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THIN AIR

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Thin Air Contest
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Vivian Shipley

1997 Poetry Contest Winner

Finalist Judge: Joy Manesiotis

A POETRY READING IN CONNECTICUT

For Charlotte Mew
1867-1928

Eeling in the back of R.J. Julia's Booksellers because my socks don't match, I head for the cushioned seat under the bay window so I can tuck my feet up. It's August, my face is pale as a tulip

bulb, but next week, I'll *stalk*, Alida Monroe's word for your entry to her Poetry Bookshop. Voice narrowing to a wire when asked if, in fact, you were Charlotte Mew, you answered, *I am*

sorry to say I am. My signature's not painted on R.J. Julia's wood floors like other poets; I mutter your line: *To the larks that cannot praise us, knowing nothing of what we do*. Helmeted

in a hard felt pork-pie hat, your head cocked, you would unfurl the horn handled umbrella under your arm, not to ward off rain congealing to pudding in Bloomsbury but to defy Volvo's,

BMW's curbed here in Madison. A shard rough-edged in dust, not smooth as sea glass or the tans at the Surf Club, you had no enclave like Emily Dickinson or *A Room of One's Own* upstairs

in R.J. Julia's. No retreat from caring, a sick mother making you maintain appearances at all costs, no white dresses, you had coal to haul, floors and clothes to scrub. A younger sister and brother

asylumed for life were reason enough to vow chastity, not to pass on your tainted line. I picture you writing novels, cursive, heartfelt but stilted, seen only by your sister Anne, so hungry she

thumbs motes of cracker into her mouth. Life should not be a test of what can be endured, what can be survived. In coves of Long Island Sound, who can say why a place resists freezing.

(Cont., stanza break)

Iris Johnson

APPLES

It's funny, how one becomes accustomed to the poems,
how they begin to look familiar
like a stranger that lives in your neighborhood
whom you see often, but don't know by name.

I am trying to heal them all,
with my savior complex.
Sometimes, I wonder if I could ever fulfill Emily's desire
and help just one? Print has nothing to do with it.
It's only a mirage of ink and hard iron.
Paper dissolves in water
if you soak it long enough.
The real stuff sticks to your teeth,
rots them like beetlenut.
I expect to be gumming my words by forty.

But what's the difference if you're decrepid?
It was always known you'd walk with a limp, later.
Your smooth skin would wither
like a shrunken apple the yellow-jackets have gotten to.
Those rotting apples always fill the autumn air
with such a rich aroma, you can't help but notice them.
Chances are, if we bend low enough
to retrieve your frail body from the sticky soil
our fingers will be shocked away
with a sting. We'll think of nothing but that apple
for years to come, as your body,
sifts into the earth,
as our hands
begin to swell.

Undercurrents, perhaps, like those in *Fame: A blot upon
the night, / The moon's dropped child!*, short lines acting as small
islands like the Thimbles down the coast. Almost fifty before

you published *The Farmer's Bride* in 1916, your first book with
lines in *the sweet-briar air* that lift me like wings of a monarch,
your words pollen gilding my fingers. You cut off hope of love,

though not the ache. Did Thomas Hardy copy *Fin de Fête* in
his own hand on a British Museum Reading Room slip because
the poem was for him? At the burial of his ashes in Westminster

Abbey, surely you whispered, *Sweetheart, for such a day / One
mustn't grudge the score; / Here, then, it's all to pay, / It's Good-
night at the door.* Woven or caught in a braid of love, darkness

grew like a cataract filming your eyes. A life you could not shed
like skin: a nursing home in Beaumont Street with no outlook,
the room in back, a high grey brick wall blocking sunlight, stars.

With only occasional pigeons as company, you longed for a visit
from anyone even the man who emptied trash. Lost, useless
as nets beaten into a frazzle, frayed by mussel shells and clogged

with seaweed, through a gauze of seventy years, Charlotte, your
life looks softer removed from the mesh of a real body. Even ink
has faded on the death certificate that says you died by your own

hand *while of unsound mind* on March 23, 1928. So many years
of cleaning, your hands were numb but not your throat when
Lysol, a comet shooting through you, left a tail of pain curling

like a tongue, licking at what would soon no longer be there.
Outside Alida Monroe's bookstore, the thud, thud of gold
beaters hammering rang in your ears. The sixty poems you

left keep their rhythm in my heart, keep it beating steady
as oars rowing near a glacier with waves breaking on its flanks,
the deceiving sound of shoreline where there was no shore.



Scott R. Ellis

1997 Fiction Contest Winner

Mercy

Clay stands in his wife's study, scowling out over her desk through cold glass toward the San Francisco Peaks. He can't see the mountains from here, his view blocked by heavy ponderosa forest. He can see frozen ground, loose pea-sized red-black volcanic cinders thinly scattered with pine needles and snow. He can see the unused chicken coop, windblown snow like diamond gnats swirling in its lee. On the roof, with its nose stretched between its paws and its eyes closed and a drift forming downwind, lies a dead dog.

Clay watches the dog. The temperature has climbed forty degrees since breakfast, Flagstaff's latitude exerting more influence on the weather than its elevation, and the dog will have to be buried. It's been fine out there for days, keeping watch over the house, the other dogs, and Clay; Clay has been happy enough about letting cold care for the corpse on the chicken coop roof, away from the other dogs and the skunks and the pool of its own blood. But it's going to thaw, so it will have to be buried, and now is the time.

But nothing happens *now*, these days; everything is interrupted by extended starings at some spot in the air midway between the hood and the road, the hammer and the nailhead, the house and the dead black dog. Clay has meant, for instance, to dust the desk in this room. He has intended for days to come in here and run a dust rag over the birch top of her desk. To dust might even be why he came in here today, before he found himself immobile at the window, resolving to bury the dog. He turns to do that, to put on coat and gloves and find shovel and pick and go out and chisel a Lab-sized hole in the frozen cinders. He doesn't remember to dust the desk, and so it remains as it was, a computer-sized dustless square on the left, a photograph of Clay face-down on the right.

The dog was not theirs. He was one of a string of dogs that they found in the forest behind the house. There is a back road into the place, two miles of dirt that branches from the paved road to the county dump, and people who treat dogs like garbage think the woods near the dump are a good place to do so. Every few months, driving the two-track road through the woods, Clay and his wife would see dogs moving with anxious speed and random direction across the pine duff, zigzagging with noses to the ground, tails low. Clay and his wife would stop and call. And most of the dogs would come to them, slowly, carefully, tails and heads down, riven between terror at being abandoned in the forest and a heritage of domestication which told them to trust humans. The dogs would slink near and slither up into the Blazer, staying low, and Clay and his wife would take them home.

The dog which now lies dead on the chicken coop was not running through the trees when they found him; he was plodding

slowly beneath the ponderosas, stopping without raising his head, trudging slowly forward again. He did not heed their calls, didn't even cock his ears or turn to look. "What's the matter with him?" Clay's wife had asked.

"He's old. Deaf, I think," Clay said. "But maybe scared nuts. Careful." The old dog hobbled along, moving away from them, finely-feathered tail carried low between thin legs, and they circled him, out-paced him, stood in the snow and pine needles and waited until he finally looked up and was purely delighted to see them, the skinny tail whipping, the hobble kicked up to a stiff trot toward them, his nose cold on their hands, his tongue warm and dry, his eyes hollow and milky and glimmering. "Come on, Old Man," Clay said, and the dog didn't hear but trailed them to the Blazer and became, to Clay and his wife, The Old Man.

Clay and Jill shared the same birth date, a week before Christmas, a fact that they had both taken as a sure sign that their relationship was cosmically blessed and which still struck Clay as cosmic, though no longer a blessing. They had been out to a celebratory birthday dinner. It had been civil enough, Clay thought, the conversation focused on writing and dogs and other things nonthreatening. The conversation had not touched their faltering relationship until they were driving home, the Blazer mushing through warm wet Southwestern snow. "Clay," she said, "I'm going to move out."

"Nice day to tell me that, Jill," he said.

"What? I should have waited until tomorrow?"

Yes, he thought, you should have. "When are you leaving?"

"The day after Christmas. I've found a place."

"Mark's house?" Mark was the man

she'd been seeing, the man from whom she'd accepted, a week ago, a thin silver necklace, the man that Clay already knew was not her "friend." The man she'd met at a twelve-step group designed to help those with addiction issues centered around relationships, sexual and otherwise. "You moving in with Mark?"

She looked away from Clay, looked out at the snow or at her own reflection in the glass.

"Well, Christ, Jill—that's the logical guess."

"No. Not Mark's house. A little cabin I found."

"Are you coming back?"

"I don't know."

"I'm supposed to just wait for you to make a choice? Sit around and hope I win a game I can't play?"

"You play by letting me go, Clay."

They were home. She got out and opened the back gate, their other dogs gambling around her feet. The Old Man squinted at them from under the porch-light and barked his thin old bark. She walked away from the Blazer, stalking across the cinders and into the house. By the time he chocked the gate closed the light in the spare bedroom was on; by the time he got back in the Blazer, the spare bedroom's door was, he knew, locked. She'd been sleeping in there for two weeks, locking the door, locking him out. He'd hear her come out, late, after his light was off, to use the bathroom, to brush her teeth. Clay parked the Blazer and walked up the porch stairs. The Old Man barked again, a sound hoarse and reedy at the same time, and licked Clay's hand. Jill had brushed past the dog without

a hello, without noticing that his hips were more stiff than ever, his eyes more hollow and milk-filled, the eyes of a corpse, gleamless and pained. Clay said, "We're dying, Old Man."

It was cold the morning The Old Man couldn't walk, a week after Christmas, six days after Jill had left. It was bitterly cold—Clay envisioned burst pipes—and still dark when Clay hurried downstairs, clunked pitchy juniper logs into the woodstove. The Old Man thumped his tail at Clay, groaned to his feet, took a step toward Clay, and fell, collapsed onto his right side, hit the floor with a whoompf. "Old Man! Jeez! Shit." Clay thudded to his knees and patted the old gray head, the muzzle salt-and-pepper all the way back to the shoulders. He shuffled around

so as not to be between The Old Man and the heat from the stove. They were there on the cabin floor, Clay and The Old Man, for a long time, heat

slowly replacing cold in the floorboards and the air and, Clay hoped, The Old Man's hipbones. The Old Man thumped his tail on the floor. Clay prayed, unsure of to whom, that The Old Man would get up and walk.

When gray light started seeping in from the east, the dog did walk; he creaked to his feet and made a lap around the stove and fell again and yiped when he hit the floor. He struggled up and staggered to the back door and whined to go out. Clay opened the door and icy gray air tumbled in. The Old Man pitched out and fell down the stairs and crashed in the snow at the bottom, trembling, not wagging his tail, not hearing Clay say, "Wait, Old Man, it's all right. God damn it."

The Old Man thumped his tail at Clay, groaned to his feet, . . . hit the floor with a whoompf.

He cradled the dog and carried him barefoot through the snow to the chicken coop, lowered him to a sitting position on the straw-covered floor. The dog wanted to lie down, sagged halfway to the straw and fell over. Clay righted him, settled him in with his white nose between his thin black legs, ruffled his ears. "I have to go get something, Old Man. I . . . have to put some boots on. I'll be right back." The dog, trembling, trembled harder, shook trying to raise his head to watch Clay go.

Clay hurried as he pulled on his boots and coat and loaded his rifle, tiny .22 shells—"shorts," glorified BB's—slipping in his fingers. It seemed vital that The Old Man not get cold, that he be warm, comfortable. Clay wiggled his hands into his gloves, read the thermometer on the way out: twelve below. When Clay re-entered the shed The Old Man could not raise his head; he twitched the feathery end of his tail. Clay wondered if the dog knew a gun when he saw one, if in better days he had hunted ducks over cold winter water, anticipating with a different tremble the plunge, the swim and retrieve, the "Good dog," the touch of a gloved hand.

The Old Man gave no sign that he remembered past guns or that he saw the present one. Clay knelt next to him, reached down with his left hand to massage the dog's neck, lowered the end of the barrel to within an inch of the dog's head, moved his left hand down to the dog's shoulders. "Goodbye, Old Man. You're a good dog," Clay said, and he pulled the trigger twice.

The dog certainly died with the first bullet; the second was insurance of mercy. He was dead, he had to be dead, but his body was long in the habit of living and while it stiffened instantly it did not relax for a time,

for what seemed to Clay like forever, an eternity in an empty chicken coop on a cold gray morning, while the dog's tail wagged like a pup's. That might be nerves, Clay thought. And it might be gratitude. Clay said, "You're welcome, Old Man."

Clay leaned the rifle on the wall, lifted the dog, kicked loose straw over the blood on the floor, arranged him on the chicken coop roof. Clay was crying by the time he got back to the house. He called his wife at work. "Jill," he said, "I had to shoot The Old Man. He couldn't walk anymore."

Jill said, "Oh."

Clay scrounges up shovel and pick and an old blanket among the sawdust and chaos in his shed. He thinks hard about where to dig

the grave: it must be far enough from the buildings to remain undisturbed; it must be visible from the house; it really ought to be under a tree. He

considers the biggest ponderosa on the property, decides that its roots will underlie wherever he tries to dig, settles on a young ponderosa between the Peaks and the house. He shuffles aside the melting snow, adjusts his grip on the pick, and swings it in the smooth fast arc he's perfected over two decades of splitting firewood. Clay expects the ground beneath the cinders to be rock-solid frozen; he is surprised when the pick breaks through a thin icy crust of soil and buries itself to the handle. He imagines that swinging the pick through a skull and piercing the brain beneath might feel much the same way.

It does not take long to dig a hole big enough for The Old Man, but the temperature keeps climbing, and Clay is sweating by the time he drags the dog from the roof of the chicken coop. The dog's body is still frozen, quite stiff, and it is surprisingly light, as

**He says, "If you're there,
God you bastard, you'll
take this dog."**

if most of his weight alive had been stoic good cheer. Clay settles the dog gently upon the musty green army blanket, rolls the blanket over and around the dog, gently, tucking the blanket into neat square corners. Clay lowers the bundle into the grave, gently, the cinders hard under his knees, his back protesting. He straightens up, stands up, looks down. It is not the grave itself that is final, nor is it the words said over it, or the mouldering to dust. It is the first shovel full of dirt, falling directly, not gently enough, on the blanket, pattering dully on The Old Man as if he were hollow. Clay looks toward the mountains and stands there alone with his dead dog and his absent wife and watches while sudden southwest storm clouds boil up over Mounts Humphreys and Agassiz, Fremont and Doyle. He says, "If you're there, God you bastard, you'll take this dog." Clay finishes filling the grave, packs the dirt, levels the surface, sprinkles cinders over the disturbed earth, pine needles over the cinders.

The telephone is ringing when he walks into the house. It is Jill. "Clay," she says, "are you working today?"

"Why?" he says.

"I want to come and pick up my desk."

"I'll help."

"I'll bring my own help."

"All right. I'll be gone by nine. I'll stay gone until maybe three."

"Okay."

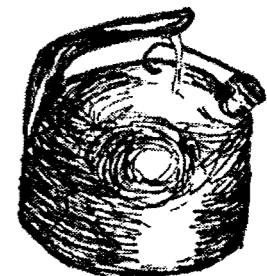
"Right. Jill. . . if you stand on the back porch and look straight toward Humphreys, there's a little tree almost out to the fence. The Old Man's buried under there. In case you want to say goodbye."

"Okay," she says.

Clay hangs up the phone and peers out the window to the north, toward the burial tree. It is snowing, big wet heavy flakes hissing out of the Arizona sky. There is no sign

of the grave.

Clay will work poorly, bending nails and mis-cutting boards and snapping at his crew. He will, when he gets home, find Jill's tracks in the snow, and the tracks of a large man's boots, a shuffle of dirty snow where they wrestled her desk into a truck. Jill's tracks will not lead across the yard, past the chicken coop, to the tree by the fence and The Old Man's grave. The snow out there will be clean and unbroken. ■



Brigit Pegeen Kelly

THE PLACE OF TRUMPETS

To the place of trumpets,
To the place where the sun sets,
To the place where peace sits,

We are going. By twos
Or threes, going to choose
New weather and new clothes,

The new sound of words walking
As trees among the winging
Fields, the fields on herons' wings;

Where all who wake, wake undone,
Back beyond their fragile bones,
Back to where the self is song,

Where the unmade hands are wheels,
The arms newest prayer shawls,
And the heart the child that kneels

And never tires, and never
Fails to watch at the door
The sun plucking its poor

Chest open and scattering
Its blood out, dropping
Down its bloody lasting blessing.

To the place of trumpets
We are going. To the sweet
Beggar's pipes blowing and wet

Winds unwinding the last
Winding sheets on streets where past
And present meet, where West

(Cont., stanza break)
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Marries East, and trust turns
To betrayal as its friend,
Where days and moon and sins are one

Blessed wind passing over
The passing plains, over
The sea, the comforter,

Full of salt so sweet it fills
The hollow tongue until
It splits as time will

Split and spill its tattered toys,
Fixed by the merest gaze
Or longing in the place

Where quiet ways grow,
Where the wound loves the arrow,
Where ankle and adder know

Accord, where the lion's lamb
Leads him to the grasses down,
Leads him with her little song,

*Lay us here, lay us long,
Let us in this grass as one
Sleep now where we first began,*

*Here on the sand where we first met,
Under the trees before His seat,
Out of the cold, out of the heat,*

In the place of trumpets.

from: *To the Place of Trumpets*
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Ana Maria Spagna

Writing in Place: An Interview With Pam Houston

Pam Houston's first collection of stories, *Cowboys Are My Weakness* (1992), caused quite a ruckus. It crashed the Publisher's Weekly Top Twenty and drew raves from the critics. It earned a 1993 Regional Book Award, placing the twenty-nine year old grad student securely in the company of the bog boys of the literary West, Cormac McCarthy and Wallace Stegner, who shared the award with her that year.

Conventional wisdom, the kind that judges the book by the title, attributed *Cowboys'* success to the narrator's candid reflections on ill-fated love affairs. But conventional wisdom missed the point. The narrators' relationships are framed within, and underscored by, settings as untamed and difficult as the characters themselves. For Pam Houston, those settings are largely the point.

"Everything good that happens to my narrators happens because of the land," Pam explained to me when I reached her by telephone at her ranch in rural Colorado. "Everything good that's ever happened to me has happened because of the land.

Since *Cowboys*, nearly all of the projects she has undertaken have centered on the land, some land, somewhere. In addition to completing collaborative projects (*Women on Hunting* 1994, *Men Before Ten A.M.* 1996), she has published dozens of travel articles for publications as varied as *Mademoiselle*, *Travel and Leisure*, and *Outside*, among others. Most recently, she has been putting the finishing touches on her forthcoming story cycle, *The Moon is a Woman's First Husband*, which trails the narrator zig-zagging across the continent from Alaska to the Amazon.

I reached Pam shortly after her return from a five-week trek in the small Himalayan nation of Bhutan. It was a snowy evening—in Flagstaff and in Colorado—the night before her Bhutan article deadline. She took a break from furiously composing to talk about travel writing, and about writing in general, while an aging dog barked mournfully in the background. "Doggy Alzheimer's," she explained, characteristically mincing no words. "It's very sad."

Where and how do you actually go about writing a travel piece? Do you do it in locale or when you're back at home?

I take really extensive notes when I'm there. In Bhutan, for instance, I filled up a whole blank book of notes. If I can, I try to let it sit for a few weeks because when you first come home everything seems profound. And then I work on the article, which doesn't take that long. It doesn't take me anywhere near as long to write an essay as to write a story. I can usually write an article in five or six days of hard work.

How much of your original journal survives in the article?

An awful lot. I write pretty well on the fly. I'm not thinking at that point of any real structure for the article, but in terms of solid paragraphs about where I am, I'm able to keep a lot of that. In fact, in this story I'm trying to preserve the journal form in the article. I'm not sure how that's going to work out. I might have to abandon it sometime late tonight.

Is that something your editors suggested?

No, this is me. I've never done it before. I'm always tempted to do it. Then I'm afraid they'll think I'm cheating or something. But for this trip, which was a trek, it seems particularly apt to do it that way, so I'm going to try.

How much liberty do you take when you dramatize the story?

(laughs) Oh, lots of liberty.

Do you go so far as, say, taking a great line from somewhere and else and using it in Bhutan?

Well, I go so far as inventing characters to say things that I want said, but that I don't think the narrator can say. My basic philosophy—which you may have heard somewhere because people seem to get upset about it and print it—is that I don't believe in truth. Well, I believe in capital T Truth as in *every story has its own Truth*, but I don't believe that there's such a thing as *how it really happened*, which means I'd be a lousy journalist. But in these articles I'm not reporting the news. I'm telling a story about a place. I wouldn't ever make up a place or try to describe a place I haven't seen because my writing is very landscape driven. For me, the Truth is in the place. But if I need a character to come in and say something that, say, I read in a guidebook, I'll invent a character to tell me something about Bhutan.

Is that acceptable to your editors? Do they realize it?

The editors I work with repeatedly know that about me. Every now and then I get into trouble. *Working Woman* magazine once asked me to do an article about why women over forty take adventure vacations. "Sure," I said, "I can do that." Then I hung up and I thought *I have no idea why women over forty take adventure vacations*. So I called several women over forty who had climbed Kilimanjaro or what not, and I asked them, and they said really mundane boring things about why they took adventure vacations. So I wrote them up, and then I invented three women who said really profound and beautiful things about why they took adventure vacations. I wrote the article about these six women. Then the fact checker called.

Uh oh.

Right. She said, "Give me the names and phone numbers of the six women." And I

had to tell her, "Well, you know, I made them up." There was silence for a minute. Then she said, "I guess we don't have to call them then do wo?"

But that article appeared.

Oh yeah. I've never had something not appear.

So it doesn't affect how you approach a project if you consider it fiction or if you consider it nonfiction?

Absolutely not. Just today, when I was working on the Bhutan article, I realized the introduction was a little heavy before I get into the trek, so I moved a couple events that happened beforehand and described them as though they happened on the trek. I do that all the time. I feel very flexible about it, and no one has convinced me otherwise.

When you were in Flagstaff last spring, you were excited about having moved to Colorado, have you written about your new home?

Yeah, I have. About half my new book of fiction, *The Moon is a Woman's First Husband*, is set here in a town called Hope.

Is it easier for you to write about a place you know well or one that's entirely foreign to you?

I actually found it harder to write about Colorado after living here for three years than, for instance, Bhutan, where everything is new. One of the things I love about travel writing is that you go to a place and your have to appropriate in a sense. You have to invest it with all kinds of emotional attachment in six days or fourteen days. You have

to look out your window and think *right now this is mine*. I love that initial discovery. But to really write about a place like it's your home, to get all the nuances of the place, I think you have to be there a long time. Maybe even wait to write about it.

I hear a lot of outdoor enthusiasts complain when they see a place they like to visit written up in a magazine like *Ski* or *Outside*. Do you feel that travel writing in any way betrays a place?

That's one of the things I try not to think about too much (laughs). On one hand, writing can be the way we save a place. That's what Rick Bass is doing in his new book on the Yaak Valley. And that's what they say about Glen Canyon, too. If enough people knew about it, maybe Lake Powell would never have been created. So there's an argument that it's good to celebrate a place because it gives people respect for it. And since people are finding every place anyway, it's better they come in with respect rather than with the old conquest mentality.

On the other hand, sure, I know I betray places. I wrote about a tiny hotel in France and I knew at the time that I was destroying this little piece of paradise. Now when you go there, it's packed with Germans and Americans. And I know I'm the only one who wrote about it. So I know it's my fault in that case. On the other hand, again, the people who own the hotel are really happy, now. They're making a good living. There's no simple answer in there.

Is it your love of traveling or your love of writing that keeps you at it?

Oh, it's my love of going.

Do you feel that the two are in competition?

I can tell you my editors certainly do (laughs). No, truly, every new place I go makes me a better writer. I'm actually at a crossroads in my life right now. Bhutan was a place I've wanted to go to for a long time. And it was a wonderful trip. But I left right in the middle of trying to have a more settled life. I have this ranch, and I love it here. I'm in love. I want to get married. I want to have a baby. Then there's this life I've always lived, which is unpack your suitcase and pack your suitcase. I've lived that way for so long. I'm so good at it. I'm so good at *Oh, we're not in Switzerland anymore. Where are we?* Sometimes I'm afraid I won't be so good at that other, more settled life. Maybe my gift is to move.

Do you see the two blending at all?

That's what I'm hoping for. I've found a man who has made it clear that if I have a baby then I say, "Oh my God, I have to go to Mongolia," he'll say, "OK. Put the baby bottles in the freezer. Have a great time." That's one of the reasons I love him, because he sees my need for that, maybe better than I do. And I've always been a good dog mother. One of the things I've always done with a new dog is throw him in the back of the pickup when he's six years old. *You're my dog, so you're a traveling dog*. That's how I'll be with kids. The kid better have some hiking boots if he's going to keep up.

Do you consider yourself a "women's writer?" Is that a label you're comfortable with?

Sure. It's not one I hear that often. I know more women than men read my books, but not by all that much. It's about sixty-five/thirty-five. I figure I'm writing for people who share my experience, and a lot of the time that's women. But interestingly, all my

hate mail comes from women. I get a lot of great mail from both men and women and some psycho mail, *I want a piece of your clothing* mail. But the only nasty mail, the *you don't deserve to be published or we're coming to kill your dog* mail has always come from women.

Do you have any idea why that is?

I know exactly why that is because they tell me. It's women who identify themselves as feminists, which is of course how I've always identified myself, and they believe I'm glorifying an archaic form of masculinity and setting a bad example for young women.

That's really strange.

One of the reasons that you find it strange is because you live in Arizona. If you lived in, say, Maryland, you might not get what's good about what I'm doing. I run up against this all the time. If you don't get the connection to the land, then what it seems like is just a woman who has a lot of rotten boyfriends.

Do you consider yourself a "western writer?"

Oh, I think so. I'm from New Jersey, of course, but everything good that happens to my narrators happens because of the land. Everything good that's ever happened to me has happened because of the land. In Bhutan, the Buddha they revere the most is always shown with one hand holding his begging bowl and one hand touching the ground. My guide explained that the "the earth bears witness to their enlightenment." And I thought, *That's me: the earth bears witness to my enlightenment*. Everything I've learned, I've learned from the landscape, and it's often been this one.

Do you have new projects in the works?

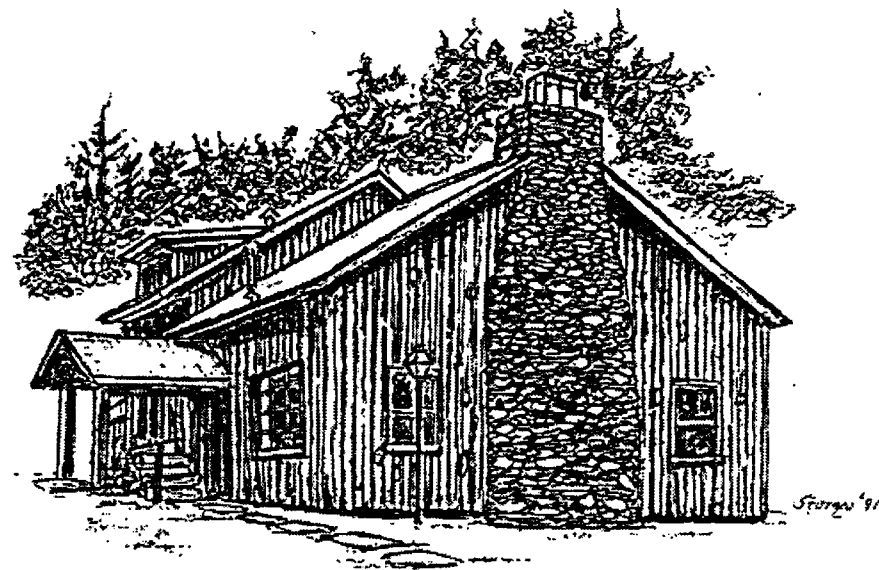
The fiction collection is coming together, then on the heels of that will be a non-fiction book, sort of the best of the essays.

You call the new book "fiction." Are the stories based on your travels?

Sure. The book starts with a story about a trip down Cataract Canyon. Then there's an Amazon story, an Alaska story, a hurricane off the coast of Florida story. Really, the book's about a woman who moves around too much looking for a home. Then the last four or five stories are set here in Hope.

Do you suspect the reaction will be the same as it was to *Cowboys*?

I don't know. I believe these stories are a little more complex. Certainly not inaccessible in any way. *Cowboys* was all about me getting my shit together at a certain point in my life. This book is all about me getting my shit together a little more at a little later stage in life. I don't know why there wouldn't be the same reaction. ■



Charles H. Webb

TURTLE LOVE

The male only wants one thing.
He charges at the female—rams
Her shell, bites her legs, bobs his head
Like a pump handle to impress her.
All she wants to do is eat—
An apple core, a piece of watermelon rind,

A lettuce leaf. Her head darts
Out of her shell, stealing nibbles
As he struggles to surround her,
A slow army of one, clambering
Up the steep slope of her carapace,
Sliding off, charging back to try again.

Even mounted, he looks miserable—
Mouth gasping, tail dribbling semen,
His life futile unless a few sperm,
Like exhausted marathoners,
Drag themselves into the queen's chamber
And sink into her eggs like soft divans.

Finished eating, the female crawls out
From under him toward the burrow
He dug through decomposed granite,
And she took over. She looks bored,
Put upon, until he stops pursuing.
Then she crawls toward him.

Rob Carney

THAT BAD-ASS GOD FROM THE OLD DAYS APPEARED TO ME IN THE FORM OF A 40-GALLON HAT

—for Lyle Lovett

saying, “You’re the one, Carney.
Better get yourself some breakfast. I’ve got news.

I’m making you My posse, Mi Generalissimo, Ghengis Khan.
I’ve had it up to My wild-man beard. It’s time”;

explaining He’d conceded that the meek don’t stand a chance,
the kind, the long-suffering,

the ones whose bikes get stolen off the porch,
the endurers of rudeness,

polite ones putting up with Har!Har!Har!Har!Har!
Fat chance, inherit the Earth,

with at least a billion bastards in their way.
He shouted damnation and brimstone,

barked, “Body blows, Champ—work the body,”
howled, “Jab!” so loud He shook the rooftop

off the Alps, His mood shooting solar flares
and banging like shutters the walls of the San Andreas Fault.

I’m saying I’m sanctified.
I’m a licensed apocalypse. My spurs are celestial signs.

And I’ve come to put my foot down,
to cram my feet down the throats

of all creeps, thieves, hypocrites, gossips,
stiffers of waitresses,

(Cont., stanza break)
20 Thin Air Magazine

throng of obnoxiousness,
legions of mediocre self-elect,

come to stomp my feet in their guts
and tromp about like I’m breaking in new boots.

Stand warned: I’ve been diagnosed “predisposed,”
meaning likely not to put up with crap,

meaning volcanic. So when God comes calling,
materializing as a Stetson with a blazing silver hat band,

well, it shouldn’t take a soundtrack or saloon’s dead silence
to spell out what’s about to happen next.



Postscript to Cloud Nine

Summer and I mixed martinis. She'd been reading A.R. Gurney with her high school students and the cocktail scenes had put us in a sophisticated mood.

"I don't know why we bother with these parties." I peered into the living room at guests clustered in quiet groups, like at a wake. "No one seems to be having a very good time."

"What do you care?" Summer skewered olives on a plastic sword. "You don't even like them." All the fascinating people we'd known in graduate school were gone, home or off to jobs or, if they were lucky, into repertory companies. We'd been reduced to befriending Summer's fellow teachers, who gobbled our lovely hors d'oeuvres platters and even our staple foodstuffs—tuna and peanut butter and soup—never contributing any good drugs or even a decent bottle of wine.

"You don't like most of them, either," I said, "and we're almost out of gin."

"Yeah, but I still want them to have fun," Summer said. "It's an ego thing. Like when you flirt with some loser, and then he doesn't call, and you feel like a loser, too."

"When have you ever felt like a loser?" I said.

Willem Shanker, who was chinless but sort of attractive, liked to flirt with me and taught Honors Math, whatever that was, strode into the kitchen and helped himself to a martini.

"Nothing is fun anymore," I said.

"Obviously you need much more to drink." Using his teeth, Willem snatched the olive I held between my fingers. Up close I could see he wore cover-up under tired-looking eyes. He jabbered on about wanting to quit teaching and go back to writing historical romance novels. Summer and I feigned interest in his monologue. We were actors, good at pretending.

I pondered what Willem would be like in bed. A weeper, probably. And I'd never cheat on Louie. Yet only an hour ago, when I'd called Louie's motel room in Fort Lauderdale, a woman had answered.

I hung up, hoping she was a chambermaid, or that the operator had connected me to the wrong room. I sat with my hand on the receiver for a long

time, as though I might reach Louie psychically that way, obtain an explanation. I didn't mention the phone call to Summer. Talking would make it real.

I excused myself to circulate the tray of drinks. In the living room someone had put on disco music and a few people danced half-heartedly. A wispy teenager, one of Summer's students, did *The Hustle*, wiggling a behind tight enough to bounce a quarter off. In another corner a bookish group was engrossed in conversation about quantum something or other. Distinctly alone, Olivia, our birdlike new roommate, braced herself against a wall.

"Martini?" I offered. She shook her head. Not once in two months had I seen her ingest food or drink, although she kept soy milk and gluten around.

"Do you think," she asked me, "you could pick me up from my ophthalmologist tomorrow? He'll put drops in my eyes and I'll be completely blind."

"I guess I could." She never asked favors of Summer or Louie. In fact, their ebullience seemed to frighten her. "By the way," I said, "isn't that my choker?" Around her neck hung a strand of amber beads.

"Oh." Her hands flew to her face, as if to ward off a blow. "I saw it on the bathroom shelf and I didn't think you'd mind. Here, I'll take it off."

"No, you can wear it." I said.

A couple in matching floral shirts took drinks from my tray. Willem, now in line to use the downstairs bath, raised his glass to me and smiled.

In the kitchen Summer replenished a

vegetable tray. She said she'd never liked that choker anyway. But the point was that I hadn't left it in the bathroom. Lately objects had been mysteriously rearranged on my dresser, clothes folded when I'd left them rolled in a ball. Clearly, Olivia was going through my stuff. Once Louie thought he'd heard Olivia breathing outside our door while we made love. Really, she gave me the creeps, but with Summer's fiance off in Nigeria for the Peace Corps we needed a fourth roommate to manage the rent on the decrepit but gorgeous Victorian house we'd rented for five years.

After the party I went to bed and tried not to think about Louie—what he might be doing and with whom.

Lately objects had been mysteriously rearranged on my dresser, clothes folded when I'd left them rolled in a ball.

With Louie, you never knew. He was wild, unpredictable. Once he tried to settle a disagreement with another actor by chasing him with a chain saw. Luckily Louie was stoned and collided with a snowbank, jamming the gears, and the actor got away. "I was just going to shake him up a little," Louie had said. Like Summer, Louie had a lavish excess of personality. I envied that. Off stage I never felt very interesting.

During the night I stumbled downstairs for a glass of water and caught Olivia devouring leftovers. For a few minutes I watched her digging into hummus with her fingers, gobbling carrot sticks, shoveling in mouthfuls of slightly crushed cake. The sight was repulsive but oddly fascinating, and I was curious to see the whole act. But spying evoked twinges of guilt. "Olivia?" I said.

She regarded me with famished, startled eyes and hid her mouth with a flannel sleeve. "Don't tell," she whispered, as if

I'd discovered her masturbating.

"Of course not." I drank my water quickly and went back to bed. Tell who, I wondered, tell what?

At one-thirty I untied my apron and removed the paper hat I was required to wear at Donut Delite. I'd worked there since my last acting job, a small role in a brief, disastrous play produced by a company almost in Boston. My shift didn't end officially until two. Pat, who worked the counter with me, glanced at the clock and then suspiciously my way. She was the assistant manager; Mr. Mumphrey was out most of the time, presumably managing other stores.

"I have to pick up my roommate from the doctor," I told Pat. Actually I had plenty of time to finish my shift and retrieve Olivia, but it wasn't as though this was a job I cared about, and I wanted to stop at the mall.

"Okey dokey, then." Pat adjusted a pencil in her bleached nest of hair. I knew she didn't believe me. Only yesterday she'd chided me again for being late. "I guess me and Hilda can handle it." Hydrocephalic Hilda, forty-two hideous inches tall, staffed the drive-through window. To get into character for work I sometimes contemplated altering my appearance, penciling on a mustache or teasing my hair into a cock-eyed bouffant. Pat and Hilda were idiots, and the customers—drooling, smelly old men who lingered over coffee for hours, old ladies in hats adorned with plastic flowers—chattered at me all morning, expecting me to laugh at their feeble jokes for a quarter tip.

At home I changed out of my polyester uniform and ignored the ringing phone. I was due for a call from my mother, who would inevitably ask why she'd spent my dead father's insurance money on my education so I could hustle donuts. Why couldn't I get a decent job, she'd want to know. To her acting was a scant notch above prostitu-

tion, opening a script akin to spreading one's legs for cash.

Olivia leaned against the designated office building on State Street, her hair wrapped in a nylon scarf. I pulled over, honked the horn and yelled her name twice before she deemed it safe to climb inside.

"Marie?" Her black eyes blinked in my direction.

"No, I'm Hans, the ax murderer," I said. We sped over slushy roads under a dish-water-gray sky. Winter depressed me, and to brighten the day I'd just lifted a pair of earrings from Filene's. "Are your eyes all right?"

She said it was just a routine test, although it was easy to imagine her going blind. She had that helpless, crippled quality. When I reached across the seat for my gloves she flinched. That was the thing about Olivia, she always made me feel like I was being mean.

"I think it's so wonderful you're an actress," she said. "I heard someone at the party say you got your first part when you were only six."

"Well, it was no big deal. Just a teeny part in musical. I met Julie Andrews, though. We had a scene together." Which was a total lie. I'd been 12, and it was a hygiene film, a local, low-budget production where I acted awkwardly confused over my budding womanhood until a cookie-baking mother explained its wondrous mysteries.

But I wasn't about to tear off chunks of my real biography for Olivia, since that type never gives anything back. Anyway, I think truth is highly overrated. Reality is filtered through subjective perception, which means truth is relative and even the lie you choose to tell reflects something real.

Olivia's cheap scarf was patterned with geometric shapes in heavy brown and gray. I remembered those scarves, virtually indestructible, stashed in coat pockets to en-

sure entry into Holy Confession and Mass when I was growing up. You had to keep your head covered in church in those days.

"You are so wonderful to do this," Olivia said. "I mean, I know it probably messed up your whole day." She touched my arm, her damp palm kneading the bare skin between my coat and glove. I pulled away. The gesture reminded me someone I hadn't thought about for years.

I knew Frances Dearborne in high school. She had a wooden leg and lived in a cramped apartment over her parents' gas station. I never knew how she lost her leg and she never mentioned the prosthesis, which poked at odd angles to her body when she sat. I speculated about dramatic explanations: A murder attempt, an accident, a horrible disease? Frances, dull and ordinary, always available, was the person you might call with a juicy tidbit of gossip when everyone else's phone was busy. She was remotely connected to my circle of friends, a clique that hovered on the fringes of the elite, sometimes fortuitously intersecting with cheerleaders and football players, doctors' daughters and lawyers' sons. Frances was our mascot, a quirky identifier; befriending a crippled girl proved that we were generous and kind. Plus her large family, half Cuban or Chilean, was embarrassingly poor. Frances, often hatless, would pin a tissue to her head on the church steps.

For my friends, tolerating Frances wasn't a big sacrifice. She rarely ventured out with us, since maneuvering over bleachers at basketball games and keeping up on shopping trips was nearly impossible. Frances would whine, then burst into tears and go home. But I was forced to sit with her twice a day on the school bus. None of my real friends shared that bus, and Frances never understood I sat with her out of awkward, obligatory courtesy. She considered me her closest friend, wedging her chair next

to mine in the cafeteria, blabbering about the boy she liked, who worked at the gas station after school. She whispered about her father's drunken tirades, her mother's latest problematic pregnancy. "Don't tell me," I'd plead, mouth-breathing to avoid the stench of her breath and wet wool coat. Her mother's coat, with a ratty fake fur collar. I didn't want the burden of Frances's secrets, was afraid her ugliness would rub off, branding me by mere proximity as a freak.

Acting rescued me from Frances—school plays meant staying late for rehearsals and not taking the bus. After each production I would resolve to change my seat on the bus. I'd do it casually, as if I'd forgotten she was there. Though I hoped that during my absences she would make another friend, Frances was too smart for me, too loyal. She waited outside my last class, insufferably cheerful, leaning her dead weight on my arm.

In the morning I found two tickets to a chamber music recital on my dresser. Olivia was a graduate student in the music program. She played the oboe. Obviously, the tickets were a gesture to thank me for the ride, to entice me to like her. But once I'd been struck by her similarity to Frances liking her became unthinkable. Olivia stirred up dark feelings I thought had mellowed into pity over the years. One hopeless parasite in a person's life was more than enough.

"She's been in my room again," I told Summer.

"Well, for God's sake, she was leaving you a present." Summer unloaded scripts from her briefcase. Her persimmon lipstick exactly matched her coat. "Marie, you have a phobia about that poor thing." To Summer I think Olivia was practically invisible, like limp parsley garnishing a plate.

"That's easy for you to say." I buttoned my down jacket. "This afternoon I was

trying to read a magazine and she sat at the other end of the sofa, just staring."

Summer said, "Maybe she has a crush on you."

"Bite your tongue," I told her. "I'm going to the airport to pick up Louie."

Louie worked on tech crews that traveled the beauty pageant circuit, and for months he'd been away more than he'd been home. He always cracked jokes about the girls—their fake breasts and big hairdos. He carried a shopping bag off the plane, filled with Miss World T-shirts and sun visors, and sported a coppery, traitorous tan.

The temperature was well below zero. As we scurried across the airport parking lot my nostrils froze. "How was the pageant?" I mumbled through the wool folds of my scarf.

Louie shrugged. "The usual." His stocky wrestler's body, wrapped in a parka, huddled against the cold. He didn't look guilty or in love with someone, just tired. "Jesus, it's cold." Taking my keys, he unlocked the car and got behind the wheel. I was too apprehensive driving in traffic, he said, like his grandmother.

Summer hugged Louie when we got home. "Welcome home, Big Daddy." This week Tennessee Williams starred on her syllabus. "You're home just in time for drinks." Tortured notes from Olivia's oboe leaked from her room. Summer handed each of us a glass.

"Why is there a leaf floating in here?" Louie asked.

"That's mint, dummy," Summer said. He slapped her behind and said he was

going upstairs for a shower.

"I thought you had rehearsal tonight, Summer." I sipped my mint julep.

"Canceled. The water pipes at school froze. So I'm making spaghetti and meatballs." She checked a pot of marinara sauce simmering on the stove. On the counter, next to the cutting board and a loaf of uncut bread, was an envelope with a Nigerian postmark. The letter had been opened, yellow ruled paper had been stuffed loosely inside.

"Practically the whole letter is a tribute to a new volunteer from Australia," Summer, dicing garlic, said. "Phil makes her sound like a cross between uber-model and the Dalai Lama." Vigorously, with the flat side of a knife, she whacked garlic cloves. France Dearborne's breath had reeked of garlic, residual odors

oozed through her pores. Sometimes, after sitting near her on the bus for an agonizing half hour, I'd swear that heavy, spicy smell exuded from me.

"By the way," Summer mentioned. "Nice earrings. New?"

I twisted one of the thick silver hoops. She didn't need to know I found it arousing to steal now and then, nothing too valuable and only from overpriced stores that could spare the merchandise. "I need an aspirin," I said.

Upstairs I snooped through Louie's duffel bag, which was unzipped on our bed. I poked among his soiled clothes and shaving gear, turning up nothing incriminating. The shower was still running. Through the clear liner I watched Louie lather himself, whistling. His penis stood at attention, al-

Louie worked on tech crews that traveled the beauty pageant circuit, and for months he'd been away more than he'd been home.

ready hard. Louie was sexually insatiable. Often I woke during the night as he entered me from behind. The best aspect of his beauty pageant job was that I got more rest.

"It's just me," I said, and pulled Percocet from the medicine chest. The prescription wasn't mine—I'd bought the bottle from a friend—but it dulled bad headaches and coated frayed nerves. Yesterday the bottle had been three-quarters full but now only seven pills remained. I knew Louie wouldn't bother with pansy medicine like Percocet. His body was a walking pharmacy, all the guys took dope on the road. Summer wouldn't take any without asking first. I swallowed one tablet and walked deliberately down the hall, knocking on Olivia's door.

The ersatz music stopped and out poked her head, mousy hair parted in the center with a wide margin of flaky scalp. Past her I could see posters on the walls: Beethoven, an Ansel Adams print, kittens playing with yarn. "Some of my Percocet is missing."

"Were those yours?" Her black eyes grew wide, veiled in innocence. She wasn't fooling me. Like Frances, Olivia was a professional victim, preying on other people's good will. And victims don't give up easily. Olivia rubbed the cord hanging around her neck, held taut by her oboe's weight. "My head was splitting wide open and you weren't home. I only meant to take one, but a bunch accidentally spilled down the sink." She bowed slightly, as though expecting me to strike her.

I folded my arms. "Well, around here we try to respect each other's privacy."

"I'm sorry," Olivia mewled. "You're not mad, are you? Oh my God, I hope you're not mad at me, Marie."

"I'm not mad," I lied. "But next time you want something, just ask." Retreating down the hall I heard her door close softly, and what might have been muffled weeping.

"What's with Olivia?" Summer said as we polished off the meatballs. "She's been holed up in her room all night."

"Probably she's sulking." I scraped my plate into the trash. "I talked to her about swiping my Percocet."

"Something is seriously wrong with that girl," Louie said. Butter from the garlic bread glistened on his lips. Outside the wind snapped brittle tree limbs, and even inside the house the air felt crystalline, braced with cold. The three of us went up to the room Louie and I shared, where it was a little warmer, and smoked the last of the hash Louie had smuggled out of Mexico.

"I should be grading papers." Summer passed the hash pipe to me and flicked a speck of parsley off her engagement ring. "It's good we don't do this all the time. This stuff breeds complacency."

"I disagree," Louie said. "Complacency is bred through routine. The problem is we're all in a rut. Before you know it we'll be middle-aged, with pot bellies and thinning hair and patterns on our calves from tube socks cutting into our puffy, aging flesh."

"You've already got a pot belly," I mentioned.

"So do you," Louie said.

"She does not," said Summer, who'd been my best friend since sophomore year, when we'd both failed to land roles in a campus production of *The Cherry Orchard*. Most likely, if one of us had been cast we wouldn't have become friends. One of us would have been jealous instead.

Louie was right, though, about us being in a rut. Or at least about me, stuck in a donut shop in a godforsaken New Hampshire town. Acting, the only thing I did reasonably well, was what I loved, being a rehearsed instrument of meaningful movement, part juggler and part ball. Ambition would require moving to New York or Bos-

ton or Chicago, but I couldn't fathom leaving Louie and Summer behind.

"I refuse to spend another winter like this," I said, nestling my feet under Louie's thigh to warm them and simultaneously sucking my stomach in. I wondered what a strange woman in a motel could do for Louie that I wasn't handling already. I resolved to buy a book on erotica so I could surprise him with a few tricks and to start doing sit ups again.

"You know what this place is?" I said. "The American version of Siberia."

"Yeah," Louie said through a cloud of hash, "and we're all in exile."

"I, for one, love this house," Summer said, "but if you're waiting for the landlord to insulate us you're wasting your time." She went downstairs to fix fresh drinks, and while she was gone Louie and I fooled around a little.

"Good Lord," Summer said upon her return, looking slightly wobbly. "Haven't you two taken care of this already?" Louie and I broke apart, and she sprawled on the bed between us. My sweater was off, but I still wore my bra. "Here." Summer passed her mint julep to Louie. "Drink mine, too. I'm feeling suddenly maudlin."

"It's that damn oboe music," Louie said, although I hadn't heard Olivia playing for a while. And it wasn't the music, or the drinks; it was Phil's letter bothering Summer, I thought, and worrying about him falling out of love with her in Nigeria.

How can I explain what happened next? Certainly it was not choreographed, not planned. At least I hadn't planned it, and Summer hadn't, but it's possible Louie had fantasized about the three of us together. We flirted with one another; we were affectionate. Sometimes I felt closer to Summer than to Louie, or vice versa, depending on the rhythm of the day.

Louie drew both of us into an em-

brace. He placed my hand and his on Summer's breasts, he leaned across her and kissed my mouth hard. His libido was legendary, part of his reckless, dangerous allure. For him this would be nothing new. I knew what Louie wanted, and it was relief more than shock I felt as he unfastened Summer's clothes. Because something like this was bound to happen eventually.

When Louie and I made love he talked dirty. He snarled horrible, filthy things, barked degrading remarks that excited me, speeding my orgasms. But that night no one said anything, as though words would shatter some wicked spell. After a deep, boozy breath I kissed Summer—I'd never kissed a woman before—and the sensation was mildly pleasant, like weak April sunlight or coals from a dying fire that warm the skin. As things progressed I fought the urge to wrench Louie and Summer apart. It seemed for a while that they'd forgotten I was there. Then Louie pulled me back in.

A threesome is great as a fantasy, but in practice it creates too much stimuli; there are too many limbs and orifices to orchestrate. Intimacy evaporates and it turns into a circus act, noisy and unfocused. Unsatisfying, like a meal with several courses of heavy, overspiced food. I did not feel worldly and bohemian but callous and cheap. But I let Louie lead me. I stroked, I petted, feigning ardor and urgency, acquiescing graciously when it was not my turn to do but to watch, conquered and malleable, repulsed.

Before bleeding me entirely of popularity Frances Dearborne got pregnant and dropped out of school. She issued several invitations to visit her and her oily newborn, making teary phone calls when I didn't come. Even her mother called, sobbing in broken English, getting me grounded just before the school dance where I knew I would finally, in a frilly short dress, snare a desirable boy. "Can't

you just be nice?" My mother's voice echoed. "How would you feel if you were the one in that trashy family, and with a baby and a wooden leg?"

Long before morning I woke. Louie and Summer and I still shared the bed, loosely covered by a stained quilt. We had not drawn the blinds and a hazy aureole of light surrounded the street lights. The air hung densely with a fishy, ferny smell. Someone farted. I got up.

To open the bedroom door I had to push hard, which seemed curious. Then I saw: Olivia, unconscious and supine on the floor. Under my bare feet the carpet felt sticky and wet. I screamed. While Summer pressed towels to Olivia's arms to stop the bleeding and Louie called 911, I ran into the bathroom and threw up.

Louie drove us in his truck to the hospital. He'd get us there faster than an ambulance, he said. Olivia sat propped up in the crowded front seat, wrapped in a blanket, still asleep. Her legs poked out, unshaven, two furry sexless twigs. Her wrists weren't bleeding much anymore. Under my nails blood had dried to a crusty maroon, although I hadn't done much but pass Summer bandages. A sudden wave of nausea made me gulp. Despite the frigid weather I cracked a window.

"Good idea," Summer said. "Fresh air might rouse her."

Olivia had swallowed a bottle of aspirin, several ounces of liquid cold medicine, raisins and chocolate-covered graham crackers, a handful of Quaaludes and my Percocet. The doctor who pumped her stomach said she could have died if she'd slit her wrists correctly, with vertical slashes along the vein. "That's the mistake most people make," he told us. "Which is lucky, because we can get them some help before it's too late." His manner was friendly, conspiratorial, as though he could tell that the secret of wrist-

slashing was safe with us.

But the doctor didn't come out for nearly two hours. Meanwhile we sat in the otherwise empty waiting room, arranged in a semi-circle on vinyl chairs.

"This is all my fault," I said. Probably I was still a little drunk. "I shouldn't have believed she spilled all those pills, and I yelled at her."

I wondered if Olivia had heard us in our room earlier, and if this was what catapulted her to despair. Maybe she was disgusted. Or she might have envied what sounded like a surplus of togetherness and felt more sharply alone. Otherwise why would she have been outside our door? "It's all of our faults," I decided.

"Listen, Marie," Louie said, "while you're at it, why don't you blame yourself for the depletion of the ozone layer?"

"You don't understand anything." I sobbed into my hands, which smelled of Olivia and blood. "And you don't care about anyone but yourself."

"Uh oh," he said, "here comes a crying jag."

"You're not helping any, Louie," Summer said.

"And I didn't see you holding back," I told her, recalling her luxurious moaning earlier, which had struck me as a shade too melodic and controlled to be real.

"Let's all calm down." Her eyes were closed, her head leaned against the back of her chair. "It's not anybody's fault. People don't just decide to commit suicide like that." She snapped her fingers. "Obviously, Olivia has a lot of issues."

"I'm going out for a smoke," Louie said. "Jesus Fucking Christ." In a Catholic hospital he said that.

"Bring us back some Cokes," I said.

Summer sat up and moved her chair closer to mine. "We're all upset," she said, "and last night everyone was just in a weird

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place. We'll forget that any of this ever happened." Which meant that no one was to mention the sex to Phil. And in a way, the threesome already seemed like it had happened a long time ago, to someone else or in a dream. Compared to the sobriety of Olivia's situation who screwed who wasn't especially significant.

I thought about how much happier all of us had been only a year ago: Summer directing an acclaimed production of *Cloud Nine*, me playing Edward and Betty, and Louie bossing the techies around. I had presumed that was the beginning of my career when really it might have been a meager apex, or the end. "I'll never be an actress," I said. "I'll never get another good part."

"That is not true," Summer insisted. "You already are an actress. Remember how great you were in *Cloud Nine*?" But it was Summer whose reputation had soared with *Cloud Nine*, who had dazzled local theater critics by conquering a challenging play that requires the actors to change roles between acts. She who had cajoled the conservative drama department into letting us tackle Caryl Churchill's racy script in the first place. And she had cast me, either because I was good or her friend.

"Besides," she said, "real artists always have these worries. Only untalented people always think they're good. You want to know my biggest fear?" Behind her hand she suppressed a giggle. "I worry I'll end up directing some lame local stock company, the kind that does musicals for old ladies with blue hair."

"Stop," I said, and laughed. We shouldn't have been laughing. What if the doctor came out? What would he think? What if he told us Olivia was dead?

"On opening night they'll give me a lovely corsage of carnations, because they are so long-lasting and cheery, and I can pin them onto my cardigan." We doubled over

with laughter and wiped tears from our eyes.

"That seals it," said Louie, who appeared with three soda cans. "You two have finally gone over the edge."

For two days Olivia stayed in the hospital psych ward. She had an aunt who drove down from Maine to bring her home. Olivia sat outside in the aunt's wood-paneled station wagon while we packed up her things.

"She's always been delicate." The aunt grunted, bending from a thickset waist to roll posters into cardboard tubes. Her permed gray hair curled over the brim of a tam. "I'm sure you girls have done a lot for her." She held up the kitten poster. "Now isn't this the cutest thing?"

"Look at this," I whispered to Summer. In a shoe box of reeds and sheet music I found a tube of my lip gloss and a silver button I thought I'd lost. Summer frowned warningly—the girl almost died, so ease up, is what her look said—but I stuffed my belongings into my pocket. When no one was looking I swiped a pair of Olivia's earrings, tiny pearl studs I would never wear.

"We need to develop a better roommate screening process," Louie said that night as he packed for another pageant, this one in Palm Beach. "Show them some ink blots. Or find out if there's a family history of insanity."

I sat on our bed and watched him cram socks and shorts into his bag. The contestants for Miss Junior USA were 13 and younger, so I didn't have to worry about this trip. Since Olivia's near suicide neither of us had initiated making love. We rolled to opposite sides of the bed, barely mussing the sheets I had changed the instant we returned from the hospital.

At the hospital, after the doctor had given us Olivia's prognosis, he sent out a staff psychologist to talk to us. The psychologist was much older than the M.D., thin and ex-

hausted, with fingers stained from nicotine. He asked questions about Olivia. What were her habits? What did she talk about? Did she have many friends? He seemed disappointed that we knew so little about her, only perking up when I related how she had gorged herself on leftover party food. "I should have told someone about that earlier, I guess," I said. He shrugged noncommittally, jotting notes on a pad.

Summer asked him why on earth anyone would want to kill herself. "Suicide," the psychologist said in a practiced tone, "can be like choosing to drown. Life gets hard, the water's cold, you're tired of treading water and you don't know how to float."

Later I thought about what he'd said. I wasn't convinced that Olivia intended to die. She'd crawled to our room, after all, when anywhere else in the house she could have discreetly bled to death. Who knew she would go so far to milk sympathy?

Almost two years before any of us knew Olivia I made a weak attempt at suicide. My boyfriend, Daniel, had suggested we see other people, which devastated me because I thought I loved him. In his bathroom I extracted the blade from his razor and made shallow cuts across the thready veins of my wrists—the wrong method, I knew now. I watched the tiny creases redden and leak surprised little seams of blood. What I wanted was for Daniel to realize how much I meant to him, how far I was willing to go.

Daniel's response, though, was annoyed disgust, like I had peed on his rug. "Come and get your roommate," he'd told Summer over the phone. "I can't handle this." At home Summer curled my hair, took me to a bar and planted us at a highly visible table. She sent me teetering on steep heels across the smoky room, dodging dart and pool players, repeatedly plugging coins in the jukebox. "You've got to get back on that horse," she said. "Daniel isn't worth more

than 10 minutes of misery."

Finally Louie looked up from the pool table, put down his cue, and came over. We knew him, but only very casually. He bought us drinks. Summer flashed her new engagement ring. I let Louie take me home, where he fastened me to the bed with real handcuffs and believed that an allergy to wool had made a mess of my arms. For me there had been no doctors, no relatives clamoring to help, no hospital or even any bandages. Of course, I hadn't really wanted to die.

And whether Olivia was serious about suicide or not, at least she hadn't done things half way. Frail people can surprise you with their resiliency. Even Frances got the boy she wanted. Probably she still lumbered around the town where we grew up, made unsinkable by her wooden leg.

For nearly a week after Louie left for Palm Beach I called in sick at Donut Delite. I had the house to myself all day, where I drank beer, watched television, and didn't bother getting dressed. I was afraid to call Louie in Palm Beach, afraid another woman would answer the phone. And he didn't call me. Sometimes images from our threesome flashed through my mind or in my dreams, only now it was not Olivia but me outside the door.

"Moping around isn't good for you," Summer said. "Do you want to get fired?"

"Are you kidding?" I flipped through TV Guide. "Donut Delite looks too good on my resume."

"That's not what I meant." Summer put a hand on her hip. "It's just that the rent is due next week, and now there's only three of us to pay."

So I returned to work, where I served donuts with fragile efficiency. This lent credibility to my excuse of minor surgery to remove an ovarian cyst. The regular customers claimed they'd missed me and coughed

up a little more change.

Mid-morning I went out back for a box of plastic straws. Chuck, the cook, had left a vat of crullers untended. He was always outside grabbing a smoke. Those crullers needed to be turned. With Chuck's spatula I flipped over the dough, watching crullers pop and blister, teasing my fingers to dip close to the bubbling grease. But when Chuck barreled through the back door I jumped, so that my index finger accidentally dipped into the sizzling fat. Searing pain spread up my wrist and I dropped the spatula onto the floury floor. Pat applied salve and loose gauze bandages. "Hold still, honey," she said, nodding her beehive-topped head.

"This must hurt like hell." It did, but the pain was nothing Percocet couldn't handle, and Chuck was always good for a few. Other than my blistering fingers I felt almost elated, cleansed and blithe, like after a long cry.

"Goddammit," Chuck kept saying between cigarettes. "Mr. Mumphrey said youse girls was to stay out of the vat."

"She was just trying to help," snapped Hilda the dwarf, who offered me sips from the flask she stashed in her locker. Really, they weren't so bad. Or maybe they were, with their lurid blue eye shadow and stories about giving hand jobs to guys in exchange for free drinks. But who was I to criticize? Maybe we were more alike than I'd thought, all of us going nowhere, pretending to be more than we were. ■



Marie Whittemore

ARABY

—after Joyce

In the bellies of white flowers
there is this belief: the milk of dragons.
Oil lost in lungs of birds, lost in eyes of fishes,

only in dreams do I hold these dead ones to my breast.
This is not their transformation into Saudi garlands,
wares, or Troubadours calling, *night*,

but a festival of the invisible.

For alms, I keep lists of names, genders, species,
also lists of those who have hidden from my beloved

the mountains with well-fires.

Here the myrrh is cursed
black, daylight a stranger—

In Kuwait a universe is withdrawing into a blue prophetic eye,
into the lion gorging upon the caribou,
the caribou upon the land, but not

in the unmouthed prayers of purple children.

The jet fighter's assault, bombardment, rebuttal
is no change. It always being this way

no bystander can mistake an oasis for a desert or
the scent of a girl dying into a woman who mourns
none of these. What she hears, I hear, not the

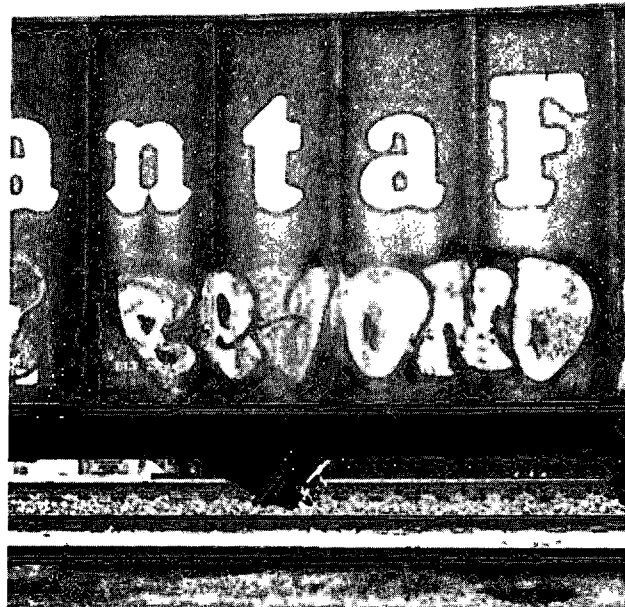
rhythm but a chorus of nomads

a wounded soldier, the child, and I am yet unable
to separate them from two camels lost in ecstasy.

CATCHING THE BLINDS
Avoiding Bulls and Eating Ham Sandwiches in the Shade: The Hobo Travels of Cactus Dick

A Transcription by Jason "Cactus, Jr." Dick of an Oral History Narrative Compiled by Diana Dick Franklin from Joseph Bailey "Cactus" Dick

A while ago I was reading Roger Welsch's book of Great Plains fiction and folklore, It's Not the End of the Earth. But You Can See It from Here, and getting quite a kick out of it. In one of my favorite sections, "Facts," Welsch is talking to Fool Bull, an old Lakota man. Welsch is worrying aloud to Fool Bull that enough isn't being done to pass down Lakota traditions to the younger generation. Fool Bull responds this way: "He laughed and laughed. It took him several minutes to regain control. 'You white people,' he chuckled. 'You're amazing. Roger, if a treasure is lost, it isn't gone. It's still there, where it has always been. It just so happens that at the moment no one knows where its place is. The knowledge isn't lost. We are. The truth never sleeps.'"



On May 30, 1975, my aunt, Diana Dick Franklin, sat down with my Grandfather, Joseph Bailey Dick, and a tape recorder at the family house in Cottonwood, Arizona. J.B. had lived quite an interesting life, and he liked to tell people about it. He was a barber by profession, and his younger days spent as a farmer, hobo, pool hustler, soldier, and boxer, among other things, gave him plenty to talk about to folks who came in to his barber shop for a cut and shave. J.B.'s photo graced the cover of the second issue of Thin Air as his boxing incarnation, "Cactus Dick."

Aunt Diana wanted to make sure some of this stuff was down on a permanent record for others, especially her seven year old son (who now lives in Brooklyn) and her four year old nephew (that's me). Twenty-two years later, I woke up and the truth was waiting for me, in this tape and with the voices of two long passed-away relatives.

The following is a transcription of this straight, off-the-cuff narrative. Every once in a while there will pop up a constellation of capitalized words. These are my aunt's. Diana knew when to let a maestro ply his trade. She lit the fuse on what follows, a roundabout story starting in the early days of the twentieth century detailing J.B.'s taking up the hobo life, his migration across the southwest, and his struggle to see things clearly and remain neutral and his own man in the midst of Post-World War I America and the oftentimes violent world of the Labor struggle. Enjoy.

I thought I'd tell the story of my life. It's not anything great, but it's all true. I was born on a farm right in the middle of Texas. My dad had 640 acres of land, and us kids were busy all the time when he was around, but when he wasn't around sometimes we loafed. Eight of us boys. We lived about 9 miles from Eastland, Texas.

We'd been there 26 years on that place and Dad never had a vacation, so they went out to West Texas, and they saw a lot of that land, and they decided to move. So there was nothing out there, just level as the floor, no bad weeds or nothing. You could grow cotton out there without any trouble. So we sold our homeplace in 1916 to a fellow by the name of Smitty. We gave 5 dollars an acre for it in 1895 and sold it for 20 dollars.

So then we went out to West Texas and bought 320 acres of land and stayed there 9 months and built a house. The wind blew so hard out there nobody could stand it. My dad went up there, and when we moved up we moved into Ranger and he went up about 4 months ahead of time and built what they call a shack up there in those days and drilled a well. He built a 6 room house and I could see he was dissatisfied and unhappy. In the old place we had a big barn, and 60 feet long, and a 12 room house that had been there 26 years.

So he heard about Arizona and that they were growing long staple cotton out here so he and his brother-in-law, C.C. Butler, they got that car together and they come out to Arizona, bought some land out here. So that moved us out here and that was in October 1917.

So way out in Arizona we liked it pretty good. Flu come and the schools were all closed, and the boys decided to go back to Texas. Sold out our farm, went back there. I didn't like it back there, so I wanted to come back to Arizona. The folks didn't want to

come back then.

HOW OLD WERE YOU?

I was 18.

YOU LEFT TEXAS AND CAME TO ARIZONA?

Yeah, by myself. Didn't have enough money to buy tickets, so I always wanted to ride trains anyway. Heard so much talk about it. Those people in the old days, they didn't have any money. Didn't anybody hardly have any money.

So there was a boy there in Eastland that I knew, his name was Truman Horn, so he wanted to go with me. He wanted to ride the trains, so I took him with me. We went down to the railroad yards and caught the blinds of a Sunshine Special Passenger Train on the Texas-Pacific, and we rode that in halfway to El Paso before they ever put us off. So the first couple of days we got into El Paso. It was a pretty big town. So then we caught a train out of there and landed up in Douglas, Arizona. That was about 15 miles from Bisbee.

Douglas was an Army camp. Bisbee, was a mining camp, and at the jewelry stores in those days it was nothing to see a 20, 25, 30 dollar gold piece laying in the window and everything was busy and so we come on out and settled down on a farm and shipped all our horses and furniture and rented a railroad car.

YOUR DAD YOU MEAN? YOUR DAD BOUGHT A PLACE THERE AFTER YOU CAME TO ARIZONA?

Well, after I come to Arizona he had enough of Texas. He'd never worked for wages, and he got a job pulling an ice wagon, 15 dollars a week. (laughter)

So that didn't suit him so he come back and got another place in Arizona, and he didn't like that. The real estate man pulled a fast one on him. He had some real good water, and he put a canteen on the porch when he sold it to him. They'd been walking over

it a little and so he said, "Mr. Dick, would you have a drink of water?" So he was thirsty, you know, and pulled the canteen off, and it tasted good. So when we got our mules and one thing or two, and the wagon got down to the place it was about dark, and dad pumped up some water to drink, and it was this old gyp-alkali water. Boy, was he mad! He was mad enough to tear the country up.

Then he sold out and then he moved back up where the old homeplace was and stayed there from 1920 til he passed away in '65. And I wanted to go to the Coast. I didn't want to farm. I was just a kid, 18 years old, so I went down to the railroad yard and caught me a train out to Maricopa by myself, and got down there on the main line of the Southern Pacific. Got down there about sunup. The train come through, and I just hopped on the blinds, you know.

And so I'd never seen the ocean. So I got over to California and got up on top the passenger train there, the tanker of it, the engine, the rear end, the timmer they call it, and I was seeing all kinds of pretty country, vineyards and everything, some orange trees. I never saw so much pretty country in my life. Broad daylight! Nobody paid any attention to me.

I rode right into the viaduct in Los Angeles, and the fireman began to push and pester me to get off, so I got off and wanted to go to Venice, California. I'd heard about Venice, you know, being a resort. So I caught a Venice short line and went out and got there about 7 o'clock at night.

In 1921 I went to Tab, California. A friend of mine, he was a good pool player. He was a better pool player than I was, and it took a good one to beat him, and so we thought we'd go up there, it was kind of an oil town, and make a little money, and we couldn't beat the best pool player in town. We could get the second best; we could get him. That's who we got money off of.

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So we got in there and got us a room and next morning, why all of a sudden, the landlady and everybody come hollering down and wakes us up. "Get up, get up! The scabs are coming, the scabs are comin'." They had had a strike there, you know. The oil field had a strike, and they was shippin' in a trainload of scabs from San Francisco to break the strike.

Well, we didn't know nothing about no oil business or nothing, we was just there to play pool and bum around. So they put us in the car and took us up to the headquarters there, registered us up, law and order, and put a badge on us and took us on out to the car and the car drove up, you know, and they's set 'em a car a piece in the back seat, you know, and they run out of guns just as we got there, and we didn't get to go out to meet the train.

They derailed the train. They spread the rails out there, and they went out there and took pocket knives and clubs and everything away from these scabs, and they turned that train around and make it go back to San Francisco.

That was the time time Fatty Arbuckle, that was in September, he got in that party up there and that woman died, you know. Roughed him up in San Francisco. That ruined his career. They run everybody out of town the next day. They run us out of town because they didn't want anybody around that might take a job or somethin', but they had a parade, women and children, up and down the street, you know.

Those union men, they were really strong. Closed the bootleg joints and everything else, and they was going to fight this strike, and they had a deal that if you struck you'd lose your job. That was the story.

But what they done, the company wanted to get rid of the older men. That was right after WWI, you know, and they wanted to put the young men to work, you see. You

had a lot of seniority, why they'd fired you, and you didn't get no pension. So that's how dirty that was.

Well we got us a ride into Bakersfield and got there, and they had that law and order business at the depot. There was some people. Of course, we didn't have our badges on or anything. We got rid of them, and they deputized everybody in town. E-erybody was a police.

So we're waiting for a freight train, and they made us get on a freight train. . . . They "suggested" it, you know. Of course, they made us. And we got into the coal car there and there was 56 hobos in that coal car. People wasn't like they are today. It wasn't dangerous. They were friendly. Nowadays you can't go anywhere without getting knocked in the head and robbed.

So, we wound up in San Bernardino, California, and this boy who was with me, why we quit the freight train going pretty fast cause they got a bad railroad bull there. The railroad bull is hired by the railroad as an officer to chase the hobos out of town. They don't care what they do to 'em. They hit 'em with a stick or anything. Not allowed to kill them but . . . almost.

So we got a room a roomin' there and for some reason or another this boy with me had went out with some policeman's wife over in Phoenix, and he saw this policeman was on the police force in San Bernardino. So we got a room and went to bed and got up the next morning, and he was gone.

I didn't have any money. He had the money. And the seat of my pants was tore off, and I got a needle and thread from the landlady and sewed my pants up and went down on the street in front of the poolhall there. The railroad yards in SB run right into town.

So I was getting pretty hungry. It was getting to be about 10 o'clock, and I didn't have no breakfast or nighting and didn't

know a soul in town. Pretty weird atmosphere. So pretty soon an old gentleman come along, going into the pool hall, and I asked him, I says, "Mister," I says, "you know I haven't had anything to eat this morning, how's the chance of getting 25 cents?" He says, "I don't have any money, but if you come over there to the house I'll fix you a sandwich." And he says, "Now you can sit here on the floor seat just as you want to."

He was a flagman in the yard, flagging, and he lived right there. So I says, "No, I'll get out here under the tree." I felt guilty. Didn't want them to have a hobo sitting on the front porch. So I was sitting under the tree, and here come this old hypocritical woman, an old lady all dressed up in 1890 style clothes, you know, all society like, and she says, "Look at that hobo setting out there. Just look at him. Just look at him." As if I was wanted for murdering 10 people. I just looked at her. I guess she felt it. Just like hot rays. I never moved or nothing.

Anyway, the police would get you, ybu know, if you was around town. They'd run you out of town. They'd check up on you. So, anyway, I never had done nothing to anybody to this day; maybe I have it figured out. They had one of them big salt and pepper caps, you know the big bill, and I went up to the post office to get a stamp or something, and a man met me there on the steps. He raised that cap bill up and looked at me in the face and never said nothing. They was looking for somebody, you know, someone who had done something. But I didn't answer the description.

So anyway I went on back after eating that sandwich, went on over there to the poolhall and some boys had been playing. . . . They packed fruit around SB.

The boys in there at the poolhall had been playing a little 9 ball, and I called one of them off to the side, and I could tell he wasn't shooting too good, and I told him, I

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says, "You give me a dollar and let me get in that game, and I'll make you some money." So he give me a dollar, and I got in there, and I think I run up about 10 to 11 dollars before these guys got up and quit. I was just a shooting them like shooting fish in a rain barrel.

I was desperate. So they all hung up but this one guy, and I broke him of what he had. He was a call boy. He was supposed to have been the slicker there, you know. And he marked up 18 dollars on the wire. That was in 1921.

So anyway, I went on down to Venice, California, and I run into a friend of mine I knew down there. We decided to hobo back to Phoenix, and we caught a freight train, and we got on a passenger train, and we got coming into Colton. Well, we could see that the police was seeing us. We was on top this train. And he's seeing us climbing down getting off, and there was bushes out there, and he was culling angles so he got us, you know. So had to buy a ticket to the next stop, to Indio. I don't know how far it was, 50 or 60 miles or something 'round there. And so we wound up in Indio and caught a train out of there and come on back to Phoenix.

Rather abruptly, the tape cuts short at this point. After frantically reviewing this sputter in the narrative and checking and rechecking through the other tapes in the Cactus collection, the thread is not picked up again. I now have more sympathy than ever for paleontologists, archeologists, and anthropologists, all of whom are called upon to recreate wholes from fragments. What is clear, at least to me, is that Cactus was a man who found himself caught up in many an event that was a far cry from the life he had left behind in Texas. The teens and 20s of the twentieth century were by far some of the bloodiest in the American Labor
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Movement's struggles for fair working conditions and a livable wage. Check out the 1987 film by John Sayles, Matewan, to see a particularly vivid recreation and drama of Labor's struggles. But back to Cactus. Here was this young tramp finding himself caught up time after time in serious and potentially dangerous labor unrest. What is impressive to me is the way Cactus was able to see the situations he found himself in for what they were and still maintain the sanctity of his individuality. In going from train to train, freight to freight, town to town, he was literally just along for the ride.

To me, this narrative is about a time in American history that seems to get more distant with each e-mail and steady check I receive. Could I or anyone else I know really hop one of the blinds heading out of Flagstaff in search of adventure, relying on a razor-sharp pool game and the willingness of strangers to donate ham sandwiches along the way? I just don't know. I don't know if I'm that strong or brave, or if it's just an entirely different world. I'll keep listening to the tapes of my long deceased grandfather. Like Fool Bull says, the truth is never too far away. You just have to look. And ride the occasional blind. ■

Brigit Pegeen Kelly

DEAD DOE

for Huck

The doe lay dead on her back in a field of asters: no.

The doe lay dead on her back beside the school bus stop: yes.

Where we waited:

Her belly white as a cut pear. Where we waited: no: off

from where we waited: yes

at a distance: making a distance

we kept,

as we kept her dead run in sight, that we might see if she chose to go skyward;

that we might run, too, turn tail

if she came near

and troubled our fear with presence: with ghostly blossoming: with
the fountain's

unstoppable blossoming

and the black stain the algae makes when the water

stays near.

We can take the gilt-edged strolling of the clouds: yes.

But the risen from the dead: no!

The haloe trouble-shooting of the goldfinches in the bush:
yes: but in season:

kept within bounds,

not in the pirated rows of corn,

not above winter's pittance of river.

(Cont., stanza break)

The doe lay dead: she lent
her deadness to the morning, that the morning might have weight, that
our waiting might matter: be upheld by significance: by light
on the rhododendron, by the ribbons the sucked mint
loosed on the air,

by the treasonous gold-leaved passage of season, and you

from me/child/from me/
from . . . not mother: no:
but the weather that would hold you: yes:

hothouse you to fattest blooms: keep you in mild unceasing rain, and
the fixed
stations of heat: like a pedaled note: or the held
breath sucked in, and stay: yes:

stay

but: no: not done: can't be:

the doe lay dead: she could
do nothing:

the dead can mother nothing . . . nothing
but our sight: they mother that, whether they will or no:

they mother our looking, the gap the tongue prods when the tooth is
missing, when
fancy seeks the space.

The doe lay dead: yes: and at a distance, with her legs up and frozen,
she tricked
our vision: at a distance she was
for a moment no deer

at all

but two swans: we saw two swans
and they were fighting
or they were coupling
or they were stabbing the ground for some prize
worth nothing, but fought over, so worth *that*, worth
the fought-over glossiness: the morning's fragile-tubed glory.

(Cont., stanza break)
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And this is the soul: like it or not. Yes: the soul comes down: yes: comes
into the deer: yes: who dies: yes: and in her death twins herself into swans:
fools us with mist and accident into believing her newfound finery

and we are not afraid
though we should be

and we are not afraid as we watch her soul fly on: paired
as the soul always is: with itself:
with others.

Two swans....

Child. We are done for
in the most remarkable ways.

from: *Song*
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Read This?

John Faulkner
Men Working (Yoknapatawpha)

Reviewed by Jason Dick

I've always had trouble pronouncing Yoknapatawpha, William Faulkner's mythical Mississippi county that he created to host his experiments in regional, racial, familial, and personal conflicts en route to his Nobel Prize for Literature. Regardless of whether I can ever pronounce Yoknapatawpha correctly more than three times in the same calendar year, I am glad it existed for Faulkner and continues to exist in the minds of readers the world 'round. Without the fictional Yoknapatawpha county, there would have been no Yoknapatawpha Press run out of Oxford, Mississippi, and without Yoknapatawpha Press, I'm not sure I ever would have come across *Men Working*, the 1941 debut novel from William Faulkner's little brother John Faulkner.

Both those Faulkner boys are dead now, going on thirty-five and thirty-four years now, and William's library fame is solidified for the next few centuries or so. But younger brother John, a civil engineer by trade, charter plane pilot, self-taught painter and writer, well, who's ever heard of him? Read *Men Working* and wonder why no one's ever heard of younger John.

The novel is set in the early days of the Great Depression in rural Mississippi, in the deep, deep south. The Taylor family is a down and out sharecropping clan. They can't get ahead, especially of recent, and so Paw Taylor decides to move himself and Maw and

the nine kids into town so he can take a job with the "W, P, and A" (Works Progress Administration and later Works Project Administration) one of the most prominent New Deal relief programs of the Depression.

Paw Taylor and everyone else who moves into town get away from the poverty stricken desolation of sharecropping, but land smack in the middle of a brand new set of problems to oppress them. High rents force families to share the old, decrepit mansions of the town, up to eight families at a time. Merchants in town lick their chops at the prospect of hooking the recently located and regularly paid WPA folks into credit and extension loops. The workers oblige by believing that they absolutely need items they never previously did before, like radios and cars, and also at the expense of paying for things like groceries and rent and the water bill. When the WPA starts announcing its standardized eighteen month furloughs, chaos ensues, the least of which is the boarding families using their backyards as latrines because the water's turned off. Hello to Hepatitis and Diphtheria.

I don't know what kind of painting John Faulkner liked the most, but if I was a betting man, I would wager he liked to paint large, impressionistic pastoral scenes, yet still have the occasional hankering for realism. The novel's narrative structure follows suit. Faulkner lays out a seamless, idyllic setting with his own internal monologues, then drops into gritty, down-home regional dialogues and soliloquies to give the readers a realism fix, then heads back to the border of the canvas as he wraps up the section with another pastoral description. The structure takes the shape of an impressionist sandwich, and it's highly effective and readable.

The Great Depression is moving further and further away from the American psyche. When a person suffers an extraordinary amount of pain, eventually the brain

will stop accepting the nervous system's stimuli regarding the pain. In effect, the pain is turned off, although it is still there. The Depression's effect on the character of the nation may have had this effect on those who suffered it. With memories of the Depression fading, it seems inappropriate, even disrespectful, to forget that the pain was there at all for generations as close as our parents and grandparents.

Thankfully, novels like *Men Working* exist. Far from a social document or propaganda piece, it depicts simple people enduring not so simple horror in plain terms. It galvanizes images of human struggle at the most basic level and serves as a testament to the symbiotic optimism and pessimism that defined the lives hit hardest by the Depression. It's not fancy, polished, or regal, but it's a fine read, and John Faulkner deserves to be known as more than just a Faulkner sibling who also wrote. Neither he nor this book should be forgotten. ■

Barbara Cully
The New Intimacy (Penguin Books)

Reviewed by Nancy Johnson

In April of this year, to celebrate national Poetry Month, Kore Press of Tucson published a poster in which eight poets talk about how they perceive poetry: Here's what Barbara Cully says: "there has been some speculation as to whether or not it is appropriate, or even barbaric, to write poetry—to indulge in poetry—after the horrors of this century. Our discussion might begin where we agree that would be too great a loss—

that it would be a capitulation to those horrors if we did not."

The New Intimacy is Cully's response to the horrors of this century, a response in which she redefines intimacy in light of a present that incorporates torture and technology in new ways, a present that allows no escape, and where, in effect, everything is happening at once. We are forced into familiarity with details of a savage world that until now the individual—"an easily broken private citizen on a boulevard/of groomed poplar"—could try to ignore.

Cully pulls us into her vision and response immediately. The first and title poem of the collection begins:

While 14,000 Chinese die in bold
cottons under military rule,
the same number lie sunburned and
scattered on the island.

Here you don't *traverse*, to get any-
where one *circumvents*,
which means a spiraling down of fuel
spent as foreign paper—
recently made more valuable by the
repression of Asian democracy.

This is where we take off for deserted
planets.

Where at the far end the video store
and the food store
mesh into something we can both
hunger for, *afford*.

On the island, disposable income
everywhere abounds

in a world where a plethora of quickly
made foods reaches
finally the preservative-saturated
ends of the earth and cannot rot—
two hot dogs unearthed Saturday in
a daily dated 1978 look pretty good.

The poem continues with the same intensity of language and idea, and also with the movement from wide shot to medium to close up and back—through space *and* time—that distinguishes Cully as a poet of fluidity and grace.

This graceful movement creates a balance which underlies the book in a number of areas: the balance between intimacy with the larger world and between lovers; the relationship between what is visible and what is invisible; the openness of both speaking and listening in a single poem; and from her poem “repressed theme,” “Fragments, and only slender hope of offering/something more than obscure and less than obvious.” Cully moves with the seeming ease of a dancer among starkly contrasting elements of language, event and image. Consider, for example, the second stanza of “as one goes, rain falls.”

I miss you because one of my favorite ways of being is out loud.

In a tiny room an enormous partnership looms up—a few years—

then you become aware of another natural phenomenon

like bamboo, like enormous suck holes in Florida.

I miss you because one of my favorite ways of being

is lying supine while someone is bringing me a drink.

There is an open window.

The country, made of clay, is immaterial as long as it is coastal

and not too heavily fraught with war. You remember war.

It is the color of the desert. It has the unmistakable smell of dead fruit.

It has been staring up at us from magazines.

until it has become in parts of our minds very sexy,

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kind of lovely, and nearly affordable.

A date palm tosses its dry head on the boulevard.

The sky turns an acceptable gray.

It is the middle of the day in the middle of the week.

In this poem Cully opens up language so that in addition to speaking it listens, in the way a gray day seems to absorb sensation and sound. She is able to do this partly by use of space on the page but also by slyly involving the reader. Cully gives you something to hold on to early on, so that you are willing to dance with her even when the steps are unfamiliar. You say, “Yes, I understand this,” and then are surprised by the next move and the next. The pay-off is the emotional hit, the unexpected reality blast she delivers.

Through all her unflinching observation and use of severe images, Cully is seeking new ways of finding and valuing love in this world where what is new at this moment is obsolete the next. Some of the poems in this collection ring with beauty in the face of extinction—“nureyev,” “field tone”—and “baby,” is a poem I wish I’d written for my son.

Barbara Cully won’t give you a tidy poem on a tidy page. She’ll make you get in there with her and work. What you get in return is a re-vision, a way of sorting out within chaos and of taking inside yourself.■

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* *The views expressed in Thin Air are those of the authors, and are not necessarily in agreement with the views of the staff or our sponsors.*

Contributor's Notes

Rob Carney received his Ph.D. from the University of Southwestern Louisiana in the spring of 1997. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Callaloo*, *Zyzzyyva*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Quarterly West*, *Willow Springs*, *Northwest Review* and others.

Scott Ellis lives with his wife, stepson, dog and two cats in Eureka, California, where he teaches for volunteer's wages as part-time faculty at the local community college and plots his escape. *Mercy* is Ellis' first story to be published in any venue of which he is not an editor.

Jeffrey Hurt writes, "All of that refrigerator art was not in vain. The countless hours of cartoons that have coagulated in my blood and brain now emit with every muscular contraction of a brushstroke. If only ACME made paint brushes. . . ."

Rhett Jamesson was born in Texas in 1951 and has lived in California, Nevada, Washington and most recently in Flagstaff where he enjoys his various roles as husband, amateur photographer and independent businessman.

Iris Johnson is a graduate student in the creative writing program at New York University. She currently teaches undergraduate creative writing and coordinates the writing workshop at Goldwater Hospital.

Nancy Johnson's book *Zoo & Cathedral*, published in 1996, won the White Pine Press Poetry Prize. She lives in Washington, D.C.

Brigit Pegeen Kelly teaches in the creative writing program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and in the Warren Wilson College MFA program. She has won many awards for her work, including the "Discovery"/*The Nation* Award, the Cecil Hemley Award from the Poetry Society of America and the Theodore Roethke Prize from *Poetry Northwest*. Her first book, *To The Place of Trumpets*, won the 1987 Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize, and her second book, *Song*, was awarded the 1994 Lamont Poetry Selection of The Academy of American Poets. She received a fellowship from the NEA, among others, and her poems have appeared in *The Pushcart Prize* and *Best American Poetry*.

Lynda Majarian earned an MFA in creative writing at the University of Arizona and is now living and writing in Vermont. Her story, "Ginza Girl," appears in the December 1997 issue of *Spelunker Flophouse*. "Postscript to Cloud Nine" grew from Lynda's wish to explore how sex and desperation might affect the dynamics of an insular, self-absorbed group.

Rob Morrill grew up in San Francisco. He spent his undergraduate career at U.C. Santa Cruz and attended the graduate creative writing program at NAU. Currently, Rob teaches high school English in Tucson. In his spare time, he is training to be the brake man for the next U.S. Olympic luge team.

Ana Maria Spagna lives and works in Stehekin, Washington, which by *National Geographic* reckoning, is the most remote place one can live in the lower 48. Recently, she was chosen winner of the If It Moves personal essay contest by *Kenesis* magazine. Her fiction has also appeared in *Kenesis*.

Vivian Shipley is the Editor of *Connecticut Review* and a professor at Southern Connecticut State University. She won the 1997 Lucille Medwick Prize awarded by The Poetry Society of America. In 1996, she was awarded the *Sonora Review* Poetry Prize from the University of Arizona, the *Defined Providence* Poetry Prize and the Gretchen Warren Award from the New England Poetry Club. She has poems forthcoming or currently appearing in, among others, *The Southern Review*, *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Indiana Review*, *The Texas Review*, *Northeast Corridor* and *The Nebraska Review*. Her first book is titled *Poems out of Harlan County*, and her second book, *Devil's Lane*, was nominated for the 1996 Pulitzer Prize of Letters. She has a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University.

Britta Alexandra Spilsbury does professional photography worldwide. She lives in Maui, Hawaii. Her passion is portraying the divine expression of peoples' mysterious and sensual nature through mythical photographic journeys. You can contact Britta Alexandra at P.O. Box 1746, Makawao, HI 96768.

Ronald Paul Sturga earned a B.S. (Art Education) at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and a M.S. Ed. (Guidance) at St. Bonaventure University. He served as art instructor and football coach at Port Allegany High School and currently is Assistant Director of Student Development at Edinboro University. He has done a series of pen and inks.

Charles H. Webb has published poems in *The Iowa Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Gettysburg Review*, and *The Best American Poetry, 1995*. He has poems forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *Paris Review*. His book *Reading the Water* recently won the Morse Poetry Prize and will be published in 1997 by Northeastern University Press.

Marie Whittemore teaches at Arizona State University where she received her MFA in Creative Writing in 1994. Her work has appeared in *Antioch Review*, *Analecta*, *Tucson Guide Quarterly*, *Tucson Weekly*, *South Ash Press*, *Angle*, and among others is the winner of the 1993 Tucson Poetry Festival Award.

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◆ FICTION

**Ann Cummins
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ANN CUMMINS' S stories have appeared in THE NEW YORKER, THE BEST OF THE WEST series, BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES, and elsewhere.

JANE ARMSTRONG'S stories have appeared in THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, BELOIT FICTION JOURNAL, MISSISSIPPI REVIEW-WEB, APALACHEE QUARTERLY, and elsewhere. She is the winner of the 1994 Joan Johnson Award for Creative Nonfiction.

ALLEN WOODMAN'S latest works of fiction include ALL-YOU-CAN-EAT, ALABAMA, a comic novel, and short-short stories in STORY, MICROFICTIONS, FLASH FICTION, and SUDDEN FICTION (CONTINUED). His second collection of stories is forthcoming from Livingston Press (Univ. of West AL). He is also the author of the popular children's books THE COWS ARE GOING TO PARIS and THE BEAR WHO CAME TO STAY. Woodman is the Director of the Creative Writing Program.



Flagstaff, a city of 51,000 in northern Arizona, is surrounded by pines and aspens and is dominated by the majestic San Francisco Peaks. It is close to the Grand Canyon National Park and many national monuments. Its elevation, over 7,000 feet, clean air, a four-season climate, train whistles at night, and numerous coffee shops make Flagstaff a great place for writers.

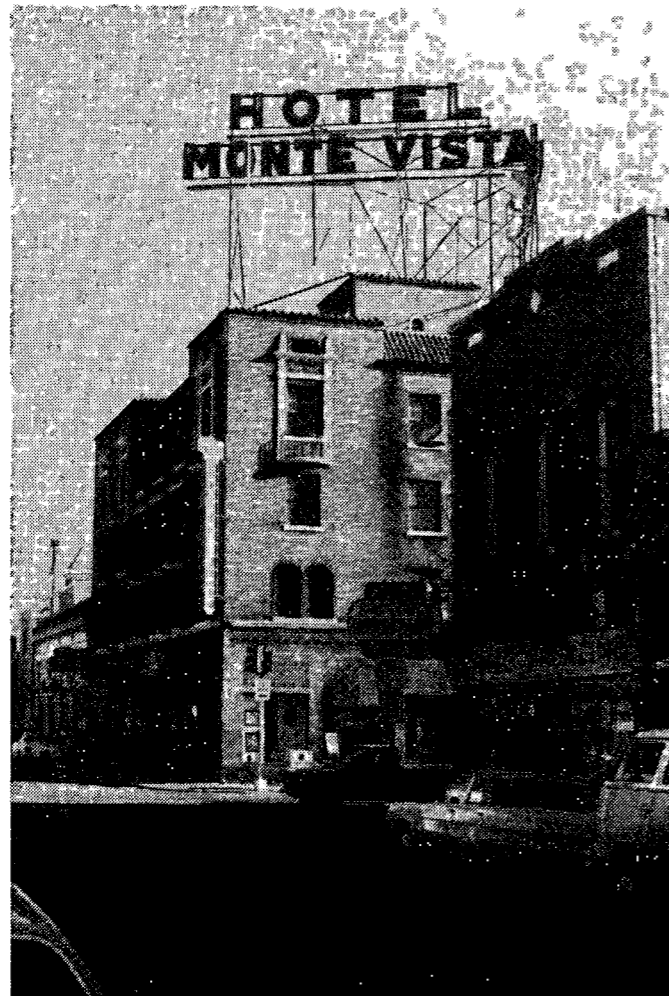


Photo by B.K. Clark.
One view of downtown Flagstaff.

◆ POETRY

**Barbara Anderson
Jim Simmerman**

BARBARA ANDERSON won the National Poetry Series Award for JUNK CITY. Her play in verse, 1-800-911, is forthcoming in 1996. She has received a Stegner Fellowship and an NEA Fellowship in Poetry. JIM SIMMERMAN has published three books of poetry, HOME, ONCE OUT OF NATURE, and MOON GO AWAY, I DON'T LOVE YOU NO MORE. He is the co-editor of DOG MUSIC, an anthology of dog poems.

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