

FOUR STORIES

By

GREGORY KENT RANDALL  
( )

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Thesis Approved:

*Mary Robinson*

Thesis Adviser

*Gordon Cleaver*

*Samuel H. Woods, Jr.*

*N. N. Durham*

Dean of the Graduate College

953392

## PREFACE

I first developed a special interest in creative writing as an undergraduate and was fortunate to be able to pursue this interest as part of my graduate program. What follows is a creative writing portfolio with a critical introduction. My purpose in this study is to show how my work relates to the literary tradition and that being done by selected contemporary writers.

I wish to thank Dr. Mary H. Rohrberger, my thesis advisor, for her criticism and encouragement in this study and my work of the preceding three years. Appreciation is also expressed to Dr. Gordon A. Weaver and Dr. Samuel H. Woods, Jr. for their helpful suggestions.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Headings	Page
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION. . . . .	1
"THE HAIRCUT". . . . .	16
"BACON FRYIN'". . . . .	26
"BEATING IT BACK". . . . .	35
"PAUSES" . . . . .	45
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	62

## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

"There is no new thing under the sun," concludes Ecclesiastes 1.9. Historians, however, attribute a variation on this quotation to Mlle. Bertin, Marie Antoinette's milliner: "There is nothing new except what has been forgotten." Both maxims, though different in tone, hold true for art in general and for literature and fiction specifically.<sup>1</sup> E. B. Weinstock states that experimental fiction is "a serious attempt . . . to utilize the data of traditional experience in order to produce new forms."<sup>2</sup> He dismisses rumors that there is a "mysterious and romantic process of self-discovery and catharsis"<sup>3</sup> in experimental writing. In short, all experimental fiction grows out of previous forms.

Phillip Stevick in Anti-Story: Anthology of Experimental Fiction suggests that "innovation is the motive of all artists."<sup>4</sup> Innovation, though, should perhaps be viewed as a variation on or alteration of convention rather than as something new or unique. Writers of experimental fiction, for the most part, take liberties with literary conventions, while still realizing the importance of tradition and convention. Stevick's somewhat paradoxical statement could be altered thus: contemporary artists, many of them, wish to avoid becoming predictable. And I, at least, would like to generate experimental fiction while simultaneously retaining and perfecting literary techniques and conventions which are vital for this innovation. Four Stories is the beginning of such an attempt.

"The Haircut" is mostly in the Ring Lardner tradition, and it is aimed primarily at what Stevick (p. xix) calls the "middle range of experience." Local color is the major component of this form of realism, or fidelity to life as it is usually perceived. The use of fantasy and the rapid pace are Thurberesque in some ways, but I think go beyond that. The element of fantasy in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" is controlled and understandable, whereas fact and fantasy are shuffled in "The Haircut," resulting in ambiguity. In the story symmetry is a structural principle. Three barbershops--one that Arthur considers "evil," one that he remembers as "good," and one that he believes has elements of the preceding two--are developed simultaneously. Fact and fantasy are also alternated until the climatic dream sequence, but the major leitmotif is the barbershop story. It is finally, then, not a short story about vanity nor the loss of innocence, not a story about fantasy nor sexual initiation, but an initiation into the art of story-telling. All aspects of the "barbershop" motif function on the same level of reality. Social satire is minimal, and Arthur's psychological makeup is subordinate. In "The Haircut" I worked within established literary modes and made an attempt at undarkened humor with only slight intrusions of irony.

I attempted a greater level of complexity in "Bacon Fryin'" than what was intended in "The Haircut." Because there is only one character developed dramatically in "Bacon Fryin'" the interior monologue is used extensively to aid in characterization. When carefully used, the interior monologue gives the immediacy and intensity of first person narrative while still operating within the third person limited point of view. It is commonly used for the dramatic

presentation of material when a soliloquy is unrealistic and the usually more rapid-paced stream-of-consciousness is not desired. Interior monologue in "Bacon Fryin'" (and its limited use in "The Haircut") is used not to represent the complicated associations that supposedly occur when a person thinks, but rather the representation of sub-vocal completely expressed thoughts; it is not the process of thought as it occurs, but the result of thinking. The dream sequences in "The Haircut" and "Bacon Fryin'" do move more toward the stream-of-consciousness, but still use a regulated and logical presentation of words and phrases. When unskillfully handled, the interior monologue can be misinterpreted as narrator commentary, but when used skillfully it can be an effective device in character development.

A second, more unusual technique used for characterization in "Bacon Fryin'" is the flashforward. If these flashes are interpreted as the protagonist visualizing the possible events occurring after his body is discovered, the reader will have few problems. But it cannot entirely be assumed that these flashforwards are occurring in the protagonist's mind. If the flashforwards occur independent of the protagonist's mind, disjointed from the chronological progression, then how are they reckoned with at the story's conclusion? This spatial and temporal phenomenon could be likened to Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," although not brought about by the surprise ending Bierce has been criticized for using.<sup>5</sup> The psychological peculiarity of the hanged man's last moment adds nothing to the development of theme or the function of unity in "An Occurrence." The use of the flashforward, however, in "Bacon Fryin'" is meant to add a different point of view by which to evaluate the protagonist. This would seem a



less intrusive way to enter the third person limited narration, as well as to add ambiguity to the climax. The juxtaposition of the final flashforward--the newspaper account of Ballantine's death with his seemingly futile escape from the apartment--is intended to emphasize the "relative ease" with which he could have died. I am convinced that this use of the flashforward is a viable, yet still experimental technique that necessitates further evaluation on my part.

My third short piece presented here, "Beating it Back," moves into the realm of the "anti-story." The particular classification I am using is "metafiction,"<sup>6</sup> or what Stevick labels "against mimesis" (p. xviii). It is the insistence on the narrator's part that what is being told is fiction, a story depending entirely on his whims for its outcome rather than the elements of the story established in its beginning. Stevick (p. xvi) calls it a "rendering of a reality 'out there' in the world of observed experience deliberately broken by a reflexive commentary on the work itself." Heinrich Böll as author/narrator intrudes from the very beginning in his story "The Seventh Trunk," a mystical account of a thirty-two year period in which he attempted to finish writing a story he read the beginning of in the Bockelminen Parish News. In Keith Fort's "The Coal Shoveller" the author/narrator informs the reader in the second sentence that he has gotten "a bad start" in writing his short story. He then comments on what he sees through his second-story window, and explains the history of his neighborhood before saying that he wishes to write a simple short story about this scene. There follows an objective, "camera eye" description before a second intrusion: "I can't go on like that. Words have a powerful integrity of their own which no amount of authorial

intention can eliminate." It would seem that this is the author/narrator's admission of failure as a mimeticist.

New-fiction writers, Myron Greenman says, are attempting to redefine literature's purpose, in effect, claiming that "the function of literature, and hence its value, no longer inheres in literature itself but only in the opportunity that it provides for some form of self-expression."<sup>7</sup> I find mimesis still present in all supposedly "anti-mimetic" fiction. Mimesis emphasizes the relationship of fiction to the "universe." Greenman states: "The writers of new fiction have attempted to transfer the critical focus from the 'aesthetic object' to certain attitudes and beliefs held by its maker."<sup>8</sup> Thus, new fiction's paramount interest is "the replacement of a reality that is to be imitated by the act itself of mimesis."<sup>9</sup> New-fiction writers are imitating their personal "universe," the momentary reality they most understand.

While the "anti-mimetic" story is now commonplace, my use of narrator commentary and the resulting shifts in point of view do seem to be a unique way to achieve this type of "anti-story," especially since much experimental fiction and nearly all "anti-mimetic" fiction is written in the first person. The use of balance, or symmetry, found in "The Haircut" and "Bacon Fryin'" is pushed to extreme limits in the first five pages of "Beating it Back," at which point the narrator commentary begins appearing and the first story begins disintegrating. The ritualistic ordering of each section, its rhythmic order, is broken again and again by these fragmented, highly parenthetical comments until the formal structure is lost at the same time the narrator begins a patching together of a new story in a personal, erratic manner. The point of view, in a slightly different tone, shifts repeatedly to the first

person with which the story begins. By continually addressing a "you" who has additional knowledge of the first story, I hoped to enlarge the scope. A second level of reality is the result. More importantly, if the reader assumes the "you" role he becomes involved in such a way that he may feel a part of the evolving action, or if not, at least a sense that the creating process was occurring simultaneous to his reading. It is comparable to avant-garde films in which the director or cameraman participates in the film; that is, he too is recorded by the "live" camera.<sup>10</sup> The addressing of "you" was my own way of increasing reader participation.

One final change that occurs with the narrator commentary is the focus. The geographic isolation and flat characterization give way to specific locales and more fully realized characters. The omniscient role of the narrator shifts, and with this shift goes the focus of the story. Again, as in Fort and other new-fiction writers, the focus is on the process of creating. If "Beating it Back" succeeds it is partly because of the realistic presentation of this process.

If I had to answer the question "why anti-mimesis?" I would respond in three ways. I believe some writers, including me, use anti-mimesis to place a reader at a closer or farther distance than that reader expected to be. Experienced readers assume their proper distance in reading any type of literature, but more quickly and steadfastly in the short story because of the speed with which the author has traditionally set the tone in the story's beginning. Besides adding another level to the story, metafiction can keep the reader active and mobile, and give the author a new means by which to manipulate distance and so develop rather than set tone.

A second reason for employing metafiction is to emphasize the

element of the absurd. Stevick (p. xxii) states that "the one thing a writer who confronts the absurd cannot rely on is traditional artistic conventions." Fort as author/narrator in "The Coal Shoveller" confronts his story's protagonist on the street to emphasize ironic discrepancies between his "character" and his "model" for that character. I believed I could show the cosmic absurdity in "Beating it Back" best by the ironic juxtaposition of two points-of-view and two tones; hopefully, I retained a degree of seriousness. Crane's "The Open Boat" was a helpful model for the first five pages of "Beating it Back," yet Crane's tone has more gravity, and he could use hyperbole effectively without fearing a loss of this tone. "Beating it Back" could not have followed the pattern set by "The Open Boat." This second reason for metafiction, like the first, is also an explanation of its value in setting tone. Greenman says that "the new-fiction writers . . . represent the first literary movement towards a total refusal to define reality,"<sup>11</sup> a refusal perhaps prompted by existential doubts that they can define reality.

I use metafiction in a third manner. It comes in the thick of writing at a point in which the characters, setting, plot, or tone is so constrained, molded, and fashioned toward a predictable end that I can only intrude, puncture the concentric circles, and wake the reader to new possibilities. It is walking up the wall after painting oneself into a corner. This is only artistic failure if an author's original intentions are of greater magnitude than his results. Writers may begin again with the ambitious intention to effectively employ metafictional devices. This was my approach to "Beating it Back." In "Beating it Back" I was concerned with a unique distancing, but it was

only after one character leaped from beneath the "silver lightpole" into the actual creation of the story that a new dimension in aesthetic distance was available.

Perhaps "pauses" is my most ambitious attempt at innovation. The techniques attempted in my first three pieces, with the exception of the flashforward, are used in "pauses." Fantasy and the interior monologue are found throughout the "pauses." Again, as in "Beating it Back," I used metafictional devices to shift the point of view. Besides the "distancing" factor mentioned earlier, this shifting point of view has obvious thematic implications in "pauses": the objective/subjective shifts are used to increase the tension of the divided person. The vehicle of metafiction was meant to enhance the portrayal of the self-conscious narrator struggling with a subject, or what Stevick calls "fiction in search of something to be about" (p. 161).

The primary characteristic of each individual "pause" is its brevity, accomplished through the use of understatement, sparseness of detail, and limited focus. Understatement can contribute toward producing an effective ambiguity. Richard Brautigan generally uses extreme understatement in his writing;<sup>12</sup> Hemingway's use of understatement in his objective sketches in our time intensifies the reader's own conclusions. Hemingway in Death in the Afternoon used the analogy of an ice-berg in relation to good writing: "If a writer of prose knows enough he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of these things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water."

The sparseness of detail in each "pause" is also a technique Hemingway is much noted for. Hemingway condenses each sketch by deleting most adjectives and adverbs and by using a simple, sometimes colloquial language. Similarly, most "pauses" consist of the pairing of simple words and concrete images to produce an identifiable tone.<sup>13</sup>

The focus of most "pauses" is a single moment of introspection, although some are short narratives. I believe that Hemingway's sketches also have a very limited focus, although they appear to be entirely objective. My own analogy for Hemingway's sketches is what scientists call black holes, or assemblages of matter collapsed to a state so extremely dense they become invisible, with only the images of the lost objects on the outer fringes of the hole. What these images represent--like the tip of the ice-berg--is all that is necessary to create a brief, yet gravitated effect. I believe achieving this effect is desirable.

The reason for this abbreviated prose writing is equally hard to explain. It could partly be a matter of an attempt at simplicity on the author's part, for I believe there are times when our accelerated lifestyles demand pricks, not wounds, and snickers, instead of belly laughs. Most "pauses" were written to examine a single moment by steeping it in immediate sensations without crushing it with an avalanche of sensory or psychological detail. An epiphany is neither imaginable or desirable. At times the tone is all important, while at other times the mood created by the sketch's elements is most important. I might compare the blocked structure of "pauses" to cinematic presentation. Frederico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman especially emphasize

what Weinstock calls the "composition of the single frame and the juxtaposition of images."<sup>14</sup>

Since each "pause" in the first three sections and most in the fourth were written separately and with no consideration as to unity, the problem of joining them and providing coherence at first seemed too great. It appeared, though, that each "pause" would be under-nourished and pale if presented separately; more importantly, a greater degree of complexity could be achieved by ordering this accumulated material into episodes. The grouping of the "pauses" functions only because of a consistency in tone, the persona/narrator, and recurring motifs. John Cheever combines a series of longer narratives in "The Leaves, the Lion-Fish and the Bear." These narratives have varied settings and points of view, but the consistency of tone creates a bond between each "random" recollection. It is a tone of dead seriousness, a seriousness with which he approaches the mundane yet grave thoughts and actions of everyday living.

Brautigan combines three individually titled sketches into a group called "Little Memoirs." The three, with drawings, neatly fill a double-page spread. There is a consistency in tone and first person narration, but that is all that hold the three vignettes together. The grouping of these three sketches creates a unity and sense of completeness that a single sketch could not achieve. The use of narrator in "Little Memoirs" is its most interesting aspect, and it takes at least three successive sketches to get a feeling for the narrator's peculiar view of life. If "pauses" is to function as a short story, the reader must participate in the story--the reader must be invited to experience a totality of effect through the sparse narrative; if only a consistency

in tone, persona, and motifs is functioning, then the reader must be given a sufficient quantity of "pauses" with which to make these connections.

What results is an asymmetrical yet cyclic progression in "pauses," yet the cycle does not return to the same place but crosses at a new point each time. Like John Barth's "Life-story," "pauses" cannot have an end, but is a continuously expanding organism following the law of entropy. All nature has a tendency to move toward instability, and if fiction is the "natural product" Sartre wishes it to be, then it too would have this tendency toward entropy. If fiction is entirely a man-made product it still retains a chaotic vitality from its source, and in a final examination, "pauses" would be more mimetic than the balanced and more traditional story, "The Haircut." As in "Beating it Back," the narrator in "pauses" has lost control of the persona. Although the individual parts are believable, the wholeness of "pauses" seems at first incoherent. John Ditsky defines two traits of experimental literature that are applicable here: "Concern with the structures by which a fragmented reality is 'organized,'" and "the imposition of non-linear patterns upon 'realistic' materials."<sup>15</sup> My intent was to show recognizable fragments of the real world, but a wholeness or progression which indeed might appear incoherent. "pauses" exhibits rapid shifts in tone because of its fragmented nature. Whether the individual sketches provide enough content to encompass these shifts I still question. The organization and coherence of "pauses" is at this stage still experimental.

The grappling with irreconcilable material has led to fine writing by Saul Bellow. John Waldridge states that the endings of Bellow's



novels "represent cessations of narrative action but not conclusions, pauses in flight but not the attainment of thematic destination."<sup>16</sup>

Neither "Beating it Back" nor "pauses" reaches any "destination," but only an end to the narration. The linear movement breaks down in both stories without any indication that a conclusion is even possible.

I have been discussing innovative techniques appearing in contemporary literature and my peculiar use of these techniques. An overall view would show one thing: irony, or the discrepancy between appearance and reality, always results from my use of these techniques. Because our lives are full of discrepancies, most critics appear to believe as I do that readers look for irony in literature. Complexity demands several levels of interpretation, and irony has been one common way of obtaining it. In fact, irony has become a distinguishing mark in contemporary literature.

Each of my stories was begun in a serious mood and with serious intent, but gradually, through my growing belief in the absurd nature of relationships, the "comedy," or "black humor," or simple "irony" emerged. The juxtaposition of the two moods brought on ambiguity and complexity, and this in turn perhaps brought about a more serious tone than that begun with. Lionel Trilling makes a confession concerning ambiguity in Lolita: "Indeed, for me one of the attractions of Lolita is the ambiguity of tone . . . and its ambiguity of intention, its ability to arouse uneasiness, to throw the reader off balance."<sup>17</sup>

Wayne Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction follows this comment by Trilling with his conclusion on contemporary fiction: "In short, we have looked for so long at foggy landscapes reflected in misty mirrors that we have come to like fog. Clarity and simplicity are suspect; irony reigns supreme."<sup>18</sup>

Irony is a vital element in contemporary fiction, but even when I consciously attempt to use another method of achieving complexity, irony is still the result. A personal question raised by the rewriting and self-analysis of these four stories is this: what level of complexity can contemporary fiction attain without the use of irony? Booth in A Rhetoric of Irony comments on this subject which he calls "the mother of confusions": "For both its devotees and for those who fear it, irony is usually seen as something that undermines clarities, opens up vistas of chaos, and either liberates by destroying all dogma or destroys by revealing the inescapable canker of negation at the heart of every affirmation."<sup>19</sup>

The irreconcilable elements of life are what Saul Bellow again and again confronts in his writing. A quotation from Herzog follows: "I can't accept this foolish dreariness. We are talking about the whole life of mankind. The subject is too great, too deep for such weakness, cowardice--too deep, too great, Shapiro." It is my hope that my aesthetic will first of all exhibit a union of form and meaning, and then, if possible, concretely represent human tenacity.

My magnum opus is not here; at this point what is important to me is not complete success with traditional and experimental techniques, but the insight to understand established methods and to attempt innovation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>My aesthetic theory has been greatly influenced by the objective theory of criticism as emphasized by the formalists Cleanth Brooks and Mark Schorer.

<sup>2</sup>"Robert Coover--'The Baby Sitter': An Observation on Experimental Writing," Style, 9(1975), 378.

<sup>3</sup>Weinstock, p. 378.

<sup>4</sup>Stevick, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1971), p. xi. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>5</sup>See Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, The Scope of Fiction (New York: Appleton, 1960), pp. 102-03.

<sup>6</sup>"Metafiction entails exploration of the theory of fiction through fiction itself. Writers of metafiction, including John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Robert Coover, scrutinize all facets of the literacy construct--language, the conventions of plot and character, the relation of the artist to his art and to his reader." Stanley Fogel, "'And All the Little Tytopies': Notes in Language Theory in the Contemporary Experimental Novel," MFS, 20(1974), 328, n. 3.

<sup>7</sup>"Understanding New Fiction," MFS, 20(1974), 314.

<sup>8</sup>Greenman, p. 310.

<sup>9</sup>Greenman, p. 315.

<sup>10</sup>Shirley Clarke's The Connection (1962) is an example of this type of cinema verité.

<sup>11</sup>Greenman, p. 313.

<sup>12</sup>See Revenge of the Lawn (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971) for examples of Brautigan's sketches.

<sup>13</sup>What this tone is I can not readily state, but it is one quite different from Hemingway's early subject, the exhaustion of value, exemplified by his bare style.

<sup>14</sup>Weinstock, p. 380.

<sup>15</sup>"The Man on the Quaker Oats Box: Characteristics of Recent Experimental Fiction," The Georgia Review, 3(1972), 312.

<sup>16</sup>"Saul Bellow at 60: A Turn to the Mystical," Saturday Review, 6 Sept. 1975, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup>"The Last Lover," Encounter, 11(1958), 19.

<sup>18</sup>(Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 372.

<sup>19</sup>(Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), p. ix.

## THE HAIRCUT

"Three dollars."

Not bad, for the girls and the dark rooms, music in the walls and cool leather, sinking couches. "Go ahead," she told him. "I think you need a girl."

So he did. In the middle of the afternoon, even, when he should have been working or studying or anywhere else but there.

"Have you been here before?" Shrug your shoulders and say sure . . . no, look at the picture, the reclining nude on the wall . . . just looking for a friend, say it. . . .

"No."

"Here's a card to fill out. We'll have someone for you in a moment. Be comfortable."

He sank into the leather couch till his knees were level with his nose. New magazines with their covers still on. Today's newspaper. This was nothing like those small-time operations with stacks of faceless periodicals aging unclassically into mere words again.

He looked again at the erotic painting on the wall. It was much more provocative than he had noticed at first glance. She was lying with her back mostly turned away from the viewer, but caught in a moment of stretching with her arms entwined above her head so that one breast was visible. Not bad at all . . . fantastic detail . . . color just right.

Above the receptionist's desk was a list of prices. With alarm he saw the bottom price, the cheapest price, listed at \$9.00. Abe only charged \$2.50--"An honest price for an honest haircut." He nonchalantly slipped out his billfold . . . seven bucks . . . this was his excuse. He pushed his hands down to rise and immediately fell backward into the cool leather as the couch gave to the pressure.

The painting was directly before him on the wall, and he could not stop his wandering eyes from resting on such a work of art. She was on her back now, her long legs drawn up at the knees, and was perhaps even turned toward him since both breasts were clearly visible. Just a fantasy . . . excited . . . look somewhere else.

For the first time he became aware of a movement in a dark corner and saw a head raised slightly from the shadows. First a pointed chin, then two hollowed cheeks reflecting like pale half-moons. A pencil-thin moustache could be seen and waxen lips parting slightly while a grating rumble came from the dark as if a throat had been cleared. A thick newspaper lay folded apparently on a crossed leg. At least two eyes were observing Arthur, he was sure.

He would leave. He would roll onto the floor, out the door then run and run and maybe get his car when it got dark. . . .

"Mr. Sampson." Tell her you have become suddenly sick . . . very regrettable . . . must make an appointment later in the week . . .

"Yes?" Fake it . . . an epileptic attack . . . a ruptured disk. . . . The smiling receptionist grasped Arthur, her hard breast tight to his dangling arm, and helped him stand. She would not let go, but continued squeezing his now unmovable arm.

"Tony can take you now." Quick, knock her loose, push her against

the wall. "Come this way please." She said three dollars on the phone . . . he was sure.

"Fine . . . thank you." It's too late . . . they'll have to take three dollars or nothing. What could they do? They walked past the nude, and as he glanced once more she languidly rolled toward him, stretching her arms, legs drawing . . . oh . . . geez . . . one more look . . . as they passed through the door.

"Hi, I'm Tony. Here's my card."

"Howdy." Arthur was bitterly disappointed.

"What'll be today?"

"Just a haircut." Tony was fat, had a blond moustache, and wore too much cologne. Where were the girls?

"A haircut? How about a style?"

"No, I just have enough for a haircut, a three dollar haircut."

"Ya go to whacking on long hair like yours and it don't come out right." He had already begun cutting, lifting up long strands of hair with his comb and playfully chomping his teeth with each cut.

"I could still shampoo yer hair then shape it nicely, pull back here at the ears, take out this bulk at the side," he demonstrated with his hands.

Arthur was silent.

"Okay." Grabbing his electric clippers, Tony began plunging up from Arthur's neckline.

Arthur stared at the wall. There were seven framed pictures of Tony receiving a plaque and a handshake from seven short, bald men with sunglasses. As he studied the pictures he became aware that each picture was identical, only blown up to different sizes. This wasn't

like Abe's with the red and white barberpole; there weren't any ranchers with cowdung on their boots thumbing last year's *Field and Stream* and their noses or listening to Abe's stories.

Abe was sort of a rancher himself and knew about all the rustling in the county. Abe'd never lost a single calf though his acreage was hardly ever watched. Abe seemed just as lucky as he was honest. Last month Arthur heard Abe's story about a college student caught rustling calves.

"He was just a freshman who'd go out at night in his pickup and find one or two calves he could rustle without too much notice, then take them back to his second story apartment," Abe began. "It started to stink something terrible, but his neighbors never said a word till he'd gotten close to a dozen head up there." Heads were shaking in disbelief around the room.

"Well, one night them people below him called the police about a rowdy party upstairs. You know, that boy swore he couldn't figure how those calves got up there a standing in his bathtub and a laying on his bed. That apartment wasn't rented out for a long time, I'd swear on that."

"Ya need the maincure girl?" asked Tony.

"No thanks." Arthur quit biting his thumbnail and placed both hands under the pin stripe sheet.

A black shoeshine man with graying hair and a corncob pipe wandered in and sat smoking opposite Arthur. He didn't offer Arthur a shoeshine, but seemed intent on studying Arthur's face. The pungent smoke travelled a crooked path toward Arthur, where it seemingly swirled around his head. The phone rang, and the old man grabbed it instantly.



"Hold down the noise," he demanded, "this is Chicago."

"Okay, that's enough." Tony stopped abruptly, and swiveled Arthur around facing the mirror. Immediately the reflection of what seemed a barebreasted forest nymph with a daisy necklace quickly handed the old black man a crisp stack of money and glided around the corner out of sight. He could see the shoeshine man writing in a small notebook and puffing furiously. This sure wasn't like Abe's.

When he'd walked into Abe's for the first time Abe was smiling at himself in the mirror. His shiny crown was completely bald, but he was smoothing back the thin, remaining strands of hair on the side of his head, his reflected audience waiting. He always did this before he told a story, and a story always had precedence over a haircut. The farmers were talking about the NAACP being in town.

"Now once not too long ago," began Abe, "a couple of darkies showed up here seeing if I'd give them a haircut. I told them right off I'd raised some cattle but knew nothing about shearing sheep--not even black ones. I was being serious, but they just sat down like I owed them a haircut.

"'Well,' I said, 'let's get on with it.' This one darkie had the puffiest head of hair I'd ever seen, so I just made a few clean sweeps from the forehead to the back of the neck. I don't think a poodle would a looked better. His buddy's eyes got big as saucers, so the other turned his head to look in the mirror and just about crapped. His eyes started rolling, and I'd swear they was both off like bats out of hell. I didn't even get paid."

Damned redneck, Arthur had thought while the farmers and two-bit merchants were laughing and wheezing and hitting their knees. Damned

rednecks, he'd thought till Abe said "Next" and smiled at Arthur like a whole new story was dawning. "Just a little off the side," he'd said as Abe combed back long strands of Arthur's hair in mock admiration.

"Healthy," he told his audience. "Where're you from?" asked Abe, scissors poised and smiling silver-capped grins.

"Why, jest up the road a bit," Arthur said as country as he could. "Been having a hell of a time lately with rustlers," he lied.

"Is that a fact?" asked Abe.

"Seven head in little over a month." Arthur had saved his hair. They talked more about cattle and wheat and Abe took just a little off the sides.

"Ya got a blower?" asked Tony.

"No."

"No?"

"Well, I use my girlfriend's." Tony grabbed a huge hair blower with both hands and turned it on Arthur's face full power, then whirled him around to demonstrate it on his hair. The shoeshine man was gone. Smoke, though, still lingered around the phone, and the black notebook stuffed with money had been dropped on the floor.

"How about a chance on this blower? One buck for a fifty buck blower."

"I don't really need one, she lives upstairs from me."

"What if you and your girl break up, what are you going to do for a blower?"

"Get by I guess . . . maybe the blower will keep us together."

*Whack* went Tony's scissors on his forelocks.

"One buck," he demanded.

"No."

*Whack* went Tony's scissors.

Arthur had just happened by Abe's neighborhood once and had seen the striped pole in front of his white corner shop and the shade trees and the farmers inside. He thought he'd like looking at old magazines in an old barbershop and just being lazily comfortable. It had reminded him of certain hot afternoons as a boy back home when the Rivoli barbershop was full of kids right out of the Saturday morning show next door at the Rivoli theatre. There were always a couple of mothers getting five or six of their boys cut at once, sometimes even a few girls were there. Just about everyone got burrs. It felt good and just couldn't look bad, even after swimming. The burr was a way of life, like those hot Saturday afternoons. Arthur had gone into Abe's that first time because it looked comfortable through the big window; he had gone into Abe's just to get a haircut.

"I don't need any hairspray," Arthur said when he saw a silver can poised over his head.

"What's that?"

"I'm working out pretty soon, so don't bother with the spray."

"A jock . . . like to bet on some games? A ten dollar parlay card? Twenty-five?"

Abe's favorite story was about an old neighbor of his . . .

"Now old Jake would come home just a stinking nearly every evening," Abe would say. "I don't know how he ever made it to the door some nights. One evening his wife let him in and helped him onto the bed. Then she started sewing up the sheet all around him and waited for him to wake up. *Ooh* was he ever surprised when he woke up in that

sheet and she began a beating on him with a broom. She kept it up till he swore he'd never get tight again.

"And you know," Abe'd pause, point his comb around the room for effect, "he never did. That really cured him, guess he was scared to death of that woman and what she might do to him. . ."

"Manicure?" a knockout blonde asked while simultaneously seating herself on a stool before the chair. Laying both of Arthur's hands on her bare knees, she began massaging the fingers. Can't refuse now . . . close your eyes.

"Ya want your neck shaved behind here?" Tony asked.

"Yea . . . please. . . ." Arthur yawned, not even thinking of the dangers. Damn he was sleepy. Where were the girls, didn't he come for the girls . . . the girls . . . .

"The girls?" asked Tony. "Why didn't you say so?" The chair made a mechanical whine and flattened horizontally while the lights dimmed slowly down to total darkness, then dimmed on just as slowly to a dull, purplish color, and one, two girls naked, now three, in the ethereal light and their glowing hands slipped off his shoes, stripped his chest, his pants disappeared, his body tingled and glowed under their dancing hands everywhere, everywhere at once . . . . . the shoe-shine man twisting the heels off his shoes, turning his shirt inside out . . . the dark man with glowing cheeks searching his pants . . . Abe peering into his pried open mouth . . .

"Seven dollars," said the dark man holding Arthur's billfold.

"Seven dollars?" asked one, two glowing figures, now three asking "seven dollars?"

"That's all," said the dark man, "that's all" echoed again in

unison . . . drifting people backwards . . . chair revolving. . . .

"That's all. You can sleep at your own place, buddy."

"The girls . . . where are the girls?" asked Arthur.

Tony smiled. "Three bucks, a simple haircut--three bucks."

"Thanks." Abe was cheaper, four bits cheaper . . . but the girls?

"Come see us again," cooed the receptionist. Ask her, just ask her about the girls. . . .

"Yes, good afternoon."

He exited and was blinded by the bright afternoon sun. For several moments he was quite helpless, teetering before his car. He caught a distorted reflection of his hair in the front window, and reflexively pounded the carhood with his fist. Inside the car he looked intently in the rearview mirror at his hair, and once more pounded his fist on the dash. The glove compartment popped open. He smiled.

The Rivoli had been a good barbershop, damn good as long as you knew which days to go and which barber to avoid. Cousin Scott had worn a red baseball cap an entire July after getting a lopsided haircut from old Tom, who was only sober enough on Wednesdays and Thursdays to work. The other five days he was barely able to stand, let alone cut hair. . . .

"Now Thursday evenings he'd start getting tight," Arthur mumbled out loud, "and he'd be drunker 'n a skunk till Sunday. Monday and Tuesday he'd dry out, but Scott asked for a flat top on Monday. It had looked like Tom cut the left side twice and just forgotten about the other, while the top looked like fourteen pieces of gum had been cut out of Scott's hair with globs of butchwax dabbed on to fill the holes. Scott was so embarrassed he wouldn't go to church until Uncle

Ollie said, 'Well wear your baseball cap for crying out loud.' Scott did, right up to the sanctuary door."

Wasn't much of a story. He looked at his hair a third time . . . a bowl haircut, that's what she'd call it. "You should have had a girl do it," that's what she'd say. Would she even sleep with him . . . the girls . . . the girls . . . a moral, a story. . . .

What the hell, he'd get a beer and look for an old baseball cap. When his hair grew back he'd have a story for Abe.

## BACON FRYIN'

Who hasn't questioned his origin, or considered the possibility that his conception was not a deliberate act by two people wishing him life and luck; who hasn't looked around a crowded room asking "Were you on purpose, were you and you?"

He flipped the lightswitch absentmindedly before remembering--no electricity, not since Friday morning when every lightbulb in every room had popped its filament. "An overload, or maybe a short," his landlord speculated on the phone. "Maybe Monday I can get someone out."

He heard a crash and knew his refrigerator had finally quit also. Two inch slabs of ice were breaking off all sides of the doorless freezer. He really couldn't understand why it had run this long without any apparent source of energy, but now he could throw out that crap: last summer's frozen strawberries, a gigantic chicken leg and thigh bequeathed by a friendly neighbor when she moved three months ago, chocolate syrup that had been through two birthdays . . . but the bacon dammit, he wouldn't throw a pound and a half of bacon away . . . he'd fry it all right now. Bacon fryin' meant a big breakfast with eggs and hotcakes, coffee, biscuits, hot chocolate, oatmeal, lots of people, chairs warmed by the fireplace; it meant things were fine.

Lighting a bottled candle left from some spaghetti party a dozen friends ago, he fried the bacon in a small skillet over such a high flame that the curling strips were simultaneously fatty and crisp. The flames licked up the sides of the pan, sizzling the long strips hanging

over the edges. He was completely absorbed in the sound of the frying bacon and the sight of the dancing flames. Pan after pan he feverishly fried, and soon stripped off his flannel shirt as the front room warmed. He was getting overweight and his skin was sallow looking by the flame's light. Had to get in shape again--get rid of the flab, tone up the muscles.

He dumped in the last panfull, but before the bacon was half-cooked the overpowering odor usually so pleasant now forced him to stop, back away from the flame and spattering grease, and throw half of the still red strips on the linoleum for his two cats, Foggy and Screamer. Holding the rest of the bacon by one warmed, greasy end, he went outside looking for the stray cat he'd ignored the past three days. Could be dead, though he doubted it. Cats are pretty crafty, take care of themselves . . . as long as he didn't see it dead.

"Kitty, kitty," he called in that voice so embarrassing yet so effective. "Come here you goddam cat!" he shouted as a light instantly came on next door. It began sprinkling again, so he threw it on the cement steps. "Something better eat it," he mumbled, and imagining someone peeking through the blinds next door, he shouted "Fuckin' rain. Isn't it the shits? The goddam rain, the cold front, my fuckin' lights . . . and not a single fuckin' person all weekend to enjoy this with."

Inside his cats weren't concerned with the weather, but growled and again and again, snatched the remaining fatty globs away from each other each time one attempted to chew the bacon. He stretched across the bed on his stomach with pants and shoes still on. He was tired, and glad of it. At least he'd be warm tonight . . . finally gotten that pilot light going . . . nearly too drafty to keep a match burning.



Done it anyway . . . no damn help. Damn have to do everything yourself. He rolled over, jerking off his shoes and socks and tossing each in a different corner of the bedroom. Sliding out of his jeans he whirled them several times over his head and tossed them through the door into the front room. He started to yank off his boxers, but since it was too warm to get under the covers he decided he might be vulnerable to Foggy and Screamer's capricious clawing.

He was falling asleep sober tonight only because the local bars were closed on Sunday. Drinking beer by candlelight in his dreary apartment with the cold drizzle and the howling wind for company would be melodramatic. He was tired anyway. Foggy and Screamer curled between his stretched legs. He'd sleep a long time. Dammit, he'd make it now. Jesus, three days of darkness . . . he could handle anything now. Nice feeling. Independence evening.

The smell of bacon had dissipated, with only a faint aroma entering the bedroom, so that once more it was somewhat enjoyable. Five o'clock every morning his father had come home from the foundry, flipped on the light, and pulled the covers off his sleepy body. He had to hop out of bed onto the cold wood and spar with his laughing father till he was fully awake. They would go down to Eddie's and drink coffee while watching their breakfast being prepared behind the counter--hash browns and eggs, the thick hunks of bacon sizzling so loudly it seemed you had to shout to be heard. Every morning they went, every morning except Sunday, when his father slept off the effects of Saturday night.

Sleep can be such a good thing he was thinking. He recognized a familiar smell--gas, or that stuff they put in the gas so you can smell it when things go wrong, like now. *Scratch this strip and smell. It*

*may save your life*, Oklahoma Natural Gas Co. had warned. God, it smelled like rotten eggs. He thought he chuckled. Good thing he was still awake. Too comfortable to move quite yet . . . had to think about this a minute, too good a moment to pass by quickly. To be gassed accidentally--how could it be easier, though surely there were more enjoyable ways. He'd heard of old men screwing themselves to death on eighteen year old girls. Perhaps the last moment you're alive is captured stop/action forever, he laughed. Would the feeling in that last moment continue? Keep laughing, he thought. Accidentally . . . would they know for sure? What about the guy he had read about who they had found singed and reddened with his head stuck in an electric oven. Surely he wasn't serious, just a feeble attempt. . . .

He remembered his last trip to the city when he was researching Baudelaire at the downtown library. When it got dark and cold the bums and winos would wander in to stay warm. He had walked in the restroom past an old man staring in the mirror. He was funny looking, like Buster Keaton. The old man turned quickly and began jabbing at him with what looked like a small kitchen knife. He backed away warding off the light blows with his leather briefcase while the old man cried "Cut it off, cut it off." When he shakily backed out the door the old man laughed again and said "Come back, go ahead, go ahead." He could have laid the old man out with one blow, yet he was frightened of even touching that bony frame. The head shifting from side to side as he bounced and hopped toward him, the darting eyes and the raised eyebrows . . . . He had left the city immediately, racing from that black bundle, that baggy-panted man with death in his hand.

*We had a hell of a good time Friday afternoon drinking beer and*

*playing shuffleboard. No, no . . . hand shuffleboard. He's good, but also a lucky son-of-a-bitch. No, he was still there when we left for supper. What about the cats? Lovable, but that doesn't mean they'd be taken care of if anything happened to him. Crap, he'd read too much. He was too intelligent to take his life, or maybe too afraid--"perchance to dream," and then driven across the river of boiling blood into the seventh circle, second round . . . becoming a moaning tree bleeding from the Harpies' beaks, taking the blows. Camus and Buber arm in arm looking down from above. "We told you so, we told you so," echoing through the inferno.*

*Yea, he was here Friday and Sunday evening . . . yea, I recognized the picture . . . really drunk Friday and talkative . . . ordered seafood special both nights . . . said he shouldn't have Sunday night . . . quiet then, but a big tipper . . . I think he was trying to pick me up . . . at least on Friday. . . . And his students, someone taking over . . . it'd be a mess. A few of them might shed a tear, or skip a meal, but then at least one of them, probably Rubinstein, would make a joke of it. "Old Bac' took a fall again last night--split the purse with Beezlebub." Fuckin' Rubinstein.*

*We played golf Saturday morning . . . joked around a lot . . . said he was in no hurry . . . usually more competitive, though he scored decently. Yes, I guess he acted a little strange. He wanted to box a couple rounds at the Y afterwards. No, I'd heard he used to be pretty salty. Right, before the hassle with his wife and the drinking. I bet he was still pretty tough . . . I didn't want any part of him. The newspaper story would be screwed up too. They'd probably hypothesize after they gave the who, whats and where. "No apparent*

signs of foul play . . . possibility of suicide . . . despondent recently." Despondent, god he hated that word . . . what bullshit, accidents happen. Sometimes you're born accidentally. Even if you're created on purpose you have no say about it. But by God you can make it harder in hell on the person deciding when you're going to die. Keep bouncing off the ropes . . . need a couple kids running around . . . whole mess of kids . . . got to get on it . . . need some kids . . . *gravida* . . . pregnant . . . fully expecting . . . *grave* . . . serious . . . empty.

God, if anything happened to him there'd probably be a picture come out somewhere. What picture would they use? Hadn't had one made since before he started going bald. It'd be a better picture, but some people might not recognize him. Had to get a new picture made soon, it was worth the money.

*I saw him come out of his office Saturday night carrying The Ginger Man. He started getting off on progeny, and how most men secretly wish they had dozens of kids running around that they didn't have to financially support. Yes, I think he'd been drinking . . . heavily. I heard him laughing all the way down the stairs. Comfortable and pleasantly warm now, probably be cold before long since the flame was out. A real pain in the ass getting out of bed in the morning . . . so damn cold, and no lights . . . he'd go to Sambo's . . . great place for breakfast . . . therapeutic . . . the sanitarium of Travesty . . . drink coffee, eat hotcakes, eggs and bacon . . . read the paper. He'd eat high on the hog tomorrow morning. Nice place . . . everybody busy and talking and smiling. . . .*

Sunday was the only morning he and his wife used to eat breakfast together. They'd eat like country squires, never cutting back because

of cost, even when eggs were temporarily scarce and the bacon had doubled in price. Sometimes on certain winter evenings they'd cook up a "breakfast," then relax by the fireplace with brandy. Those evenings seemed romantic once, maudlin now.

*I talked to him Thursday night . . . he sounded great. Just friends . . . three years. I told him not to expect me, but he's always thinking I'll just drop in. . . I tried checking on him often. Yes, I'm upset damn him. He needed to get a birthday card . . . present had to wait till he went back to the old hometown . . . always forgot his wife's.*

*We talked about many dark topics, but you realize it was so unusually cold and rainy outside that afternoon. It brought out the worst in us I suppose . . . A plague. Yes, we talked about how some cataclysmic event or even a plague would "shock our sensibilities," I believe that's the phrasing we used, yes shock our sensibilities to a keener awareness of the ease with which we can die against our strongest wishes--so much more than a single death of even the closest friend. No, these were all his ideas . . . it appears he was very perceptive, at least in his own case. Officer, I will not speculate on nuances in his behavior that afternoon, nor suggest noticeable peculiarities, but I quote his last remark: "Al, you don't realize how this morbid conversation has cheered me up." Nothing else really unusual, but he kept coming and going all day. Said he was checking the notes he left. Yes, he explained that he left notes "to whomever" in case people came up unexpectedly for the weekend. Apparently not, Officer, he kept coming back. Despondent? Off and on I guess. "Shit," he hollered as Screamer ran under the bed and a surprised, yawning*

Foggy retracted her stretched claws from the inside of his left thigh. He was nauseous, swirling as he collapsed on the bed. It's a fuckin' accident . . . Mother of God . . . he rolled out of bed . . . write it down, on the wall, anywhere, they have to know it's an accident . . . Christ Almighty . . . he reeled, dropping the pencil and leaning heavily on the window sill.

*Frederick Ballantine, 31, was found Monday evening by local authorities, the apparent victim of leaking gas. The asphyxiation occurred sometime between Sunday evening and Monday noon. Although strong evidence indicates suicide, there were also signs of a struggle. Police are continuing the investigation and considering the possibility of homicide. At the time of his death, Ballantine was a professor of philosophy at Mountolive Junior College. He is survived by his estranged wife. . . .*

He pushed weakly on the window, but it remained stuck. He stumbled into the next room, slipped on a water puddle from the defrosting refrigerator, and crashed into the stove, splitting his lower lip. He grabbed his jeans lying a few feet away and stuck his head in them while curling on the wet linoleum. He was trying not to breathe, and at the same time keep from tasting the trickling blood from his lip. The taste of blood made him furious; he was tougher than this. Looking through the unbuttoned crotch of his jeans he saw the front room window, and though the door was fifteen feet away, he crawled toward the window with the jeans still dangling from his head. He lurched upward and it raised halfway, then fell toward the cool air, but the wooden edge smashed against his crown, knocking him back on the floor. Arms supporting him behind, he was dazed and swirling . . . two,

three . . . purple green circles . . . he had to vomit . . . six, seven, eight . . . once more he charged, head low, for the narrow opening and through, through the splitting screen falling head over onto the wet grass, rolling down the embankment onto the graveled parkway.

Foggy curled up on his chest and looked in his face. Screamer licked his wet feet, and meowed in a manner approaching concern. Under his car was the stray cat eating the bacon he'd thrown out, while Foggy and Screamer eyed it. His head hurt like hell, might need stitches. Wasn't going to move, though, till the cold air cleared his head.

"Fuckin' accident," he'd tell whoever came along, "fuckin' accident."

## BEATING IT BACK

One morning you wake up and realize you're a long way from friends and home, and you've got little left to buy your way. That morning you want to say "Whoops, wrong turn, let me start again," but know the reply will be your laughing face in the mirror.

*YOU didn't surprise me when the dream died, perhaps forever, in that chilly dusk of an August struggle. It was not really so long ago you tasted the dark and heard the shifting winds blast your name. . . yes, distinctly your name across the awaiting heavens. You do remember the fateful laugh, the hard swallow and blink. Yes, you remember. . .*

The day was dimming. The traffic still continued steadily down the shimmering highway and disappeared over the hill. The heat of the day held stubbornly to the asphalt highway, and sent suffocating waves over two huddled figures leaning against a silver guardrail. One held a cardboard sign raised over his bent head, and across this torn and dirty sign was scrawled in large, black letters the single word EAST. The other rested his head on updrawn legs and folded arms while slowly, very slowly, puffs of smoke rose from his somber shadow on the ground. He methodically extinguished his cigarette stub on the side of his cheap leather shoes. This done, he retreated down into the dense overgrowth, leaving his comfortable seated position against the guardrail which separated the smooth surfaced road for half a mile from this steep, heavily wooded ravine on the south.

Forever they had waited. Forever two thumbs had pleaded a



situation grown hazy and uncertain. The first could no longer hold his arm straight, and much like a chopped tree it toppled, bouncing once upon the hard, hot surface before seemingly merging with the asphalt. Soon the whole body would melt and seep quietly beneath the black pavement.

The second was now puffing back with two large handfuls of odd-shaped rocks. Carefully placing these rocks by his feet, he faced a silver lightpole twenty yards away on the highway's shoulder. The lightpole loomed over this barren patch of highway, misplaced, most certainly, by an erratic engineer. Head shielded from the sky by a glass helmet, rooted firmly in a concrete base from which it drew nourishment, it stood a silent fortress guarding the asphalt coast.

Taking thoughtful aim he shot one rock quickly at the towering citadel. A miss, and slowly and again so carefully, he fired a second rough-edged rock at the immense structure. Again and again he fired until finally, one small rock, not more than a pebble, pinged off the silver surface.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day was nearly gone. The eastbound traffic continued, but not with the midday tempo. Cooler air was settling over the bare ears of the two figures, drifting down from the northern hill with the tall, green pines. The first had discarded his crumpled cardboard sign, and was now shading his glazed eyes up the rolling highway at the crippled sun which had moments before crashed and now lay burning where the road disappeared into the fiery horizon.

Out of the fire a speck emerged, and soon appeared as a small man burdened with a large object balanced on one tilted shoulder. Within

moments this small man grew to a good-sized cowboy with a dark wide-brimmed hat, a blowing yellow bandana, and silver spurred boots. He tugged politely on the front of his hat and shifted a leather saddle to his other sweaty shoulder. The saddle had buffaloes tooled into its brown sides and a lariat hanging from a silver saddle horn. He wiped a few beads of glistening sweat from his upper lip and nodded, touching his hat brim as he jangled by. A hundred yards east of them he stopped, and taking the coiled lariat from his saddle horn began spinning and whirling the magic rope till it floated above his head in a circle ten yards in diameter. As the diesels roared down the hill he would tip his hat, the revolving rope faintly visible in the dusk above his dark grin. Each diesel demanded a new trick, a different twist of the rope, a variance in the "yip" uttered from his mouth. His third trick was the best and that third diesel jammed the sharp curve at the bottom of the hill.

Shortly, two silent figures were again alone on the highway as truckdriver and cowboy roared into the darkness of the east.

\* \* \* \* \*

The mountain air was settling down and chilling two faces darkened by the spent sun. Cars continued east into the desert, where other figures were still staggering under the waves of heat that holds even throughout the night for those unlucky wanderers, wanderers crisping day by day in that torrid land ahead.

A soft glow was now emitted from the silver lightpole towering above the two. For the first time they noticed marks etched on the metallic surface, and began examining this guidepost like two archaeologists stumbling upon an ancient artifact. "Two days now. It's

raining. Damn the rain." "No way out. Four days, four nights. Cold. Where could you go?"--Trisch. "Paul and John and Mary and Lunda((Arf). Can't turn around now. This place is hell." Underneath this last cryptic message was written, "No. You are only close to hell. Continue east and you will find it."--Bub.

The two were not cheered by the ominous scribblings, the prophetic warning, and suddenly they were not merely tired, cold travelers inconvenienced by the inhospitality of the road, they were cursing, violent tempers beating empty fists against this blasphemous beacon for the shipwrecked.

\* \* \* \* \*

The night was black, except for the minute area glowing in the aura of the silver pole. More trucks than cars frequented the highway now. Two figures cast short, fuzzy shadows on the gray gravel beneath the tall light. They scuffed their cold feet and pushed numb hands deeper into warm pockets, perhaps wishing their whole shivering bodies could be pulled into those comforting, cavernous pockets and vanish from the starry heavens. *You never really wanted to go, you know.* The stars were brilliant, *I had to write "Force the moment, see if it holds any air," on your pillow* overwhelmingly so above the dark and lifeless earth they peered upon. At first the two had identified familiar constellations--Orion, hunter of the heavens, wanderer of the night; tumbling Andromeda; and Hydra the water-monster engulfing the sky--and they traced the North Star from the side of the Big Dipper. Then they created their own myths, their own champions of the sky by connecting those luminary orbs with invisible lines. Now they grew nervous beneath their creations, the thousand lidless eyes innocently

watching two slight figures flattened to that horizontal plane of asphalt, incapable either of rising above it or digging beneath its surface.

While pausing for breath the legs can stiffen, grow cold and immovable.

\* \* \* \* \*

With no moon the sky was truly black. Occasionally wayward headlights would momentarily pierce the black wall and startle two figures leaned heavily, deeply against the silver guardrail. *Travelling through Slapout, Oklahoma, I had my first foreboding feeling.* A diesel roared by too close to the edge and the force of the passing wind blew hard on four eyelids. Suddenly they were on their feet watching that diesel disappearing thunderously over the hill. No sooner had the sound of the diesel languished than a frightening rumble appeared in the west, and a whole herd of diesels came stampeding down the hill toward them. Four eyes flickered simultaneously. . . .

Observe two wild-eyed creatures of the dark whirling imaginary lariats high above their heads, now dancing in and out of their ropes with amazing dexterity and skill. What performers! What magicians of the dark! They danced and whirled tirelessly beneath their spotlight, never bowing for applause but eyes always on their passing audience. They performed with the confidence, the zeal of true artists, as if this one insignificant show would determine their blossoming careers, their uncertain future. Several of the diesels toot-tooted before disappearing over the hill. None stopped.

It was black again, truly black. A single laugh was heard, then echoed a second laughing voice. It was the first time the silver

lightpole had ever heard laughter.

\* \* \* \* \*

Midnight was approaching. This did not stop the diesels nor the cars from moving on toward their hazy destinations, but it did make two cold bodies think of their sleeping bags and the deep, inviting ravine beneath the silver guardrail. *Weren't we looking for a tropical island, a polynesian paradise? Guava sucking, barefoot days with browned girls--white-shelled necklaces, openmouthed--barebreasted beauties shying past us all day. It wasn't there. Beating the hell back was all we could do.* One began rummaging the highway for scraps of paper, cardboard and discarded wood. He then began scratching out sign after sign with his stubby, black crayon. The second keenly watched, two fingers moving faster to and from the pursed mouth while warm smoke enveloped his head. "Home" the first had scrawled on the bottom of an orange cate. The second smoking figure, like a mystic emerging from a trance, jumped from his seat, grabbed an old piece of cardboard and the crayon from the first, and fervently etched the single word "Mom" on the rough surface. *With a boyish grin you didn't grin when the Teton rain pounded down your upturned collar and made your cigarette limp* he wedged the cardboard between the wooden post and the silver guardrail, the sign facing west to the oncoming traffic. Strange, unusual signs soon covered the entire guardrail. The wind whipped several signs from their insecure placement, washing these messages down the highway. They began waving at the cars, two voyagers drifting from shore.

And again the cold air crackled with laughter.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was closer to dawn than it had been all night. A few straggling cars were still trying to reach their destination, and dim-eyed travelers observed an intriguing spectacle. Beneath the phosphorescent glow of that empty lighthouse two dignified personages delivered oratories, recited poetry, and burst forth frequently into arioso singing. One paced the stage, hands clasped behind, eyes entreating Calliope for the eloquent words, phrases, as the second watched, mingling the words with the smoke drifting to the clouded brain. *"Good Morning," the breakfast menu cheerfully said. "Good Morning," you replied. "Good Morning," it pleasantly repeated. "Good Morning," you nodded. "Good Morning," "Good Morning," till they asked us to leave.*

It was now time for the dedication. At the base of the silver lightpole rested a smooth granite slab, about three feet long and foot on the side. *Must I be serious? You remember it well.* The first went to one knee, and gazed upward. The second crouched down billowing smoke and wrote in neat black letters:

TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN HITCHHIKER

DEDICATED TO THOSE WHO SAW THE LIGHT AND STOOD SILENTLY

BENEATH THE ABSURD

Neither talked, but both pondered those grave black letters as if the hand of heaven had rubbed them into that surface when the waters first parted. One cigarette was ceremoniously extinguished on the edge of the memorial.

A snicker, and then another. *Salt Lake City to Flagstaff . . . a business major, I think. Washington? Twenty-nine, Art. Seven years in school, working for a newspaper also. Five gallon can of peanut butter in the back . . . tight with his money. Nice guy, though, picked*

up everybody he saw: the dope fiend who ate all his peanut butter, the drunk Mexican who kept sleeping on everyone's shoulder, the splint-legged Navajo hitching to the Indian hospital in Phoenix. Remember when we stopped at the Wupatki ruins? Cochise stayed in the van. "Hmmmh, rocks," he only said waving a crutch at his heritage.

\* \* \* \* \*

The eastern landscape was softening. No traffic had passed for an hour. It wasn't any colder, it wasn't warmer. Two figures . . . can we press closer? Do we dare look into the eyes . . . just a brief moment . . . try to see their colors?

No. Let the faces grow fuzzy again, leave the voices a mutter and their eyes colorless. Again now, two figures . . . just two figures. Art knew some good stories since he'd travelled quite a bit. "Everyone is hungry in Calcutta," he said turning to look at the dope fiend. "There sure aren't any dogs or cats running around the streets. Professional beggars maim babies and then employ them after they've grown into grotesquely deformed children. Their little arms and legs are just twisted around into all kinds of inhuman shapes." Art was silent for a few moments, then as an after thought stated, "People go hungry here, also. Dog is quite a delicacy some places, they eat it for Thanksgiving on the Dakota reservations."

\* \* \* \* \*

The day was dawning. The traffic had picked up considerably; morning was a good time to travel. It was pleasant to be awake at this cool hour with an eastern sun shining warmly on tight faces. Observe two figures leaned lightly against a silver guardrail. We pitched our tent on the football field, the middle of the football

field in that little Mormon town, and when those two o'clock revelers stumbled upon us you said, "Hello there," as they yelled "Shit" running backwards trying to figure what was happening. They talked in low voices, almost reverent in their statements, their pauses. They skipped rocks across the highway. Many had delusions we discovered. The spelunker hitching back from Peru . . . around Phoenix I think . . . "Best caves in the world," he kept saying, "come to Oregon and take in a few holes." "Spelunking for an entire year?" you asked incredulously. "I could spend my whole life doing it; you know, I cry sometimes when I come back out into the light." I laughed my ass off when he asked what you'd been doing. An eastbound car had slowed down and was edging off the highway toward the two seated figures. The first still skipped rocks off the black asphalt, and continued telling a story, a humorous story it seemed. The second grinned between slow puffs, and watched the car pull alongside them. The car stopped, it waited . . . .

A coughing laugh, and then another and another mingled with the morning air. First day out was really the toughest. Western Oklahoma. Remember the crazy guy? He was with the F.B.I., but oddjobbed around various farms as a cover. "Get confused sometimes," he admitted, "blew a fuse studying too hard in college." He kept killing snakes all over the highway and shaking his arm out the window. "Hurt it rolling my pickup last week," he told us. "Humor him," you kept whispering till we jumped out at Four Corners.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day was. And the traffic and the silver guardrail, the light-pole. Two figures weren't. Mostly we had an easy time. Hungry



occasionally, hot, cold and wet sometimes. Every ride meant new scenery, new people. Flexibility and persistence--like our ride across Arizona, the one you almost blew. A new car, a guy driving and two nice-looking girls, air conditioning. "Gospel Singers, Church of Christ," they hummed. "And your affiliation?" one asked presently. "Agnostic," you crudely announced. "Zorastrian," I replied thinking pleasantly of Midras, bleeding bulls and fertility rites. "HMMMMMMMM." The driver hummed the key then whispered "travelling." "We are travelling, travelling 'long the road" the girls began, "that our Savior and Lord once trod too," "We are travelling," I followed, "travelling in the steps of the One who has saved me and you." Everyone enjoyed singing . . .

Bom, bom, bom, bom, And as we travel,  
 we carry a song,  
 Bom, bom, bom, bom, to keep us happy,  
 to keep our heart's strong

Oh yes we're travelling, travelling up the road  
 Heaven bound, O glorious sound it'll all come true!

You sang too, I saw you. We both sang like hell.

## PAUSES

I. When I first saw thee sad and weeping, I forthwith knew thee to be in misery and banishment. But I had not known how far off thou wert banished, if thy speech had not betrayed it. O how far art thou gone from thy country, not being driven away, but wandering of thine own accord!

Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy

Night wasn't any different. Walking down Kalakaua Avenue subtly curving with the beach two miles . . . three . . . there's a point at which your feet just stop . . . maybe you'll sit down on the curb a moment . . . to be sure. Nothing to be found in the next block or two . . . the return is made along the beach barefoot in the wet sand, black waves washing away your traces. Warm water wraps around your jeans up to the knees (that girl taught you that) and pulls you down . . . closer . . . makes you give in.

In the daytime you were hungry and occasionally work . . . it would come and go . . . you would too. Food was a game. A Gustatory Approach to Oatmeal: Thirty-one Ways of Enjoying Your Favorite Dish, but it was always the same diluted oatmeal (regretfully stolen) garnished with mangoes. You just called it by different names according to your humor of the day and sometimes luckily had week-old doughnuts from Love's Bakery.

A few postcards written, a few books read (a few lost in the sand), and you occasionally talked (that one girl . . . the one who sometimes

cried . . . ah yes . . . her name was Marianne). The paregorics of easy living varied like oatmeal and were more often less exotic.

Accomplishments? (That girl . . . Marianne . . . a choker for you lay half-finished on her bed all summer) Calloused feet, bleached brains, Polynesian paralysis . . . but you faithfully would catch the sunset (that girl would come also . . . Marianne was a careless nineteen and sometimes cried) lying back . . . the warm sand dissolving your body . . . the spreading sun dissolving the horizon . . . your mind. In a few hours you would walk again down Kalakaua, perhaps alone, return again barefooted by the beach, bare chested . . . . . but that is not how it ended.

I'll start with the fruit stand at the junction of Highway 89 and the dusty road that carelessly happened to cross it leaving neither road the better. The highway ahead of me rose to meet the declining sun, subjecting its lower portion to the shadows of the pines and this oasis clinging tightly on its shoulder. My intent gaze was disrupted as I noticed my ride inexplicably retreating back down the same road he'd just brought me. Inside the tranquil shade of the fruit stand was a rare collection of rows and rows of five o'clock fruit, nearly all of it in some advanced state of decay. In the tent's center were caged hamsters performing feats of precision and daring on their spinning wheels while in the corner a singing dog explored the more ethereal realms. Now luckily a bumper crop of more preserved food was also stocked but unluckily the funnybook kid who was running the show couldn't make change and my last dollar was bartered for two Butterfingers and an ice-cream sandwich.

Well, starting at the fruit stand junction in a Northern California August I wondered where people usually went from there. A few hound-packed pickups rattled by, everyone staring like something was funny about me sitting there dusty toothed, half-ass whistling with thumb cocked higher and higher as they approached and passed.

I thought I'd better do something while it was still light, so I started tossing gravel one piece at a time toward the center line on the highway . . . a two bouncer, or the easy roll, backwards over the shoulder, or with eyes shut. I figured if I could get three in a row on the yellow stripe I'd surely catch a ride out. I was chunking handful at a time at that line trying to win a stuffed car out of there till I noticed that kid and some old man watching me from the big top, probably wondering how soon before I went mad and chewed up their singing dog and burned their fruit stand and hamsters and did all those things that sun smitten wanderers do when night comes around.

I maybe had fifteen minutes of daylight left and suddenly I could see myself kicking uphill pack bouncing and hat held tightly till I'd left a dusty trail between me and that goddamn junction. Instead I kind of laughed and settled back by the highway's edge, waiting to see what might catch up with me. I quit blaming that fruit stand. Back down the road there'd been other junctions, other pauses and flights. I tossed my hat aside and sifted dust through my fingers, slowly covering my boots as if to bury my feet by the road. At some point a blurred, dusky face offered a ride, radio music mixed with mountain advice, and warm red wine.

An hour later I washed off the dust in a little creek by a roadside campground, wiped my boots clean and talked to some Toronto

travellers about stained-glass windows and hitchhiking, the Sierras and firefly nights. That night I slept in the open, watching the Canadians' blazing campfire, listening to a harmonica and their pass around songs.

I left camp before sunrise thinking of cold beer and friendly meals a few days away.

II. I that with youthful heat did verses write,  
 Must now my woes in doleful tunes indite.  
 My work is framed by Muses torn and rude,  
 And my sad cheeks are with true tears bedewed;  
 For these alone no terror could affray  
 From being partners of my weary way.

Waking to one's turning. A mirror reflection of one and one only. Why shave. . . .pants yes and shirt. . . .shoes somewhere and keys already in the ignition. Sharing the late early morning with coffee black, hot, sulkingly silent in its reserved way. Answering, questioning one's own mumblings, seeking directions from a body stubborn, unmoved. Smiling, nodding to oneself in the hall, holding the door for one as the same stands sneering on turned back. Tell a joke and laugh . . . .if one is lonely, two ones is lonelier.

The room is small. A portable tv, silent, sits on a board next to a portable stereo, silent too. Above sits a fan, portable, whirring in night air from the window, open. The door is open to the sound of locusts, a loud chorus, you can't hear the cars. A sleeping bag stuffs the corner. On the floor sits a telephone, black. Work boots, black, and blue jeans, dirty. Tomorrow's lunch on a chair. The room has little else not found in other little rooms. A June bug, the brown kind, walks circles on an oval rug. The rug is dirty with oval rings

on it, brownish-red rings, brownish-green, brownish-yellow. . . . The plastic over the window screens is torn, it probably keeps the cold out in winter. The 10:00 news is on the radio . . . President Nixon has spiril pneumonia . . . Typhoon Billy is headed toward Japan. Outside the moon is probably still full, richly yellow. A man, young I think, lies sideways on a couch staring at a book, closed.

I remember once. . .

a man with two suitcases and a girl with blonde hair approached me on a narrow sidewalk. The man with two suitcases could not see the problem, but the girl with blonde hair began shifting her left to my right then her right to my left and twenty steps away I knew I would hit her and ten steps away she knew she would hit me for her eyes opened wildly with her mouth and she laughed and laughed till we collided and fell while the man with two suitcases walked quietly by.

He had a pretty blue tie and grayish-bald hair. I said nothing as he paused, scanning the parking lot as if for an old friend.

"Do you ever forget where you are?" he asked.

"Sometimes," I said as he wandered off sack in hand (Two jumbo tubes of toothpaste I saw him buy--such an old man). He faded into the sun past the last row of cars.

"Will he be all right by himself?" she asked. I said nothing as a bent figure crossed the asphalt expanse.

"Will he find it?" she asked. I said nothing as he approached a gleaming black vehicle.

"He found a car," I said, "perhaps his own."

A decision was upon him. Which to eat first, the cheese sandwich made with the fresh bread or the cheese sandwich made with the stale bread? You jsut can't throw stale bread away . . . he couldn't at least. It was just as good for you, only hard, and each week it got harder. It wasn't really the bread's fault, so he ate a few pieces every few days. But now, should he eat the stale sandwich first while he was hungry, or would it ruin his desire for the fresh sandwich? Too much. He flipped his plastic bag over a few times, opened it, and ate the one on top. They were both the same he told himself, really both the same.

He had a calendar on his closet wall. There was no light and the dates were hard to read. Each morning he would peer into the dark to read the date and know how many pushups to do. If it was the 12th he would do twelve pushups, the 13th, thirteen. Pushups woke him up in the morning and prepared him for difficulties: the first of the month was easy. On the back of each calendar page was a recipe and cornucopic picture of that month's holiday feast. He never cooked these meals, and was quite sure they couldn't be bought in restaurants, even in the first of the month when things were easy. He disliked routines, so he didn't have to do the pushups unless he wanted. Sometimes he did, sometimes he didn't. Often he forgot to look at the calendar in the dark and never knew the difficulty of the day.

Is this a dream . . . In my seventh life drinking Annie Green Springs from the bottle green and peach creek sweet with my blue plaid flannel unbuttoned and blue white boxers showing above old blues,

whitened, holy, and quite cold when the November sun goes down. . .  
Maybe it isn't this time, maybe this one is for real. . . Observing the  
calendar is at the beginning again and also reaching the end. . . the  
Tao. . . is he still around? A question appears at the door, dark and  
mysterious as she asks, "Drinking again? Why don't you write." Ah,  
the spell is broken. . . A dream or not, the mind is back to survival.

Head held rigidly high, one foot poised in indecision before the  
edge, the hot, black highway disappearing on all horizons. . . . Miles  
later I wondered, would the turtle cross the highway? If I'd seen the  
turtle smashed into the white-dashed lines it would have been normal,  
the sometimes bad but hell it happens glance and down the clean road  
ahead. It would have figured in with the countless rabbits, skunks, and  
dogs scattered along every past-travelled road. But you see, this  
turtle knew something was happening, his head cocked and waiting for an  
answer, a safe path, a way . . . just a way. Instincts saying no . . .  
something . . . something saying what else can you do . . . where else  
can you go--just straight across and then . . . maybe . . . . Maybe  
not. Maybe just instincts. All the way to the city I calculated that  
turtle's odds. At least ten minutes in crossing if he hustled, at  
least fifty cars, at least ten blind to him, at least ten unconcerned,  
at least ten killing. . . . If he'd only stay in his shell, hide in  
the tall grass . . . god damn him--god damn him. Why cross that god  
damned highway? I returned on that highway the same evening. It was  
too dark, and the spot where the turtle had waited was forgotten.

I can't figure out how one starts--I never could. Maybe it's the



finish that counts, and maybe there's the rub. The buzzer will go off just as the answer flashes across your mind and pops halfway out your gaping mouth. That's how you'll look from then on, captured in that one moment of illumination.

III. "Who," saith she, hath permitted these tragical harlots to have access to this sick man, which will not only not comfort his grief with wholesome remedies, but also nourish them with sugared poison . . . Rather get you gone, you Sirens pleasant even to destruction, and leave him to my Muses to be cured and healed.

He carried her bags from the crowded station and placed them by the smoking bus. The snow continued to blow sideways, and bowed, huddling people continued their shuffle from station to bus with eyes down and chins tucked away. She was afraid the bus would go off the road. He said it wouldn't. Her brown coat was turned up at the collar, her muffler was wrapped again and again around her neck and mouth, and her brown knit hat shielded her eyes from the stinging snow. Brown eyes looked straight-forward while mittened hands slapped snowflakes.

"Goodbye little brother," he said.

"Goodbye," she said softly.

He waved at a face in the steamy window, then he waved again till a dreary-eyed man framed his sallow face there. His house was two blocks away. As he turned the corner he could see the heavy buildup of snow on his sidewalk and porch. He honked once and again turned the corner into the blizzard.

As he sat coldly on the steps, glancing over the top of the

newspaper at the morning people, he strained for a familiar form in the crowd. What did she have on? He remembered watching her dress a few hours before. From the other room he had watched a smooth brown back, then a blue speckled bra, then a soft yellow blouse . . . or green. He knew the brown back, though. He remembered her sounds from the other room . . . the sipping of coffee . . . the brush on her long brown hair. The crowds were gone. A young couple holding hands and laughing. Look out he whispered, look out.

The moon was a pinkish-orange sliver against the flat blue dark. He walked slowly after the running, the beer had made him sweat and grow very thirsty again. From corner to corner he had chased her, around trees and into the windy night. She laughed and panted each time he caught her, then twisting free with pleasure ran again. Again and again. Her light was on. He sat on the steps and took off his shoes and shirt. "You deserve it," she had said. It was windy still and fairly cool now, but he sat on the steps under the light with his shoes off.

It had been a dog-kicking morning and he felt no better. Glaring, deliberately moving against the flow of the crowd his gait dared anyone, anyone to step in front or force him aside. He would punch the first person as indignant as himself, though he hadn't hit anyone for perhaps ten years. He was passing through a space void of people, dogs, or green grass--a ball of hurt pride swelling just below the chest cavity, rolling him forward--a foreign figure tearing raggedly through a pastoral scene painted morning sun on red brick building with birded

trees balancing the upper left blue and barebacked girls bicycling off the lower right; but just off center toward the trees an accidental drip, a purplish splotch threatening to run and discolor to the very bottom of the green grass, beside the brown girls almost off the picture.

#### IV. Kyklikos

Juggling the words around, trying to get the ideas and feelings together in the best order. Knowing there's a right way to start with the rest coming naturally. Yes, trying to write I think of those signs on certain alleys back home which read "One Way Do Not Enter," and the years in my youth I pondered which way that was.

As I approached the house in the dark I went to the window instead of the door--the curtain was drawn back and light shone in the bedroom. Peeking in from the dark coldness of December I felt as if this room was very warm, very comfortable, and I thought the person living here was very lucky, very nice. The red leather chair was ready to be sat in, the footstool was ready for stocking feet and the lamp certainly was just right for reading. I walked to the door, the key turned the lock and the room was very warm, very comfortable as I thought of the person looking through the window in the dark cold.

The ponderous 18th century novel requires steadfast attention, but ah the scenery tonight. The long dresses back in style so nice-- a gifted girl walking briskly, fingertip flicks to the sides of her skirt. The whole movement bewitching--that long piece of undulating cloth. Quickly, I must leave or ask her to sit down, Benumbed tongue, I return to the age of wit.

### Three Girls

I.

He couldn't tell at first whether she was alone, for her French bread and half-eaten salad were pushed across the table to the empty side. She was very slowly finishing a Coors when he approached her table from behind.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Yea, go ahead," she indicated, "I'm leaving in a minute."

"Crowded tonight."

"Mmmh."

"I'm washing my clothes next door, but it's too damn hot."

"I know."

She was above to work on a Masters somewhere--New Mexico, maybe Arizona. She wore turquoise and was dark and looked tired. She would lean forward elbows resting on the table and smiling, then lean backwards just as relaxed. She really didn't say much.

She left the table with a half smile. The way she held her body was nice, open . . . secretly stretching while the cashier rang up the check. She dug her hand tightly into her jeans for some change and bought a chocolate mint. Nice ass. She didn't turn, but looked both

ways outside the door, as if she might be going either direction . . . her face began fading. Other faces kept appearing as he tried to remember her features. He might walk past her tomorrow. He should have bought another beer for her, but it was nice watching her leave, it was easy watching her leave.

## II.

When the last two left, she was the only other one in the laundry-mat. Television rattling in the corner, his book boring and clothes still in the washer. So he watched her folding warm towels across the room. Wire rims and peasant blouse, curly golden hair. Slight and comfortable looking--so he stared openly and she glanced again and again, folding ever slower. She liked him watching, she must. He strained to catch glimpses of the clothes--a man's shirt or hers? No matter. She was basking in florescent lights and a stranger's look. No matter, he would smile and perhaps say something pleasant as she approached the door. Maybe he'd open it.

She made a phone call, minutes later a young man--one of his students last year--entered smiling at her, smiling at him. She was young he realized. And as she shadowed her tall friend out the door, she did turn slightly, she did smile and her hazel eyes gleamed for a moment. He was troubled and hurriedly dried his clothes in the now vacant laundry.

## III.

She walked past him head more down than forward. Deep red t-shirt and bottoms barely visible as the hips turned in step--yellow flowers

faded onto light blue, moving down legs brown and athletic. She dangled her toes absently in the water. It was dusk and he still held the book open with pencil poised. She scarcely moved, but stared down at feet rippling dark waters. A puppy tumbled behind her, licking the still dry nape of her neck and she smiled, laughed once and hugged brown fur. He smiled. It was just right, her forty feet away and pretty, only half-glances his way. God it was perfect. No one around and he would sit all evening watching her curved neck, the beauty certain distances bring.

The catwalk had been a frightening thing the first time, some fifteen years ago. It was just tree limbs and wooden poles connecting tree to tree in the woods with a wire up high to hold on to for balance. Some were very high up, but it wasn't dangerous if you were careful. I saw a guy walk it blindfolded and without using the guidewire, but he was very careful. As long as you realized where you were and what you were doing it was easy, but if you waved your arms around or gazed across the woods you easily could have been killed falling from the taller trees.

He felt better after reading through his old notebook. Why, he had been crazy before, long ago, and so now a tinge of madness could do little harm. He could come through it much easier this second time, or third maybe. He was . . . berserk . . . a good word . . . it meant "barechested" or "bearchested," and like him was of Old Norse etymology --it meant working oneself into a frenzy before battle.

Strange, he woke up thinking he'd slugged himself. "I saw you do it," he accused his right fist, then shaking off dreamy thoughts he slept again. In the morning his upper cheekbone was tender and slightly swollen, and he knew it had been no dream.

He was good. Six games straight. He kind of looked like one of Arthur's old students at the reformatory, but he didn't smile and he wasn't nervous and he got to wear blue jeans even, with a patch still he scratched on the break and suddenly his mouth opened slightly when the table was run with not a miss by a shadowed face and red hair flaming, wild. This guy was good.

As Arthur shoved in his quarter the room stood up. Tight rack. A break, a good break but a scratch and Arthur's shot . . . one stripe . . . two . . . three . . . four (my God, give me a beer) . . . not now shoot--a miss. The dark face shoots and shoots again--nice English--and the cueball slides around obstacles and curves into narrow alleys as the solids disappear till another scratch with only the eightball hanging black on the corner pocket.

"You've got another chance" says the bartender with a grin and a beer out of grasp "Shoot." A corner miss, but one bank, two, and in the side pocket hah hah. Another shot combo, the wrong one falls and the room creeps forward. Arthur catches sight of Professor Hyya wizardly drunk, wise, keen eyed on his last stripe easy and its logical bank a straight-in eightball boisterously pushing through his pause and dropping nice'n easy, victorious cueball alone on the green.

The Indians were still at their tables (eagle eyes) but two oiled olives (Greek he presumed) ran over from the shuffleboard and cried

"Don't be nervous" while he hah hahed and they hah hahed. Then he missed. Disappearing eightball fell backward to its right time, its right spot on the edge as he looked down on the flaming red hair and shadowed face tapping it in real friendly like an old drinking companion on a late night revel. Franz said "Too bad" as the room turned back to empty glasses and idle talk, "too bad, you had an easy shot." Hah hah Arthur chuckled out the door. Hah hah at the hah hah couple in the corner . . . .

Hah hah my cats no food for you hah hah as I write this, but "who were they for" I wonder most quietly now looking at empty shoes rolling sideways, laughing on the floor.

Boethius writes: "What do writings themselves avail which perish, as well as their authors, by continuance and obscurity of time? But you imagine that you make yourselves immortal when you cast your eyes upon future fame. Whereas, if thou weighest attentively the infinite spaces of eternity, what cause hast thou to rejoice at the prolonging of thy name?" I type--*History does not repeat itself, but a person* . . . . The Mariannes were gone, but times still came when he tightened his jaws (when I pound clenched fists) and he, I whisper . . . and then go on. Writing. Go on. Write. *Poetry's not enough* he cried. *Reason, please!* Letting go of the guidewire, stumbling off the catwalk, pen skidding, twirling out of sight . . . words falling apart, ideas drifting across the page. Berserk, frenzied--readying for battle.

There's a pain close to my groin, no reason I know except it is turned cold and it is raining. I smell smokey, eyes slightly burn, and



it is cool and drippy and somewhat gloomy though I feel very good--no, not feel, and that is the goodness--all fears distant while I am not drunk really but comfortable here, out of the rain and cold, secluded with an empty bed near. If everything were this comfortable, if everything so deathlike and acceptable. I guard strange powers from foreign women, I lock them away--as autumn is now I can think. The night summer died I slept deeply.

He listened for familiar footsteps, footsteps he should know after three years. He was drinking a second cup of vending coffee and lingering on the margins of his book. A bulletin board screened his couch from the door, the door she should be entering any minute. She would walk past the front desk, turn two corners and briefly come into his view before again turning down the hall to her job. If she looked up she would see him. He listened for footsteps, though, and glanced at every passing figure, not trusting a memory distorted so many other ways. Surprised and smiling, or would she be aloof and distrustful? The last gulp of coffee was cold and full of grounds.

He remembered the yellow apple he ate driving up, ravishing that apple till only nibbles were left and the sucking of the juicy core. Pulling that core from his mouth for one final look he was startled by a minute white worm crawling from beneath the stem onto his middle finger. With a fling apple and worm landed in the back seat. The brown core was still there he thought, the worm too . . . almost a cliché, like this sudden visit.

He hoped she would be friendly, that they could smile and look at each other. The door opened, nearly inaudible footsteps approached

the corner, prickling his neck, tensing his shoulders . . . the worm had been small, he remembered, and the apple very, very sweet.

As I paused in my typing for a moment, I had a strange sensation that someone was reading over my shoulder. I turned . . . no one. Once more quickly. Who are you? You I say, you reading this.

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VITA<sup>2</sup>

Gregory Kent Randall

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: FOUR STORIES

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Blackwell, Oklahoma, January 29, 1951, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Kent Randall.

Education: Graduated from Blackwell High School, Blackwell, Oklahoma, in May, 1969; received Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Oklahoma State University in July, 1973; completed requirements for the Master of Arts degree at Oklahoma State University in May, 1976.

Professional Experience: Student teaching assistant, English Department, Oklahoma State University, 1972-73; graduate teaching assistant, English Department, Oklahoma State University, 1973-76.