1994

UA68/6/1 Zephyrus

Western Kentucky University

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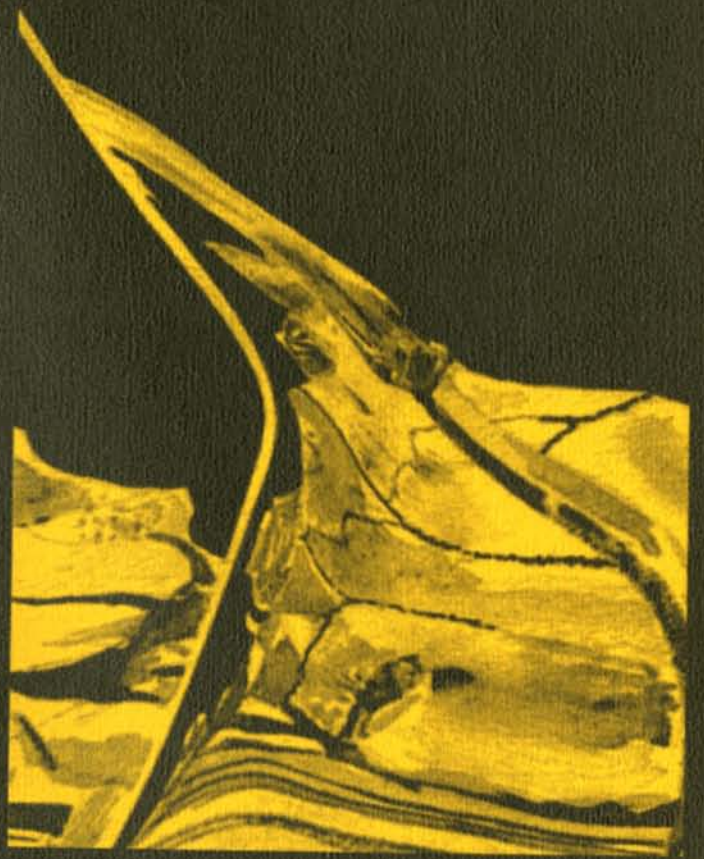
UNIVERSITY

ZEPHYRUS

A Student Literary Publication of
Western Kentucky University



1994

ZEPHYRUS

Spring 1994

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

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Western Kentucky University

Editors' notes: 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.

Zephyrus was electronically typeset in Times-Roman by Eric Hall on a Commodore Amiga computer using Professional Page software.

George McCelvey
(1927 - 1993)

Western's English Department lost one of its most respected professors when George McCelvey passed away last summer. Professor McCelvey was a dedicated teacher, an effective scholar, and a good colleague.

George received his B.A. from Rice University, his M.A. from the University of Houston, and his Ph.D. from Duke University. He joined the faculty of Western in 1964 as an Assistant Professor, was promoted to Associate Professor in 1965, and to Professor in 1969. In 1993, he entered Western's early retirement option, though he continued to teach his special areas - Romantic literature and the British novel. George McCelvey was an active and supportive member of our department for almost three decades. In particular, he was very concerned for the welfare of students, so that the departmemt has named its student loan fund in his honor. In that spirit of generosity, this issue of *Zephyrus* is dedicated to his memory and example.

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Wes Barry

Zephyrus Art Award
Robert Roberson

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The Pineapple Kids

They are the ones who stand
at the edges of playgrounds,
kick at the fences
and throw rocks against
the monkey bars
just to hear the clink . . .

They stamp their feet
at nice kids,
brandish their fists
when someone gets too close.

After dark,
the pineapple kids go home
to silent houses
and huddle in the corners
of dirty rooms,
gathering extra hardness
around their soft insides.

The Other Galatea

At seventeen, I was a rock,
not yet smoothed and formed
by the lick of years.

Mom said
"You'll bloom, Honey
You'll bloom"
but rocks don't bloom.
They form

and eventually
I did take form--
hard and lovely--
but Venus neglected
to give me life

so now I stand
forever frozen,
a naked statue
in my sculptor's dust-lit room.

Hayloft

There was a crooked barn
at the wood's edge.

I ran barefoot into the gray smell--
mildewed hay and rotting wood--
climbed the ladder
into the loft
where sunlight leaked through the roof
planks--
transparent walls of light,
ranks of airborne dust moving
in and out.

Dad said "Stay out of the loft . . .
Those boards could give way"
but I danced there--
skipped and twirled like a Gypsy child--
never pausing
when boards creaked and moved
beneath my feet.
I would just laugh
and kick hay into the light . . .

never fell through.

Deborah Brown

Sisters

I remember two girls--
miniature monarchs who ruled
a summer kingdom of cornfields and
tree lines.

Often I've seen them running
through the rows, golden tassels
waving above their heads
and I wonder
just where the stalks ended
and the trees began . . .

because we never reached
the other side,
turning midway at the scarecrow
to retrace our steps
back through the aisles,

relinquishing our reign
to the straw-stuffed man.

Fathers

I think it was around 3:30 when I was slowly awakened by my wife, who was standing over me and giving me little nudges on the shoulder. "Jim. Jim. Wake up. It's your father, Sweetheart. Jim? You awake?"

I smiled at her before her words became clear to me. "Jim, it's your father. He's on the phone."

"My father?" I slowly glanced over at the alarm clock. I remember now. It was 3:34. "Oh shit!" I jumped out of bed and made it half-way across the room before everything began spinning. I guess I shouldn't have got up that quick. I held onto the seat of our indoor bicycle for a second to steady myself and then continued into the kitchen, where I picked up the receiver.

"Dad?"

"Hey, Jim," he said.

"What happened?"

"They just called me from the nursing home a little while ago, Jim. Jack passed away."

It was nice of my father to always call his dad "Jack" around my brother and me. That's what we had always called him, for some reason. I mean, we didn't start it up or anything. When you're young, you call people whatever they tell you to call them. My uncle once told me that when my grandparents used to babysit me, they couldn't tell whether I was saying "Grandpa" or "Grandma," so I was told to call my grandfather "Jack," which came from his real name, "John." I guess it kind of

stuck, because they just let me continue calling him that, and then when my brother came along, he called him "Jack" also. Maybe it doesn't make you feel so old when your grandchildren call you "Jack" instead of "Grandfather" or "Grandpa."

"I'm sorry, Dad," I said. "Are you okay?" But then I realized what a dumb question that was. I mean, he's **my** father. What else could he say except "Yeah, I'm fine." My father never shows weakness. Never gets sick or takes medicine or goes to the doctor. And he doesn't even exercise. He loves that, but it really pisses my brother and me off sometimes. What's really bad is when he claims to get "real" exercise from lifting three or four fifty-pound catalog boxes out of the deep trunk of his car and then two-wheeling them into some country school before shooting the shit with the principal. "Real" exercise. That really does piss me off. He'll be having back problems before he's sixty, or maybe something worse. Then I'll be visiting **him** in the nursing home. I wish he'd exercise once in a while.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said. "I'm going over to the nursing home in a second to take care of things." I guess he was hinting for me to go, but even if he wasn't, I would have volunteered.

"You want me to go with you?" I said. I knew he would really appreciate my company. Besides, this was one of those times of crisis when the man in me was supposed to emerge and be strong and take control and help people cope and everything.

"Well," he said and then paused. "If you want to."

"Yeah, Dad. I'll go with you. You want me to come pick you up?" Another dumb question.

"No. I'll drive."

I said okay and asked if he could give me ten minutes before picking me up. He just lives down the

street, which is really convenient because my little sister, Katie, always rides the school bus to our apartment complex and does homework until Mom picks her up around six. "I'm sorry, Dad," I said before hanging up.

I could tell that my wife, Diane, already knew, but I told her anyway. "My grandfather died."

"Oh. I'm sorry, Jim," she said as she gave me this little hug. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I told her. God, I sound like my father sometimes. Then I went in the bathroom and splashed a buncha water onto my face and dug out all those little gooey things that get in the corners of your eyes, only mine weren't as bad as they usually were, I guess because I hadn't slept an entire night. I threw on some jeans, a sweatshirt, and my baseball cap before pouring a glass of juice.

But then I remembered that I was going with my father to see a dead person and thought that it might be disrespectful or something to wear a cap. I guess I was just used to wearing one whenever I visited Jack. Back before the nursing home, he didn't go anywhere without his cap. Jack really loved to watch baseball on TV. I think he liked me wearing a ball cap when I visited him at the nursing home.

Anyway, I tossed my cap into the bedroom on the way to the bathroom, where I splashed some water on my hair, which I brushed through and parted on the side. Then I tried to get this one spot to lie down, but it wouldn't. It just kept sticking back up, no matter how long I held it down. It kind of reminded me of Jack. He could be an ornery bastard sometimes. But he was always nice to us.

I dug through Diane's bathroom stuff under the sink until I found this NASA-engineered super-hold hair spray of hers and then sprayed some on my hair. I held the wild spot down for a second with my comb until it was sticking

down. But as soon as I began to wash the sticky mess off of my hands, that damn clump of hair stood straight up again.

I stopped and looked at the mirror in amusement. God, it was dramatic! My hair reminded me of some of the characters that I used to see every day in Hollywood. I would've finally fit in with that hair-do!

Then I remembered my father, whom I was expecting any second. My trivial hair problem was the last thing I wanted him to have to witness, so I grabbed that can of nasty-smelling hairspray again and saturated the damn wedge of hair, which I held down with my finger tips.

Then, while I began blow-drying that one spot down, Diane came in, politely covering up small yawns with her little hand, and asked me again if I was okay. She was obviously tired and just going through the motions, but I didn't blame her. We all go through the motions sometimes. It's actually a pretty nice thing to do for people when they need it. It's just that I really didn't need it. It was sweet of her, though. God, I thought. I knew I'd be seeing a lot of going through the motions during the next couple of days.

"Yeah, I'm all right, Diane. Thanks."

She closed the lid on the toilet an then sat down on it and leaned back, staring rather blankly at the carpet out in the hallway. Finally, my hair felt like it was lying down pretty well, but my damn fingertips had stuck to each other as well as to my hair, which got all jerked out of place when I moved my hand. I guess I was pretty pissed, because I felt like punching the damn wall a couple of times. Not enough to make any big dents or anything. Just enough to cause a little pain. But Diane was there going through the motions and looking sweet and everything, and I didn't want to shock the hell out of her. I was pretty pissed though. Here I was trying to do something nice for

my father right in the middle of the night, and my hair was just being a real bastard about the whole thing. I mean, Jesus! I wasn't trying to look gorgeous or anything. It's just that when you go with your father in the middle of the night to see your dead grandfather, you don't want to have a bunch of wild hair that makes you look like you still live in Hollywood. Usually when I have any wild hair sticking up all over the place, I just wear a baseball cap.

Diane snapped out of her blank stare all of a sudden and looked up at me. "There's some car light," she said. "It's probably your dad."

"Okay. Thanks," I said. She sat there for a second staring up at me with this "Can I please go to sleep now?" look. She was beautiful though, sitting there, half-asleep, but with none of that gooey stuff in the corner of her eyes. I ran the brush through my hair, ripping through the dried hairspray, breaking it up into little white speckles that scattered all through my hair and made me look like I had a bad case of dandruff. We both heard the doorbell ring.

"Hey, Sweety," I began to ask, pitifully, but Diane had already grabbed on to the empty toilet paper holder to pull herself up.

"I'll get it," she said, smiling. She gave me a little peck on the cheek and left the bathroom.

I splashed some more water on my hair and sort of used the bristles on the corner of the brush to slowly begin straightening out my mess as I heard Diane open the door and talk to my father.

Then she came back and peeked around the entrance to the bathroom, scratching the back of her neck. "Come on, Jim. Your dad's out here waiting for you. Your hair looks fine."

Jesus, I hate my damn haircut! I don't believe I was held up that night by something so stupid. I need to get one of those shorter cuts like my brother has so the next time

there's a crisis in the middle of the night, I won't have enough hair to worry about it getting all goddamned wild on me and sticking up all over the place.

Anyway, I heard Diane back in the room with my father, telling him how sorry she was about Jack. It was sweet of her. I don't think she was just going through the motions, either. I think she really did feel sorry for him. Finally, my damn hair wasn't looking so bad. At least it didn't look like I had just got off the bus from Hollywood, and it didn't look like I had dandruff or anything, so I washed the sticky hairspray residue off my hands and forehead and then went in to see my father.

His eyes were bloodshot and watery, though that was partly due to it being so late. He goes to bed pretty early. Diane and I stay up quite late sometimes, doing homework and newlywed stuff and all, but my father goes to bed at 10:30 every night, right after "Married With Children." My parents will watch it in bed with the lights out, and as soon as my father sees that still frame of Al's stupid smiling face with a big "PRODUCED BY: So and So" plastered across it, he'll laugh a little along with the fake studio audience and then say to my mom, "That's the funniest show" as he feels around for the remote. He'll usually either raise the volume or change the channel accidentally before finding the power button. Then it's about 10:30. I know because sometimes when the coin laundry room in the basement of our apartment complex is too crowded, Diane and I will be over at my parents' house, washing clothes. And we'll be in their kitchen, eating some frozen yogurt and hear my father laughing at the Bundys and talking to my mom. Sometimes, he forgets to close his door.

Anyway, he didn't look like he felt so good. If he just listened to me once in a while and started exercising, being up so late wouldn't have near that effect on him.

Damn, my father's hard-headed.

"Are you okay, Dad?" I asked as I gave him a quick hug and pat on the back.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks." We ended our embrace and I began to slip my jacket on.

Diane told him again how sorry she was and that if there was anything she could do, for him to let her know. That was pretty damn nice of her. She's really great sometimes.

But then my father kind of shocked the hell out of me. "At least he didn't have to suffer very much," he said.

I immediately looked up at him to see the expression on his face. Was he being sarcastic or something? Not suffer very much?! For five years he stayed in that little room inside that damn one-story community-center-looking building they called a nursing home. Five years with a bunch of damn old people who were crazy or senile and were always screaming or moaning about something. Five fucking years! That alone sounds like a hell of a lot of suffering if you ask me. I don't care if I was there receiving backrubs twice a day and getting to workout all the time and eating gourmet vegetarian dishes every night. Just that damn screaming and moaning would get me. Not to mention that small room with those big tiles on the floor like they had at my elementary school and that damn thermostat that was always set on about eighty degrees and couldn't ever be changed, no matter what you did to it.

"Yeah, Dad," I said. "It's good he didn't have to suffer very much."

We didn't talk a whole lot during the drive over to the nursing home. Jack had suffered a stroke that afternoon and was in a kind of trance when we visited him earlier that evening. I guess he was the same way until he died. I

remember wanting to say, "Why the hell didn't they take him to the hospital?" I'm always trying to put the blame on someone else, but they do usually deserve it. And I felt that this was one of those times, that they really had screwed up. I mean, Diane works in the emergency room at the hospital, and you should see all the stuff they bring those old people in for: little cuts on their hands or bruises on their arms or twisted ankles. Not that any of those things should be neglected when it comes to old people or anything. But Jack had a stroke, for Christ's sake! And nothing was done about it? What kind of idiots did they have working at that damn nursing home, I wondered.

And then, right while I was thinking all this, I remember my father coughing a little. It was really weird. He's the kind of guy who goes out into the freezing weather with just a long-sleeve shirt and one of those arm-less vest things on and then with his bare hands makes a monstrous snowball which he socks you right in the head with. And he never, ever catches a cold. It wasn't a bad cough at all. It just surprised me to be hearing one from him.

We were almost at the nursing home when my father broke the silence. "I don't know if you knew this," he said, "but we had an arrangement where if Jack were ever in the condition he was in earlier tonight, you know, being unconscious, and his vital signs began to drop . . . Well, they wouldn't try to resuscitate him or put him on any type of machine to keep him alive artificially. When it was his time to go, they'd have to let him go." I couldn't believe it at first and even felt a little angry. How convenient, I thought.

I didn't say anything for a long time. I just stared at the small strip of lighted highway ahead of us, looking for the first sign of some poor, unsuspecting stray dog. I didn't have very much faith in my father's reactions with him being so tired and all.

Then he said, "That's no way to live, anyway."

My eyes move over to his steering wheel, but my face stared ahead. "Being hooked up to a machine?" I asked.

"Well, yeah. Especially being hooked up to a machine. That's not even living, really," he said. "But I mean living over here in this nursing home all the time. That's no real way to live."

We pulled into the parking lot of the nursing home. It was dead out there. Usually there were so many cars that I'd have to park next door at the video store. But at almost four in the morning, I guess there weren't a whole lot of people visiting their old, sick relatives.

I thought about what my father said, as he parked right next to the large handicapped spots up front. I had never been able to find a spot like that, but maybe it was because I always came during rush hour, when people were conveniently visiting their relatives on their way home from work or on their way home from church. My father was right. I mean, that's how I had always felt, too. But then why the hell did they leave him over here, I wondered. He was right though. It wasn't any way to live.

When we were half-way to Jack's room, a nurse approached us, and my father introduced himself. She didn't even say she was sorry or anything. She just followed us to Jack's room, going on about how she had followed procedure and had done everything step by step, just the way it had been written in Jack's file. My father just kept smiling and nodding his head, though he never showed his teeth. Then, right before we reached his room, the nurse said she'd be down the hall if we needed her. I remember wanting to say, "No thanks; we'd rather have Dr. Kevorkian's help," but I guess I was just upset then.

My father turned to me before going in the room

and said, "You can stay out here." But I wasn't sure whether he was telling me to stay out or letting me off the hook, trying to protect me from a possibly horrifying sight.

"Well, okay. I'll be right out here."

Then he went inside, and I just kind of leaned my shoulder blades and the back of my head up against the wall and stuck my hands into my front jean pockets and rested them there with my thumbs sticking out. But I was moving my hands around in my pockets a lot and just couldn't keep them still. And I began thinking that somebody might mistake me for a pervert or something, so I pulled my hands out and crossed my arms. But that was really uncomfortable, so after a while I just said to hell with it and shoved my hands back into my pockets. It was funny; the whole time, I didn't hear any screaming or moaning. When my father came back out, he wasn't even crying.

"Do you want to come in and see Jack?" he asked.

It felt like I was being granted some kind of privilege, that this was one of those father-son things. And I didn't want to let my father down, so I followed him into Jack's room.

The first thing I noticed was that Jack's roommate was gone. They must had moved him into a different room or something. I guess that could be hard on a old senile person: your roommate lying dead in the bed next to you, especially him being around the same age and all.

The curtain that was usually closed to separate the two halves of the room had been drawn open, and I walked around to the foot of Jack's small bed. I had always thought his bed looked like an operating table, but with a mattress and guard rails. But the only operating tables I've ever seen are the ones in movies, and they're always covered up by a body or surrounded by a bunch of damn doctors, so I've never really got a good look at one of them.

I guess I was expecting a sheet to be covering Jack's entire body or something. Then someone would pull it back and say, "Is this John H. Winston?" And my father and I would nod our heads and grip each other and he'd say, "Yeah, that's him. John Winston." My father would have to sign something, and then they'd give us a few minutes alone to say our goodbyes before Jack was covered up again and carried away on a stretcher.

But it was just the both of us, alone with Jack. My father stood a little closer than me, with his hands on the metal bar at the foot of Jack's bed. I felt kind of awkward at first, looking down at Jack with my father in the room and everything. I mean, what if I had a strange look on my face or something? So I just concentrated on a very neutral, sorrowful expression as I watched my grandfather, who lay there still and quiet, though not appearing quite at peace.

My father turned his head but not his eyes towards me and said, "He doesn't look the same, does he?" It was funny the way he said it. Like he was feeling sorry for ME or something. I was fine though. I just remember thinking that the least that nurse could have done was to close Jack's mouth. It was wide open and reminded me of a painting that I still can't quite place. The only image that's really clear to me is of this dead woman. It seems like her skin had been burned or . . . Was she a victim of one of those Nazi gas chambers? Even that's not really clear, but I do remember this wide open mouth. None of her teeth show. Just this kind of dark hollowness inside her gaping mouth. I can't even picture whether or not her eyes are open. I just remember the mouth and how much pain she seemed to have suffered before her death. God, I wish that nurse would have closed his mouth. I guess that wasn't in his file though.

"No, he doesn't look the same," I said. "He kind of

looks like the Jack that lived here, but he sure doesn't look like his old self." God, that was a stupid thing to say, but I said it. I guess I thought that maybe when he died, Jack would return to his old plump, ornery, spirited self, instead of remaining all withered and wrinkled and dry-looking. The whole time he was in that nursing home, I swear you couldn't keep moisture in his skin. My father would rub lotion on Jack's left hand, and then before he was finished with the right hand, the left one would have soaked up all the lotion, though it would still be all dry and scabby. It was strange the way Jack just kind of dried out at that damn nursing home.

I stared down at the white sideburns and full head of white hair. Jack had really beautiful hair. They just gave really lousy haircuts at the nursing home. I think this legally blind woman who stayed two rooms down from Jack gave all the men haircuts once a month.

My father moved around to the far side of the bed and placed his hand on the guard rail, right next to but not touching Jack's hand. I began wondering if maybe that nurse should have crossed Jack's arms. My father stared down at the wrinkled eyelids and stubbly neck and sunken-in jaws and gaping mouth, slowly turning his head from side to side and gently stroking his own cheek and lips. "I suppose that nurse didn't want to touch him after he died," he said with this pitiful smile. God, I really wish she would have closed Jack's mouth.

My father scratched above one of his ears, and then briefly ran his fingers through the grayness on top of his head. His eyes were still on Jack as he began to turn towards me. But then he stopped turning and looked down at the floor under Jack's bed. He slowly climbed down to his hands and one knee and picked up a small candy bar wrapper, which he stared at for a long time, slowly succumbing to a smile.

"Look here," he said, turning in my direction but still looking down at the wrinkled wrapper he held. It belonged to a Mounds bar--Jack's favorite snack. When my brother and I were little and stayed over at Grandma and Jack's house, Grandma would always show us the bottled Coca-Colas in her refrigerator and ask if we were thirsty while Jack would pull out his big tin bucket filled with little Mounds and Almond Joy bars and tell us that we could eat all we wanted. He only ate Mounds, but he'd always have both kinds on hand for my brother and me.

Much later, whenever we'd visit Jack in the nursing home, my father would feed him a couple of Mounds bars. That always got Jack excited. Sometimes he's speak louder or clearer than usual. Sometimes he'd make more sense. And every once in a while, while he was chewing, Jack would get this grin on his face. And I could tell that my father always felt good after seeing that grin. That was what he liked the best. Not the being louder or making sense or anything. Just the smiling and grinning.

But since my father wasn't able to make it up to the nursing home all the time, he always made sure that Jack's night stand drawer had an adequate supply of those bite-size Mounds bars. The nurses were really good about rationing them carefully, but one day a new nurse forgot to put the bag of Mounds bars back in the drawer. She just left it sitting out on Jack's nightstand, and when they came to bring his supper, Jack was lying half-way on his side, moaning. About fifteen or so wrappers were scattered on the bed and floor, and chocolate and coconut were all over his mouth and chest and hands. He was only sick for about a day, but he never did let my father feed him any more Mounds bars. That really bothered my father. He tried other stuff: cakes and pies that my mom made and sometime even ice cream. And Jack would usually eat them. He ate just about everything you fed him, except for

candy bars. He'd open his mouth and wait till you put something in it and then close his mouth and chew very slowly, usually opening before he'd finished chewing what he already had. Occasionally he'd get louder or speak a little more clearly than he usually did. Sometimes he'd even make sense. But Jack never grinned the way he used to, and that really depressed the hell out of my father. Anyway, that's how it was the last five months before the stroke.

"What is it?" I asked. I knew what it was and all, but I guess I just thought it would be better if I let him tell me. "It's a Mounds wrapper," my father said as he looked up at me. "You believe that?" He tried to chuckle a little but it only caused him to cough again. It wasn't very smart of him to go out in the middle of the night without wearing some kind of big jacket or something. Damn, he gets me mad sometimes.

"He must have ate that one Katie was nibbling on the other day," my father said. "I told her not to leave it there on the nightstand, but I guess she forgot to throw it away." My father grabbed onto the bed's guardrail and pulled himself off the floor. Then he looked down at Jack.

"I don't believe it," he said as he rested his hand on top of Jack's. I just kind of kept quiet and smiled. My father combed Jack's wild hair to the side with his fingers and kind of patted him on the head. Then he carefully folded up the wrapper before shoving it into his pocket. "You ready?" he said, still looking down at his father.

"I'm fine, Dad. Just whenever you want to go."

Then my dad gave Jack a little peck on the forehead and turned around with this kind of sad but peaceful smile on his face, like the kind you get when you've finished typing up a paper you've worked on all night and it's not all that great, but you're just kind of glad it's done so you can go to sleep. I gave Jack one last look goodbye, even

though I knew I'd be seeing him at the funeral home and everything. Then my dad kind of put one hand on my back to let me know it was time to go. As I turned to walk out the door, I saw Dad trying to wipe some of that damn gooey stuff out of the corner of his eyes with his two little fingers. My stomach began cramping a little as we walked towards the doorway. God, it so was late.

Corn

When mother took us to church to pray
for rain,
I saw that hateful dried-up
look on your face.
And knew you wouldn't stay
here. Dependent on the ways of God.

Still, I imagine you on this worn pew.
We sing from the same musty hymn book.
Wear the markings of summer and corn,
threadlike etchings on our bare
legs and arms.

Unnatural

When the children moved into
his home, he acquired this manner

of sighing that cooled the entire house.
Poor man. The new wife drags her

bags in soon. You know about his ex-
wife, don't you? She who lowered herself

from the judge's bench. "Yes. Voluntarily.
Forfeit. Yes." Understand

that she loved. Herself. Enough to
give up a mother's rights and

walked through the middle of them all,
forced herself out the heavy wooden doors.

Their hissings still rattle through
her hollow insides.

In Their Garden

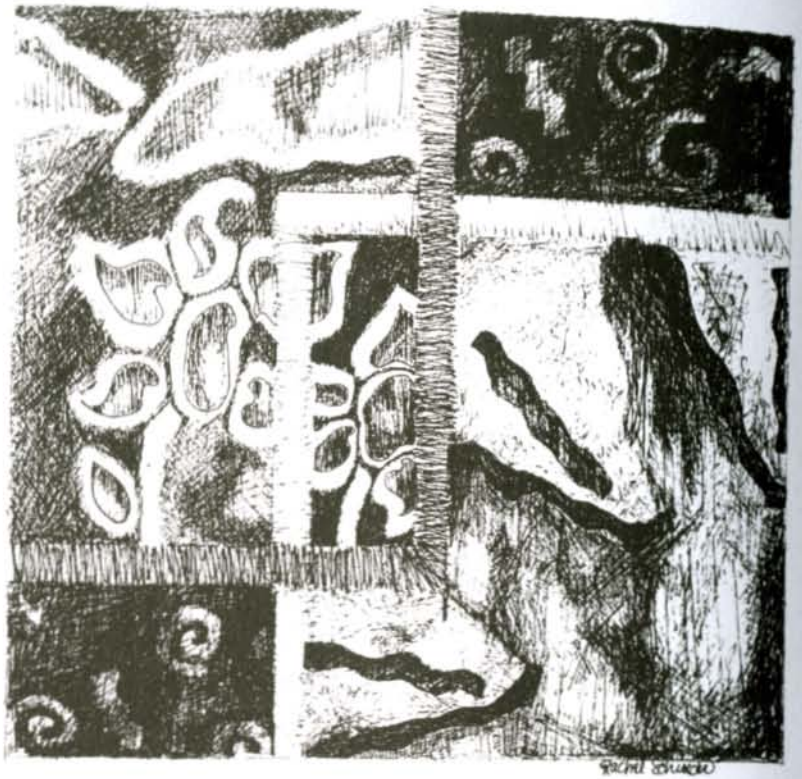
He and his wife squat in their garden
Among a tangle of green bean vines.

His hands, stuck by briars while cleaning out
Fence rows, are knotted.

The left middle finger was sliced off in a combine.
Feet are gnarled from tromping underground
In coal mines. Heavy stinking workboots.

Same sun that fed his crop grilled his skin
Deep with wrinkles. Furrows, Ruts.
But he knows how to take a forked apple
Tree branch and find a thousand underground
rivers.

He plants sunflowers, loves hummingbirds,
Seeks shelter with his wife under a grape arbor
When summer storm breaks.



Planting Things

We plant geraniums, side by side
In your backyard,
Our hands together in the dirt.

We reach into the air
Pulling meaningless words, pleasantries
To hand to each other
We have forgotten how to care for them.

As we finish our planting,
The things that used to matter--
Things of importance,
Slip around our iced tea glasses
Through our sweaty fingers
In brown streams seeking the ground.

Predicament

Merde! Veronique screams. She won't stop screaming.

Our predicament:

Every person in "Dollar Mark," except for me and Veronique, is Basque.

They use the symbol here, $.

Every person in $, except for me and Veronique, is away right now at a Basque hoedown 822 miles away in Cheyenne.

They'll be back in two weeks.

A day before leaving for the dance-a-thon, Ed's fellow townsmen had to set out pots of H_2O and grub for their dogs and sheep. In $ only Ed, my boss, can afford to fly someone in to watch his dogs and sheep. I'm from Baltimore. I had answered Ed's ad in The Nation.

Veronique is a woman I met at the Buckhorn Bar in Horse Tail this afternoon.

Veronique has to be at a meeting in Horse Tail, her home, in fifteen minutes.

Horse Tail, eight miles away, is the closest town to $.

I walked there today, a pleasant walk, it was in the 50's! But that's unimportant.

Snow's been falling heavily since 7:00 or 8:00 tonight, it's now 1:38 a.m. according to Veronique's watch anklet. (It has a huge face with gigantic, green phosphorescent numbers, it's the newest thing, but that's not important either.)

It stopped snowing thirty minutes ago.

The sky's clear now, not a cloud anywhere, it's just blackness.

Merde!

There's eight inches of snow on the ground. It's not very windy, that's good. And surprising. But the drift on Ed's front porch is getting deeper.

Veronique's car won't start.

She didn't tell anyone she was driving me home and might be late returning.

Veronique drives a dune buggy, just an engine and a frame, with a two-by-four for a seat. She calls it a dune buggy, it's really a go-cart.

The temperature according to Veronique's anklet is 23°, the wind chill is -10°. The numbers are huge and green.

Every home in $, every storage building, every truck, every "space of property equal to or larger than the average file cabinet," (including the post office, though it's smaller than the average file cabinet) is protected by at least three specially trained dogs.

Most are wolf-Doberman hybrids, all are trained to kill slowly.

"The love of every dog is to guard the space of property it's assigned."

Every person within two feet of the "space" is given a warning bark (even the owners).

At that point every person is given sixty seconds to leave or to give a unique "gesticulative command, known only to the dogs [assigned that particular space of property] and to its Master." Every space of property has its own "pass" or "gesticulative command."

The commands are subtle, carefully worked out, impossible to fake.

If a person fakes a command or steps into the space

or lingers in the "two-foot zone" for one second beyond a minute, the dogs attack. Every space of property has a two-foot zone.

On the road is safe, usually.

Veronique and I are standing on the front porch.

We're locked out of the house.

The drift is nearly to my knees now.

But luckily we're accepted by the property, "that is, we've passed the dogs guarding the space"; in this case the space is the yard.

"A Master leaving a space of property doesn't have to check in with the dogs assigned that space," but that's unimportant.

"A 'system' is all the space of property combined." Therefore, the town of $ ($, Wyoming: 37, five families and a post office) is composed of six "systems," but that's not important either.

The dogs guarding the yard, we'd "activate" them.

That isn't a good idea.

Besides--standing on the edge of the porch, just a two-foot by three-foot slab of concrete, with the house right there, and the clump of sagebrush there, and with the wind blowing this way, from behind us, it's a little better protection than open road.

Because Veronique and I are on the porch (here) and not inside the house (there), a space of property different from Ed's yard (his numerous sheds, his garage, his truck, his tractor, his barn, and the rest of his property, each a "space of property" with its own dogs), the dogs that guard the inside of the house are now activated.

And because it's so cold and I'm so nervous--Veronique won't stop screaming--I can't recall the unique gesture that calls off the dogs that are now lining up in the bay window, waiting for us to enter the house's two-foot zone.

Eyes glinting like razors, wet muzzles quivering back into growls.

Warm breath fogging the glass.

Damn those fangs, most of them longer than my longest finger.

Otherwise, Veronique and I would break in, or crawl through the swing door.

Two or three sheep are in the bay window too. They're looking at us, bleating. Ed, like his fellow townsmen, has a swing door set into the back door. Both dogs and sheep use it. Sheep don't have to gesture to the dogs, they can come and go as they please. They're all in the house right now, I can hear them brushing up against the door behind us. They like to huddle in the front hall. I can't hear the dogs. The dogs are trained not to bark or howl, but all that's unimportant.

Ed spent three weeks training you! yells Veronique: merde! merde! merde! merde!

Veronique is French, but that's not important either.

I don't have a car here or I'd break into it. I've got the truck Ed left me, but the keys for it are inside, on my bed. Even if I had the keys to it, or the keys to anything, it wouldn't matter: I've forgotten every gesticulative command.

I don't' have a stick, a gun, a rock.

Even if I did, I don't think I could hold onto it for very long. The wind's suddenly picked up to thirty, forty miles an hour.

We assume the power here (and in town) is out. The light over Ed's porch has just snapped off; so did the street light next to his barn; the street light over his garage; and the desk lamp in the living room. Chew Hollander's place, a mile away, Ed's closest neighbor, disappeared into the plains.

Several wires are down and crackling and hissing

on the road. The phones are probably out too; there's no public phone in town.

We can hardly see five foot in front of us now. It's just whiteness, it's just what the wind's stirring up, this wind's really something. But the sky is still clear, there's no clouds, no moon, just stars, look a meteor! What perfect stars, what a perfect sky, it's similar to poetry.

Merde!

The temperature according to Veronique's anklet is now -12°, wind chill -44°. The numbers glow green up through the snow.

I'd risk breaking into something, but most of the dogs are thirty to fifty pounds heavier than either Veronique or I.

Both of us are small.

It's her fault we're stuck out here, it's her fault we're dressed like this, it was her idea, but that's not important. Regardless, we're embracing.

My fault! you shit! my fault? you bastard! Don't give me that you little shit! Bring your swimsuit, he says, I've got a hot tub, he says, you shit!

Six minutes ago we were dripping wet.

Veronique has on a bikini, only the bottoms (remember, she's French). I'm wearing cut-off jeans; both of us are barefooted.

The drift on the porch is gone now, blown away.

We were soaking in the hot tub, and we'd go back but something happened to the plumbing. It started pumping in cold water, the water's probably freezing (or frozen) now. The hot tub's run by a Honda generator stored in an adjoining shed, and neither Veronique nor I know anything about that kind of thing or we'd try to hook the generator to her go-cart. But then we'd have to break away from each other, and hike to the backyard, and around the garage, and get by the dogs guarding the tub, and then by

the dogs guarding the adjoining shed with the Honda generator, and I just don't remember those hand signals.

Veronique and I are clasping each other. She's screaming at me: let's break a window, let's do something, I'm going to do something damn it! You can do it, you did it here! She's confused, I didn't break a window. She's referring, I think, to our "passing of the dogs," the dogs assigned the yard (those right there), when we returned from the hot tub, giggling, happy her arm around my waist. I was relaxed then, I waved my hands like a Rockefeller, the dogs bowed and stepped aside, Veronique wasn't screaming merde! merde ! merde! down the back of my head: you bastard! Her head is lying on mine, / my forehead presses into her shoulder, / my cheek against her left breast, / just a nick of warmth, her nipple, / pink at my mouth. / Merde! The water on our skin, / ice now, is cementing us together. / Our here amour is said in a language neither Veronique nor I understand.

'Baccer War

What'll we do when the 'baccer war's over
how will we teach our children hard work
if they don't know the feel of a splinter in their hand
or the pop of a green 'baccer worm under their feet?
Sweat and barn heat mix
with the rainy air from a thunder shower just missed
talk about the last girl somebody . . . .
how to cuss like hell and get so mad
at fate that put us here
all just another part of the welfare state
once was a way to put food on the plate
now it often just fills Santa's bag.
We export our death now
and our young women smoke
their beauty away
while my great uncle's lungs
leave his breath behind
and he asks why
in a swarm of baccer cutters
almost no-one lights-up
they wonder how anyone could be so dumb.

Enemy Prisoner of War

An Iraqi epw in the sally port
about to be loaded on a truck
waited on his knees in Saudi sand
shakily held his brown penis and
blindly pissed on his strapped hands.
While we watched from
behind our fresh concertina
armed to the teeth,
shotguns, M-16's and
squad automatic weapons
all marksman as Marines
one of us could have shot it off.
He was the most vulnerable creature
I have ever seen.
Now I wonder,
did he believe we had killed
our parents to become one of the
few and the proud;
and if we had (shot it off)
would he have cried or
screamed out loud.

Cat Man

We rearrange eons of history in a single scrape,
with knobby feet and diesel breath
win the name of making a road
Some want to know what we'll have
when we're done with it,
after we've scraped it clean and flattened it all out,
took all the curves out of the trails,
no more mud on our cars;
all so perfectly clean and sterile,
no more noise in our subdivisions.
And the yellow cat man never sweats the details
he just goes where his boss points
and pushes it all down and piles it high.
Always building and tearing down,
what a wonderful society we have
washing the red clay into the streams
choking the fish and gravel creatures
in the name of prosperity.
We're setting the pace in the western world
now the rest can follow our paradigm for success.
Only a few will take breath to blow the horn
to warn the rest that the race is almost through;
but it may already be too late
by the time the field catches the leader
the track may be gone.

The Last Farm on Aiken Road

The steel guts and bolts of Detroit
sink into the soft ground behind the old barn.
The cracked headlights on the smiling grill
house cobwebs and their spiders.
The rusted axle rests in the new March mud.

An over alled farmer with thick hippo skin
feeds seedlings into the insect-like planter.
The skinny farm-hand sits in the driver's seat
as oiled gears and machine belts whirr, and whine,
inseminating the cake-batter ground with seedlings.

His smooth neck turns toward the new construction
where the horses and cattle used to graze.
Asphalt lanes and concrete driveways replace
the cud-fields, sweet-grass, and boy-climbed
sycamores.
A four-cylinder sedan, with an unused ashtray
wanders by humming and its driver stares at
yesterday.

Middletown Tuesday Afternoon

They tell me there were farms here
before polished supermarket floors,
the crowded mini-mart, the Taco Bell.

I walked in narrow shoes that shine
like the new, black Japanese sports cars.
I have an ironed apron around my neck--
calloused fingers from opening boxes.
I have stiff knuckles from frozen food.

I wait for the WALK signal--
fumble with my work uniform.
Blue bus, and slick-shine car fumes
remind me of New York City air
I used to force into my lungs.

They tell me you could wander on Sundays
through the goldenrod sprinkled meadow--
smell the deep horse-air seep into your chest

where the cars stand in formation today
on the sizzling, oil-strained lot.

Wes Berry

What the Civil War Never Resolved

My best buddy Lance and I visited a friend in Florida. On the night of our arrival in Titusville, Dan treated us to a pork rib feast at Frankie's Barbecue Wings N'Things. We sat at a corner table, hunched-over heaping plates of flesh and bone, gnawing meat from the bones in carnivorous fury. T-Rexian college boys in manners and appetite. Lance's reddish-brown beard and mustache were matted with tomato sauce. He is Lannie the Horrible at the table.

"How do you guys like the ribs?" Dan asked.

"They're good," I said, "but I like a little more heat and vinegar in my rib sauce."

"You damn Yankees don't know anything about good barbecue."

"Damn Yankees!" Lance shouted, bouncing a rib bone off his plate, splattering tomato sauce over the table. "I'm Southern--by God!"

Southern by God? This passionate proclamation erupting from Lance's lips made me smile. I thought, "What is he thinking, this salmon-eating blubberhead who lived his first twelve years in the heart of Alaska?" Is Lance really a Southerner? Does living in southern Kentucky for eleven years make him a Southerner, even if he survived forty-below winters in Fairbanks for over half of his life? Who can define Southernism! My quest for a specific definition has generated a giant gumbo of opinions.

I remember my eighth-grade history teacher saying that the Mason-Dixon line (the hypothetical boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania) was popularly regarded as the dividing line between the South and North. I'm skeptical. Sure, Maryland farmers grow some tobacco, and Maryland was a border state during the Civil War. But I can't believe the state or its natives are Southern. After all, Maryland is one of those small states in that lump of small states in the upper right-hand corner of my U.S. map. It shares a peninsula with Delaware and is neighbor to Joysy. Okay, so Maryland is also close to Virginia. But is Virginia a Southern state? Virginia farmers produce much tobacco, that green, spade-shaped leaf indigenous to the South. But have you ever spoken with a native of Norfolk? Yankee, I tell you. Surely these folks aren't **true** Southern. I can't explain why I feel this way--it's a gut feeling.

A woman from Arkansas told me that Kentuckians are Yankees.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Do you really believe that the home of the Derby, famous fried chicken, slow-sippin' bourbon, and tobacco growers (and chewers--you know a Kentuckian is level-headed if he has tobacco juice dripping from both corners of his mouth, don't you?) is a Yankee state?" She stuck to her guns, nodding an affirmative "yes." I believe this woman has some "little rocks" in her head. It is a gut feeling.

A woman from Connecticut introduced herself while we waited in line to tour the White House. "Your accent is charming. Where are you from?"

"Kentucky, ma'am."

"Really. I've driven through Kentucky. Quite pretty. You Southerners are quite friendly. Quite."

"Thank you, ma'am," I said, swelling with pride as she recognized my Southern heritage. "I like to think that we are **quite** hospitable." Yes, I consider myself a

Southerner. I drive a Ford pick-up and speak in a drawl which becomes more pronounced when fishing with my country-boy friends. I eat 'polk salat' with eggs over-boiled so that the green ring separates the yolk from the white. I work with men who speak of little besides coon hunting, fighting and trucks.

On coon hunting:

Jimmy: "Grumble mumble heh heh heh DAWG mumble treed grumble DAWG heh (spit) brumble gumble heh heh DAWG!"

Chigger (alias Dale): "Yep. Dayam DAWG mumble grakin grumble DAWG bassturd treed. Heh heh! Shet em. Sheeting DAWG!"

On fighting:

Herman: "He squez me so hard wit dem legs, it made me wanna fit. I don't believe I could wup that sonuvabitch. I wayload that mother. That's how ignorant bote of us wuz. Next day, I was sowa (sore).

Jewell: "He'd break yer damn jaw off, wudin' he?"

Herman: "Hell yeah. He's the stoutest sonuvabitch I ever seen in my life. I garntee ye. I wupped em' once, but I don't wanna roll on em' agin. You can wup a man if you can outwind em' but I can't stay no more. I ain't got no wind no more. If luck goes good, I'll live to be fotey, wit all dem smokes I smokes.

On trucks:

Herman: "I lak red, but it's hardern' hell to kep clean. IT cost six-hunnard to put new tars on it. Ain't nuttin' lak drivin' a new truck. I lak it! Ye pay for it, but it don't really make no difference, long as ye lak it. And I run the dawgshit outta my truck, ye know. I let my arnge palers (orange peelers, loud exhausts) talkin' fer me. Hunnard-fitty mile an air." These men swear they are Southern. I believe them--not just because they speak in a hick dialect (although the drawl is, I think, an important

aspect of the Southern character)--but because Herman says (speaking for the group), "Hell yeah, we're Southern! What kind of lame-dick-college-boy question is that? Didn't you learn nuttin' in all dem years of school?"

I've been to 'hog-killins' at granpa's farm and gorged myself with crispy cracklings from the big iron kettle till I was well-leavened, bloated, fat-sick. Grandpa says that fried hog fat puts hair on your chest and gravel in your craw. Perhaps, but I haven't touched cracklings since. I know Grandpa is a Southerner. It is a gut feeling. He mashes together with his fork a half-stick butter and dark sorghum, sops it up with a homemade biscuit, and inhales the sweet, morning after morning. He wears faded denim overalls to every place but church. He watches Hee Haw on Saturday night. And I'm his blood. I've cut his tobacco and hauled his hay, fished his creek and killed his hogs. I'm his 'little chitlin.' Surely I'm Southern too.

I've grown to believe that Kentuckians are the aggregate of all that is friendly. But my pride was knocked-back a bit recently when I visited a small southern town in Mississippi and experienced a hospitality there superior to the most respectable example of hospitableness. The old men sitting on the benches outside the courthouse, the town hub, waved at us as we drove by. Drivers of other vehicles were polite, allowing our university van the right-of-way at intersections. I asked directions of several people while hiking the town; all were polite in their direction-giving. The white-haired woman who served me breakfast, impressed by the rapidity with which I inhaled my sausages, eggs, biscuits, bacon, garlic-grits, and coffee (black), threatened to take me home with her and serve me a "rale male" (as I looked like a growin' bo-wee and all). I experienced **true** Southern hospitality during my stay in Mississippi. Indeed, the experience made me question the degree of my Southern character.

I tried again to discover a "concrete" definition of Southernism. This time I visited a ninety-four-year-old Mississippian, Miss Bessie. Raised in Mississippi, she had a myriad, a gob, a whole bunch of stories to tell about the Old South. I asked if she thought Kentuckians are Yankees. Miss Bessie, not hesitating, not even pausing to ponder the question, replied, "No. I believe you have to go farther than Kentucky to find Yankees. When I was growing up, Yankee was a dirty word."

I was pleased that Miss Bessie considered Kentucky a part of the South. Although one woman's opinion is not the law, my gut feeling said, "Listen to the old woman. She is wise. She is trustworthy. You are Southern. Believe it."

I am still looking for the definition of a Southerner, or the boundaries between the South and the North. I have often said that the North begins at Louisville and stretches into Canada, because my Louisvillians are too fast-paced and proper-speaking to be true Southerners. But neither can the host of the Derby and the home of several makers of cheap bourbon be true Yank.

Is a Southerner one who turns single-syllabic words into multiples? ("The co-wut hay-yus stay-unds day-ulln tay-ulln own the squay-ya. Owva they-ya." Translation: The courthouse stands downtown on the square. Over there.) Is a Southerner one who lives in a town with one-hundred churches, ninety-six of them Baptist? Is a Southerner one who lives in a town in which the sale of whiskey is legal, but beer isn't? Maybe. I suppose we shall never know a precise definition, a cut-in-granite-law-of-living for the Southern character. (1. Thou shalt say "sir" and "ma'am." 2. Thou shalt eat possum and "polk salat.") Perhaps the most unbiased way of determining a person's degree of Rebel or Yank is by letting each person listen to his gut feeling. Each should establish her own degree of regional character. Answers to life's mysteries

may be found in the gut. We should trust the gut. It knows.

The boundary between the South and the North, or between a Southern and a Northern character, may be vague in some folks. My buddy Lance is a good example of this thin line. But if that Alaskan native considers himself a Southerner--if he is truly proud of his Southern ties--then I would argue that he is a Southerner . . . by God!

Leah Hogsten

Jason At the Piano

I have been waiting for the right time
To sneak up on you
unnoticed
alone
To gaze deliberately out the window and
daydream
as ivory kisses lure me
to a romance
within myself

K. S. Kallstrom

Women of Children

Circled by small, dimpled limbs
and high-pitched cries
they sit,
like westward settlers resting on the plain.

Afraid to meet
the golden wilderness
naked and alone,
they shield their hips
with newer flesh
and drape their necks
with beads of bone.

As they step out
into streets
with pointed chins,
heels click,
chipping buried bits
of sparking stone
to mark their trail.

Jumping Into Unknown Waters

I split the warm water
under chlorine-scented palms,
hair pulled back from my scalp
like seaweed dragged
by fishing line.

I hold my breath
as I glide toward your
floating thighs,
then slide along your skin
to break the surface.

Digging Through the Attic

I feel as clean as gourd seeds in a bone rattle.
In all of this dust I shine like wet driveway gravel.
You enter books and boxes, prying into pulpy lids,
separating dirty limbs with light.
I sit on the floor, my legs curled under,
twin snakes on a cinnamon rug.
I read the veined, paper wings of dead moths.
Rat traps and photographs crowd around a poster of
the half-moon that once meant something to me.
One side of brightness is folded behind,
leaving the other to grieve its lost part.
There is a jar of ancient peanuts near your feet.
The shells hold their stone babies, sheathed in dry skin.
I imagine those mummies, those wooden sleepers
nodding against each other, touching pointed heads.
When you leave my walls fall in.
My hand closes on a glass bird.
It feels nothing in its clear heart.

Angelo Rodriguez

Book of Memories

Memories of those old times
when your wings were unfeathered
white, and ready for
the world of my vague lines.

I realize now you know what I
sometimes forget.
In silky fibers
my life is kept
with a rush of twisted letters
when eyes were half closed.

Robert Roberson Untitled

Lethargic Interchange

Slowly waking
from a Sunday afternoon
indigo sleep,

I ask the framed gazers
with stiff smiles

to circle me
and spin me
a golden story

carved
from the glistening glass
they breathe behind

I am Osiris

The little wagon's wheels were badly in need of oil. I listened, but couldn't hear the frogs. Rust had always managed to catch one. I never understood that--how he caught a frog with all that splashing and standing in the pond with the water dripping from his nose. All I ever got for my troubles were muddy legs.

"Look at those legs--you go wash those off right now, young lady!"

The next day I sat in class with the other scribes and dreamed of muddy legs and mystic games among the reeds. "Now listen carefully, Rusty. You are Anubis, jackal god of death and I am Osiris."

Then I would stand with mud squeezing between my toes and pass judgements on the souls Anubis brought to me. This one will join the gods in paradise and this one will wander through an eternity of shadow. The long legs and pale body gleamed as they disappeared. Another soul would betray itself with a splash or a ripple and the hunt would continue.

A back wheel caught on a rock, jarring the wagon. As though startled, one of his ears flopped to the side, exposing white, vein crossed membrane. The blood was caked along the soft flap: a blackened serpent that mocked.

"And now Shelley will read us her paper on 'Pets in

Ancient Egypt.'"

"The Ancient Egyptians were one of the earliest peoples to keep pets. They domesticated dogs which they used for hunting."

The lapis-luzuli eyes of a death mask remind me of the eyes of a dog; you can't see what's behind them, not really. They make me feel like a reflection.

The sun was sinking behind the western hill. The darkening hay bales became Ancient World monuments. I stopped and flipped the ear back into place. The rust-tinted fur was still soft.

"Very nice, Shelley! Now, we're going to hear from Robert. He's going to read us his paper on the 'Founding Fathers' and all about how our great nation was founded."

The sun felt hot on my arms. A lone set of tracks wound through the sand towards the distant Pyramids. Somewhere along the trail the tracks stopped and grew muddy beside a pond with an abundance of frogs and reeds. A crocodile waited in that pond.

"It was a car. I found him this morning."

"I'm so sorry, honey. I'll take care of him when I get home from work."

I looked down and saw his eyes were clouded.

"Are you sure you want to take him?"

"Head in the clouds. Ancient Egypt this and that. I'm almost afraid she doesn't know he's really gone."

"Yes, real world. Reality."

"I pledge allegiance to the flag / of the United States of America."

"Car. Found him this morning. So peaceful . . . just went to sleep."

His back was broken and the blood had dried on his ears.

"I know this is hard."

"He had a long life." Ended by a natural car collision.

"One nation under God, indivisible . . ."

If I could see through the doglike eyes of a death mask, I might find only decay that doesn't know itself but thinks it does. Believes it's alive, but under the dust I see only myself.

I stopped at the patch where Dad waited with the long-handled shovel.

Partakers of the Cup

Guerrilla soldiers stood at the edges of the village,
Spilling like green coffee berries
From a rough burlap sack.
There were confused minutes of shouting and popping.
Screams wrapped the people like brightly colored shawls
As they returned from the fields.
Villagers everywhere spun for a moment
Like piñatas at a fiesta, falling.
The loved ones gathered later, their weeping fearfully quiet.
They hunted, looking for the treasure of life,
Each praying for just one, just one sweet breath.
A child wanders past, chewing the round of a tortilla.
He finds his mother,
Lying beside the road with a long line of others,
Strung one by one like dark red chilies.
He squats beside her, kneading her hands
As she taught his sisters, remembering to push outward,
Hoping for shape, round like that morning's tortilla.
The small red circle on her white blouse pours out
Beneath her. He thinks of the priest and the cup he lifts
To heaven when the people have been bad.
The boy chews quietly, a sound he remembers from Mass.

Preserves

In the evening we pick plump ticks,
The dog's belly stretched out beneath us,
Tacked down by our elbows.
We drop them unscrewed, one by one
Into Mason jars of kerosene.
Caramel in the soft ball stages,
Swift in darkness.
You carry them carefully to the tool shed.
Stored, so our Thorn Boy will make no accident,
Slipping them tan and fermented
Between the leaves of his lips.
Taking the dogs, you hunt wild mushrooms
While I search out the wild onion
That grows through animal skeletons,
Half buried ribs rising like crescent moons,
Warnings without muscle.
Smoking, I sit beside you
Watching the river valley spill its guts,
An annual event.

Kathleen Richards

Fighting Gangsters and Memories

It took all of us to mow.
When cut grass stuck to our shirts like green chilies
soft tortilla dusk folded in.

It's a small lot now.
The lawn, a loose-skin dog creeping under the foundation.

I ran up the back stairs endless times, bounding over Mama
Who rested on the bottom step, stretching her legs
Like limp white socks over the laundry basket.

From behind Mama's safety we fired our guns
At the gangsters we hunted all morning, hung in a row,
Imaginary legs dangling from wet tee shirts, casting no
shadows.

My brother and I make the shadows now, twisting our
hands
Over the shape of years, worrying each day over finger
Over palm,
Until the years appear on the wall, suspects of memory.

Jennifer Bruton Divine Sanctity

Patrick Bernardy

The Fort

I had always considered high school a joke and completely devoid of purpose. To me, it was a prison camp, a teenage day-care that taught me nothing except how to resist the institution's smothering of youthful spirit. It was during these horrible years of my life that I needed a place to get away from my parents and adolescent pressures, a place to be with friends who shared those pressures with me, and a hideaway to weep for myself. Maybe the fact that my friends and I had built this place ourselves was what made it so special. We called it "the fort," and I sometimes laughed at the coincidence that subconsciously led to that name.

Granted, a fort could be a castle or just about any other walled structure, but forts always serve the same purposes--to protect those inside or to harbor refugees from a war. I like to think that our fort served the same purposes. High school was a war for us, each day a constant battle against peer pressure, awkward sexual urges we had no real teachers for, and meaningless educational challenges. We each were occupied in our own personalized melee against these enemies while stumbling backwards and blind across this rickety bridge from childhood to adulthood.

There were seven of us who lent sweat and labor to build the fort, seven close friends, bound by a neighborhood and gathered together in a ring of camaraderie by this gangly structure. That ring was

tarnished when we fought amongst ourselves, hopelessly crying betrayal because one of us had broken plans with the group to go on a date, but like any other ring, our hoop of friendship was forged with a dense alloy and not really destroyed. And although it has disintegrated over the years, my friends and I can slip back into that ring from time to time, though we are now young adults. Whenever we conjure up memories of the rites of youth that transpired on that holy ground, as righteous and necessary as any school activity, we immediately realize the ring will circle our lives forever.

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Two grass trails led to the fort, located at the south end of a privately-owned acreage of woods in the center of our neighborhood. These trails had been literally mashed into existence during the fort's construction: A freak rain storm had forced the cancellation of school one day in April 1989. Soaked to the bone, we commenced the creation of our haven, flattening muddy paths as we trampled single-file between the trees to the small clearing we had chosen. Throughout the morning and afternoon hours we spent working, our feet became accustomed to taking the same paths as we hauled our materials to the clearing. It did not take long before those trails were permanently etched into the wooded landscape.

Around the perimeter of the clearing, sapling stumps jutted like knives into the air. Shorn roughly with a hatchet, their smooth bark was stripped to reveal the peach-colored tissue, and they were scattered randomly, decorating our world like some massive botanical graveyard. Tall pines and oaks were accomplices to our secret rituals, for they stretched their arms to hide us from the outside world and sacrificed their limbs for firewood.

Gradually, our concealability was compromised when we stole from our partners for fuel, and the clearing spread like a tumor.

We were close to neighborhood homes in all directions, but inside the fort we were the farthest we could get from all of them. We could still hear cars pass by on the single suburban lane that divided in half the newest quadrant of our swelling residential. And on most nights we would shoot nervous glances at each other when police sirens from US-31W shattered the lulling crackle of the fire. We were often afraid that our hiding place would be discovered by grown-ups.

The fort was a T-shaped building, its ceiling approximately one head taller than any of us. It was divided into two rooms--the fire-room and the privacy-room. Thick pastewood platforms of various sizes and shapes formed the roof, in which we had roughly carved out a circle to insert a curving funnel pipe as a chimney. Overlapping planks of plywood enclosed us on three sides, nailed through strong trees which served as support beams. The only door to the outside was through the east end of the fire-room. Inside, the dwelling was almost pitch black during the brightest of days, except for a few slivers of light that seeped in because of our crude carpentry. Assaulting the nostrils was a smoky fragrance, a nauseating mixture of burnt pine needles, cigarettes, and marijuana. In the center of the room was the fire pit, dug a foot into the ground and usually always scattered with sooty twigs and ashes. A jagged circle of large stones surrounded the pit, making the interior seem like a primitive cave dwelling. This was the hub of our attention. The farther away we were from the fire, the more heavily the world weighed on our juvenile minds, and in this instance it became the center of our concentric circles of solace. To the left of the pit sat a long slab of concrete, a

foot thick and ideal for lounging in front of the fire. To the right of the fire, and just out of its way, was a black blanket, draped from a 2x4 under the roof. It served as the only barrier between the fire-room and the privacy room. Although the blanket was easily pushed aside, the thin cloth became a wall of stone, forbidding intrusion on certain acts that were the be all, end all of our social existence.

The privacy-room created the stem of the "T" and provided an arena for two events: enjoying the consequences of a drinking binge and making out. Unfortunately, in both cases, the room was not at all soundproof, and the experience was shared by all ears, rending,the relative silence of our stay with the acoustics of either situation. A delicate wave of pine branches through switch-sized saplings created the walls and roof, and was surprisingly waterproof. I realize now our impractical design was analogous to what our first sexual encounters would be like. It seemed everything we did at that age was destined to be awkward, and our juvenile attempts to create a certain atmosphere for those few young ladies who happened to consent to our advances could only be semi-private at best.

An old mattress, stolen from someone's unfortunate mother's storage shed, provided menial comfort for either alcohol-induced sleep or hormone-induced sex, and it was deliberately covered by a clean blanket we brought from home. The ground in this room was purposefully kept clear of dead pine needles since the entire structure was particularly vulnerable to the rapid spread of fire. Homemade weapons of all kinds leaned against the back of the privacy-room, a brutal contrast to the personal and often intimate activity that took place beside them. The broom-handled spears, nun-chucks, clubs, and maces were made for no other reason than the enjoyment of making them, and they were never hefted against another person.

* * * * *

I visited the fort again this past summer, probably for the last time. The paths we had woven between the trees that dreary day almost five years ago had sprung back to normal, but I knew the way by heart. I expected the worst and braced myself.

The graveyard of stumps had found their desire to grow again, I was happy to see. Frail seedlings had sprouted around the fragments of the dead tree trunks, and the pines and oaks were even taller than I expected. One thick branch pierced the once aesthetic uniformity of the pine-woven privacy-room, revealing to me Mother Nature had begun to grasp the structure with the passionate intent of retaking what she had lost.

There was nothing left of the fire-room except one stout wall. I realized its solid carpentry may allow it to remain for many years more, and I smiled solemnly as I remember how we had counted on its durability to epitomize our residency. I saw the charred script scrawled on its weathered surface and sighed nostalgically. This was our testament, a gravestone marking the passing of our childhood.

"Matt West '89"

"Josh West wuz here"

"Welcome to the Happy Hunting Grounds"

"Valhalla, I am coming . . . Please make room"

"Scott Stone built the damn roof"

The fire pit had become a womb for several newly conceived seedlings, and its stone counterparts, those jagged rocks that once surrounded it, were scattered everywhere, their blackened undersides retelling their former purpose. The pastewood platforms that had comprised the roof were gone, probably stolen for other

versions of the fort I had heard about over the years. The curving funnel pipe hung on a dead pine branch just outside the clearing, a thin crack running up its side. Beer cans and whiskey bottles, old tires, and cigarette boxes littered the entire area, covering the grounds with a shroud of neglect it will never relinquish.

The smell of stale urine pervaded upwind as I walked around the fort. Entering through a collapse in the pine-woven wall I had not noticed at first, I caught sight of the mattress, its cloth rotted and dirty. Beside its filthy mass I saw the dry-rotted form of a used condom.

Damn kids, I thought, but was I cursing those confused vagrants who had, however briefly, taken up residence in our fort or my own fleeting youth? Although the fort was in ruin, its purpose had been carried on, lifted by a new generation of spirit-raped teenagers whose daily battles I had already fought and survived, but not won. No one truly wins a war; one only hopes to escape it unscathed and with the knowledge and experience to avoid its resurrection. I had survived my high school years with the help of the fort, but what will be my next shelter when the war begins again?

By now, the fort has become a decrepit shell of its former self, like the remains of a medieval stronghold ravaged by a five-year siege. Mother Nature, realizing she is safe from trespassing humans, has reclaimed her territory from a group of young men who fail to acknowledge what they owe to her. But She'll forgive and will always open herself up to boys who look to peaceful camaraderie as a way to decipher the meaning of their childhood and what it takes to become a man. While the seven of us have gone our separate ways--two in Japan, one in the Army, two in college, one married, and one in trouble--we are no doubt still a little surprised we survived at all, but we keep the memory alive nonetheless.

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