rebecca" was one of the best stories she ever wrote (Preface xvi). Her only publication in 1925 was an article for the *American Mercury* entitled "Alabama." In this article, Sara examined, among other things, the origin of the state's name, Klan activities, and industrial development. In her discussion of religion in Alabama, she labeled evangelicalism the "eighth lively art" and stated that "political spoils and remunerations [go] to the more numerous Methodists and Baptists; social eminence to the Episcopalians" (91).

Sara Haardt's career took an upturn in 1926 as three of her best stories were published. In March, the *American Mercury* printed "Mendelian Dominant," and *Century* magazine published "All in the Family." In September, her story "Commencement" appeared in the *American Mercury.* Her income from the stories and essays she sold was not large, but she began to earn extra money by doing reviews for Mencken. She also received an excellent fee from Joseph Hergesheimer for the research she did for his book *Swords and Roses.* As her writing career began to bloom, Sara's relationship with Mencken was maturing into what would eventually be marriage. Of this relationship, Manchester wrote:

> For all the separation of years, they were much alike, these two: both enormously complicated personalities, both complicated in the same ways. Mencken's yearning for the past, for the old days in West Baltimore, . . . was echoed sharply in this dark-eyed, enormously sensitive girl who loved the Confederate tradition she wanted to destroy and attacked the vestiges of decadence with the poise and bearing of a matriarch. There was something almost comical, and equally almost pathetic, in the spectacle of these two genteel rebels drinking illegal brew in Shellhase's, she gracious and charming, he courtly and cavalier; discussing their *avant garde* ideology enthusiastically, he in the literary English of a Congreve, she in the lilting, pleasant accent of old Alabama. It was, from its inception, a friendship of people ideally suited to one another, in weaknesses as in strengths. (234–235)

The year 1927 provided Sara Haardt with her greatest literary adventure and was also her most successful financially. She sold her short story "Licked" to the *American Mercury;* the piece centers on a group of patients in a tuberculosis sanitarium, revealing their hopes and fears, their optimism and, as the title suggests, their pessimism with regard to recovery from the disease (51–62). The great adventure began when she signed a contract with The Famous Players of Hollywood to write screen plays. The contract provided her with a salary of $250 per week for five weeks and round-trip fare to Hollywood. If she produced an acceptable screen play she would receive $3,500 for it and $5,000 for a second acceptable script (Manchester 235). She left for the West Coast on September 28, 1927.

Before she arrived in Hollywood, Mencken had written to his friend Jim Tully, a hobo writer, who was then working in the movie capital, asking him to see her. "The life of Hollywood will probably shock her half to death," Mencken wrote; and then he added, "I think you'll like her very much. She is immensely amiable. Moreover, she has a great deal of talent" (*Letters* 300).

Sara readied a script based on Confederate refugees in Brazil she called "The Promised Land," but the studio failed to buy it. When

her contract with Famous Players ended, she sold the script to director James Cruze for $1,500. After the sale, Famous Players offered her another five-week contract. At the termination of this second contract, Sara decided that she had had enough of Hollywood and headed East, stopping in Montgomery for Christmas and arriving back in Baltimore for the New Year (Bode 286). As a result of the Hollywood venture, she had received a round-trip to Hollywood and about $4,000. This provided her with a financial security that she had not previously enjoyed.

She began to concentrate on completing her novel, did book reviews for the *Mercury,* and sifted through piles of clippings of anti-Mencken vituperation which Mencken had collected from publications across the country. From among the worst of these, Mencken assembled and published *Menckeniana: A Schimpflexikon,* giving credit to Sara for the "tedious job" she did in searching through "thirty volumes of newspaper clippings" (Preface xvi). In addition to her other activities for the year, she wrote and published a sketch of the hobo writer Jim Tully which appeared in the May, 1928, *American Mercury.*

After a brief respite, Sara Haardt began to suffer another siege of bad health. In the fall of 1928 she entered Union Memorial Hospital for the removal of a cyst, and in April, 1929, she was hospitalized with an infected kidney, which had to be removed. It was following this operation that the discovery was made that the tuberculosis had spread, and the doctors gave her but three years to live (Bode 288). Amidst these difficulties, she managed to publish several pieces, including two essays in *Bookman* and one in the *American Mercury.* The two for *Bookman* were literary interviews with Ellen Glasgow and Joseph Hergesheimer. The *Mercury* article, entitled "Etiquette of Slavery," maintains that the slave owners were as trapped by the institution as the slaves themselves (34).

As the closing months of 1929 slipped by, Sara slowly recovered from the kidney surgery and worked on her novel while Mencken prepared for his trip to cover the Naval Conference in London. It was during this time that they no doubt decided to marry sometime in 1930. Mencken left for Europe in December and returned to Baltimore in February, 1930. Preparations for the marriage began in earnest in the months that followed. Sara went home to Montgomery to rest and to tell her family of the impending marriage. She was able to complete her novel and had it accepted by Doubleday, Doran. She also published an essay called "Southern Credo" in the May number of the *American Mercury,* debunking some Southern myths.

Sara Haardt's engagement to H. L. Mencken was announced by her mother in Montgomery on August 2. The announcement "took all but a few of their closest friends by surprise" (Wagner 24), as Mencken had been alerting friends about the coming nuptials since June (*Letters* 318). The wedding took place on August 27 at 4:30 p.m. at the Episcopal Church of St. Stephen the Martyr in Baltimore. Neither Mencken nor Sara had wanted a religious ceremony, but Maryland law did not recognize civil marriage so Mencken arranged to have his friend Herbert Parrish, an Episcopal priest, perform the service (Kemler 240–241). Sara's mother, sister and brother-in-law were there as were Mencken's two brothers, sister, sister-in-law, and niece (Manchester 247). After a brief service, the couple departed for a honeymoon in Canada, going first to Montreal, then to Quebec, and later to Halifax. On their return to Baltimore they settled in their newly decorated seven-room apartment, and both resumed their accustomed activities.

Early in 1931 Sara Haardt's most ambitious literary work, her novel *The Making of a Lady,* was published by Doubleday. The book received mixed reviews, but was generally praised as a good first novel with promise for the future. The novel is the story of Beulah Miller, who rises from humble beginnings to marry the son of the town's leading citizen. The town is called Meridian, but the surroundings and the atmosphere are unmistakably those of Montgomery. The reader of the book gets a very good picture of the changes that take place in the town as industry begins to replace agriculture as the economic base, and the reader is also given an insight into the social strata of Meridian in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Aside from the theme of upward social mobility, the novel explores the more interesting socio-historical theme of changing values in a progressive South in conflict with the myths of the past which were "passing into legend" (100). This New South attitude is expressed by one of the characters who sees Meridian as merely "a place to earn a living. . . . He hadn't seen it as a fatal conflict between the Old and the New South" (155). As Beulah rises socially to become Mrs. Haviland she "had not only become a lady, she would be indistinguishable as a lady" (285). As a wife and mother in this most distinguished family in the town she had become "freed from the shackles of the past and set her feet securely in the path of the future" *(New York Times Book Review).*

The *New York Times* reviewer of *The Making of a Lady* recognized Sara Haardt's failure "to fuse the two themes" and pointed out other technical errors in the book, but concluded that "there is good reason

to believe that her second [novel] will be better" (6). Another review emphasized, with some justification, that the novel is really more of a story about the city than about the characters who inhabit it and that "Miss Haardt has brought to life in her book a Southern town that stays with one after the reading, while the characters are gone with the story" (Graham 629). What one concludes after reading the novel is that Sara Haardt was an excellent evoker of atmosphere, a keen observer of the social structure of this Southern town, and a facile prose stylist. One can only lament the fact that she was never to complete the novel upon which she was working at the time of her death. She had learned much from the shortcomings of her first novel, according to Mencken, and certainly would have eliminated the obvious flaws in a second (Preface xvii–xviii).

The two years that followed the publication of *The Making of a Lady* were busy ones for Sara Haardt. She placed stories and essays in the *North American Review, Woman's Home Companion*, and *Country Life*. One of these, "Absolutely Perfect," from the June, 1932, *Woman's Home Companion* was selected for the *O. Henry Prize Stories* of 1933. She published six more stories and articles in 1933, adding *Harper's Bazaar* and *The Delineator* to the growing list of national magazines in which her work had appeared. Among her 1934 publications was the short story "Little White Girl" which came out in the April issue of *Scribner's* and was selected by Edward O'Brien for his collection *Best Stories of 1935* (Mencken, Bibliographical Note xxviii).

During the nearly five years that Sara and Mencken were married, she suffered a series of debilitating illnesses. She was hospitalized in January and February 1931, with influenza and pleurisy, and was often confined to her bed for a variety of lesser ailments. Both of them had influenza at Christmas time in 1932, and on January 9, 1933, they sailed on an eighteen day Caribbean cruise which proved to be beneficial to Mencken as well as to Sara. On their return to Baltimore and in order to avoid more of the harsh winter, the two of them left for Sea Island, Georgia, on February 24. Before heading back to Baltimore in March, they went to Montgomery, the only trip that Sara and Mencken made together to her home town. She had no serious setbacks in the summer and fall of 1933, so they planned a Mediterranean cruise for early in the new year. On February 10, 1934, the Menckens sailed on the *Columbus*, visiting Algiers, Egypt, and the Holy Land before returning to New York on April 5 (Manchester 268). In May Sara had an infection, probably contracted in Algiers, which put her in the hospital. Because of the illness of her mother, Sara made the trip to Montgomery in Septem-

ber, and soon after getting back to Baltimore she was hospitalized again for pleurisy. While recovering at home from this illness, she received the news of the death of her mother on Christmas Eve. In a letter to Theodore Dreiser, Mencken wrote that "Christmas in my house was a horror" with Sara's illness and her mother's death (*Letters* 386).

Throughout her last winter, Sara Haardt, though frequently ill, continued to write. By spring she had sold four more short stories, and was in the process of outlining her new novel tentatively titled *The Plantation.* She also put together preliminary sketches for a collection of prose pieces to be called *Southern Album.* In March she had gone to Johns Hopkins Hospital for x-rays; then in May she was taken back to Johns Hopkins to undergo tests for an undiagnosed condition. The tests revealed a fatal disease, tubercular meningitis. She survived less than a week after being placed on the critical list, and died at 6 p.m. on Friday, May 31, 1935, at age thirty-seven. Sara Haardt's funeral was held on Monday, June 3, and, in accordance with her wishes, her body was cremated and her ashes buried in the Mencken plot in Loudon Park Cemetery, Baltimore.

Three of the four stories that Sara Haardt sold in 1935 came out posthumously in June and July. The year after her death, Mencken edited and published a collection of seventeen of her short stories, using her projected title *Southern Album.* As he stated in the "Preface," the selection and arrangement of the stories was his own and would surely have been somewhat different had Sara lived to make her own choices (vii–viii).

The best of Sara Haardt's writings are those steeped in her native South, and although she "had passionately denounced the contemporary South" and was in revolt against the more cloying aspects of the Old South, "she was also fascinated by her homeland" and wrote out of this background with feeling and understanding (Hobson 177). As William Manchester has said of her "she thought the Old South was wonderful, only she got a little sick of hearing about it sometimes" (234). Critical opinions of her writings are somewhat uniform in rating her as "a minor but fastidious novelist and short story writer" (Wagner 24). That she had true literary talent is admitted by critics and reviewers. "During her brief career her sensitive stories were honored three times by compilers of the annual volumes of short stories," and her novel has been called a pioneer work "along a path later to be followed by such distinguished Southern writers as Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor" (Bode 302).

Sara Haardt came to realize, as her literary skills increased, the truth of Donald Davidson's dictum that "'The writer who cuts himself off from a tradition may find himself in a spiritual desert more painful than the Sahara of Mencken's imagination'" (quoted in Hobson 160). Her writings always show that "her identity as a Southerner was always foremost in her mind" (177). The elements that go to make her a true Southern writer and a minor but significant voice in the vanguard of the Southern Literary Renaissance were best stated in Sara Haardt's own words at the end of one of her most anti-Southern essays. In "Southern Credo," she wrote:

> I had lived too close to these dead and fading things to ever break away. The dying roses, the little mounds with their ghostly headstones, the hauntingly sad April evenings, had brewed a philosophy of futility in my heart that is the curse of all Southerners, and their inescapable tradition. I might dream rebelliously of forsaking it, but it would never forsake me: my spirit was wholly entombed in loss and loneliness. (110) ❧

Notes

1. H. L. Mencken first published this essay in the New York *Evening Mail*, November 13, 1917, but it was an expanded version which he printed in his *Prejudices: Second Series* (1920) that set off the denunciations of his views by many Southerners. In the piece Mencken wrote that the South "... is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert." See H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (184).

2. See Campbell. This outstanding private girls' school was founded by Margaret Booth (1880–1953) in her home at 529 Sayre Street, Montgomery, in 1914, and operated there for 39 years. Among its distinguished alumnae is Pulitzer Prize novelist Shirley Ann Grau.

3. In a letter to Philip Goodman, Mencken wrote: "I am lecturing at Goucher College tonight: an annual affair. The audience consists of 250 virgins" (*Letters* 240). Some sources suggest that Sara Haardt and Mencken met at his first Goucher lecture, but the best evidence indicates that they met in the spring of 1923.

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The Dinosaur and the Critics: A. N. Wilson on C. S. Lewis

J. F. R. Day

C. S. Lewis: A Biography. A. N. Wilson. New York: Norton, 1990. 334 pages.

When C. S. Lewis died in 1963, his death went almost unnoticed, at least in this country, for it occurred on the same day that President Kennedy was shot in Texas. As if to make up for that neglect, there has emerged in recent years a growing industry of Lewis criticism, reminiscence, biography, and even hagiography. Writers like Humphrey Carpenter, Chad Walsh, and Walter Hooper, among others, as well as a scad of C. S. Lewis newsletters have contributed to the Lewis phenomenon, and now they are joined by A. N. Wilson, not only a celebrated biographer but also one of Britain's better-known novelists.

It is clear that one of Wilson's primary reasons for writing about Lewis is to demythologize the man — to find the "Jack Lewis," as he was invariably called, beneath the printed initials of a book cover. And there is a good deal to demythologize. Lewis was legendary, not only as a writer of children's books (the *Chronicles of Narnia*) and adult fantasies (such as *Perelandra*), but also as a formidable literary critic *(The Discarded Image, The Allegory of Love),* a brilliant Oxford (and later Cambridge) don, and undoubtedly the foremost popular apologist for Christianity in English since Chesterton. Furthermore, he was a voluminous correspondent who always answered his mail, a courtesy that is surely tantamount to sainthood these days. As a result, Lewis is in considerable danger of canonization from both the High Church and the Low, each frequently creating, as Wilson points out, rather different sorts of devotion — St. Jack the Virgin, the "catholic" saint, and St. Jack the Abstemious, the "protestant" one. Both views are clearly at odds with the facts. Wilson argues convincingly that Lewis was neither celibate nor teetotaler. In fact, Lewis's view of drink and tobacco was very much at odds with that of the religious right, and one may be absolutely sure that it was not ginger

beer that fueled his conversations at "The Bird and Baby." (Wilson also notes somewhat ironically that religious conservatives have virtually created a shrine to Lewis at Wheaton College, where his beer tankards and pipes are reverently displayed in glass cases for the edification of the faithful who are themselves discouraged from such amusements.) In short, whatever else C. S. Lewis may have been, he was very far from a plaster saint on anyone's altar. If Wilson spends more time on Lewis's involvement with "Minto" Moore and Joy Davidman than Lewis himself would have liked, it is, after all, only to be expected in a post-Freudian age. If, as Professor Stephen Sykes has pointed out, sanctity is impossible in a post-Freudian age, we have only ourselves to blame.

Wilson is at his best in describing the milieu Lewis inhabited—a milieu which Wilson, himself a former Oxford don, clearly understands and relishes. I have read few better accounts of what the tutorial system is actually like at Oxford, at least from a don's standpoint. Wilson also gives us a good picture of the much-publicized "Inklings," including Charles Williams and J. R. R. Tolkien, among the most famous. While Tolkien and Lewis's friendship was eventually to wane, Wilson argues that we owe the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* largely to Lewis's interest in the work. Tolkien, unfortunately, was less thrilled with Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia,* finding the "subcreation" of Lewis's world faulty. But if Wilson's accounts of Lewis among his friends are not quite as edifying as popular piety might prefer, yet there are still a number of people who found in that group some of the best conversation ever heard in a University, and for Oxford, that is quite a claim.

Wilson is perhaps a bit less enamored of Lewis's apologetic works. While he finds the pathos of *A Grief Observed,* written after the death of Lewis's wife, Joy Davidman, to be moving and genuine, some of the earlier works strike him as facile and even hectoring. Perhaps so, but Wilson's own criticism of Lewis's technique sometimes seems to miss the point a bit as well. Lewis was, in a very real sense, making debating points, and occasionally Wilson seems to want to take an analogy Lewis was making to demonstrate a particular point and reduce it to absurdity. When in *Mere Christianity,* Lewis tries to get across the idea of the Incarnation by asking how we would like to become slugs or crabs, Wilson objects that the analogy is offensive, since we did not make nor could we redeem crabs (181). This is undoubtedly true, but what Lewis was trying to approximate was not the Redemptive aspect of the Incarnation but the Kenotic one—the "emptying" of Christ in the Incarnation and the conde-

scension involved in God becoming man. (While Wilson may object to it, similar analogies have been used by Robert Farrar Capon, though he, as I recall, prefers frogs and oysters to crabs and slugs.) Wilson also objects to Lewis's major argument for the Divinity of Christ: Lewis argues that Christ's actually claiming to be Divine would make him, as a first-century Jew, either wicked, or mad, or, as He said He was, God. To this Wilson replies, quite correctly (as indeed with any historical document), we cannot know anything Jesus may have said. "You cannot, in isolation from church doctrine, and in isolation from the plain facts of literary history, say that Jesus said this thing or that thing. If you do, you find yourself faced with unedifying alternatives such as Lewis proposes" (165). Of course, it is precisely for that reason—to get his reader to "unedifying alternatives"—that Lewis makes his argument. It is a strong argument, and apparently Wilson's only cogent attack is to argue the insufficient clarity of scripture on the point, a view Lewis would heartily dispute. If Lewis takes scripture as a clearer witness than Wilson does, it is not wholly without reason; after all, Jesus surely said something to get Himself crucified and to inspire his followers to endure grisly deaths for His sake. It does not seem that Lewis is any less logical to follow the Gospel accounts, varied as they may be, than Wilson is to question them. While Wilson notes that Lewis was ignorant of Biblical criticism, it is only fair to remember that Lewis was not an unsophisticated reader of ancient texts—a point Lewis makes himself in "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism" in *Christian Reflections*. Of course, Lewis did make mistakes. He did even occasionally get flat caught out, as with Elizabeth Anscombe over the third chapter of Lewis's *Miracles* (210 ff.). But all in all, Wilson's treatment of Lewis as an apologist reminds me of a Rhodes scholar I knew who was told by his philosophy don that you underestimate Lewis's logic at your peril rather than Lewis's.

But this is a minor criticism of an interesting book, for in the areas of Lewis's fantasy works and his criticism, Wilson is insightful and well-worth reading. If it were only for Lewis's Oxford History of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, he would be one of the best—and most readable—critics around. Wilson's discussion of this, and other critical works, is excellent. He puts *An Experiment in Criticism* clearly in context as Lewis's answer to the new critical theories of F. R. Leavis and I. A. Richard, and when Lewis points out "[i]t is always better to read Chaucer again than to read a new criticism of him," Wilson agrees. "This seems like common sense today . . . " (289). One only wishes that it did. Lewis, the self-

proclaimed "Dinosaur" of letters would find as much to displease him in recent critics as he did in those of his own day. Not, it would seem from the results of Lewis's own approach to literature, without reason.

While there are any number of things in Wilson's biography of Lewis that Lewis fans will find troublesome or annoying, in bulk this is a remarkably interesting biography of a fascinating man. At the end of his foreword, Wilson argues that his work "is not intended to be iconoclastic, but I will try to be realistic, not only because reality is more interesting than fantasy, but also because we do Lewis no honour to make him into a plaster saint. And he deserves our honour." That C. S. Lewis certainly does. ❧

Codrescu at Large

Thomas Larson

The Disappearance of the Outside: A Manifesto for Escape. Andrei Codrescu. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990. 216 pages. $17.95.

To be exiled—by the State or by personal choice—begins a lifelong psychological struggle. It is perhaps most profound when the exile's mind remains divided between memory and the New World, one mind firmly in the past and one assimilating hesitantly into the present. The mind of memory tells the exile to keep his loss. He may return, if not in fact, then *in* memory. The New World mind tells him that his life, which stands out in ways magical and strange from the natives around him, must become more than he ever expected if he is to mature. Remain the same *and* grow.

Hence Andrei Codrescu—Romanian exile, surrealist poet, U.S. citizen, and a man of two minds, whose plight reminds us that though the East-West conflict may be ending, its individual victims live on.

You can hear the place of exile in his name: Codrescu, the same marble-mouthed rhythm as Ceausescu, the Romanian ex-president and Stalinist butcher whose censors attacked the 19-year-old's Stalin-hating poems in 1966.

Exiling himself to America in the sixties, Codrescu found a place where his New World literary aspirations could grow—New York City. There, beat and surrealist poets influenced him greatly with a poetics that de-emphasized image and re-focused speech or talk as the poem's central expression. (Among his mentors were Ted Berrigan and Allen Ginsberg.) Codrescu has done well with their lessons, publishing 14 books of poetry (beside other works of fiction, essay, and memoir), editing the surrealist journal *The Exquisite Corpse*, and crafting his quirky social commentaries for National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*.

But regardless of his literary feats in the U.S., he remains Romanian—lyrical, aphoristic, hyperbolic, addicted to metaphor.

With this book, an ode to—and display of—intellectual free-

dom, Codrescu traces his being other, being Outside, back to his origins, to the beginnings of a destiny he has always known. In the first of 10 loosely related essays on the subject of exile, he says Romania had to be the land of his birth: It is the land of the exiled. "The myth... was imbedded archetypally in our culture. I belong to a country whose main export is geniuses." Ovid, Constantin Brancusi, Tristan Tzara, Eugene Ionesco, Mircea Eliade, and Nadia Comaneci.

The great archetype of the exiled of course is the Romanian national hero, Count Dracula. Nosferatu's story epitomizes the sadness of loss because the Count can never return to the living/dying world he abandoned. The Englishman Bram Stoker refashioned the tale to reflect the Westerner's obsession with sex and immortality. But Codrescu says the hell-warning implicit in the story has been turned upside down: "[He] is *the* chief deity, and just as Halloween is displacing Christmas [as the nation's greatest holiday], Dracula is replacing Jesus Christ."

Analyzing Dracula's appeal to the West creates marvelous cacophony, a sort of crash-and-ring continuously sounded by Codrescu's past and present minds. He troubles East-West divisions with insights only an exiled Easterner could have.

> Until the recent revolutions in the East, the distinctions were clear: the Censor ruled that world, TV ruled ours.... The old Censor has dissolved into the illusionary liberty of our image-making machine. What happens from here on out is no longer a question of ideological oppositions, but a struggle for global reality.

Codrescu does not, like many immigrants, fall prostrate before the flag. He repeatedly harangues the triviality of our politics and media, the info-mania that causes us to adore our technology as it stifles our thought. Here's a desultory attack on the commodification of desire.

> All the things that mimic human desires ('sexy guns') are in fact circuit breakers: they increase the need proportionally to the distancing of satisfaction. You can't *always* get what you want because you can *never* get what you want because you don't know *what* you want when you can have *everything that looks like it*. Desire itself eventually becomes false desire until its entire energy becomes the property (and fuel) of power.

Of course many exiles dread being Americanized, becoming middle-class and safe. Some artists (such as Czeslaw Milosz whose resistance to New World ideas Codrescu analyzes) prefer marginality, writing critically about a society that upholds the worldly

principle of their freedom but is deaf to the antinational message of their art.

This loss-after-loss seems to be Codrescu's theme. What is disappearing for him comprises the expressionist art forms—dada, surrealism, modernism—those big guns a few poets keeping firing from the edges of culture to awaken people to the power of imagination. Why is the Outsider's act disappearing? Because such displays of personal power often insult authority and invite censorship. (Recall the attacks on Robert Mapplethorpe's work.) Knowing that art can incite freedom and repression, many artists are frightened of such potential. They comply, censor themselves. Eventually, if unused, the freedom previous generations have won vanishes. Equally important, Codrescu warns, the houses of invention artists traditionally inhabit outside the mainstream, where the wildness of the avant-garde dwells, are being dismantled by the competitive economic demands of both socialist and capitalist states. The growth of the imagination is irrelevant to the production of couches.

To show off his love of marginality, Codrescu often floods his writing with an automatic, associative style. An example:

> The only shocking thing in our world is its fearless use. We must eroticize language, ourselves, the world: make the points of contact glow. This may have to be done unsentimentally now, when the war machines are the real sentiment machines (a tank is a hankie) and beautiful to boot. We must preserve the human nomad forms in all their *desuete* charm: gypsy scholars, misfits, politicos, truants, escapees, runaways, stewardesses, bus drivers, train porters, itinerants, night managers, self-born-agains, by-themselves, hired guns, Kelly girls, corporate fixers, nurses, malcontents—the drifting globe. . . . We should build an oracular and practical language on the blocked flows of political exiles while retaining the formal liberty of art. We should be capable of conceptualizing our experience to the point where it becomes new experience.

Like reading Emerson, I'm unsure what it all means, but the ideas are exhilarating. Codrescu seems to enjoy making those "points of contact glow," which will prove quite an accomplishment in language but not necessarily a boon to a reader's understanding. And, since Codrescu's consciousness is forever his subject, the expression often becomes more purposeful than the message. Indeed his prose exemplifies a sort of risk-taking he feels is kaput in much American writing. "The weakness of the American poet is not that he has no imagination, but that he does not love poetry enough to *think on its behalf.*"

(On this point Codrescu the critic oddly overlooks the Spanish/Latin surrealist influences of Lorca, Neruda, and Vallejo on such

radical poets as Robert Bly and W. S. Merwin, and the fact that these U.S. poets have had innumerable imitators.)

The role of the artist as society's Problem Child is very American. Codrescu's anti-authoritarian stand follows a significant branch of American art, from Whitman and Stein to Pynchon and Morrison. What Codrescu may miss, however, as Granville Hicks once said, is that the Great Tradition in American literature belongs to the Outsiders: it is made up precisely of those writers who are alienated from—and in mortal combat with—the impersonal acquisitive values of American society.

Although Codrescu over-expresses his concept of the ontology of exile, these essays do have immediacy, a verve and toughness that recall some of our best multicultural writers, such as Gary Soto, David Mura, or Michelle Cliff. But be warned. Codrescu's soul is cut like a boxer's, and there is much of the fighter's feint that makes his love of abstraction hard to follow.

Nonetheless, read with the instructive irreverence his minds-in-tandem engage, Codrescu is joyful. His writing enacts his love of freedom. In Romania he says one always had to whisper, hide books under covers, be cautious with whom one joked. Otherwise, prison. Once in America, Codrescu has never stopped talking, often just for the joy of hearing himself speak. ❧

Interview with Shirley Ann Grau

Mickey Pearlman

Shirley Ann Grau, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1965 for *The Keepers of the House* (1964) comes from "a loosely-structured family of eccentrics if there ever was one" who were "splendid [but] forgot they had children for long periods of time. Everybody was so interested in whatever they were doing" that "they had very little time to organize others. When they remembered us, they *were* very concerned about it. Everybody was expected to go their own way [but] we were not expected to *do* anything at all. So you either did, or didn't. In either case, [it was] your problem. They'd say, 'that's very nice, dear.' It was sort of monumental indifference. I don't remember anything traumatic. Nothing seems to have happened."

Grau, who graduated from Sophie Newcomb College of Tulane University, lives now, as she has from early childhood, in New Orleans, where she raised four children [with James Feibleman, a writer and professor of philosophy at Tulane, now deceased] who "have all come out different." They are "an amazing variety" who range from "extremely conservative to extremely liberal." Two are married and one of the unmarried children "will marry at the first twinge of arthritis. When he gets up [one morning] and there is a twinge, he will marry the next 'girl.'" She said with some seriousness that "it's very nice to begin to see them go away," that children are "wearying... one grows tired." The fact that they get married and leave home "is one of the few good arrangements in nature's plan." In any case, she said philosophically, children follow "their own genetic imperative," you can't "really influence [the end result] too much" since "there are billions of possible [genetic] combinations. Some throw up physical flaws, [some throw up] mental or moral flaws; they are now checking the genetic material of murderers... it works or not," and that "when you think of the number of genetic possibilities and possible combinations, it makes a lot of

sense" that her children "are just about as varied a lot as you can have."

Grau reminisced fondly about living in the French Quarter during the early 1950s in an apartment where "one wall was black and there was one kind of purply wall" in the days "when it was a small town... not the Quarter you see now" and "you could have a very comfortable apartment behind a big courtyard and hear nothing except cats climbing the roofs at night." Now it is "a very different place" with "such an obvious dark side, a drug-laden and prostitution-laden side; it bothers me when you see a young girl with eyes running, nose running, standing on a street corner, obviously waiting for a 'buy.' When you see young boys and their pimps... working the streets, it's obvious and depressing" and there is "such a contrast between the lovely architecture and the incredible sordidness of the people walking around the streets.... Too bad."

Nine Women (1985), Grau's latest work, is a collection of complex and unusually disturbing stories about women marooned in the often muddy waters of emotional crisis. This collection is her first published work since *Evidence of Love* in 1977 and is markedly different in tone and subject from earlier novels like *The Hard Blue Sky* (1958), *The House on Coliseum Street* (1961), *The Condor Passes* (1971) and *The Wind Shifting West* (1973). The lead story, called "The Beginning," which she says is "a basically simple, ordinary story [about] a hooker and her child," a "variance on a fairy tale," will be incorporated into a novel which she is writing now.

Grau seemed reluctant to discuss her work in any detail; she said, "If I look at people abstractly at all, which I don't, [I would say] it's a never-ending parade of eccentricities and amusement... a grab bag of possibilities, [and that people] are remarkably good at passing blame." What is important in her work "is whatever the reader sees, not what the writer thinks he [sic] puts in it," that "whatever you see in a story is there." That is the "wonderful thing about words, their overtones, and the meanings they drag along with them." The finished product is "sort of an enormous Rorschach blob [that] everyone reads differently. Words are symbols, and all the associations they carry can't be controlled. They can only *approximately* be controlled and the rest, who knows?" But the stories do seem to have in common a sense of the often ungathered threads of a middle-aged woman's life, which one somehow expects to be more neatly braided or arranged. There is a haunting quality here which has to do with the unfinished scenario of experience, the unresolved complications of fluctuating memory, and the familiar insight that the character (or

the reader) does not understand the reality of her own experience as well as she might have expected to. Grau's women seem caught in that amorphous middle place between the initiation of events and their resolution. In "Hunter," for instance, the heroine, Nancy Martenson, for whom "time came and went in a pattern of overhead florescent [sic] tubes," (26) and who finds herself the sole survivor of an airplane crash in which her husband and daughters have perished, spends the insurance money on cross-country flights, awaiting her own death in the statistically inevitable plane crash. In "Letting Go," Mary Margaret, the daughter of ardent but uncharitable and unloving Catholics whose lives are demarcated by empty rites and rituals, is "running with fear from something she didn't know, something that might not have been there, something that might even have loved her"(61). "Housekeeping" has a similar message: Nothing is satisfied, or in place, and one waits for the ghostlike past to be jettisoned in favor of the present. "Widow's Walk" is an open-ended story of a woman, Myra Rowland, who is alone, without answers, entrenched in the boring patterns of the advantaged, country club life which she shared with her now-dead husband. What underscores this story is the sense many woman have, in retrospect, of having been too young and unknowing for the youthful, demanding years of marriage and childbearing, and too aware but disillusioned for the later, less stressful, more disgruntled years. It is the familiar story of many women, who experience themselves as out of time and place, but who understand the mechanisms of daily experience, and for whom the frustration and emotional ennui remain daily irritants.

Grau, whose first published work was a collection of short stories called *The Black Prince and Other Stories* (1955), said that, in her opinion, "very few courses on the short story are taught in colleges but collections of short stories are selling like mad." There is "a big difference between what teachers choose to teach and [what] readers choose to read, and there is not much correlation." She said that she "puzzles over the effect that teaching has on reading habits" in later years. "You wonder how many literate people go back and re-read *Hamlet*, [which they] were assigned in college" since most "students leave school actively disliking the printed word and it takes eight years to get over four years of college."

We talked at some length about a book on mother-daughter relationships that I was working on, and she told me about "a meeting [in New Orleans] a couple of years ago [which featured] mother-daughter pairs" and to which she took her own daughter,

who is a lawyer. Her opinion is "that some people are just so hooked into eternal self-analysis... they think about themselves incredibly, and they are ALL ALIKE! You'd think if you wasted that much time on yourself, you'd come up with something different!" This conference convinced her that "this [kind of] introspection is encouraged by analysts, and magazine articles" and "what bothers me is not that [some people] are so self-concerned, but that they are so basically dull-as-soap and so very, very boring." One daughter, whose mother "had had ten or twelve children," made them "kneel down every morning to say the rosary [and] with no wiggling. If they wiggled, they had to start all over again, which strikes *me* as barbaric and cruel. I'm not sure that, deep down in the daughter's mind... she didn't think it was barbaric too, but she didn't tell this story as a complaint. She said, 'I was raised very strictly.' This was an example of strictness. A few things like that just curl your hair. After all, the woman was thirty-five."

This conversation seemed particularly revealing because the encoded message suggests that few conflicts are ever totally resolved, and that painful experience continues to reverberate in seemingly innocuous, but powerful moments, much like those depicted in *Nine Women*. None of the conflicts described there are resolved and that is, perhaps, related to their author's statement that "there are so many irritations in the world that I try to limit squabbles" and that "I tend to avoid anything labeled 'feminist' [because] it tends to be awfully strident." It seems to me that these are the words of a writer who has a particularly pragmatic, practical, and unsentimental view of the world: that people's lives are "the most amusing jumble of things," and that there is, in spite of her best fictional efforts, very little explanation for, comprehension about, or resolution of, that "jumble of things" to be found. For every writer, however, there is the recognition, and the description, of that "jumble," and at that, Shirley Ann Grau has been doing an exemplary job for over thirty years. ❧

Woodland Treasures

Janet L. Smart

Winner of The Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald Young Writers' Contest, sponsored by the Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald Museum Association, Montgomery, Alabama

> *Whatever Treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summtertime, remember!*
> *Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child.*
> —**Sara Orne Jewett** from *The White Heron*

The pond was cool, with its vast, overhanging limbs of ancient pinoaks, and was very special to Aubrey. She was eleven and unsure about most things. Her thin, lanky body pushed forward, physical testimony to her energy and curiosity. She had a freckled, pointed face with arching eyebrows, an angular chin shooting down, and solemn blue eyes which often reflected her uncertainty. Aubrey lived several hundred yards from the sheltered pond; in fact, it belonged to her uncle, if such a place can belong to anyone. Aubrey spent her summer days at the pond, exploring its tiny lagoons, wondering at its secret depths, luxuriating in its rich mud oozing up between her toes. She observed the teeming life the pond supported, the thousands of their varieties, their minute struggles from birth to death, and, when it was near dark, she sat and listened to their sibilant voices. She saw during these still moments that she shared the pond with many other life-forms: squirrels, chipmunks, o'possum, occasional deer, even the water moccasin, leaving its tiny, deadly wake as it swam through the deep, green water. And, above all, there were literally millions of insects buzzing, shrilling, ringing, rasping, flying and crawling in a thick shroud, feeding off each other and the rich broth of the pond.

Aubrey's favorite place was an overhang on the far side of the water where the trees were thickest. There was a steep slope which jutted straight up for about twenty feet, was level for about three, and then plunged down again. At the pinnacle of this overhang, Aubrey would sit, her head close to the lowest limbs on the great trees. She could look out over her pond from this vantage and see the broad expanse of water at its widest point and the dark, slim bodies moving deep under its surface. She could see the roof of her uncle's farm house through the thick trees in the distance and the birds flying overhead. She sat there for hours on the smooth rock of the perch,

and, sometimes, when she was brave, she jumped from the overhang into the deep water below. As she swam into the darkness, finally feeling the tips of the soft grass on the floor of the pond brushing against her body, she sensed that the water held some great secret that she would never know.

"What are you doing out there all day?" asked her aunt.

"We play," was all she answered.

Her uncle would slurp his coffee and read the Dallas Times Herald while they ate breakfast.

"Says here they're trying to build a rocket that'd go to the moon," he said. "Fools. Why in the hell don't they invent me some farm machinery that's not always breakin' down, huh?"

Aubrey looked at the picture of the rocket in the newspaper. "Looks like a big firecracker," she said.

"They'll never make it," commented her aunt, "they just need somewheres to spend our tax money."

After breakfast, Aubrey visited her mother for a while. She lay in bed, her eyes opened, unmoving. Something important had popped in her head one day while she was lifting a tub of laundry. Something deep down in there had given way like a balloon swelled with too much air. And now her mother had parted with the world, a state Aubrey understood, even envied, as she got close to that pale face, peered down into those clear, blue eyes, and wondered what dreams were in progress inside her mother's head. Once, while she looked deeply into her mother's eyes, an awful expression appeared on the face, momentarily agonized, as if she had seen a repulsive sight. As Aubrey watched in horror, the face constricted for perhaps five seconds. She lurched away from her mother, paralyzed with fear, and, finally, the expression gently relaxed again into a vapid droop. After that, Aubrey had more respect for her mother's dream state.

That summer proved to be the most uncertain of Aubrey's life: sweltering months of confusion and doubt. At night, she would gaze into the dusky mirror on her dresser, squeezing the red eruptions on her forehead until the blood soaked her handkerchief. She would fling herself on the lumpy old bed, listening to the night outside, watching the moonlight creep over the worn carpet on the floor. She dreamed of being whirled away on a little piece of earth, out into the universe, watching the world becoming smaller and smaller until it disappeared forever, leaving her sweeping away into blackness, alone. She often woke up in bed with her corpse-like mother, clenching the limp hand, sweating and shivering, unable to remember the journey from one bed to another. Her aunt only shook her

grey head from side to side, perplexed. Aubrey knew they were all dying, her mother the fastest.

The days at the pond were better. Several children came to visit occasionally, and they would invent long-running dramas in varying degrees and complexities. The two girls would be lovers, kissing fervently, their opened hands shielding their lips lest they actually touch, the boys the stalking villains, the cops, the robbers, the cowboys, the rustlers, the monsters from outer space, skulking behind the trunk of the huge oak. Aubrey found herself tied up rather often, or hiding in the briars and brambles around the pond, trying to stifle her giggles and the threat of urine streaming its way down her skinny little thigh. She hid well and was rarely discovered.

One day, she was hiding in a small trench about twenty yards from her special place atop the towering overhang when she heard footsteps which were not those of the boys or her best friend, Suzanne. As she peeped out from her vine-covered hole, she saw a tall young man in jeans, naked to the waist, striding toward the bank of the pond. His blond hair glistened under his small work cap. He had the broadest shoulders Aubrey had ever seen, his muscles flexing as he walked unhurriedly through the brush. He knelt at the bank of the pond, swept some water up with his hand and mopped his face. He removed his hat, splashed water over his head and shoulders and then shook off the water like a dog after a bath. Aubrey's heart began to beat faster as she watched the sparkling drops of water coursing down the man's smooth face and shoulders. She knew he must belong to the construction crew which was building a new asphalt road that would serve the farming community where she went to school. She had not realized the road would be so close to her pond.

As she watched, the man began to look intently at the jutting rise across from where he squatted. He got up slowly and walked with easy grace toward the overhang. Aubrey was mystified as he began to climb up and over, then turn and climb over again, the jutting edge sheltered by the thick sheaf of oak leaves overhead. He then sat exactly in the center of Aubrey's special place and began to run his hands over all the bumps and ridges of the stony ledge. Finally, he knelt on all fours and crawled down the entire length of the hillock, caressing all the irregularities as he went. His face was tense with concentration. Aubrey covered her mouth, feeling she could burst with amusement and curiosity. He was the most beautiful creature she had ever seen.

She stiffened as the man turned and walked right toward her hiding place. She had given up and was ready to be discovered when

he stopped. He had his back to her and was looking again at the gentle curve of the overhang, now reflected in the still water of the pond.

"My God, I can't believe it," she heard him whisper.

Then he turned and began to walk away from the pond, shaking his blonde head and running his long fingers through his hair. For several minutes, Aubrey crouched in her hole, gazing at the ledge upon which she had so often sat. It was bathed in the dappled sunlight, gold and green, deep gray in the shadows. Its curve seemed unremarkable to Aubrey, but she felt a tug of uneasiness deep inside.

That night when she changed her clothes to go to bed, Aubrey noticed her undergarments were soaked with blood. Suddenly weak, she quickly hid her panties and shorts under the bed and then, trembling, lay on the floor under the window. As the cool night breeze swept over her, she hugged her body, feeling the little breasts under her arms, her knees shielding her abdomen where she imagined bloody rivers forming to spill out of her in floods. She felt some inarticulate yearning, some incalculable grief, and it was spine-tingling. As she listened to the chorus of night sounds, sung by the myriad throats, she faced the reality that they were all whirling together and that time is the enemy, getting them all older, and older, and then, finally, dead. She lay rigid as the wind moaned under the eaves of the old house, and gradually, she relaxed, let go, and fell asleep.

"It's the curse of being a woman," said her aunt the next morning.

She handed Aubrey a bright pink and white box, and a ribbon of elastic, "You'll get used to it. You better, anyway, cause you're going to have it most of your life."

Aubrey looked down at the paraphernalia in her hands and felt she had reached the very lowest depths of despair.

She spent most of the morning with her mother, combing the dull hair and washing the limp hands. She sat on the bed beside the still body and read aloud a story from a copy of her aunt's Ladies' Home Journal. It was about a family who grieved when they had to put their ancient pet dog to sleep. Aubrey used the corner of her mother's sheet to wipe her eyes and nose as she read.

At twilight, as Aubrey sat listening to Gogi Grant singing on the TV, she heard a knock on the screen door. She was astonished to see the young man she had seen the day before as she hid in the woods. He stood on the front porch, neatly dressed in slacks and a

short-sleeved shirt. He held several thick books under his arm.

"Hello," he said. "What's your name?"

"Aubrey Brock," she answered, opening the door for him. He had a clean odor which crossed her nostrils momentarily.

"Can I speak to your father?"

"My father is dead. My Uncle Ramsey is out back. I'll get him." Aubrey ran through the rickety old house, banging her hip painfully against the kitchen counter on the way, and called to her uncle to come in.

"Good evening, Mister. . . ," said the young man when her uncle entered the room. Her uncle was a small man, slumped over, a stubble of beard across his face. Aubrey suspected he had been drinking while sitting on the swing under the peach trees in the back yard.

"Oglesby, Ramsey Oglesby," he said, and they shook hands.

"I'm Patterson White, sir," said the man, and then looked at Aubrey. "And you're Aubrey, right?" She nodded.

"Well, Mister Oglesby, I've come with some important news for you, for all of you." He looked behind him at the sofa and made as if to sit. Her uncle just stood and watched him.

The young man laughed nervously. "So," he said, "I work for the highway department. We're building FM 45, you know, down from Sherman?" he gestured north.

"Really, I'm a student over at Denton, at the University. I just work in the summers to finance my education." Aubrey saw her uncle shift on his feet. She hoped he would let the man finish.

He went on, "I came on your pond yesterday as we were surveying and found something that was very surprising. You see, I'm a paleontologist and I think I saw evidence of an incredible find out by your pond."

"A. . . find?" said her uncle.

"Yes. Something absolutely remarkable. I can't be sure until I've done some digging, but it looks like. . . "

"A paley—what?" asked her uncle.

"Oh, a paleontologist. That's someone who studies animal life which has been extinct for millions of years. Look," he held out the books. Her uncle took one and opened it. Aubrey saw brightly colored pictures of lizard-like animals crouching and creeping across the glossy pages. Her uncle considered the pictures. Aubrey remembered studying about the creatures in school, but, with the blond man standing so close beside her, she felt mute.

"Is one of these things around here?" asked her uncle uneasily.

"Yes, but I can't be positive which kind until I do some more looking. I can be sure though that it's some kind of sauropod," he took the book and turned the pages until he found a picture. "I believe it's going to be something like this, judging from the size of the shoulder bone I saw out there yesterday."

Aubrey and her uncle looked at the picture of the great long-necked beast, its belly swollen and grotesque, its four legs bowed and squat under the tremendous bulk. Trailing behind was a long tail that tapered off to a tiny point.

"Something like this?" asked her uncle, pointing to the picture with his gnarled finger, its nail caked with years of tractor grease and black East Texas soil.

"Yes, something like that," answered the young man, his face glowing, his voice reverential, expectant.

Her uncle still regarded the picture. They looked at him for several seconds. Then he said, "Well, hot damn! Let's go see him!"

His interest soon flagged, however, when he saw that the spectacular monster pictured in the book was embedded in a massive mound of stone and dirt rising up on the edge of the pond where he had lived and worked for fifty years. Aubrey was transfixed by the young man's discovery as well as the young man himself as he pointed out this or that knob representing the various skeletal remains of the animal.

"Of course most of the important bones will be buried inside this mound, probably all through it. But you can detect the outline of the shoulder blade here," he traced the curvature of a smooth, rounded edge embedded in hard-packed dirt and stone.

"God, the size of it," he said softly. "Look, Aubrey," he quickly lay down, stretching out his smooth body alongside the ridge of bone. "I'm over six feet tall, Aubrey, and this piece of bone is still longer than me. Can you imagine an animal of this size, living and walking on the earth, right here by this pond?"

Aubrey could not. She had used the smooth edge as a hand-hold many times.

"Well," said her uncle, "you say he's here. So?" He squatted on a piece of rock atop the mound.

"If I could, I'd like to get some people up here from the school to dig him up, put him in boxes, and put him up in the Caruth-Byrd Museum in Dallas. You see, nothing like this has ever been found this far south before. It'll be on every scrap of paper about him that he was found right here on your property."

"No money in it?" asked her uncle.

"No, I'm afraid not. You have the right to refuse us. But I hope you won't."

"Let's go back to the house now," said her uncle. "It's getting dark."

Back in the house, Aubrey held her breath until her uncle finally consented to let the young man and his friends come back to dig. He picked up his thick books and left in a hurry, stepping up into a battered pick-up that roared and smoked away.

Aubrey watched until she could not longer see him. A strange feeling had come over her, as if she were falling in on herself, the walls of her body caving in until she was completely gone. She looked at herself in the halltree mirror. Her image was warped, but she was all there. Her long, skinny legs and arms, freckled and knobby, hung out of her clothes. Her hair was limp. As she watched herself, she made a grotesque face to the mirror, contemptuous of her own reflection.

Late that night she awoke shivering. A sudden and terrible realization came to her: they would come tomorrow and dig up her place. She rose quietly and pulled on some shorts and a blouse. Outside the moon was full as she walked toward the pond. She was aware of the intensity of the night noises, the crickets screeching, night birds calling, the rustle of the suspicious little animals as they busied themselves in the continuous search for food. The whole nocturnal mechanism was whirling and clicking like the inside of a clock. The trees around the pond were silhouetted against the moonlit sky, their dark limbs swaying gently. She walked quietly around the curving inlets of the water until she reached the mound. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she saw the shape of the massive pile of stone and soil. She acknowledged the presence also of that other element in the mound, that assortment of remains piled helter-skelter throughout. Slowly she climbed up the steep side of the mound and then lay very still, her cheek against a broad plate of bone. She felt the residual warmth of the sun emanating from it, a pulsating tremor as of a rush of air in the night. She closed her eyes and saw nostrils three feet across, eyes glinting under a wedge of bone as big as her body. She hugged the high point of the mound and felt the great sides heave, the seventy-foot backbone flex. The mighty jaws opened underneath her, and nubby, flat teeth glistened moistly in the moonlight. The huge lungs expanded, and as air rushed past four-foot vocal tendons, Aubrey heard a deafening roar. The cry was never-ending, its echo reverberating through the woods as she covered her head with her arms. It was a death cry, universally

recognized by all things living since the beginning of time, and it filled her with a visceral sense of great loss. The colossal tail thrashed under her, huge plumes of dust swirled up and then died down as the giant lizard breathed a last mammoth sigh and was forever still. Aubrey felt the last tremor of life shuddering away. She lay still for a long time and then began to weep deep, gutteral sobs.

At dawn, Aubrey visited her mother. The pale eyes fluttered open, pools of gelatinous light-sensitive tissue, pupils black, no one there. Aubrey stared into them.

"They're coming today to dig up the mound by the pond, mother. There's a brontosaurus in there. It's been there for sixty-five million years, he said."

Her mother's eyes registered nothing.

"He said it died out there because it turned cold and all the water dried up. Dinosaurs could only live in a warm, wet place like a swamp, so it died," she paused.

"And it's been out there all these millions of years, mother."

The enormity of it engulfed her, and she lay back on the bed, her head resting on her mother's wasted legs.

Later that week, her mother died. Her aunt found her dead. The only difference in her mother's general demeanor was that she breathed no more. After the small funeral, Aubrey went to her room and sat on the bed in the sweltering summer heat, in her Sunday dress with the flower pinned to her bodice. She stayed there grieving all day and would not even see the blonde young man when he came to give his condolences. ❧

Contributors

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Jeff Arnold almost always watches the sun rise and set and tries to stay tuned to the poetry of nature. He occasionally rides one of his three horses the eleven miles to Pueblo County High School, Colorado, where he is a teacher and coach. His poetry has appeared in *Mountains In The Wind, Phase and Cycle, Rocky Mountain Poetry Magazine,* and *Alabama Poetry Review.*

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