

1990

UA68/6/1 Zephyrus

Western Kentucky University

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ZEPHYRUS

A Student Literary Publication of
Western Kentucky University



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ZEPHYRUS

SPRING 1990

A publication of the English Department
of Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

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Editors' notes: 1) Our selection process is based on complete anonymity. If an editor recognizes an author's work, he or she abstains from the decision-making process for that work.

2) The 1989 *Zephyrus* included a piece titled "How to Tell 'Em Apart" by Sam Droганes which substantially replicated Arnold Fochs' "How to Tell Republicans from Democrats" in his 1974 publication *Advertising That Won Elections*. The editors of *Zephyrus* regret this serious occurrence of plagiarism. To the best of our knowledge, all works included in this issue of *Zephyrus* are the original creations of the student authors.

Zephyrus was electronically typeset in Times-Roman by John Warren Oakes on a Commodore *Amiga* computer using *Professional Page* software.

Photostats produced by Dax Games. Robert Penn Warren portrait by Tom Foster.



Dedicated to
Robert Penn Warren
Born April 24, 1905 Guthrie, Kentucky
Died September 15, 1989 Stratton, Vermont

America's first official Poet Laureate
The only person to win Pulitzer Prizes
for fiction and poetry.

"We live in time so little time
And we learn all so painfully,
That we may spare this hour's term
To practice for eternity."

- from "Bearded Oaks"

Award Winners

Geoffrey McCelvey Memorial Award
Susan Maertz

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award
LaNita Kirby

Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award
Allison Thorpe

Wanda Gatlin Essay Award
Tabatha Hibbs Foushee

The *Zephyrus* Essay Award has been renamed the Wanda Gatlin Essay Award in honor of Ms. Gatlin's twenty-year contribution to the publication. Ms. Gatlin served as faculty advisor for *Zephyrus* beginning with the 1969 issue and continuing until her retirement last year. We extend our thanks to Ms. Gatlin.

Table of Contents

Award Winners	4
Nine Poems by Susan Maertz	
Blades	7
Since Then I've Moved	8
Opening	9
Prodigy	10
Carpenter	11
Order	12
Cutting Vegetables	13
Needlepoint	14
Waiting for Something to Happen	15
Andy Rademaker	
Know Your Rights	16
A Requiem for the Dr.	18
Janet L. Holloway	
Ingesting	19
The Same Year	19
Linda Walker Cox	
Broken Storm	21
November Roses	25
Wild Donkeys Bray	25
Beverly Forehand	
	26
Brent Fisk	
Crayon Creation	27
Frightened	28
History	28
Margaret Cooper	
Before the Demolition	29
Kelly Howsare	
bananas	30
Connie Voges	
Route 1, Buffalo	31
Tabatha Hibbs Foushee	
Happy Lane	33
Five Poems by LaNita Kirby	
View from I-65: Heading North from Music City	37
Social Drinks: The Night After	38
Female Legacy	39
Reflecting During Street-Sweeper Hour: 4 A.M.	40
View from the Porch	41

Dwight A. Gray	
Newton	43
The Impressionist	44
Holly Hedden	
Everywhere a Sign	45
Four Year Old	46
Rebecca Fullen	
A Pride of Lions	47
Skies	48
Audrea Jackson	
Depth	49
Mike Nickel	
The Last Jellybean of Summer	51
Heather V. Butler	
Union Station	58
Concentric Shell	59
David Scott Baker	
Letter to Mom; a Dismal Delay	60
Matthew Forman	
Mainstream	61
MY-KU	61
Allison Thorpe	
Reflections on an Abandoned House Jesse James Once	
Supposedly Slept In	63
Poem in D Major	69
Lest There Be Shadows	70
Susan Ferguson	
Isolation	71
J. Martin Cobb	
On John Ashbery and Late Fall from Cherry Hall	72
Kim Kafoglis	
The Cat Tree	73
Kathy Binns	
On Becoming a Sage, 11:30 PM	77
Chinese Dualism: from Green to Black,	
a Second Perspective	78
Notes on Contributors	80

Nine Poems by Susan Maertz

Blades

At fourteen
 I was the grass in
 a Walt Whitman poem--
 new and narrow and
 poking out all over,
 still slick with morning moisture.
 And you,
 only one year older,
 the terrified gardener;
 your fear reflected
 in the rake, the hoe
 your shining, full moon face.
 The air smelled like
 hay and corn and apple cores
 that year and
 Quick, I said
 Before I change my mind:
 Mow it all down.

Since Then I've Moved

The last time I saw you
we sat in the living room
and I wore your brown sweater
and the cigarette you were smoking
left a thin gray string
blurred in my hair.

Since then I've moved
to a place where
all the rooms are for living
and your brown sweater is my brown sweater
and smells more like
coffee and dried flowers
than your smoke,
which dissolved slowly and floated away,
pulling you behind it,
one end tangled in your hair.

Opening

Inside, the air is wet
and your hand on my thigh
is an animal that has lived there
a long time--
like the fish whose eyes are milk
when we shine our flashlights.
They flip in the dark water
like silver coins.
This cave is the womb
of the earth, you say.
The last virgin there is.
Outside, I look
for your face in the snow,
find it in the black bones of trees,
imagine your body rising above me
like the steam that rises from the river
on the coldest day of the year.

Prodigy

When I wake up in the morning
and your hands are on me
I am a piano
all smooth dark wood
and white keys.
The way your shoulders
slowly become your chest
your hips, your legs--
gradually,
so I hardly notice--
is a piece I can play
from memory.
My strings are pulled tight.
I respond to your touch.
Run your fingers through me;
I resonate.

Carpenter

You are almost
the size and the shape
and the depth
and the breadth
and the width
and the height
of the hole in my life.
With the help of this hammer
I can make you fit.

Order

After you left
 I cleaned everything;
 sweeping you out of the corners.
 I stacked your books neatly
 in order by author,
 shirts pressed and folded,
 albums alphabetical;
 all carefully assembled
 and burned
 with the leaves that had gathered
 haphazard
 that fall.
 When there was nothing left of you
 but a charred, black spot,
 I drove drunk
 much too fast down a coiled country road
 wound up tight like a spring.
 Anything
 to reaffirm my life.

Cutting Vegetables

Tomatoes smell like leaves
 piled in one place
 for a long time,
 like wood beginning to burn.
 The skin darkens,
 pulls tight, splits--
 releasing bloody pearls.

The smell of onions
 is salt in my eyes,
 sharpness stretched out long
 and thin like a scratch
 treated with olive oil
 and wrapped in layers of paper.

Potatoes make me feel as if
 I'm holding the earth in my hands,
 and bell peppers ring loud enough
 to hear a thousand miles away.

This year the corn is tall
 and greener than envy
 and innocence
 and everything else;
 a feast enough to feed us all.

Needlepoint

Mouth watering, you braid
with your eight legs,
and your hair falls
in a red rope down your back.
O Arachne,
look where vanity has gotten you--
every silver stitch
is a monument to your liberty.

Teach me your trick, spider.
Give me the threads of a thousand days
and show me how to sew him to me:
his palm to the small of my back,
his lips to my face.
Teach me how to tie the knots
that tighten every time he breathes,
how to keep my prey alive
until the time is right.

Waiting for Something to Happen

Watching this salamander
crawl up the glass, the blue belly
shines like a meteor
that would fit in the palm of my hand.
When it rains
I burn wild sage
and wait for the kettle to boil,
or stand out in it
until the water rounds the edges
and I am a smooth stone.
My days are oil
seeping into my skin
and I feel heavy
and laced up with cobwebs.
Sometimes I sleep late,
but the time seems to stretch out
a long way
before meeting itself
at the other end.

Know Your Rights

Down at the beach
reading my rights,
when all of a sudden up comes
this peach of a
bird, looking prime
and ripe, tasty
enough I might add,
only she don't have the time of day for the
likes of me. so
I gots to go up to
the suntan booth and grab a clock to
show her where it's at,
but when I gets back she's all
cuddled up to some
heavy palooka with arms like
pistons, and I says,
you coulda done better than that with
a steamshovel,
but he don't like that and tells me so with all
of about three-hundred horsepower in those fists of his,
so I crawl back to my hole in the sand and resume
reading my ever-popular rights and
just then,
right there,
middle paragraph of line 38,
section 243.76
dot-sequence mid-shift 4 I sees it!--
You have the right not to disturb
muscle-bound palookas
in search of a sparkling body of effervescent
womanly nature, lest you should be pulverized...

Ah, so that's it, I says!
Well, I suppose I should
build me a castle in the sand, kinda take my mind off
things,
but as I go to fetch some water for to lubricate my walls,
I see this babe that's altogether too much, and she's layin
around speechless with eyes closed
on the too hot burnin sand, and rememberin something from back in
section 126.54, I quickly check to reassure myself,
and there it is: You have the right to all babes washed up and
wishing
to remain silent...So
I casually wander over and ask her if she's washed up, and
she don't say nothin...my kinda girl, washed up that is!
So I give her mouth to mouth for about an hour or two and she
don't seem to mind too much, despite the fact she woke up after
the first minute and put those sun-kissed golden arms around my
lobster-burnt back...and finally she says, I relinquish the right
to remain silent for the right to invite a handsome sailor to
dinner
at my humble abode,
and those brown eyes and all,
what else could I do but accept...acceptance, the divine right...
a lonely guy should know his rights...

A Requiem for the Dr.

the cat in the hat knew
not what he did as he cooled
all those kids on his way to
the sky
and the Dr. ran out of postcards as
he busied himself greeting
the young at heart and
the stoplights all turned
green as the cars began to stop
and the little kid in the heavy white robes
finally got to where he was going such a long time
ago, seems like about 1900 and 90 years since and still
he had no go but now the signs say please instead
of DONT

WALK

and the corners
are covered with the ashes of
eternal praise as
the lions run free with the
children and the lambs follow close behind
baa-baaing along their merry way to
greet their flock which has always seemed
silly because birds travel in flocks
as did geese and why should sheep but that never
really mattered to them they just kept on going
and the sun kept shining
until this fog cast the shadow of
a thousand feather-beaten eternities over the world and
we felt the power of freedom coarse through our
misled souls

Ingesting

I chewed the truth
like a stem of grass.
Blood spurted from my lip.

The Same Year

It was the same year
that Butterscotch fell down between the walls
and we dragged him back up,
kitten claws stuck in rags tied together
baited with a piece of bologna;
that Daddy showed me
how Old Jack the mule eats corn,
and the copperheads
under the corn crib
got into the garden.
It was the same year
that Ma Bragg spent
a week with us
and we picked pink roses,
she combing my long blond hair
in the sunshine.
She told me how pretty it was.



Broken Storm

Here, let me fluff up your pillow and cover you with our quilt. Just look at that old quilt. I think it has improved with age, growing warmer every year. It has been with us till it almost feels alive. It has been through wars and the Depression. When I made it, I didn't know if we should save it or go on and use it. The weather decided for us that first winter.

We would wake up with snow covering our quilt. The water would turn to ice in the water bucket. The wind would whip up under the door, and raise the rug up off the floor. That linoleum rug was deep pink with gold and dark blue roses, remember? Stepping on those linoleum rugs felt like walking barefoot on a frozen pond. And the sheets on this cherry bed were stiff from starch and crisp from the cold.

Sometimes you would come to bed while I was finishing up the supper dishes, and I'd tell you to warm up my side, too. Then, I'd dive in with icy feet and we'd shiver together under the covers till we got warm.

Our little round coal stove kept its heat to itself. I'd hike my dress up to warm the back of my legs and they'd be roasted on one side and frozen on the other. I don't think we could have made it without each other that winter.

We were married in February and Howard Jr. was born in November. That boy about made a lie out of us.

Howard, where have these years gone? Was it sixty-something years ago we held little Howard in our arms?

Nature is a strange wonder. I can cheat nature a little by

dying my hair red. Of course, you never did mind for me to look my best. So I don't know why anyone else would. You are the only one I ever wanted to please, anyway. The only man I would ever dance for.

It's hard to believe we've been together for sixty-odd years. I knew I loved you the minute our eyes met. I said to myself, "This is the man I've got to have."

Of course, you remember, my folks raised a fuss when we decided to marry, but I had to have you or die. Papa said, "Ruth Ann, we had other plans for your life." Parents mean well, like mine, but nothing could change my mind.

Papa thought you were too rowdy for me. He said, "I don't think Howard Marsh is the marrying kind."

You didn't know what you wanted till you met me. All you needed was the right woman to get a hold of you. And that was me. Just like Adam. Adam didn't know he needed a woman till God made him one. Then he didn't know what to do with her. She had a mind of her own, even if she didn't always listen to the right voices. Oh well, I haven't been put here to judge anybody. So I won't.

But Papa misjudged you. That's when we thought about running away to get married, but I'm not one to run. As you well know, I'll stand up and face anything big as it comes. So we went to my parents and told them we wanted to get married.

Papa said, "Ruth Ann, don't see him for six months, then if you still feel this way in six months, we'll talk about it."

Remember, we agreed to do that. I quit eating and mooned around and starting losing weight. I didn't have much to lose. I just weighed ninety pounds. Mama tried to coax me to eat by fixing all my favorite foods. But every time I sat down to eat, I would see your face staring at me in the china plate, and the blue flowers were your eyes.

Papa didn't know if I was going to make it or not. He had always said, "Ruth Ann, you keep this family alive."

I finally got interested in making this quilt. I wanted our quilt to be different. Mama said, "I never saw a design like that."

I said, "It's my own pattern. I call it Broken Storm."

I stayed in my room most of the time and worked on our quilt. Wouldn't it be grand if we could sew all our scars together and wear them as a shield? Of course, they would have to be sown close together to keep other scars from seeping in.

As you well remember, after three months, Mama put a little wedding together for us. I wore Mama's dress which had to be seamed up. We were married in church.

And you, Howard Marsh, were not a churchgoing man when I met you. You hated to get up before a crowd. But I told you if you were going to love me, you had to love me before God and everybody. You were so nervous at the wedding that you dropped my wedding band, and it rolled up under a pew. We were down on our knees trying to find it, and if you didn't kiss me under that pew, I am not here. If Papa had've seen it, he'd have had a heart attack. I whispered to you, "Howard Marsh, can you control yourself till we get home?" We found the ring and I said, "You get that ring on my finger, and I'll never take it off."

I got to pay you back at the end of the ceremony. You thought you were going to get by with a quicky kiss, but I laid one on you. It buckled your knees. Then, I heard Papa coughing in the audience, so I thought I better let you breathe.

The years went by almost as quickly as turning pages of a good novel.

Howard, you said, "If we work hard, we'll have something some day."

You always loved the springtime, sowing seeds, and watching them grow. Your hands were so tender with every seed and plant, but you fought weeds with the fury of a warrior.

I can change my hair color by cheating, but I can't change all the courses of nature. Some channels we can't control.

You're going to have to have to get straightened up because it's about time to get the garden out. You know I can't keep my rows straight. Mine are as zagged as lightening, or the...or the designs of this old quilt.

Do you hear me? You're going to have to get up. You have been laying up in this cherry bed all winter long. You made this bed for us with your own hands. And our cherry chest and....

Now don't use up all your strength trying to talk. I can talk enough for the both of us. I always could. Is there anything I can get for you? No?

Look at that sunshine out there, Howard. It's just a beckoning us to come on out and join it. Those blue eyes could always speak and bring warmth like this old quilt. What do you see, Howard?

Maybe you can see that picture on the calendar with the clear waterfall, falling into a sapphire lake. What are you reaching for, Howard? Me?

I'm going to crawl right up here in this bed with you and take you in my arms and sing you a song. I'll sing "In The Garden" because that's your favorite song.

Now leave your oxygen tube alone and listen. Just close your eyes and I'll sing. That's a good boy.

"I come to the garden alone...." Hmm Hmm Hmm Hmm....

We had something, Howard Marsh.

November Roses

The fall roses
late bloomers
are the rarest
waiting
for ice enclosure

and when they sing
we stop to listen.

Wild Donkeys Bray

I kept my feet warm
by exploring new lands,
New Orleans.

At night
I tasted alien foods
hot, spicy
like the shows
in the streets.

Donkeys don't pack burdens---
they wear straw hats
and prance on bourbon.

Red - blue - yellow - green. I found them in that order.

One under the battered sofa, another two fallen between cracks in the warped floorboards, the fourth in my cardboard schoolbox along with Elmer's glue.

With them I had created my own world of bright blue castles and dragons as red as clowns' rubber noses.

I had drawn and dreamed of all the great things I would do and see in a world I envisioned as Crayola-vivid.

Crayon Creation

With you I create
a world where
rainbows and stars
leap from jade grass.
Where a smiling,
silver-haired God
floats on indigo
thunderclouds and
rules his universe
from a refrigerator
door.

Frightened

Plastic sunflowers on metal rods
placed about the yard.
They say they scare away the moles,
and I think the neighbors are
frightened too.

History

I hide in the cornstalks like a grasshopper
and pretend to be an Indian.
In the fall when the corn has been harvested,
I'll find an arrowhead there among the rows,
and I'll sneak back home on hidden trails.

Before the Demolition

She sold the dulcimer
made with her own hands
and the teddy bear you gave her
Before the demolition
the strangers came
armed with conversation
and money in their hands

She kept the vase that sat on the table
A gift from a grandmother
that reflected in the morning sun
in a shadowless window
each morning was begun
alone with grandma's vase

the dreamer turns over a new leaf
the artist cried of wasted words
that the dreamer wasted upon her
the artist is gone
left town with the door unlocked
she knew the time was short
she invited them to go on in
after she was gone

After the demolition
the younger had a recurrent dream
of entering and claiming her own
or a souvenir to hold
she was an analyst
she knew she had left something there
right before the excavation

between the lines of what's been written
are years of silence
of leaving no traces
of masks and rage
a hint of resolution
the dreamer turns over the stone
long since the demolition

bananas

Saturday, too green, fresh from the store
they sit on top of the refrigerator
like three sleeping new moons
filled with a solid, sweet cream

Sunday, a little lighter
the green is being overcome
by a pale yellow

Monday, brighter still
I add them to Rice Krispies
they bob to the top
like flat, miniature full moons

Tuesday, running late
grab a freckled banana for breakfast

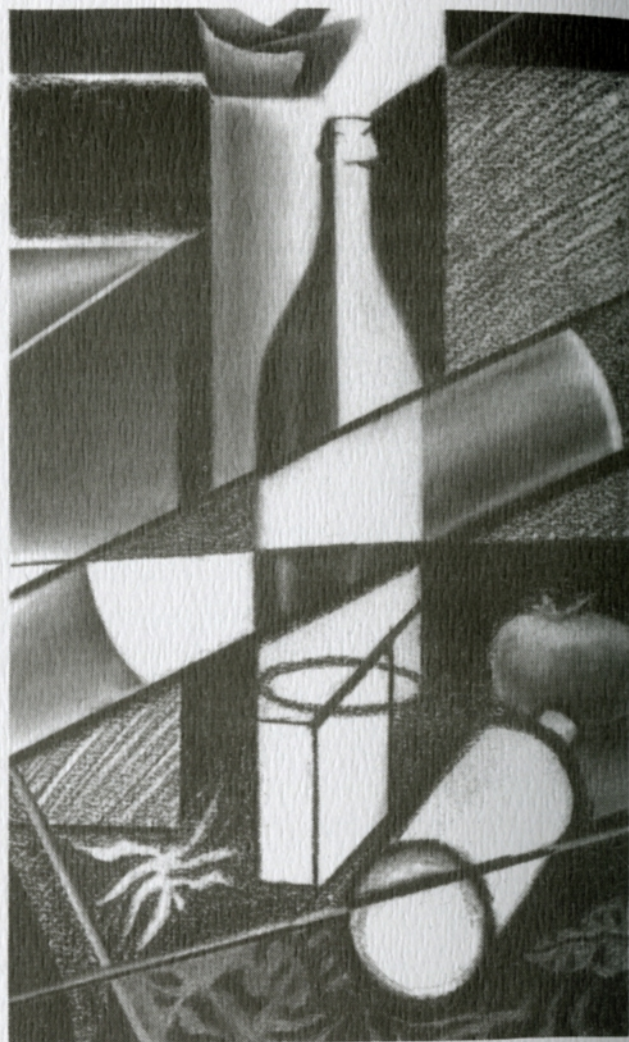
Wednesday, forgot

Thursday, the last new moon
now black
has blended into the night

Route 1, Buffalo

Lumber is rotting
on the old weathered porch.
No swing
inviting me to visit.
Empty windows
are blind to warmth.
The thistles
point out the reality-
Queen Anne's lace
softens the blow.
Paint and roof
have disappeared
like the decaying flesh
of the dead.
Wasps standing guard
under the eaves
tolerate only
the reminiscing.

Happy Lane



I finally drove out to the old homeplace. I hadn't been there in four or five years--not since the house had been moved out. I was afraid to go there and see the reality, afraid the reality would corrupt the memory I had developed as a means of holding on to what I had lost when we had moved.

The place on Happy Lane had been family land. My great-grandfather, Wallace, had operated a truck farm there. He had 200 acres of timber land behind the house as well. My grandfather, Noble, had been raised there. He had helped his father set out the four large trees that shaded the yard. My father, Lee, didn't live there until he was grown and married. However, he moved to the place just a few months before my birth. I had lived there until I was twelve. I felt bonded to the land; it was the family place. It was my heritage.

When I was twelve, the land was sold to a coal company. We moved to another place ten miles away, to a square of land about an acre in size bought from a stranger. It was a place with no memories, a place with no heritage. I was angry with the decision to sell, even more angry that no one had consulted me. I felt the place belonged to me as much as it did to my father and my grandfather. It was my inheritance as well as my heritage.

As we prepared to move, I began to develop a memory of the place: the sun was low in the afternoon sky, the orange-yellow rays splashing across the front of the freshly-painted frame house. The front door was ajar as it often was on warm afternoons; the small, concrete porch was swept clean. About the house the yard was neat and

trim. Along the fence row on the property line, the wild roses and the honeysuckle were in bloom--a tangled hedge of small, pink flowers mixed with white and yellow blossoms. Their sweet fragrance and the humming of the bees filled the air. The pond, dry as it was each summer, was a cracked bowl shaded by fragile willows. The air was warm and soft: an early June dusk. The crickets were just beginning to sing.

For years I carried this memory about like a jewel on a silk pillow, guarding it as a man consumed with avarice guards his treasure. I refused to drive by the place after the fence rows were mown and the barn pulled down. But last March I returned. I felt I had to.

When I turned my car on to Happy Lane, I was struck by the desolation of the area. The comfortable farm houses I had visited as a child were gone, as were the big, wooden barns and the white, plank fences that surrounded pastures. The fence rows that had once been a haven for rabbits, groundhogs, mice, and birds had been bushhogged into oblivion. As far as I could see the only building that remained was an old shack that had been falling in on itself when I was a child. Now, it appeared to stand only through the support of the briars that grew around it.

I almost missed the driveway to the old place. There was only a little gravel among the weeds and the beer bottles. The place had the wild, abandoned look of former house sites reverting to a state more primitive. The four large trees still stood, though they seemed aged, gray, and gaunt as they towered above the new growth that was springing up beneath them. The yard was thick with wild grass, browned by the frost but strong and eager to burst to life with the first warm south wind. Where the house had stood was a cluster of saplings, particularly in what had been the living room.

I walked over to the front porch, the only physical

remnant of the old place. The paint had finally been worn off except for a few green spots along the edges of the steps. The porch had seemed much larger when it had served as my stage, my igloo, my general store. I sat down on the step and was enveloped by weeds and saplings.

The harshness of the place chilled me; I tried to call up my perfect memory, but it wouldn't come. Instead, I remembered the house in the winter with drifts of snow banked against it. The paint was peeling from the house (as it was most of the time), making the wood a motley gray and white. Inside the house was cold, except in the living room where it was often unbearably hot. The furnace sat in one corner of the living room, a great metal box-of-a-god that demanded timely sacrifices of coal and belched smoke and dust continuously.

I remembered my mother carrying buckets of coal from the shed. Her tongue would touch the corner of her mouth as she struggled across the yard, looking as if she would break in half from the weight of the coal-filled buckets. As I got older, I would stand at the back door and open it for her; the icy air would chill me. As Mother again trudged across the yard to fill the buckets with the dusty, black chunks, I would run to the living room to warm my hands, listening for the scrape of the metal shovel against the coal. When the scraping ceased, I would return to the kitchen to hold open the door once more.

I remembered the piles of quilts on my bed during the winter, so many that I could barely move beneath their weight. I would burrow beneath the blankets, taking my pillow with me, and remained buried there until my breath warmed the frigid sheets. Only then would I come up for air, wrapping the blankets about my head so that only my nose and eyes were exposed.

I had forgotten those memories, buried them just as I had once buried myself beneath the patchwork quilts in

order to stay warm. I sat on the porch of the old place, the memories came back like unavenged ghosts: restless spirits that had to be dealt with. Among the restless dead was the memory of the monotonous trudge from the truck to the house, carrying water in gallon milk jugs.

There had been no running water at the old place. There had been a well for a while, but blasting at the coal mines down the road had caused the walls of the well to cave in. For whatever reason (and only he truly knows), my father never got around to digging another well or to putting in a cistern. So we hauled our water in gallon jugs from my grandmother's house some fifteen miles away.

On the back of the stove we kept water in a metal bucket which we heated whenever we needed to bathe or to wash dishes. Shallow sponge baths were taken out of the kitchen sink. In the winter a short screen of towels spread across chairbacks was constructed to hold the heat in that corner of the kitchen which was warmed by heating the oven.

Another unavenged ghost. As I sat on the steps, more and more drifted by: the outhouse beside the barn, Mother's embarrassment that we didn't "have water," the lack of privacy (I slept in the dining room), the clutter (there was only one closet), the intolerable heat in the summer (the house wasn't air-conditioned). One by one the restless spirits drifted by.

I began to mourn less my lost inheritance.

Five Poems by LaNita Kirby

View from I-65: Heading North from Music City

To these sleepy eyes
fall's dressing is a new shag carpet
draped vertically over
these little hills that try so hard
to be Tennessee's bare shoulders.

The hills have rolled for miles now
like marbles out of control
stopping and starting just anywhere.
They sun themselves carelessly
against this morning's ceiling--
a white lace sky so fragile
it's a snowflake.

I wonder:
Do they know winter by its smell too?

We move through the smoke of our breath.
We have let the cold in through the windows.
No words.
Cigarettes out, we find ourselves
spilled suddenly into Kentucky, bluegrass waving.

I reach for your hand.
A homeward silence nudges me soft awake,
like a dawn-blue gown,
whispering.

Social Drinks: The Night After

Friends come and leave
their beer and coolers in my refrigerator.
Bottles and cans compete in shape and color, and these
in turn contend against the slender neck and full lip
of my single bottle of blush wine--
its handle cold at first touch, yet easy enough
for the curious to pour her, taste her
mellow, warm, sweet.

The difference she is from the others,
the way she could hum inside you once there,
her manner of shy talk in the dark of cold air
when the door is shut and no one hears--
she would have you know this
but never say so.

She wills herself into contentment, knowing
your desire for something more fruity,
less elegant than she
is what you must consume for now.
She knows too that you
might change someday
even as she prepares for never.

She preserves the holy
of what remains anonymous
in herself and others. So,

daily I learn, and nightly
lean into the solitude of wine,
growing blush, warm, and quiet
among friends.

Female Legacy

My need curls into your abdomen
like dough in a baker's strong hands.

You will leave me
tomorrow, for work,
unaware.

On my back, still,
I remember
my mother, chewing orange-slice candy wedges,
staring wild out the kitchen window.
I remember too
what she stared at: my father's back,
bent at the waist and biscuit brown.
He yanked unruly weeds from his garden,
daily.

Tonight, now it's midnight,
your gravelly snore is his.

Silent, my jaw set,
I crave tangerines,
teeth grinding.

Reflecting During Street-Sweeper Hour: 4 A.M.

Times come when lack
of sleep
can make you put on
Mozart,
carefully, now:

You slide the black disc
from its white, wrinkled sleeve;
it reminds you of ironing done
as a favor now, out of duty before
the divorce.

You laugh aloud
in the dawning of day:
At twenty-nine, why
still giving yourself the lie
about purity and white?

You brush the record grooves
with a fingertip, erase
previous prints,
stroke a few scars
only God knows about.
You go one step more:
apply the needle, relax.

You dream, and when you see
his face, you try
to believe
this time around
it won't hurt.

View from the Porch

She has stepped outside
to watch clouds fall, in crystal
dots at a time.

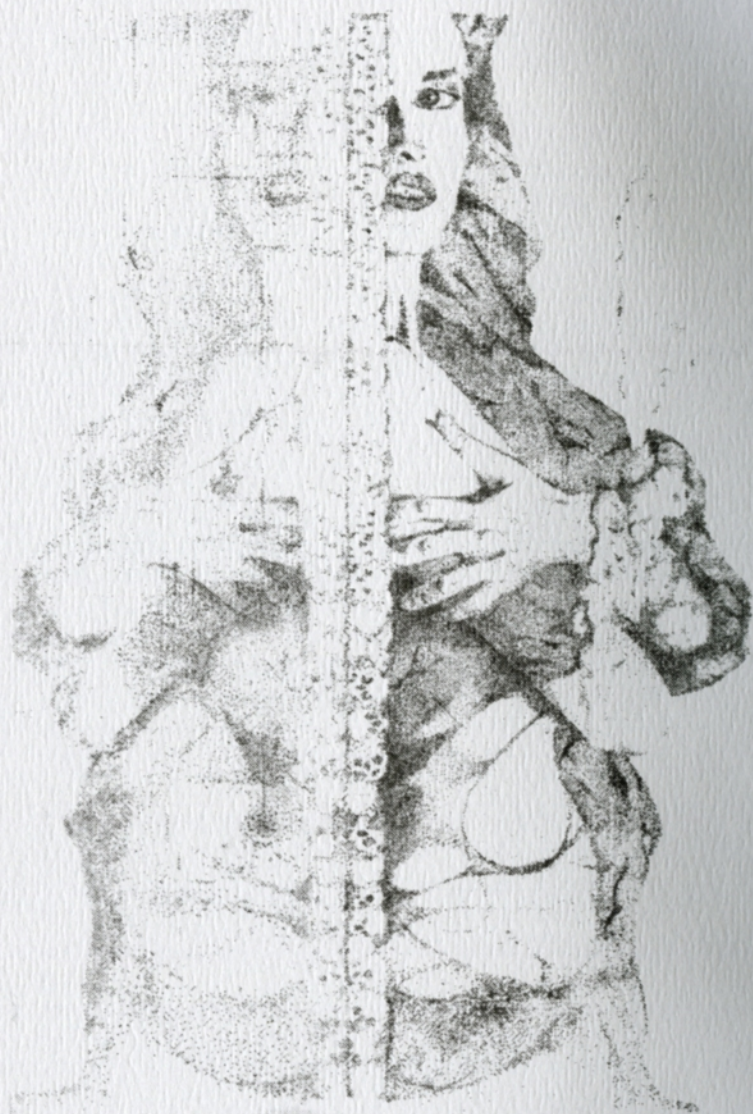
He finally has company.

She wants to know the magic
of clover vibrating in wind,
the subtle music of their dark green
mixed against the blues
of a painter's palette sky.

She leans closer to hear
the dissonance
of his dangling guitar strings,
to see the way his hair mocks the clover,
swirling without effort. His fingers
wrap the guitar's neck, find more blues.

He smiles, watching her listen.

With the same easy grace of raindrops
in mid-August, their thoughts appear
to ricochet between
his eyes of blue and hers of hazel,
their bond gaining strength
in small bounces.



Newton

roads and rivers run
one direction
and one jonathan
fallen from back
of one gray lady
packing bushels
for homemade jellies

even our truck --
watch that brake --
all too quick if we're not careful
descends toward town
hesitating

we look here for squirrels
there for deer, when one appears
we always: stop

god knows why

"why how was your trip through the country?"
"lovely"

one non-descript word will do
lovely?

woodlands out west
were lovely (before industry
moved uphill, into clouds)

posturpedic comfort
keeps us still to hear
romantic howlings of wolves
knowing that in the distance

they are up there
running

The Impressionist

he took his canvas out of doors,
canvas on canvas,
where light would not filter into neutral
but hone itself
on the whetstone eye
bringing fragments -- a tree
of yellow and blue leaves here,
blue and red shadows

commas and dashes
kept a blade of grass bent
at the point of breaking
and later the eyes perceived
the tension

what did the wind say?

what did it matter?

Everywhere a Sign

**PRISON AREA:
DO NOT PICK UP
HITCHHIKERS**

I think I like this sign.
It absolves me of guilt.
The kink I feel
for not investigating
strange cries at night.
For locking the door
when I visit down the hall,
for giving in to
popular paranoia,
blanket distrust,
guilty-until-proven-
otherwise.
I didn't untangle
the leg of a dog
from its leash today,
afraid its owner might
be watching--
I would soak up
the guilt of nothing
like a sponge,
wear it like a sign
on my forehead.

Four Year Old

Your head is twice as big
as it should be.
It's because you hold a world
in your head.
It's full of dogs
with extra long tails,
shelves built two feet high,
walking plastic dinosaurs.
And nothing stays inside the lines.

A Pride of Lions

The lions are on the wall
There's mine
With a bone in between
the wide zoo cage bars
An orange water dish is pasted near
the golden paws of my cut-out lion
and fat white letters stand out
L...E...O
No one else named their lion.
I can pick mine out from far away.
As we single-file to lunch
I look over my shoulder to see the lions again
There's mine
No, wait--that one has white letters too.
spelling LEO.
I fidgeted through lunch
Who copied?
Some of us got back to the classroom early
I glared at the wall
The other lion was shabby
the pencil lines didn't really make
eyes, nose, mouth.
No one was looking
I reached up high and tore down the crooked letters.
I sat down at my desk
red hot but right.
The rest of the class came in
The dumb runny-nosed boy
pointed at the raggedy lion copy.
I froze.
See, he said, it's like hers.
He turned
his big head smiling
I like your lion
It has a name and everything
His blue eyes shined at me
I think I said thank you.

Skies

A sky like that
takes me back to autumn camping trips
lying half-way out of a pup tent
so I could fall asleep with stars in my eyes.
A sky like that
makes me want to
swing onto a smoldering horse
and gallop beside the sunrise.
A pink-slivered purple-clouded sky
mysteriously hovering.
Mother saw the sky, too,
and said if she went to
a daughter shop
she'd pick me.
She'd say, "I want that cheerful one,
God knows this family needs it."

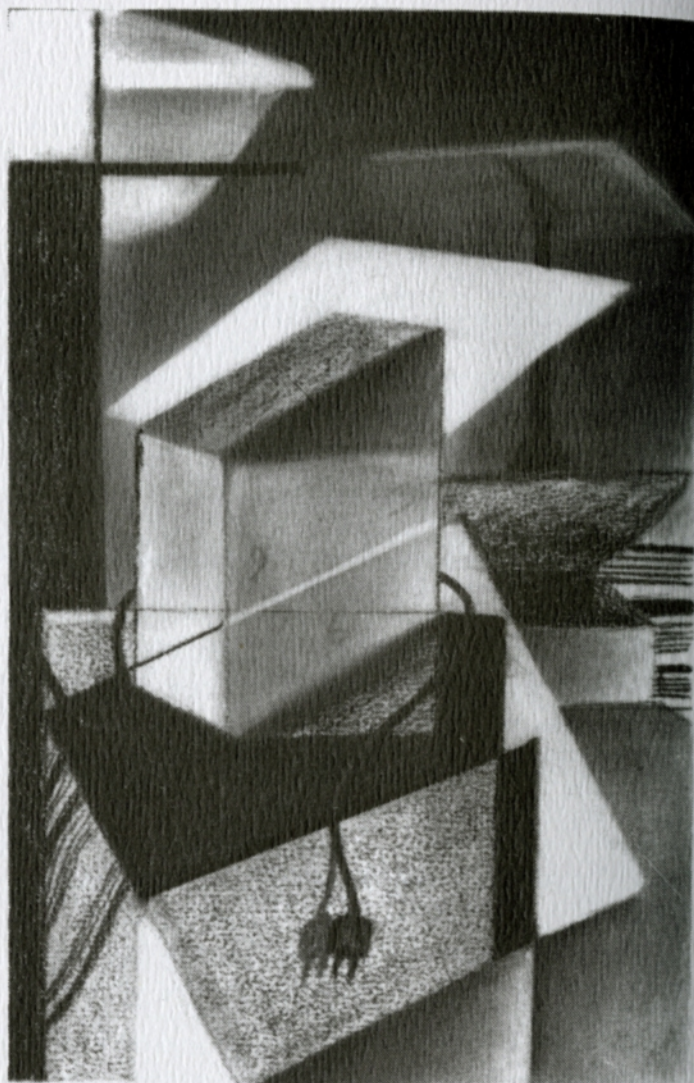
Depth

Eddie Denhauser can leave a room,
lounge beside a water fountain, get himself a drink,
chat up a nice babe, relieve himself in the men's room,
all the while being deep and meaningful.
Some people can do that, their lives are full of depth.
It's none of it in the wrist, I've tried.

But I can't see humanity in a Black Eyed Susie.
A cat crossing the street is just that to me.
Which is why Eddie Denhauser takes home an A in literature,
an A in physics, while I take home a lousy C.

Tell me man's eternally damned soul writhing in agony over
past indiscretions and lost inhibitions, doomed forever to
roam the universe in search of a mother, a mirror, a saviour.
Then I see meaning.

The moon is like a spinning orb...but it's also made of
green cheese. You know?



The Last Jellybean of Summer

He's stupid. He's energetic. He's competitive. He's daring. And oh, did I mention that he's my brother, and that he's stupid?

Two weeks of August had rocketed by, showing a lack of respect for the honor of being the last fourteen days of summer. This upset my brother (Mark) and me since the inevitable inauguration of a new school year was upon us. He was going to finally start jr. high school, while I remained in the trenches at Paul E. Nagal elementary school for at least another three years. It was Wednesday, and we started back on Thursday. We were intent on savoring that last jellybean of a day as long as we could.

It was not a black jellybean day, or even a white jellybean day. It was more of a red or purple jellybean. That meant we could chew on it, and suck as much out of the day as we wanted. We started by playing a game of "Smash 'em Up Derby" in front of the house on our bicycles. Marty Ball cut his face open on an unprotected handle bar. That didn't really matter because no one liked him anyway.

That little incident postponed the final round of the Derby. So, as Marty's older brother, Todd, took him home, we sat up our makeshift ramp at the foot of our driveway. It was there that you could find your maximum speed. We jumped in order. Mark first, then Barnes, Cope, and me.

We jumped our bikes for a while, but my mean Huffy grew tiresome. Even though it had new knobby tires and a mud guard, the excitement still turned tiresome. An idea hit me. It involved my Bigwheel of two summers ago. Thus, history had been created. The events that followed quickly became part of neighborhood folklore. It's even

been rumored that a movie based on the incident is still in the pre-production stages at Warner Brothers.

"Let's jump the Bigwheel."

"Wait a minute," retaliated Cope. "Do you mean jump over the Bigwheel, or actually use the Bigwheel as our jumping device?"

"Huh?"

"Is the Bigwheel going to be our jumping means?"

"Huh?"

"What the hell are you talking about, Cope?" Mark backed me up.

"Are we going to jump over the Bigwheel, or are we going to ride it?"

"Ride it!"

"Christ, man! Why didn't you ask it like that the first time?" Barnes didn't like Cope too much, and delighted at the chance to make him feel uncomfortable. Mark threw a clump of dirt and hit Cope in the chest. Everyone else followed suit until he had taken enough, thrown up his arms, and shouted a general expletive aimed at all of us.

I pushed the yellow and orange plastic vehicle to the top of the driveway and stared down the sloping pavement where the ramp proudly stood. I put the Bigwheel on. I say that because I had since outgrown it like an old pair of children's underwear. It fit snugly and uncomfortably, but if you put your mind to it, it started to feel kinda good.

For those who have arrived at adulthood via an underprivileged childhood, perhaps a quick review of "The Bigwheel" would be in order. The Bigwheel is, and has been, the vehicle of choice of kids everywhere since it first hit the scene in the late 1960s. The simpleton would refer to it as a souped-up tricycle, but it is much, much more. It sports a sleek, hollow plastic body, which is attached to two small back wheels and one big wheel in the front (hence the name Bigwheel). You steered not with a circular disc, but

with handle bars, thus providing the child with a motorcycle -- "rebel-without-a-cause" -- attitude. This renegade feeling of lone-wolfdom was spurred, in part, by the flaming stickers that came equipped with each unit.

It's not really an efficient mode of transportation. Its peddles are attached directly to the front wheel, making it nearly impossible to conquer an incline of more than 12 degrees. Brakes were a problem, because it had none. It was, however, usually a child's first vehicle, so its faults weren't ever really noticed. It was fun, it was yours, but most of all, it was a cool ride.

"I'll be jumping first," my brother demanded. He put his hand on my shoulder and painfully pressed two fingers into the space between my sternocleidomastoid and clavicle (upper back muscle and collarbone for those of you who made less than a "C" in high school Anatomy).

"Okay," I squealed in a voice a couple of octaves higher than normal.

I took the vehicle off, and Mark put it on. It was hard to believe that the problem of not being able to reach the peddles ever existed, as it was clear that my brother was having a hell of a time bringing his legs in enough to land his feet on the plastic footings and still move.

With a little limbering, Mark fit into the Bigwheel with a minimum of grunts and curses. He got his legs to make the movements of peddling, but the front wheel just spun under the force of his weight. After all, Mark did weigh more than 100 pounds.

"Somebody push me."

I was the closest, so I put my hands on his shoulders, not daring to cause him the pain he gave me, and pushed him in the direction of the launching pad. Our driveway's downhill slant gave him the proper momentum to at least get him up the ramp, but it gave him very little flight time. It was kind of up, then right back down again. He was

lucky that the impact of the landing didn't compact his spine or something. He involuntarily grunted loud enough to let us know that it hurt, and to send us into convulsing states of laughter.

Barnes hit the ground in a fit, I stood at the top of the driveway making a vain attempt to hold it back, and Cope was brought out of his sulking. Mark was both embarrassed and angry that people were laughing at him. I knew that something would come of this anger. I could never have foreseen how much, though.

"What, do you think you could have done any better?" This question was directed at no one in particular. It was more of an attempt to save face.

"I wouldn't even want to try," Barnes squeaked out with tears rolling down his face.

"Okay Barnes." Mark was enraged now. "What's your record?"

"Forty-two."

That meant that Barnes had jumped forty-two logs from our stock of firewood with his bicycle. Evel Knevil jumped busses and canyons, we jumped hunks of wood.

"I can beat that with the Bigwheel!"

"Yeah right, you can't even get that with your bike."

"It can't be done. You'll die," Cope chimed in.

I knew, unlike the rest of our summertime gang of prepubescent bikers, that my brother was serious. He would not lose. It didn't matter if it was backyard football, dodgeball, or a game of video pong; he had to be the winner. I once squeaked one by him in a 20 lap run around our electric race car track, and he physically beat the hell out of me. He was serious.

"Line 'em up."

We didn't build too many fires at our place. My dad would claim that it wasn't cold enough, or if it was cold, then all the heat would escape up the chimney. I sat at the

top of the driveway while the others put the stock pile to its only useful purpose. Side by side lay forty-two pieces of firewood. Some were bigger than others, but regardless of their individual sizes, it made an impressive trail of wood; about 254 yards if I remember correctly. I probably don't.

Mark, then, topped it all off with the proverbial firewood cherry: "The Back Log." My dad was saving it for a very special fire. "It'll make a fantastic coal base," he would predict. That one hunk of wood had caught many a back wheel in its time. It was the sole reason our bathroom cabinet was so well stocked with bandages and Mercurochrome.

"Go ahead, count 'em."

No one had to. We had all kept track while they were being laid out. I wondered. He couldn't even make it over one log if the first jump was any indication of how the stunt would turn out. How, then, could he possibly clear forty-two? The answer drove up in a 1970 Dodge Coronette. Timmy Greene.

Timmy was the overweight cousin of Barnes, who painfully found out that having a car would not solve his social problems. He hung out with us periodically, and it was a tremendous blow to his ego.

"What's going on?"

While Barnes pulled him to the side and informed him, Todd Ball returned from his house, without the injured Marty.

"What's going on?"

Cope pulled him away and engaged him in another private briefing.

Mark was by himself in the yard pelting the mailbox with gravel. That meant he was meditating. I went over to find out how he planned to pull it off. Unfortunately, he had no plan.

"I'm going to be brotherless," I thought to myself.

"Hey Mark." Timmy interrupted my premature

mourning. "You want me to push ya?"

That was the plan we were looking for. Timmy would push. Okay, so maybe it wasn't a well-thought-out plan, or even a good one, but Timmy was fat, and he was big. He was the only plan we had.

Everyone, with the exception of Mark and Timmy, stood at the bottom of the driveway flanking the long line of wood: Mike Barnes, the only one of us who had something to lose (a record); Mike Copeland, the kid whom we befriended and none of us knew why; me; and Todd Ball, the kid who just kind of showed up periodically. We were eager. We were silently bonding.

"Ready..." (I had the honored job of cueing the jumpers.)

"...Set..." (I thought about how nice it would be to finally have my own room.)

"...Go!"

Timmy's footing was good; he didn't slip an inch on take-off. Mark kept his feet pointed outwards to avoid hitting the spinning peddles. He was kind of helpless when you think about it; kind of like that first monkey that went into outerspace. Small pebbles were kicked up by the strength of the mighty plastic wheels.

Barnes wrapped his left palm around his right fist; Todd watched with the same morbid sense of curiosity that has kept mad slasher movies on the screen for so long. No one really noticed what Cope was up to. I stopped breathing.

"Aaaagh!" Timmy was exerting all the power his rotund body could muster, and it showed through his red face and screams. Mark's knuckles were white, and his face had turned pale. He was just a few more feet from the ramp.

"To hell with the room," I thought to myself. "He's the only brother I've got. Please, God, don't kill him."

A more hollow sound filled the air as the Bigwheel hit

the ramp, then silence. Ten pounds of plastic and 120 pounds of thirteen-year-old masculinity soared into the air. I forgot to mention the aerodynamics of the Bigwheel earlier. It has none.

It started leaning to the side, but Mark didn't abandon ship. It was a matter of pride now. At the peak of its ascension, the Bigwheel was about halfway across, and more on its side than upright. It was coming down fast, heading for "The Back Log." Mark's horizon was now vertical. We all knew it was going to be close, not to mention painful.

He came down, avoiding the might of my dad's future coal base, but soon found that the ground was not an obstacle easily avoided. He hit on his side, never giving thought to letting go of the Bigwheel. Sliding a little on his side, Mark kicked his feet out, thus sending him into a roll: Bigwheel, then boy, Bigwheel, boy, Bigwheel, boy, then silence.

Mark moved a little, so we knew he wasn't dead. I guess most of us were a little relieved at that. But did he break anything? Did he get brain damage? Could I ever ride my Bigwheel again?

His eyes peered up, looked us over, then settled on Barnes. The dirty face attached to the swollen body I knew to be my big brother smiled and spoke.

"I made it!"

The summer was over.

Union Station

Chicago in November--
The air tastes colder than it feels...
like lead.
Harsh grey penetrating
as I await another train
to wherever it is I think I'm going.
Last night I stood in the rain
and watched the water carry away the
ghosts of Chestnut Street along
with the fragments of the coffee cup
smashed in your honor.

Concentric Shell

Ivory tusks
dig knotholes
into the memory of
trees--hallways
through rings of you
to enter in my wandering...
round and round and sometimes
one circle deeper into you--
revolutions around
your core, watching
the spiral of knowing
bring me closer to
the cavernous hollow
creeping out to meet me
in your perimeters.
I know the crash you fear
and I am
stone to splinter you.

Letter to Mom; a Dismal Delay

Mom, I could never believe that honesty
was even a policy or the best
like looking both ways before crossing
the road and tomorrow is never
a brand new day though it could have
been "when you were my age," before
the chicken had crossed the road,
before he looked both ways. Mom,
we have eaten all the apples
in even less days but still the doctor
will keep away because he does not
make house calls anymore, but they
are golden delicious nonetheless.
Send more if they can keep.
Tell father Hello because I said so
and tell him the grass doesn't care
where the fence is and tell him
I met an unrespectable elder and
a penny saved is a lost cause.

They were such confident proverbial
truths--done. I drop this pen
and move my elbows from this table.

Main-Stream

have you heard the rhythm, danced the dance
that has been danced for thousands of years?

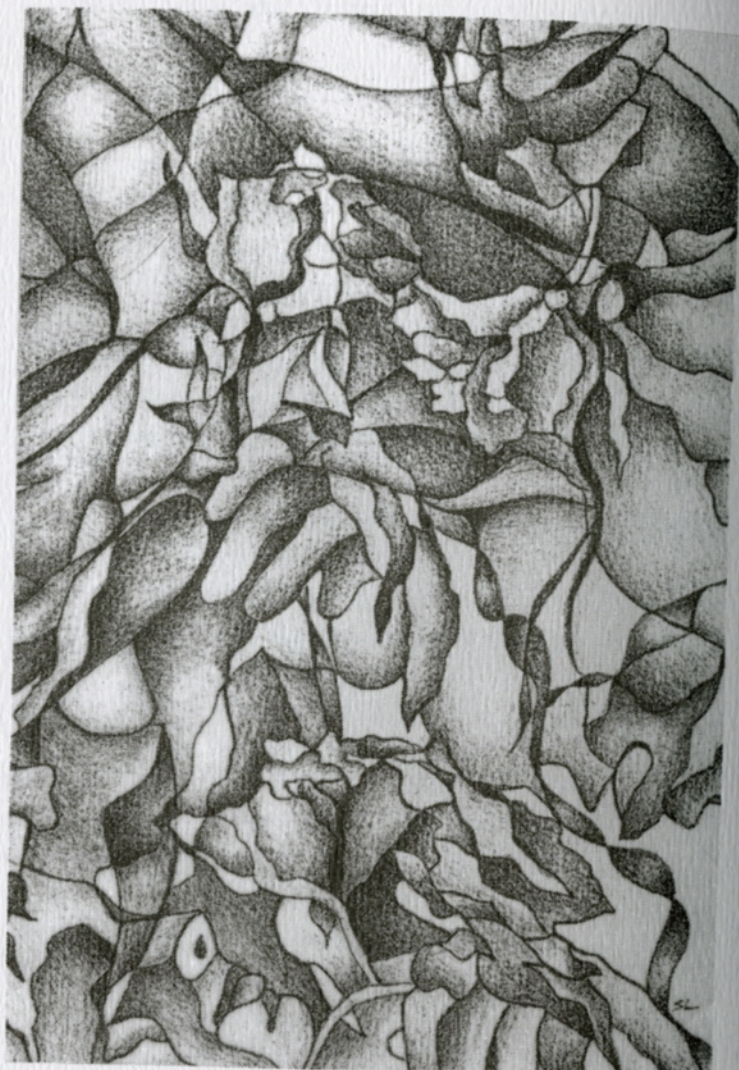
adam clayton powell
dick gregory

have been replaced.
we have satisfied our con-science
with
lighter-skinned
cosby-like negroes.

thus
no more
awkwardness
is necessary at our prom. who do we thank for
this erasure of true evolution?

MY-KU

my bicycle tire
converses with the night-street
full moon lights my way



Allison Thorpe

Reflections on an Abandoned House Jesse James Once Supposedly Slept In

It's just a dumpy, old log cabin grown shaggy with years. Two brick fireplaces--tottering bookends--sandwich the tiny rooms. Chinking has crumbled and lies now like stale breadcrumbs even the bluejays won't touch. The boards are rough, thick poplar weathered to a wrinkled blush. Broken windows, long and narrow, grin with jagged teeth. A patched roof of forgotten tin slants low over the porch eyeing westward, away from the highway. Gnarled grapevines, green rattlers, smother the north wall. Poison ivy has claimed the south. The east bows like a naked prisoner to the whip of ridge winds.

But for spring.

Come season, the old place dons a lilac gown of southern hospitality. Leafy petticoats sashay, cause the howling drafts to stutter, fall down, roll over. Year after year as I travel that same stretch of winding road on my way to a job of which I have long tired, that purple temptress sways in wait, ready to siren adventure loose from my middle-aged soul. With heady allure, the flowery perfume invades my window easily, whispering, "Slow down, come back, d-r-i-n-k m-e i-n. The stories I have to tell," it flirts as I race by. "Sit. Listen. I'll tell."

No time. I press the pedal, late as usual. The low hills teem with trucks and tractors. Ranch houses sporting pink lawn flamingoes fly by. Newly-graded roads, varicose veins, blur. My mind is flung to a time before the oozing asphalt, the machine violations, the three-bedroom bricks...

... the only sound: a fierce pounding of hooves as he gallops the dense valley. His breath comes harsh and ragged. Sweat pours salty raw down his face and back.

Good thing this pony's stout, he thinks. Too hot a day for April. Smells ripe of August.

He curses. The shootout went all wrong. Lost his horse. Hell, what was that shaky old man doing with a gun anyway? Darn fool couldn't see a blazing thing. Hit the horse instead of him. Lucky this mare was near. They been traveling strong for a telling day now, and she ain't let up once. It's like she's been waiting for this all her weary life, and she don't aim to stop 'til she gets her fill. The dust is about to bury them though, he thinks. It's done ready to swallow them whole.

Driest spring in a hundred years, some say, and they pass more than one field resting brown and thirsty, bearing crops of honeysuckle and bent cedar. Locusts rule the world. Creeks lie dead as the animals that go there to die, dry as the windy grit between his teeth, dry as farmer bones rattling to the moneylenders waiting to bleed 'em like stones, like the stony fields. Dry as one more day to face.

The pony tosses her saucy black nose to water. He lets her lead. They wander the twists of a muddy branch to a clear, deep pool. She drinks long before the man gets down in it. Whiskey couldn't do better, he thinks, though he'd be willing to give it a try. The pony nudges him in her greed for motion.

There's something about this money they carry the pony don't like. The man knows it ain't much. He wonders what happened to the boys. He didn't see one go down--none but his horse. He curses again. This part of Kentucky was supposed to be full of small, sleepy banks. Just right for him and his men. He takes a deep breath. He needs to head for Missoura. Needs to head home.

Night comes faster than their travelings, but the moon bides them through shadow. He sees a faint glow off to the right and rubs his eyes. It doesn't go away. There shouldn't be anything out here; still, the man slows to quiet. The pony has manners enough to follow.

It's a small place out in the middle of the dark. He ties the horse to a shagbark and steals closer. The air is heavy with lilac, powerful enough to addle a man's senses. He feels lost among its savored force.

"Up easy now." The metal is ice on his neck, the voice low. Female. "What are you up to sneaking around a person's window in the middle of the night?"

"My horse and I been riding hard," he answers. "We need a place to sleep."

"You smell like you been riding hard. I want you to turn real slow."

He moves. She is shy of five feet with hair the look and color of steel, modeling a set of red johnnys, and aiming a sawed-off barrel at his heart. Something wasn't right. Something about her eyes.

"You're blind," he says, lowering his arms.

"Keep 'em up there, sonny. Just 'cause a person's eyeballs give out don't mean they can't see! Now, who are you? Where you headed?"

What to say?

"I'm waiting."

Then, "You wouldn't be the first man I killed."

"Bob Walker. Heading out for the cattle drives."

"Ain't been cattle drives through here since . . ."

"Going to visit my brother."

"Wouldn't be traveling so fast."

"I robbed a bank."

"Now we're getting somewhere. Put your hands down and go rescue that poor horse. Barn's yonder."

He rubs and blankets the pony. Tosses hay from a tidy stack. A pair of large bays watch with curious care. An old black buggy sits tucked back in shadows. Everything was kept well. Too well, he thinks. Must be some old man about. Sons. A blind woman couldn't do all this. He returns with cautious step.

"I'm alone," she calls impatiently from inside, tracking his silence, reading his thoughts. "Come in, come in, there's hot food."

There is indeed. Fresh bread. Stew full of carrots, potatoes, green beans, and beef chunks big as the state of Missouri. The man laughs. He sees berry pie and cups of dark, steaming coffee. He almost forgets the old woman in his hunger.

"I like a man with an appetite. My late husband and all my boys was fine eaters. What joy to set a table full. There's tobacco in the far drawer." She shuffles toward the pantry. Brings out a bottle and pours two shots. "To them that lives outside."

"Outside what, ma'am?" he asks.

She taps his glass. Throws it back like a cowhand. "One's enough for me, but pour what you will. There's a mess of rooms down the hall."

"Front of the fire is fine with me, ma'am." He draws another shot, trying to cool his parched throat. What luck, he thinks, in finding this place.

"It feels safe having a man in the house again. Can't be too careful. Not with people like Jesse James running in and out of Kentucky."

"Jesse James, huh?" He misses the glass. "I was just fooling before about robbing banks." Spills on his leg.

"Well, I can see when a man's tired."

He turns away. "I'll tend to the coals."

For all his troubles, a dead sleep finds the man. When he wakes, it's with a start in the unfamiliar dimness.

"Old woman, what're you doing rustling in the night?" He smells side pork frying.

"Son, for me it's always night."

They down their fill, the woman chattering on like a morning bird. Like easy family. She hears the horse first and motions the man to stillness, but he readies his gun as she strides into the yard.

"Morning, Clem."

"Cora." The man on the big chestnut nods. "You all right this morning?" The voice is rough.

"I'm fine! And know you well enough to know you ain't come to pass the day. What's on your mind?"

"It's the James gang. They hit nearby. Heard tell Jesse headed this way."

"Clem, I keep my gun loaded and I can use it!"

"I know it, Cora. Now don't get yourself excited. I just think it's right foolish for a woman to be living out here by herself. One of these . . ."

"We been through all that!" She cuts in. "I'm staying! It's mine, Clem, and I ain't leaving. Not Jesse James, not twister, not flood gonna do it!"

"He's a killer."

"I'll remember that."

The man inside hears the dust of fast hooves. Then her strong mutterings, ". . . meddlesome old goathead."

"Your beau?" He laughs.

"Oh, you shush! I got no need of a beau. I married my mister out of love and walked his side for thirty years and six sons and outlived 'em all." She stands board straight and still against a doorway lit of red dawn. "Now I just spend every one of the Lord's days in hard work, waiting to join my family." She nods to the large stretch of lilacs out back and looks young as a dreaming girl.

The man wonders at the purple and green wildness amid the drought.

"Some days I get to wishing a body would break in and bash my head," she continues. "Shoot out my heart. Send me on to the lilacs." Sighing, "I get impatient."

"I gotta go," he says.

Those sightless eyeballs stare down his soul.

"I'd give it all to buy your way in," he says a bit too loud.

They glare and glare.

"I know you would, boy. I know you would."

He shunts the moneybags atop the hay and walks out of that small haven, mounts his pony, and rides across the dry fields, up into the hills of tomorrow, and he can't get the smell of lilac from his head . . .

. . . as I drive by. Plows run rampant. Pickups whizz by my old jeep. Bulldozers raze the land.

Don't lose the lilacs, I cry.

Please, the lilacs.

Poem in D Major

For Pachelbel
(And B)

A victorian Sunday in the mist of May.
A drawing room gracing west London.
Wallpaper that holds the busyness
Of Gilman's chaotic yellow power.
Plants line the conservatory wall
In green rigid guard.
The called gather.

I am a friend of Katherine's.
She has set about the task
Of my salvation,
For I have been lost.

Today I am to be rescued
By a quartet of baroque lovers.
The old men tune.
Women clear their unlined throats.

I compose myself, soothing the green
High-neck velvet and lace dress
That lies like bud and snow
Against my autumn hair.

You enter late
In dark dapper elegance.
Leave your hat and coat at the door.

The room stifles, stills.
Sweetly, sweetly,
The violins begin to sing.

Lest There Be Shadows

Til moonbows arc ponds
of cattail opulence and stars of ice
lend luck to leaning lovers,
I shall tarry this island lagoon
of phantom mist and ragged whippoorwill wit,
keeping company with candles snuffed
and sprigged rosemary hung from oak beams
to dry a heady death.
I am scholarly in my woolgathering.
Fall easy prey to toad charm.
There are lessons to be learned
in this mad soliloquy without you,
but I cannot guess at their worth.
Is it just dates to be memorized?
History to be rended and combed for hindsight?
Homework lost along the way?
Tell the teachers--
Writing for practice has no soul!
I am quite guilty, instead, of memorizing
your stroke of moonlit recitation,
rending and combing the history
of how your arms sheltered rainy days.
I am the troublemaker in the third row
who wants nothing more than to catch your eye,
the one unteachable
in the art of losing you.
The pond holds to mirrored musings.
Star forces set sermon.
I walk to waysides dark
lest there be shadows weeping.

Isolation

I shouldn't have watched it,
but I did.
I even paid money to see it
which is worse.
I knew what was coming.
I had seen it before.
Two-dimensional people become flesh.
They become you and me and them.
They are playing our lives for
money and fame while we remember
and hide.

On John Ashbery and Late Fall from Cherry Hall 105

An apple-red leaf pirouetted
down through a warm shaft of light
squeezed between Cherry Hall and Gordon Wilson.

Outside the wind pushed.
Leaves fell, steady rain
pattering on the sidewalk,
resting around the cinnamon shadow
of one fallen yesterday.

Inside was John Ashbery, again.
Out past the window was the grassy knoll.
I sat for hours last summer
talking to the girl
with eyes like onyx
in my ring from high school,
eyes that sparked, a star
in the black midnight sky.

The Cat Tree

"There he goes again, straight up that path to the cat tree. I swear, that man is the most stubborn man I know."

Well, Grandma was right. Daddymilt was stubborn about using that cat tree. It was his way of handling a bad situation. I peeped out the kitchen window and saw his gray frame plodding up the half-hill path toward what Grandma and I both knew was the inevitable.

"Go after him, child! Maybe he'll listen to you. God only knows I talked myself blue-in-the-face about that dang tree. Milt just won't listen to me."

Grandma was right again. Daddymilt just wouldn't give it up. It seemed almost religious to him. His way of redemption. I jumped off the step stool that had been my perch for most of that early autumn afternoon, grabbed my jacket, and ran out of the house toward the path as fast as my new Keds P. F. Flyers would take me.

"Daddymilt! Daddymilt! Wait for me!"

Daddymilt was of course my grandfather, my mother's father. My entire eight-year-old life I had seen him every day, and I felt I knew him as well as anyone could. We had a special kind of bond, I guessed, and that's why I never seemed to understand when some people, including Grandma, described him as eccentric, stubborn or, as was Grandma's favorite adjective, "half-baked." He was my Daddymilt and I took what he did and said as the gospel and he knew it.

"Hey, wait for me!"

He slowed down from a trot to a plod, looking over his shoulder to estimate my arrival at his side. He was a small man, but the Derby hat he wore made him look

taller. The feather in his hat always pointed in the opposite direction from where Daddymilt was headed. It was like an omen; maybe that's why he seemed always to meet up with calamity. If only he'd turn that hat around, then Daddymilt and that feather could get going together.

"Honey, you know I like to do this by myself. It ain't a pretty sight, you know."

I had never exactly been with Daddymilt at the cat tree. I had seen him on his way to and from the "chore" as he called it. Never had I been God's witness to "the end of suffering and the beginning of a better world." But Daddymilt had often explained his intentions to me, and I never really had a burning desire to see it done.

"Well, let's get on with it," he said.

As I reached him, I could see plainly the furry ball in his cupped hands. It was no mistake; this time it was Ol' Fox, the tomcat. His orange, shaking body was spattered in what I guessed was blood; his tail flicked ever so slightly and he groaned a growl as best he could before we make our next steps on the path.

"Poor Ol' Fox!" I whined, wanting to help him, release him from this agony he must be in.

"Yep," said Daddymilt as he stroked Ol' Fox with his three*fingered hand. Daddymilt was running out of fingers. He seemed to chop them off as easily as he could chop tobacco. Accidents, he said, were meant to be. So I found solace in that. And so, in that matter-of-fact way, we made our way past the barn, the cornfield, the frog pond and the pumpkin patch. We plodded along silently beyond Daddymilt's prized grape arbor where the sweetest would soon find their destiny in Daddymilt's "secret-recipe" wine.

"How'd it happen?" I asked. "Did a cow kick 'em? Did he get in a fight with the dog?"

"Nope. I did it this time." He shuttered as he bit his lower lip. "Ol' Fox was under the truck, up in the engine, asleep, I guess. I turned the key and he was pretty-near chewed up. I did it . . . I did this to Ol' Fox. He's in such pain. I just can't let him go on."

Ol' Fox began to foam a little at the mouth; his green eyes were open slightly and were glossy and far away. He writhed every ten steps or so . . . the pain, I guessed, getting more intense. We neared the end of the path. I could see the cat tree up the way, its sprawling branches tangled with the colored autumn leaves. On each low branch was left a remembrance of the others who were "released" here: The mama cat who got the infection after giving birth to six kittens; Snowball, the white cat, whom Daddymilt brought to the cat tree after a run-in with a rattle snake; and some I never heard about. Each branch had been wrapped with a noosed rope for Daddymilt's purpose. And after each release, the ropes were cut, and the tree left adorned only with frayed fragments of the occurrence.

Daddymilt put Ol' Fox down near the tree. The cat's breathing became more and more labored. He solemnly wrapped the rope around the branch finally noosing it with a snap. I watched silently as he picked Ol' Fox up gently and slipped the noose around his blood-stained neck.

"Ol' Fox," he said, "your pain is about to end. This ol' world ain't nothing compared to where you're headed! It's the kindest thing for me to do, and I think you know it, don't you son?"

Ol' Fox gave a long, deep catterwail to Daddymilt, and I guessed that they had signed the deal. Ol' Fox was ready to be released, and Daddymilt was ready to do the releasing.

"You're a good cat, and I feel real lucky to have had you as mine." At that, Daddymilt swung Ol' Fox

backward; the cat's neck caught the noose of the rope, and he dangled and twitched for what seemed like a long time. Daddymilt somberly leaned against the tree until it was over and done. He had let me witness this private, almost sanctified, ritual of his, silently, reverently.

"Ol' Fox was a damn good cat, he was. But he sure is a damn sight better off now, I tell you." Daddymilt cut the noose and placed Ol' Fox's limp body in a shoe box that he filled with lime.

"Time to put him under," he said as he began to dig a grave for Ol' Fox.

I thought that Daddymilt was right . . . Ol' Fox is a damn sight better off.

I thought of this often through my years and even as I walked the hallway toward his hospital room; the vividness of that day was almost eerie. Now a young woman of almost twenty years, I still did not know what to expect from Daddymilt. I hadn't seen him in almost a year. He lay there shaking, his arms flicked back and forth once and a while, and as I neared his bed I could hear him groan. His eyes looked glassy and far away as I peered down into his older-than-I-remembered face. He recognized me slowly.

"Honey," he said, "they won't let me die. . . ." He gasped for air as I rubbed his silver head.

"Honey?"

"Yes, Daddymilt, I'm here."

"Take me to our cat tree."

Kathy Binns

On Becoming a Sage, 11:30 PM

I was born
wiser than my brother,
four and a half then
and humanity's fear
my sister sees
doesn't stop
life's happening.
So now it's August--
enemy fog this morning
slate grey companion sky tonight.

I've aged:
wrinkles, dependencies,
curiosities about reincarnation.

Once this summer
I confronted Death
--enveloped in smoke, hunger--
impending, yet
unable to meet my gaze.
Arrogance! the accusation
--confidence, my reply.

Then today I knew passion
the heat of my tears
threatening comfort. Momentarily,
I envied by brother.

**Chinese Dualism: from Green to
Black,
a Second Perspective**

I. Denial

When I lived in China,
I was barraged with traditions, proverbs,
but never the yin-yang.
Now in quiet rebellion there,
light and darkness,
 heat and cold,
 dryness and wetness
unite. Youth are slaughtered,
while in a pub on College Street
Mr. C. discusses Chinese cosmology
 in the aftermath of jazz.

II. Anger

I haven't seen your parents
since your dad said he loved me
a year ago and months later
 you asked why --

III. Bargaining: Putting Away Childish Things

Peer pressure, reminding me
I said I would.
You give instructions:
inhale, hold. . .
 simultaneous gag.
You smile, dance the life Billie sings,
note my clumsiness and serve my wine in a tumbler.

IV. Despair

Like the mute in McCuller's story,
you refute her claim: we all
have something to hide. Wide open
you say, your bicameral audience,
there for the duration,
laughs hollow
at your Carol Burnett antics.

V. Acceptance

Lady in black,
cats have nine lives,
but I recall only three
or four wakes
followed promptly by
resurrection, reinitiation
into the Dead Poets Society
(no apostrophe). There,
a woman can embrace her delusions.

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