The South Carolina REVIEW

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The Review is edited by a cooperative editorial staff from three South Carolina universities.

The editors solicit literary manuscripts of all kinds: essay, fiction, poetry, criticism, opinion, social comment, scholarship, and reviews. South Carolinians, native and adopted, are especially encouraged to contribute.

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The South Carolina Review

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Cottonmouth

Along the creek
near the shallow puddles
are signs left by a cottonmouth
indented, damp, and faint.
When I come this way
I kneel to see the patterns
poison has made,
designs formed
by a trailed stick
held by a boy
or by a trickle from the stream.
But, leaning closer,
I blink to see the skin.

GERALD DUFF

Editorial

The returns on the first issue of *The South Carolina Review* are now in, and although not a landslide, they are encouraging enough to convince us that we were correct in our belief that a serious need for a magazine of this kind exists in South Carolina – a magazine which prints excellent writing by South Carolinians (by birth and adoption) but which also invites writing of excellence from any source.

Writers, patrons, and newsstand sales have surpassed our expectations in their generous support. From all parts of the country, manuscripts have come in an unceasing flood. If all of them had proved acceptable, we could plan our issues for the next decade or so. But to them we applied the highest standards of which we are capable in the hope of publishing only material meeting the highest standards anywhere. South Carolina writers have pleasantly surprised us with their fecundity, and we hope that before many years have passed, the contents of *The South Carolina Review* will resemble a roll call of the best South Carolina authors in our time, along with a distinguished company of writers from all over.

The academic "publish-or-perish" syndrome is evident in the unsolicited scholarly articles piling up on our desks from many states and territories. Rather consistently we are returning these pieces in favor of work that is creative, imaginative, uniquely personal, and more widely appealing. Not that we are opposed to scholarship; we set our watches by it. But a scholarly piece must have something human to say and say it with liveliness and grace. At the moment we are limiting our interest in scholarly articles to those about regional figures and trends. To that end we plan a special fall issue of *The Review* that will examine some of the major writers in the state's literary history.

Another major aim is the discovery, publication, and nurture of unpublished authors from the state and the region—as both our issues thus far attest. Without doing so, we should fail in our hope of enlivening the South Carolina literary scene and perpetuating and enhancing its cultural tradition.

Readers and subscribers have been numerous; but quality needs more. For the more we have, the better we can make *The Review*. Most

public libraries in South Carolina and many private citizens have taken out subscriptions, and we hope to broaden our base of readership through a more vigorous advertising campaign in the future.

Our most gratifying financial response has come unexpectedly through two agencies, whose assistance will help keep us alive and solvent in these early issues: the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, a national non-profit organization funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, and the South Carolina Arts Commission, whose support of other arts in the state has already begun to bear fruit in the emergence of imaginative new programs. We are happy to be recognized as a part of the exciting ferment in the arts, nationally and locally; for we are convinced that good writing is one of the most sophisticated and challenging of all the creative arts.

To these agencies, therefore, and to the private citizens whose donations helped us qualify for this assistance, and to the faculty and administration of Furman University for their endorsement of the idea of turning some issues of *Furman Studies,* in cooperation with Clemson and the University of South Carolina, into a more general literary magazine as a service to letters in the state, and to all our contributors, subscribers, and readers, we the editors wish to express our appreciation.

A. S. R. and F. D.

Cedars

Their shadows had already joined
us when the birds broke my dream
this morning and I left you

still lying in the strip of
spring light whose fingers play
on the sundial of the wall

Crocuses have pierced through
leaves you gathered last fall
the dark wind has gone away

and the saw of seasons has not
divided us yet   O my love
the cedar trunks which I passed

in the yard split at the groin
light sprays between limbs but
the roots are holding fast

CATHARINE SAVAGE

Do You Really Understand What I'm Saying?

RAVEN I. MCDAVID, JR.

As the characteristic mobility of our times takes us out of one environment and into another, we sometimes realize, a bit painfully, that not everyone places the same values that we do upon the simplest details of communication. In 1938, in my first professional foray outside the late Confederacy, as an instructor at Michigan State, I almost came to blows with a colleague because I used the word *brat*—as I would have used it in South Carolina—to describe a noisy group of faculty children who had been holding up the line in the cafeteria. When I asked a friend why there had been such a violent reaction, he explained that in Indiana, where he and my irate colleague had grown up, *brat* still carried the connotation of illegitimacy that it had in Elizabethan times—as in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi.*

But my bewilderment, at what seemed an irrational response to a casual remark, is not unusual. The average Northerner who moves South is often surprised to learn that many Southerners will not use the term *Civil War* to designate the late unpleasantness which officially ended at Appomattox Court House. Although Robert E. Lee and his lieutenants used the term without qualms, about 1890 the United Daughters of the Confederacy launched a campaign in behalf of *The War between the States,* previously known only in the title of the memoirs of a non-combatant politician, Alexander H. Stephens, Vice-President of the Confederacy. It became the routine duty for members of the U.D.C. to harass offending editors every time *Civil War* appeared in print, especially in the South. So successful was this campaign of epistolary *Schrecklichkeit* that a number of Southern newspapers had a standing order in their stylebooks that *Civil War* was always to be rewritten as *War between the States*. The *reductio ad absurdum* came in the 1950s, when the columns of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* carried an announcement of a lecture by a veteran aviator and soldier of fortune who had served in "the Spanish War between the States." Feeling that this was already too much, the *Picayune* struck the rule from its stylebook and quietly rejoined the Union.

But the fact that one person's habitual use of language may elicit an unexpected response from a person with a different background can

be more than comic. In the Roosevelt period, Henry A. Wallace—looking toward greater opportunities for every American, and indeed for every citizen of every nation, to participate in the benefits which our new technology had made available—chose to describe our epoch as *The Century of the Common Man.* As he used the phrase, it was in the traditional Midwestern sense—the sense previously used by Lincoln—of the average man, without conspicuous advantages or disabilities. But in the South at that time, *common* generally meant, when applied to human behavior, "low class, uncouth, disreputable"; it was a word that no one would want applied to himself, no matter if—or particularly if—it actually described him. Since many Southern newspaper publishers and politicians already disliked Wallace, it was easy for them to exploit the well-meant phrase as indicating the lowering of standards that could be expected to follow the adoption of Wallace's program. When one remembers the extremely close vote for the Democratic vice-presidential nomination in 1944, one is tempted to speculate that the choice of a phrase that could be easily misunderstood— that could even be twisted by one's enemies—-may have cost Wallace renomination as vice-president, and ultimately the presidency. In political statements as in military field orders, one may assume that anything which can be misunderstood will be misunderstood.

A far more ominous—but let us hope, inadvertent—misunderstanding of the meaning of a word has come to light in the gossip over the last dread days of World War II. As anyone knows who is familiar with *Robert's Rules of Order,* in American parliamentary procedure the term *to table,* or *to lay on the table,* means to remove a motion from consideration. But in British parliamentary procedure the term means just the opposite: to lay before a deliberative body for consideration. One who learns his rules of order from the South Carolina legislature can be pardoned bewilderment on reading in a Canadian newspaper, "The prime minister introduced the new tax bill, which was promptly tabled"—and then learning that swift passage was expected. Fortunately our relationships with Great Britain and Canada are seldom impeded by the differences in the way we use this phrase. But it is possible that the whole course of human history was altered by the fact that in 1945 this phrase was used in one sense but interpreted in the other. When the Allied ultimatum was presented to Japan, the story goes, the report came from Tokyo that "the message was received in the Diet, and laid on the table." I do not know enough Japanese to conjecture

whether the term would have been ambiguous to a translator – that it might have been misunderstood without special knowledge of the Japanese parliamentary vocabulary – or whether the translator knew the English term only in its British sense. But the story-tellers aver that the announcement was interpreted by the Americans as a Japanese rejection of the terms of surrender, and that this interpretation led to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A part of the record of any linguistic form is not only the way in which it is used by those who use it, but the way it is received by those among whom it is used.

But communication is more than language alone; it involves a whole series of interdependent modalities of behavior, any one of which we ignore at our peril. It includes not only grammar and vocabulary and the meanings of words, but in oral communication it involves such things as pronunciations and stress and intonation, the complicated nuances in the tunes of words, the gestures of the speaker, the phenomena of body contact, and even the distance at which we stand when attempting to communicate; and whether oral or written, the overt message cannot be divorced from the other kinds of social behavior that accompany it. This has been quite apparent in the recent misfortunes of some of our enthusiastic young people at the University of Chicago – and I dare say, of their counterparts at other institutions. Over several years they have lobbied with the University administration for the privilege of living, as undergraduates, in off-campus apartments rather than in University dormitories; more recently a small but articulate group of them have agitated for a change in the University position toward the Selective Service System. Yet surveys of neighborhood realty offices have disclosed a reluctance to rent to students, and the University Senate not only upheld the University policy on the draft but condemned the tactics of the agitation. In both instances there were well-documented statements about the unwillingness of the agitators to accept the standards of cleanliness and decorum that the community expects of those who insist on the privileges of maturity. It is almost certain that the insistence of the agitators on ostentatious eccentricity in dress and grooming has distracted the attention of the larger public from the more serious messages they were trying to present. There is a striking rhetorical contrast between the bearded males and stringy-haired females of the Chicago demonstrations and the carefully dressed, well-mannered Negro undergraduates who launched the sit-ins in Greensboro a few years ago, and whose dress and manner were more than once favorably commented

on – especially by Southern newspapers – in contrast to the behavior of the hecklers who tried to stop them.

These instances, we must remember, took place within the framework of educated middle-class urban American society. If misunderstanding is possible when people share so many social values, we should not be surprised to learn that misunderstandings occur more dramatically when the participants in a system of interaction come from different cultural systems. So many misunderstandings have arisen between Americans abroad and the citizens of their host countries that, for more than two decades, linguists and anthropologists have been serving as consultants to government and business.

The importance of spatial relationships in human interaction has been noted by Edward T. Hall, of Northwestern University, in his two books *The Silent Language* and *The Hidden Dimension.* He has observed frequently, and his observations have been verified by others, that in our society the canonical distance for males in normal discourse is about an arm's length, approximately twenty-three inches (at last report he had not reached so firm an agreement on the distance between two females in conversation; and as we all know, the appropriate distance between a male and a female is subject to a number of additional variables). If one doubts this, he should try stepping a little within the canonical distance in his next conversation with a stranger, and seeing what happens. At the cocktail party or other occasion when more than two males get together in a conversational group, the twenty-three-inch distance becomes the radius of the imaginary circle about whose arc the participants are distributed. So consistently do we observe this limit that we consider it a matter of instinct, of human nature. But it is not; it is cultural. To Latin Americans, the effective distance of informal communication is a foot or a little less; to Levantines – except the most highly Westernized – it is the distance at which one person can smell the other's breath. Here we can see the possibility of all kinds of misunderstandings, some comic, some serious. Since the unsophisticated North American interprets the invasion of his canonical distance as an act of unpleasant aggressiveness, and the Latin or Levantine interprets the North American distance as a mark of coldness, it may happen at a diplomatic reception in Washington that the Levantine will approach and the North American will back away, until it even turns into a Chaplinesque chase in slow motion down a long corridor or across

a drawing room, with the North American ever backing away and the Levantine sliding nearer in a vain effort to reach the distance at which he can talk informally. Surely something needs to be done to explain the cultural expectations in communication; and when most of these episodes involve our people in foreign lands, suspect for the very magnitude of our wealth and power among people whose chief possession is often a strong sense of their personal and national dignity, the greater part of the burden falls on us.

Another matter in which cultures may differ sharply is that of permissible body contact. We accept, informally and intuitively, the fact that minute differences in the area of contact may materially alter the relationships between a boy and a girl sitting side by side on a sofa; what begins as innocent proximity may change — by an almost imperceptible shift — into something else. In relationships between parents and children, there is sometimes a narrow line between affectionate patting and chastisement. And so in our associations with peoples of other cultures we must be very careful not to assume that they treat contact-phenomena in terms of our own experience. This is especially true in our dealings with the Islamic world, and most particularly true where the Arabs are concerned. It is customary for American out-of-door workmen to engage in a good deal of physical horseplay; it is an accepted gesture of approbation in many sports and many kinds of work to slap a teammate on the back or the buttocks (see any football game on TV); and the Arabs, most of them small by Mississippi Valley standards, seem to invite these gestures from the American roughnecks working beside them in the oilfields. Yet physical contact of this kind is deeply resented in the Islamic world, and the outsider who yields to what might be called normal impulses in our masculine culture may end up getting his throat cut. It is a tribute to the intelligence and perceptiveness of the Aramco consortium that in an age of intensifying nationalism in the Middle East, their relationships with the Sa'udi Arabian kingdom have continued friendly, to their mutual profit: they have simply seen to it that everyone from the Western hemisphere who goes overseas, no matter on how high or low a level, is trained both in the language and in the culture of the people among whom he is to work — and they do not tolerate lapses, but remove the irritating person as soon as possible, which usually means the same day.

Gesture systems, too, may differ, regardless of how natural or universal we think our gestures ought to be. We turn the backs of our hands to those we beckon to us, the palms to those we are trying to warn away; but in Levantine culture the reverse is often true. Nor are the non-linguistic noises that accompany our social communication any more universal, or free of cultural differences and whims of fashion. In our culture, a belch at the table is a gross lapse of manners; in other cultures, it may be a signal of approval of what one has been served. The whole subject of table etiquette, of course, is fascinating. We notice that the English and continental fashion seems to be to use the right hand only for wielding the knife or spoon; the fork is held in the left hand for transmitting food from plate to mouth. Of course, though, Englishmen wishing to get along in Islamic culture have learned other habits. In that culture the left-handed person is under even more suspicion than he is in some of our rural communities, and has none of the advantages he may have with us as a pitcher, first baseman, or forward passer. For pious Moslems who follow the prescriptions of the Prophet, the left hand is ceremonially unclean, assigned certain humble sanitary functions and prohibited from handling food.

With this, let us return to our own society, and note that we have definite subgroups with peculiar gesture systems. My fellow Greenvillian, Henry Townes, a distinguished entomologist though not as widely known as his physicist brother Charles, remarked in our last conversation that I used certain hand movements which were familiar to him but which he had never seen outside our part of South Carolina.

There are similar variations in the orchestration of our language communication. Some of these seem to be regional, notably the so-called "Southern drawl," which seems to involve an overlengthening of the heavily stressed syllables and a shortening of the weak ones, rather than any slowness of speech. (Actually, one can have sharply clipped speech, with slow over-all speed, creating a most threatening effect, especially if the pitch level is lower than usual.) A few of these effects are associated with particular ethnic groups; the visceral adverse reactions of Northern middle-class whites to the speech of lower-class Negroes seem to be due, in part, to a jerky rhythm. And other effects are associated with particular occupations: over-loudness and rasp with the non-commissioned officer; high pitch, throat openness, and rising-falling intonation with the elementary-school teacher; nasality with hillbilly music. And some intonations may indicate psychiatric disturbances: an abnormal

squeeze on the intonation range, so that the highest and the lowest pitches are not kept as far apart as they are wont to be, seems to be one of the touchstones of a depressive state.

But even in what passes for normal life there are more than enough intonation variations for us to think about. We are inclined to make allowances for the intonation reflecting a foreign language in the community: the Scandinavian tune so often heard in Minnesota, the tune even a goy might have if he grows up in the Bronx, or the tendency in the Pennsylvania-German areas to end statements with a rise instead of a fall and some questions with a fall instead of a rise. But the Midwesterner thinks the Southerner has a sing-song style, and the Southerner comments in turn on the Midwesterner's surly monotone. And a good deal of the alleged superciliousness of the Briton, so far as the American is concerned, comes from a different kind of intonation curve in such questions as "Where are you going?"

When we reach the level of pronunciation, we discover that the American situation is atypical in contemporary Western society, though it has had its counterpart in China and in classical Greece before the rise of Athens. In most other nations there is a single local variety of pronunciation heavily favored: Public School English (originally the upper-class speech of the London area), Parisian French, Castilian Spanish, Roman-Florentine Italian, Moscow Russian; in comparison, all other local varieties lack prestige, and the speakers are marked as provincial. In English-speaking North America, however, we have never had a single city or area that was overwhelmingly prestigious in all cultural matters: Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Richmond and Charleston among the older centers, and Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Atlanta, New Orleans, Denver, Salt Lake City and San Francisco among newer ones have their traditions and their excellences. And though travel, trade and changes of jobs have blunted many of the sharpest local differences, many remain, and people quite rightly assume that one variety of cultivated American speech is as good as another. Unfortunately, we do not always have our regional interactions with our social and economic peers, and our reactions to other regional varieties are inevitably modified by our attitudes toward the speakers we have encountered. The average middle-class Chicagoan does not first hear Mississippi speech in an association with a Hodding Carter or a William Alexander Percy, but at best as an employer or foreman meeting a semi-skilled worker.

The tendency in Chicago and other Northern cities is for the local middle-class white to identify every unfamiliar Southern voice as that of a rural uneducated Negro. My chairman, Gwin Kolb, a native of Jackson, Mississippi, and a distinguished graduate of Millsaps and the University of Chicago, is racially misidentified with alarming regularity; and when I was living in Ithaca, New York, I could not find a vacant apartment until I started exploring in person – in telephone conversations it developed that apartments were always "just rented" in the five minutes between my discovering the vacancy listed in the housing office and my arrival at a telephone. Some of this is a matter of regional patterns of intonation; some of it is the dropping of /-r/ in such words as *beard, barn, board.* And to show that such regional ethnocentrism is not confined to any part of the United States, I have had several of my educated friends in South Carolina ask me, "Why is it that the educated Northerner sounds so much like the uneducated Southerner?" Perhaps here, too, the problem of /-r/ is at the heart of the matter, for in much of the plantation South, old and new, the preservation of the Middle Western kind of /-r/ in *barn* is associated with the poor whites, a mark of the Snopes and not of the Sartoris.

(Parenthetically, a very few of us are as good as we think we are in identifying race and social class by pronunciation. As a part of the recent study of social dialects in Metropolitan Chicago, under the joint sponsorship of the University of Chicago and Illinois Tech, we elicited reactions of local citizens to characteristic pronunciations. To determine whether there was any genuine feeling for the race of a speaker, or whether it was a matter of regional features, I served as control – and found that even veteran students of mine put me on the dark side of the blanket. And even more surprising were the reactions to another speaker on the same tape, a third generation South Side Chicago Irishman – though lacking some of Mayor Daley's characteristic speech forms – currently a college teacher and a Ph.D. candidate; he, too, was racially misplaced by a large number of his fellow Chicagoans. As far as I can tell, Negroes are no better at this than whites – they, too, often misjudge my race over the telephone – and in one experiment in Virginia, I found that Southern intuition was no better than that of other regions. Nor would more extensive samples necessarily be better: in Roger Shuy's recent study of Detroit speech, race was identified about eighty percent of the time, but there were no examples of Southern white speech to complicate matters, and the educated Negroes were very frequently mis-

placed. It is a sobering observation even to professional linguists – and more sobering in implication to those teachers who seek to erase regional accents – that people do not respond with complete accuracy to pronunciations, even to those which in a given community are clearly tied to race or social status.)

We have many other examples of the same kind of confusion, less dramatically detected. We know that both /grisi/ and /grizi/ are used in cultivated American speech, with a rather clear regional cleavage but with some communities of mixed usage. In such communities we will find warm disagreement as to whether the /-s-/ or the /-z-/ pronunciation sounds nastier. Or take such words as *hog* and *fog*, which in the Greenville of my boyhood might have either the vowel of *father* or that of *law*. Some educated speakers, of good family, maintained that the pronunciation with the vowel of *law* was countrified; others, of equal education and family background, insisted that the pronunciation with the vowel of *father* was an affectation.

Fortunately, in grammar – which is the surest touchstone of education and social standing in America – we are in far better agreement than we are in pronunciation. Centuries of the school tradition, and as many of printing, have given us a fair amount of agreement on what constitutes standard grammar. When striking non-standard grammatical features are combined with disparate regional and racial backgrounds, as in the public schools of Chicago and other Northern cities, we get some spectacular results. After three years at Chicago State College my wife was able to identify – some ninety percent of the time– the race of incoming freshmen she had never seen, simply by the non-standard grammatical forms in their placement themes, notably the uninflected third-person singular present, as *he do, she have, it make*. But even here there are variations which we ignore at our peril. Our school grammars warn us that *et* as the past of *eat* is substandard; yet this pronunciation is used by some proper Bostonians, many proper Charlestonians, and all speakers of standard British English – it is the only pronunciation given in the *Concise Oxford*. Many educated Southerners still say *he don't* in familiar conversation; and in Charleston and some other Southern communities the proudest members of the oldest families may use *ain't* uninhibitedly in conversation, though only to people they consider their social equals. They would never, of course, use it in formal speech, let alone in writing. It is from this complexity in the social signalling in

language that the Chicago businessman moving to Charlotte or Atlanta faces the same kind of problems in communication that he might face in moving to Oslo or Rio – except that in the latter situation he would be more on his guard because the language is more overtly different.

With words, of course, the situation is even more overt, and probably easier to deal with, particularly since industrialization and urbanization have taken their toll of the humble and rural portions of the vocabulary. But we still have to pause, occasionally, to decide whether *evening* begins at noon or at sundown, or whether *dinner* is a meal at midday or at the end of the day. We may raise an eyebrow when we learn of some of the strange regional synonyms for familiar words: when we learn that in southern Indiana and central Kentucky a *mango* is not an exotic tropical fruit but a green bell pepper; when Inland Northerners use *butterbeans* to designate not the tender limas (as any proper Southerner would use the term) but the yellow string beans, or *wax beans*; or when we discover that in the Carolina mountains *corn dodgers* may refer to small hand-shaped loaves (what the West Virginian calls *hobbies*), in the coastal plains to dumplings, in Savannah to corn griddle cakes (*battercakes* to most Southerners), and in Brunswick, Georgia, to the spheroids of corn meal – seasoned with chopped pepper and onion and fried in deep fat to accompany sea food – that more enlightened Southerners would call *hush puppies* or *red horse bread*. But we are playing with dynamite when we use any of our common designations for racial or religious groups. Every dictionary editor encounters indignant protests from those who resent his inclusion of the verb *to jew*, or *to jew down* – meaning to drive a hard bargain – even if the dictionary is careful to label it "usually offensive." *Nigger* represents the normal phonological development in English, and only Dick Gregory can get away with using that pronunciation. The pronunciation *nigrah* is a traditional polite Southern pronunciation, yet it offends many people of various races in other regions. The Las Vegas school board, though aware of the potential dynamite among their ethnic minorities, until recently used the term *colored people*, which was deeply resented because the desired designation was *neegro*, with full accented vowels in both syllables; conversely, this last pronunciation is resented, as an affectation, by many Southerners of good will. And in the last two years many self-appointed racist spokesmen have been clamoring for the adoption of the ethnic label *black* – which has long been a term of contempt

among Southerners of both races. Wishing to be just, loving, and yet honest, many of us are bewildered as to what we can say. In essence, I suppose, there is no short-term answer, nor any in the long run except a heightened cultural sensitivity. For despite all our anxieties, when push comes to shove, we have to recognize that in language there is nothing good or evil but usage makes it so.

To the First Man Killed by Gunpowder

Join the auk and the passenger pigeon
and the whistling swan

Rest in peace on the shelf with
the city directory for 1916

And from here to there whisper with
cracked lips

Of the small ship lost in the storm
off Argos

RUSSELL GRAVES

Camden

I am standing in the kitchen,
my hair in braids around
my head. Iron and copper pots
hang above the wood range,
and a window looks out
to the river, which I recognize
as if it were my blood.
You are wearing a sword
and a gray cavalry costume,
and though you do not speak,
I know that the sergeant
is waiting, and that you leave
for another war which I
had only read about, and now
relives in us. A presentiment
of disaster must haunt

you, for you will not go;
you pace to the door, a glove
slaps, and I grow embarrassed
as the moment swells, floods,
stops.—Then I am in
the drawing room, under
yellow Italian curtains
whose huge flowers mingle
in uncomprehensible patterns.
It is quiet, and I do not
breathe: the fulfillment
comes, ever following quickly
in dreams upon fear or hope:
the shots blast.—I awoke.

So Camden—named for a lord—
got its tower blown off
by a federal gunboat,
shooting blind at the head
of the South. It came around

the bend, where the Rappahannock
crooks under steep banks,
had to follow the narrow channel
along the bluff. They could see
only the corbelled eaves,
raised in Renaissance pride,
over the villa. They shot,
for target practice.

She was alone in the house
then, with the servants
and slaves. She saw the cuts
where the lowest shots lodged
in the timbers of her wedding
house, walked among the debris
in the garden. It was calm,
afterwards. No dream endures.
He had built this, across
the river from her birthplace,
to woo her over. The blueprints
hung, framed, in the hall;
a Baltimore architect had come
to oversee the building.
Three years later, he
was a colonel in a dissident
army; she was twenty-two.

He had bidden her goodbye,
before they came, pulling
on his boots, and slapping
his glove as he talked
with the sergeant, by a boxwood
hedge. Under the Lee
and Carter portraits—
General Lee of Stratford
Hall—he had spoken, not
of present necessity, but
of a future, of the house

that was his love for her,
and of the long elm lanes
he would plant, where they would
walk, and their children later.

Two-minded South, two-faced:
honor and slavery, white
and black. Some still live
the wound of it. We walk along
the alleys, which their descendant
trims, on his Toro mower. All
has once again been called
into question; we move
among the columns of Camden's
veranda, and think of what
the defeated men must have
felt, rocking on the porch
of the Richmond Old Soldiers'
Home. Something died at
Camden, but we return to it
in dream; we are its dream,
shades on the pink stones.

CATHARINE SAVAGE

The Sounds of Silence

PAULETTE BATES

Just as he was falling off to sleep one summer night, Emory Bishop noticed that he couldn't hear the little Westclox he kept right beside his bed. He figured it had probably stopped running. Guided by its green luminous dials, he picked it up and held it to his ear in the dark. Far, far away he heard a gentle tick-it, tick-it. The hands read twenty minutes until ten. The clock was still running. He moved it slowly from his ear, testing – the tick-it grew weaker and weaker. With the clock at arm's length – silence. The breakdown which had occurred was in himself and not the $2.95 clock from Woolworth.

He was nearly seventy, old enough to be going deaf. But it was something unexpected, something that somehow he hadn't planned on. He reached up and turned on the lamp by his bed. The light helped dispel the feeling of emptiness that had suddenly overtaken him. The room did not seem so very quiet in the light. But the rest of the house was dark. Emory had the thought that he could only hear within the range of the small lamp's light. And that beyond, in the darkness, was silence. He sat very still on the side of the bed, to see if he could hear anything at all. His eyes were straining too, as if they could help out his ears. The katydids. They sang every night during the summer. They had for as long as he could remember. Nothing. He couldn't hear them. But then he did hear something. A car going by on the highway in front of his house. He heard another right behind it, sounded like a Volkswagen. Was that really relief he was feeling? He realized he had been holding his breath, was starving for breath until he heard that Volkswagen go by. Now he relaxed, as after tension. But the katydids? Where were they? Or, were they out there, and he couldn't hear them? He looked down at the Westclox, passing the night away, but silently for him.

In the kitchen, on bare feet, he switched on the light, looking for the roaches to zip out of sight. Mary had kept them away although the old kitchen had many cracks to harbor them in. But now that he was alone, he let them have free reign of the place. "We live in peaceful co-existence, I use the kitchen during the day, they use it at night,"

he had explained to his daughter Margery, who with typical housewife feelings, had wanted to spray the kitchen with Raid.

He couldn't sleep. He had prided himself on not having old-age insomnia. Of course he got up early, no sleeping late, but whether that was from age or habit he couldn't say. He had gotten up early – had had to – all his life. Even then the days were not long enough. He opened the icebox and got out some Spanish rice to heat up. The icebox motor came on with a rumble, then settled into a steady buzz. I hear that, Emory thought to himself. He felt better. He heard the coils of the eye pop as they came on under the pan of rice. Perhaps, he said, it's just a head cold. That little clock will probably be keeping me awake in a few days. He noticed the water dripping from the faucet. He had his hand on the tap to turn it off when suddenly he noticed. He couldn't hear the splash. A drop formed and splattered onto the yellowed porcelain. He became very still, held his breath, squinted his eyes. The next drop slowly formed, swelled, and dropped like a ripe piece of fruit. He couldn't hear it at all. It hit, and nothing.

"When," he said crossly to the roaches that were beginning to peek out of the cabinet between the stove and icebox, "have I ever heard water dripping? Have I ever? Or am I getting picky because I can't hear a damn clock." His own voice sounded fine to him. Another drop formed and fell. He tried to think exactly what dripping water sounded like. He couldn't form a sound in his mind, the way the water was forming at the end of the faucet. He turned the water on a little more, to get a bigger (louder) drop. The water came out in a little stream, he could hear that. He turned it back to the left too far. Finally he got the drops regulated. Drop. Drop. Drop. No sound at all. The Spanish rice was beginning to stick and smell in the pan. One roach, confident even in the light, ventured out and ran across the cabinet. Emory jerked the rice pan off and hit after the roach with it. He came down on the cabinet so hard some of the rice bounced out. He would have that to clean up in the morning. He suddenly couldn't stomach red rice. He put the pan in the icebox, and went back to bed.

He had seen other men grow old. He couldn't even remember how many men he had watched dying. What he couldn't understand was the way they accepted it. No struggle, and therefore no victory. How could they let go of life so easily? It began slowly, of course, but over the years he had come to know the signs. Death got inside a man some-

how, hardly noticeable at first. Maybe the victim didn't even know himself, or dared not know. The dimming of sight, or perhaps a mild stroke which left one arm dangling, its owner saying to everyone, It's nothing, I'm regaining the use of it a little more every day. Or perhaps it was the gradual loss of hearing. Some old fellow would turn his left ear, his good ear, to you, leaning forward, so that you were exhausted by trying to talk to him. He had seen it happen. Emory Bishop, the observer. But how could he have ever imagined himself detached from it all? He had never felt like an old man, really. Somehow he had saved himself from that. Everything was intact. Nothing much — nothing important — had escaped him yet. A clock ticking, water dripping. Still, these things were gone forever. At his age a man hates anything to be final. He was truly pained at the thought of never hearing these insignificant things again. Once you give up even a little, there's no stopping it. It had come to him that if he couldn't hear the clock, the water, there might be — no, there *would* be yet other things he couldn't hear. He guessed his old ears were wearing out. Seventy years of listening, how much had they heard in all those years? It was an incomprehensible question. But he had never anticipated his own body wearing out, the way toasters and vacuum cleaners and underpants wear out. It had happened to others, he had seen it happen again and again. But his own body? No man was expected to anticipate it of his own body.

He began paying more attention to sounds. And sure enough, almost overnight, the volume of the whole world had been turned down. The sounds he could hear, which were many (only the smallest ones were lost) became somehow precious to him, wonderful, indescribably painful. . . . He was out hoeing his garden, listening to a multitude of sounds he had never really noticed before. The world seemed to have a texture of sounds; he heard them all together and yet could pick out specific sounds. There was absolutely no silence anywhere anytime. Silence. It was a word that was beginning to take on some meaning for him. He had thought he knew what it meant. No sound, that was silence. But now it was becoming a force in his life. Like love, the night he wedded Mary, and pride, the stormy afternoon the twins were born. The sound the hoe made as it hit the too dry soil was one he had heard as long as he could remember being a person. It was a sound connected in some mysterious way to the muscles that started moving in his back and shoulders down his arms and through his hands as he hoed: con-

nected too with his eyes watching the earth break up, dry and flakey on the surface, but moist deep down where the hoe searched it out; and even to the tomatoes that came at first as little white flowers and green hard balls and then one day big and firm and feeling of ripeness in his hand, as he gave them away to someone, anyone. All that was the sound of his hoe hitting hitting hitting the earth. It all went together, and wouldn't be the same if one horrible day he couldn't hear that old hoe hit the dirt. His tomatoes had about run the course of the season. The june pinks were long gone; the big boys still were hanging on, but not so full and red now. The enemy in the garden was the strawberry plants. He had set them out in early spring, first time he had tried for strawberries, and – it was a mistake – put too much fertilizer on them. He had the healthiest, greenest plants in the county and never a single strawberry. The plants had gone wild, spreading out, threatening to take the whole garden over. He kept after them every day though, driving them off the tomatoes, and out from among the okra. Soon they would die for the winter, and come back next year much tamer and willing to bear fruit.

His daughter was bound to notice, gradually, that his hearing was not as sharp as it used to be. The times became more frequent when she would have to say, "Papa, don't you hear me, I'm talking to you." He would say, "What was that, Margery? I wasn't listening." But she didn't mention it, embarrassed herself over it, because she knew that he was embarrassed. It was too hard a thing to hide, though, especially when Emory sometimes would miss completely what was being said. But to mention it would make it a problem, something they would have to deal with. It was easier to ignore it.

One day he said to her casually, as if to make conversation: "I think I'll get a hearing aid." Margery had come over to hang the winter curtains. She was standing on one of the kitchen chairs Emory had brought to the living room for her. She went on hooking the curtains onto the rods when he said it. He had figured she would carry on as if it were nothing, when both of them knew what it meant for him to say it. She probably hated for him to say it; in fact, he knew she hated it, because he himself hated to say it, even if he would never admit it to himself. He could imagine her saying to Henry, I wish Papa would get a hearing aid; he's getting deaf as a doornail. Still, he knew that it must hurt her somehow to hear him say it.

"You're not getting hard of hearing, are you, Pop?" she asked him from above the window.

"Goodness no," Emory lied; "I don't think so. It's just that I'm missing a few of the little sounds, you know. Old age, not expected to hear everything. Read about a hearing aid in that Life magazine, and I said to myself, there's not any reason why you should miss even the littlest sounds. So I might try one, if I ever get around to it."

"OK, Papa," she said, "it might be a good idea."

The next week he called Margery, and they went downtown to see about a hearing aid. After all, he explained, it's no more than wearing glasses, and a lot of people, young people, wear glasses. He was enthusiastic about the hearing aid. Why didn't I think of it before, he asked himself.

The hearing aid fit neatly into a pair of glasses. "Hardly noticeable," he said to Margery, who smiled encouragingly. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps she didn't know what to do with her old papa who was going deaf. It could get to be a problem. He rested the thick stems of the hearing glasses on his ears. After all, Margery was married, had a family to take care of, her own life to lead. Hadn't she been good to drop by a lot, call every so often, even though he could take care of himself. That was the important thing, to take care of himself. Nursing homes? he said to himself as he looked in the mirror. He tried to really see himself, objectively. I look nearer fifty than seventy, he thought. He wouldn't go near a nursing home, not even for a visit. One of his old cronies, B. F. Wilkins, had gone to Pleasant Haven nursing home, and Emory would never go visit him. Always some excuse when Margery suggested it, until she gave up. The doctor finished inserting the lens in the frames. He put them back on Emory.

"Hardly noticeable at all," Margery said. Her voice came through to him loud, hopeful, wonderful.

The hearing glasses reopened the world for Emory. They were perhaps too strong, as if the volume had been turned up a little past the comfortable point. But that's the way he wanted it. In the same way that a near blind person marvels over the world when he gets glasses, so Emory marveled over the world of sound. It was as if all his life he had somehow neglected hearing – seeing all the time but never hearing.

"Margery," he said one afternoon when she dropped by. "Tell me what Henry's car is." Margery considered her father, who peered out of his heavy glasses at her. His head was constantly cocked now, first this way and then that, listening. He reminded you of an intelligent hunting dog who tilts his head as he listens to the clicks his master is making with his tongue. Since he had gotten his glasses, his head was always thrust forward.

"Henry's car," Margery said, "is a 65 Chevrolet Impala, blue, I'd say a royal blue, with white interior."

"Right," Emory exclaimed, "*but* Henry's car is also this door opening with that little suction sound, hear it" – and he opened the door to demonstrate. "It's the engine turning over, the swish of the windshield wipers (he switched them on too), it's that sound the tires make when they first start to roll, and it's this, best of all." He gave the horn a long loud honk.

"Stop it, Papa," Margery laughed at him. He reminded her of a little school boy, who had a balding head and big horn rim glasses. Or maybe Mr. Peepers.

Emory became aware of everyday sounds he had never noticed before. Like the sound his own feet made on the bedroom rug, and how different the sound was when he walked on the kitchen linoleum. Even scratching his head produced a new sound to listen to, test out, relish. He could actually hear himself putting on and taking off those miracle glasses – made a rubbing sound as the stems slid behind his ears. He was sitting on his bed one night, ready for sleep, but taking two more minutes to wear the glasses, to hear the cars going by and the toilet running. He noticed his own breathing. How had he missed hearing it in seventy years? He sat very still, all was quiet, except for an occasional car. He listened to his own raspy breathing, the intake, catch, release. Slow, rhythmical, calming. He tried to think what happened to the air inside him. All he knew was something about lungs, heart, blood. He thought about it until it seemed that he could hear the air going all through him, revitalizing, cleansing, purging. Falling asleep that night, he thought, I will live forever.

Human voices became intriguing to him. Especially his own. The glasses magnified intonations. "Who really listens to his own voice?" he asked Margery, listening to his own as he asked her. And Margery's

voice. He couldn't describe it if you asked him. But he knew it, knew it not just to identify it but knew what the person behind it was saying and not saying. He felt like he was living fully for the first time. Becoming conscious of sounds, hearing them intensified, made him more conscious of his other senses. Maybe it was because of the glasses, maybe not. But now smells seemed richer, touching things, he was aware of the feeling.

Then one day, the hearing aid seemed weaker, as if a battery had run down.

He didn't want to go out to the garden that day. Summer was nearly over. The strawberry plants he had battled over the season were turning rust red. They were no longer a threat. A few tomatoes were left, but they had turned overripe overnight. After a whole summer, he was tired of tomatoes. Perhaps it was the change in the weather, fall coming on, that sapped his energy.

As he was sitting in his leather chair, just sitting like he was waiting, a strange thing happened. He heard a clock ticking. He aroused himself and listened hard to hear it. Nothing. He thought he must have been dreaming, or imagining. But as he settled back, he again heard the clock, tick-tock, tick-tock. His Westclox was in the bedroom; that wasn't the clock he was hearing. It sounded so familiar to him, so near. But he knew perfectly well there wasn't another clock running in the house. The only other clock he had was here in the livingroom on the mantle. But that clock had stopped running at least a year ago. It had stopped running right after Mary's death, so that he was doubly deprived: of his wife of fifty years, and of the sound of the clock that had ticked away those fifty years.

He checked the mantle clock to be certain it wasn't running. He already knew that even if it was, he wouldn't be able to hear it. He rested his hand on its smooth porcelain top. It was like an old friend who hadn't let him down by continuing to operate after Emory himself had broken down. They had silence in common. Still, somehow, he was hearing a tick-tock from his broken clock. No, he was not hearing it. He was remembering it. In the same way that the memory captures a long ago scene or face, it had captured the sound of the clock, with its rhythmical tick-tock, holding the tick a little longer and stronger than the tock, as if the tock were merely an afterthought. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

After this, he heard other things – or rather remembered hearing other things. Sounds that were long gone, and had long been forgotten until now. He couldn't listen so much to the outside world, so he began listening to the inside one. At first they were just random sounds he heard in his memory. The sharp crisp cut the shears made when he trimmed the boxwoods. The way the ice box came off and on during the night (he couldn't really hear it now). Always he heard the sounds of things past. Sounds he had heard and not paid much attention to had lodged in his mind somehow and now were coming back to him, to fill the silent hours that were overtaking him.

He was still sitting in the leather chair, listening, when his daughter stopped by to check on him. He could barely hear her voice.

"Are you all right, Papa?" she had to yell for him to hear.

He didn't answer, just waved his hand a little. It was not that he didn't want to talk to his daughter, ask about the family and all. It was that he was beginning to hear patterns of sound. They fell into place, forming little bits and slices of his life. All he wanted was to sit and listen.

He was hearing the voice of the preacher at Mary's funeral as his daughter started across the living room. "She was a good Christian woman, a wonderful wife to Emory and a good mother to her children. God rest her soul." He saw his daughter walking toward him, saw her mouth opening and closing. "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." A good deep voice, a young voice, a voice good for a funeral.

"Papa." He felt himself being shook a little, felt a hand on his old thin shoulder, looked up into his daughter's face. "Papa," she said, "What is it?" She sounded so very far away. It seemed strange because she was standing so close.

"You'll have to speak up, Margery," he said finally, "because I'm having trouble hearing you."

She was saying something again, but it took a lot of effort and energy to try to hear her, to even listen. Instead, he heard the scraping of the casket as the pallbearers slid it onto the back of the hearse and the slam, slam, click as they shut the double doors. Then the turn-over of the engine, the sound of the tires on the gravel church parking lot. He looked out the window and saw cars going by in front of his

house, saw the wind blowing in the oak trees, turned to look for Margery, but she was gone, left the front door wide open.

Later he saw Henry, Margery's husband, and Margery come through the door. But just then he heard his wife Mary call from the kitchen. "Emory," she said, in the strangest tone, just once. There was a loud noise, a glass rolling across the table, and then a crash as it broke on the floor. Mary was falling. He could hear the overturning chair and his own footsteps as he ran into the kitchen. She moaned low and long as he set the chair up and helped lift her to it. And then there was the sound of her voice once again, just as dear and oh so familiar and she said it's over and I love you and sighed and was dead. More footsteps and he was hurrying into the livingroom, the clatter of the phone as he fumbled with the receiver, the fluttering of phone book pages, and the tick-tock of the mantle clock, and his own voice of a year ago crying simply, help, help, help.

Emory felt himself leave the ground, felt Henry's arms under him, saw the Impala, couldn't hear the car door slam, but watched it close. The thought flickered across his mind, what is happening? but it wasn't important, so he watched the silence of his neighborhood going by, and heard a knock on the door, Mary was calling him, saying, "This is Major McDuffie, he asked to see you," heard the rustling of the envelope, the breaking of his voice as he told her the news, and the sound of them all, even the soldier, crying.

The hospital was large and red brick. Emory watched it approach with disinterest. Again, up he went in Henry's arms and felt joggled around as they went up the long flat stairs to the big glass doors. Henry was saying in a very low voice far far away something about a room. He heard sounds of his shoes walking down the hospital corridor, he had taps on those shoes, they almost echoed in the quiet hospital corridor. The nurse's skirt rustled a little against her legs; she was saying in a sweet Southern accent, "My goodness, Mr. Bishop, twins! Such a fine healthy pair, one of each. What will you call them?" Then the sound of his own voice, young, confident, excited. "Margery and Morgan." The sound of his finger tapping, tapping the glass at Margery and Morgan, tap, tap, tap, at their little faces which wouldn't look. Henry was laying him on very white sheets. He tried to say thank you, but either couldn't or wouldn't. The doctor bending over him had a pleasant enough face, was obviously trying to say something, moving his mouth in a rather

exaggerated way. The old clock was still tick-tocking in his head and now there was a multitude of sounds. Voices of friends he had long forgotten spoke once again to him, the sound of a spring morning when he was a young man walking on a cement sidewalk to his first job, the sound of coffee percolating, of his dog Flash barking all night long when there was a full moon, the first airplane he ever heard, his own voice singing Rock of Ages, the ocean waves, a Whippoorwill. Each sound as new and delicious as if he were just experiencing it.

He felt the needle in his arm and saw the bottled liquid strung over his head. Margery seemed to be crying. Her eyes were red and puffy and she held a kleenex to her nose. Henry was looking out the window. The doctor and a new nurse stirred around the room. He heard a voice calling him, sweet and pure, a little weary perhaps, but at the sound of that voice he felt his own being move, as if a string tied to the very core of his body were being pulled.

"Emory, Emory," his mother was calling him, "come in now, it's getting late." And then came the sound of his own childish voice, high pitched, almost frail, answering his mother. He heard the sound his bare legs made as he came home through the low scrubby blueberry bushes, the creaking of the screen kitchen door, the pouring of the milk, his own "God is great, God is good."

The silence outside his mind grew heavier; it squeezed out the last drop of noise, so that he looked out on a room of people who were mysteriously moving without any sound whatsoever. Margery was sitting now, sobbing without sounds; it was a wonder to behold. It tired him, though, to watch her. He shut his eyes; all sights vanished, as all sounds had, only there were no picture memories to fill his mind. But the sound inside went on, the constant and calming tick-tock of his mantle clock. The sounds were getting softer now, blurring, more delicate and indistinct, such beautiful sounds. He could hear only two voices now, he knew them, only he couldn't call their names. Hearing them once again he felt warm and secure and happy. He could no longer open his eyes, didn't want to or need to. He had lost contact with his body.

All that was left now were soft gentle sounds.

Sisters

BENNIE LEE SINCLAIR

They struggled to understand each other.

"The . . . rowd?" Torie mumbled, lips scarcely moving. "The . . . rowd?" she repeated desperately.

"Dear, whatever are you saying?" Nan pleaded, looking helplessly to the nurse who hovered in the corner. "I can't make it out."

"Has . . . *crowd* gone?" Torie met the challenge with unexpected clarity.

"Oh, dear, *what* crowd? Whatever are you talking about?"

"Crowd . . .," Torie strained toward her, "take Morris Jr. . . . please . . ."

"Oh, no!" Nan thought, understanding. "She thinks it's the wreck, poor thing, but that's been thirty years! What can I do? I shouldn't argue with her . . ."

"I'll take care of everything," she said quickly; "don't you worry."

"You'll . . . take Morris Jr.?"

"Dear, he's right outside the door, having a cigarette. Do you want to see him?"

She thought that Torie nodded – it was difficult to tell, with the paralysis – and she went out to get him, eager to be free of that oppressive conversation. He was down the hall, talking to a doctor, his black hair glistening in the harsh light. Timidly, she motioned to him.

"What is it, Auntie Nan?" he asked, hurrying back respectfully.

"She asked for you."

"All right." He patted her arm and hurried into the room, ducking his head instinctively as he passed under the doorframe, but in an instant he was back, scowling.

"She's asleep, Auntie."

"Well, wake her up. She dozes in just a second, you know. She asked for you."

Someone had left a folding chair in the hall, and she sank into it gratefully. She had been nearly two days without sleep – unthinkable, for a woman her age. Wearily she moved about in the small chair, looking for some way to rest her head. She was almost comfortable when Morris Jr. reappeared.

"She knew me for a moment," he said, "–she even asked about the children, but then she went off into that nonsensical talk again. What's the matter, Auntie, are you ill? You look so pale." He bent his face almost to hers and patted her shoulder. "You really must get some rest – we can't have you getting sick too. There's a sofa in the lobby downstairs – it would do you good to stretch out and put your feet up for awhile."

"But, your father?" she asked, reddening. It was the real reason she would not leave her vigil. "You won't let him go in and . . . upset her again, will you?"

Morris Jr. bent even closer to her ear. "I had the doctor give Dad a sedative," he whispered conspiratorially, "strong enough to knock out a mule. He'll sleep until tomorrow, at least, and not bother a soul. Now, will you be a good girl and get some rest?"

"Well," she agreed, less reluctantly, "like Papa used to say, 'The man must rest who'd think his best.' Where is my pocketbook?"

"I'll get it for you." He returned, grinning. "Good Lord, what have you got in here? It weighs a ton."

"It's a sandwich, and a gown and slippers and things, in case I spent the night," she said defensively.

"But, you can't sleep in a hospital as if it was a hotel."

"I did when Mama died," she bridled.

"But, that was ages ago, Auntie. These days there isn't room for the sick, much less guests. Good Lord, do you realize what I had to go through to get a private room for Mother? It took me half the night." Seeing her confusion, he added, "Auntie, don't you know I'm teasing you?"

Patiently matching his steps to hers, he saw her to the lobby, almost deserted at that hour.

"Will you be all right now, Auntie?"

"Yes, I'm fine. You run on back to your mother. Call me, now, the minute there's any change."

Stealthily — for at her age one had to resort to stealth if she would go on living as she always had — she watched him go, then slowly made her way to the entrance and out into the night. Since there was no place to sit outside, she caught hold of the railing and lowered herself carefully to the cold stone steps. It was peaceful at this late hour and she felt revived by the breezes, peculiar to May nights, that rustled close to the earth, scarcely touching the treetops. It was becoming a lovely, misty night — the sky was clouding over, erasing the stars one by one, and, even as she watched, a faint rainbow came, rimming the moon.

It brought to mind another moon circled with faint colors, when Torie was a newborn baby. She had stood on the porch of the homeplace, looking now at the strange moon, now at the new child her mother rocked. It too was a beautiful night, and Mama was uncommonly happy. She sang sweet songs Nan had never heard before while the baby gurgled and stared back at her with coal-black eyes, curling and uncurling its fists like tiny cats' paws.

Nan shifted about on the cold step, but would not go back inside. Out here her thoughts came at their own pace and she could reckon with them; in the tight air of the hospital they crowded in on her until she felt she had no control at all. Now, in this moment of privacy, she wanted to come to terms with the fact that Torie was dying.

Torie's stroke had come at an unfair time — the tragic climax to a rare and happy day. When Morris' reunion left the sisters with the whole afternoon to spend together, they had acted like schoolgirls with an unexpected holiday — ever since he retired, it had been almost impossible to do anything without him.

They had decided to drive out to Fairplay, a pilgrimage they had not made in many years. To their relief, they found that the new interstate had passed the area by and it was still remote, laced with narrow dirt roads as it was when they were young and rode in Papa's buggy. Much had changed — new houses, their own homeplace gone and, except for a few scattered irises, no trace left; the schoolhouse, too, torn down, but the small stone church stood looking like its old self — a tribute,

Nan thought, to Papa's generosity: he had given the land and then helped with its construction. The presence of that familiar building brought the old times fresh upon her as she cleaned the weeds from her parents' graves and set a jar of roses between them.

"Mama always loved roses," Torie remarked.

"Papa loved them too," Nan said defensively, but her thoughts, too, were of Mama and roses. At that moment, with the old thing rising again between them, she had come closer than she ever had to saying—

"Torie, I know about you. I *know* about you, Torie!"

It had swelled for the moment— fed, no doubt, by all the years of restraint – but, praise God, she had held her tongue; nothing had happened to mar the sweetness of that afternoon. Instead, they sat on the crumbling cemetery wall and reminisced: about their brothers buried there, and childhood friends and sweethearts, and aunts and uncles and cousins moldering in the damp May-flowered earth before them. Torie had softened and admitted, "I miss Fairplay sometimes."

"I do too," Nan agreed. "Like Papa used to say, 'A person can't pull up *all* his roots.' "

"I'd like to be buried here with Mama and the boys," Torie went on, after a moment.

"With Papa, too," Nan corrected gently.

An ambulance screamed around the corner, recalling her thoughts. Scarcely a day had passed since she and Torie revisited Fairplay, and yet here she was, sitting clandestinely in the night, waiting for Torie to die. It made her feel unbearably old, as if she bore some special scar for every one of her eighty years.

Yet, she had been more than fifty when she found out about Torie, and, until then, she had never really felt that age was a burden. Nothing that had ever happened to her, not even the terrible loneliness of her husband's early death, had been so jolting. A great part of her youth had stayed with her until then – Mama's and Papa's teachings, her own faith in the way things were – it even seemed, looking back, that if she had not found out about Torie, she might be a young girl yet, still pondering, innocently, the question, "Why love and reward the bad child more than the good?" She had read the Bible from cover to cover

in an effort to understand the lesson of the Prodigal son — to understand, with it, why Papa should put up so patiently with Torie's insolence; why Mama should favor Torie above the others, continue treating her as a precious gift even as she ripened into a vulgar, disrespectful girl who couldn't be trusted with boys. The problem had grown into Nan's life like a riddle that would always taunt and never be answered (was not meant to be answered, she had learned, when it was all worked out). It was almost as if she hadn't started to grow old until the day it was solved.

It was early March, 1943, when she climbed the steps to Torie's beauty parlor, just as she did at four o'clock each Wednesday. Though Torie made much about giving her a free shampoo and set every week, she knew that she earned it. How many times had she taken Torie and the boy in when Morris was on a rampage? In the middle of the night, no matter the time, they came to her for shelter and sympathy, when surely Torie could go to a hotel now and then, or at least not egg Morris on at three o'clock in the morning when she knew how it would end. And, aside from that, hadn't she kept Morris Jr. for over a year after the wreck, doing all the things for him a mother should have done? Torie seemed not to know how hard that year had been for her . . . or giving the boy back. A free shampoo and set? She felt not a twinge at hinting for a rinse, and even a permanent wave on occasion. Torie could afford it — her establishment had survived the Depression and was flourishing in war, upholding her adage that women were going to be vain no matter how hard the times.

"I tell you . . .," Torie confided as she massaged Nan's scalp with sure fingers, "if this keeps up — whew! — what won't I be able to do? I'm thinking about leasing the office next door — I could get six more chairs and dryers in there, and maybe set up a table or two for manicures . . . Imagine, I'm getting calls for *manicures!*"

"Imagine that!" Nan said, dryly.

Torie rattled on, as ever unaware that her sister's heart might house anything other than benevolence and gratitude. Everything was going as it always did on those Wednesdays, when suddenly the heavy, unexpected tread of male feet violated the ritual. Feminine voices came to a self-conscious halt throughout the shop; only the dryers kept up a steady whir as Torie, without a word, hurried off to meet the visitor.

"Now, who in the world can that be?" Nan wondered as she retrieved her glasses from her pocket and stared at the unhealthy-looking old man who clasped Torie familiarly, pressing his cheek to hers. "Well, he certainly acts as if . . . why, it's Mr. Formo!" she almost cried aloud when he turned her way and she saw his eyes. She started up before she remembered that her hair was sopping wet and she wore only a slip beneath the rubber apron. He had not recognized her. Reluctantly, she held her place. He had been a good friend of Mama and Papa – it would be a pleasure to reminisce with him.

"How he's aged . . .," she thought regrettably. "I haven't seen him since he left Fairplay . . . how many years? It must be more than forty. Yes, I was ten or so the year that he was principal of Fairplay School and boarded with us, right before Torie was born – 1898 or '99, I don't remember which. Lord, he was handsome! Well, I do wonder what he's doing *here*," she thought curiously as she watched him turn and follow Torie into her small office.

Puzzled, she leaned back in the headrest. She had not seen Mr. Formo in those years since he left Fairplay, though she heard news of him occasionally – that he finally married, and quit the field of education for the real-estate business in Columbia. Someone had said they saw him at Mama's funeral, but she missed him. In the last year or so she'd heard that he had cancer and was dying, and she could believe that now, having seen him.

"What excitement he brought into our house," she thought nostalgically. "He was smart, and had traveled, and was so handsome . . . I used to dream I'd marry him when I grew up." Like candles lighting in dark places, the past began to flicker. "It was such a thrill to sit across the table from him . . . the stories he told . . . like Papa used to say, 'That man could charm the angels out of heaven.' "

Gratefully she closed her eyes, lulled once more by the steady hum of dryers and women's voices. She could almost see the family again, seated over a steaming supper, so caught up in the young principal's adventures they almost neglected to eat. Mama, just past thirty, was still strikingly pretty, and Papa, in his forties and graying, had begun to wear the long moustaches that later became his most memorable feature. The young, clean-shaven principal had spoken eloquently in behalf of those whiskers, chiding Mama for her feminine prejudice. Mr. Formo's own thick black hair was severely combed in deference to his

position, but his coal-black eyes were irrepressible, and none of them could resist his humor.

Yes, it was sweet remembering those days, and the small details that filled them with so much unconscious pleasure: Mama's long and delicate fingers always working at something as she listened to their talk, a girlish flush spreading at the roots of her hair; the night air blowing in from the fields, rustling the curtains—

"Your head must be getting terribly cold," one of the girls stopped in front of her. "Wouldn't you like me to finish you up?"

"Well, . . . I suppose so," Nan said, and, not trying to hide her annoyance, added, "It looks as if Torie has forgotten me."

The girl smiled. "Oh, when that man comes, they sometimes talk for hours."

"You mean, he comes often?"

"Well, not often. Every few months, I guess. But when he comes, she drops everything else. They're old friends."

Nan was silent – it made no sense at all. When she was finally seated warmly beneath the dryer, she stared with almost painful curiosity at the office door. How could Torie know Mr. Formo? She wasn't even born when he moved away.

Unsettled, she lapsed once more into her memories of the past, another near-forgotten scene and a vibrant, compelling voice:

"Hannah, if you're not too tired tonight, I wonder if you'd help me with these papers – that is, if your husband doesn't mind."

A reed-thin child with corngolden braids, she was helping her mother clear the table. The grown-up voices floated above her.

"Of course, I don't mind," Papa answered cheerfully. "It'll be good for Hannah to exercise her mind. As the wise man said, 'A little learning is all that sets man apart from the beasts.' "

It was one of many similar scenes.

"You go on up to bed and I'll be there before long," Mama said in her sweet, low voice. "You run on with Papa, children. I'm going to help Mr. Formo with some schoolwork."

"Mama, can't we stay up too?" one of the boys pleaded.

"Absolutely not, it's your bedtime. Run along now."

Nan hovered on the stairs until the others were gone.

"Goodnight, Mama," she whispered shyly.

"Goodnight, dear. Be a good girl, and say your prayers."

With a sudden, unexpected force, the rest of the memory congealed: Mama, blushing; Mr. Formo's fine dark head bent toward her, his eyes reflecting the flames from across the room; the sound of slippered feet going stealthily down the hall when night was almost over; and the smell of roses – always the smell of roses – yes, Mama wore a rose pinned to her dress. Once, Nan came upon Mr. Formo wrapping one of Mama's roses in his handkerchief. . .

"No! No! Not Mama! Oh, no!"

Nan sat up with a jolt, scraping her curlers painfully on the dryer, her hand pressed to her shuddering heart. *Torie's dark eyes, that forehead!* And, dear God, Morris Jr. was his very likeness . . . his eyes, his hair, his height . . .

It seemed that her heart would burst, or that the earth would open to swallow her, but when finally she looked about, all was as it had been. The girls were chatting with their customers, their clever fingers flying. Outside, the afternoon was waning in thin sheets of mellowed gold as ten million other gentle afternoons had waned.

"I must calm down," she thought. "I must calm down, or my heart will burst. Oh, *Mama!*"

Old axioms of Papa's flooded into her mind – "Judge not, that ye be not judged. It's best to let sleeping dogs lie. Ask not questions that do not concern you–"

"Papa . . . ," she thought wearily, "Poor, dear, trusting Papa . . ."

There was something else he had said one time, when someone had hurt him deeply–

"The human race must bare its face, and tender thee humanity."

She did not quite understand its meaning, but it comforted her.

Above, there were excited voices.

"Yes, I saw an old woman go out this door – quite some time ago."

Was that Papa coming down the steps, two at a time? No, of course not! It was Morris Jr.

"Auntie Nan, are you all right? What are you doing out in this dampness?"

She brushed at her dress, collecting her thoughts.

"Just airing. Airing, and thinking" she said finally, "but I've sat too long, and the cold's gone right to my spine. You'll have to help me up." And then, remembering, "Your mother?"

"She's taken a turn for the worse, Auntie . . . she doesn't know a thing. The doctor says . . . it can't be long."

Nan leaned heavily on his arm as they climbed the steep steps. Finally, she found the words she wanted, "It's best this way, you know. Your mother would never have wanted to go on living with half a mind, half a body."

"I know." Morris Jr. patted her hand. "It's always been so important to Mother to get around and go places and have a good time. She's different from you, Auntie."

"Well, you see," she said gently, "I took after Papa. Torie . . . Torie was always Mama's child."

Vita

I was born when Switchblade Knife
Picked up Heroin for wife,
And except one certain bed
All my memories are red.
God, perhaps, is merciful?
Not our God. His eyes are dull.

Girdler B. Fitch

Like, The Real Underground

I must think of the
Marquis
de Sade
sitting in some level
of Hell,
smiling outrageously
at
how
pretentious
has become PORNOGRAPHY.

As the eternal flames

higher,
lick
about the mad sooty
lips, I see
the Marquis
laughing prodigiously
at the absurdity
of clinical,
Anglo-Saxon
thesaurus
sensuality,
humorless and dull;

PURITANISM
turned inside
out,
like a sock,
pulled
from a sweaty
FOOT.

O. HOWARD WINN

Thomas Wolfe: The Idea of Eternity

Hari Singh

As often emphasized by the philosophers, eternity is not an extension of time; it is a distinct order of the timeless. Thomas Wolfe, however, retains a simple and unphilosophical view of eternity as an inordinate extension of time. As its symbols, he cites objects that do not share the mortal nature of man. Contrasting man's brief life with the mountains and rivers which exist forever, Wolfe stresses the tragic human situation of helplessness and impotence. In *Of Time and the River,* while describing Eugene's first train journey from Altamont to Boston, he details the animated conversation among his fellow-passengers about political events of the time, underlining through an almost imperceptible irony the ephemeral nature of such issues. This conversation is punctuated with Wolfe's comments contrasting the transience of man's life and his passions with "the lonely, everlasting earth – the earth which only was eternal – and on which our fathers and our brothers had wandered, their lives so brief, so lonely and so strange – into whose substance at length they all would be compacted."

Wolfe's view of eternity is not a mystic ascent into the order of the timeless. There is no triumphant note here, for there is no spiritual passage beyond time as in mysticism. In mystic philosophy, the supra-temporal illumines the temporal at every point, and the mystical endeavour is to grasp and hold on to this "point of intersection" of the natural and divine orders in a state of heightened perception. But for Wolfe, thoughts of eternity are depressing because he is then irresistibly drawn to compare the tragic brevity of man's life on earth with the unchanging, indestructible back-drop of eternal time against which the drama of his transient existence is enacted. Thus in *The Web and the Rock,* in the course of the tempestuous love-affair between George and Esther with its alternate quarrels and reconciliations, George Webber pondered over the nature of human life, and "there came to him an image of man's whole life upon the earth. It seemed to him that all man's life was like a tiny spurt of flame that blazed out briefly in an illimitable and terrifying darkness, and that all man's grandeur, tragic dignity, his heroic glory came from the brevity and smallness of this flame." Again, strolling through the Rue St. Honore in Paris George sees his face reflected in a mirrored shop-window and suddenly realizes the ravages which time

has wreaked upon his visage since his previous visit to Paris three years earlier. He ruminates over the transitory nature of man's life under changeless skies and has "a vision of death and time, and he turns his eyes up for a moment to the timeless skies, which shed their unperturbable light upon the street and all its fashions, and as he looks at the actual faces, the movements, patterns of the men and motors, the mystery and sadness of the human destiny is on him."

Earlier, in *Of Time and the River*, Eugene Gant finds himself a wandering exile in Europe, where his quest for certitude has been as unsuccessful as in America, and he sees human life as a brief and futile endeavour fated to lose itself in the void of eternity, "the ghostling and phosphoric flicker of immortal time, a brevity of days haunted by the eternity of the earth." A stranger in Europe, seeking peace and certitude which he now felt would come to him only in his homeland, he pondered over the purpose of human life: "his heart was filled with all the mystery of time, dark time, the mystery of strange, million-visaged time that haunts us with the briefness of our days." Again and again for the protagonist-hero as well as for the other characters in Wolfe's novels, thoughts of eternity are a reminder of the tragic briefness of man's life upon the earth. His characters are seen as transient shadows flickering across the unvarying back-drop of eternity.

Since Wolfe's concept of eternity has nothing in common with the mystic notion of an order of reality beyond the temporal one, eternity for him is not a symbol of the realm beyond time which is the mystic goal reiterated by Eliot in our own day.

> Here the past and future
> Are conquered, and reconciled,
> Where action were otherwise movement
> Of that which is only moved
> And has in it no source of movement—
> Driven by daemonic, chthonic
> Powers. And right action is freedom
> From past and future also. ("Dry Salvages")

There is no conquest of past and future; there is no freedom from the bonds of chronological time in Wolfe's concept of eternity. The eternal, far from arousing any ardor or shedding its luminosity over everyday life within the dimension of time, only underscores the despair and hope-

lessness of human endeavour. But since time present contains not merely the past but also the future, there is within the temporal dimension an element of progression which receives a heightened emphasis in Wolfe's later works and offsets, partially at least, the dismay engendered by thoughts of eternity. In the prefatory invocation at the beginning of *You Can't Go Home Again,* Wolfe affirmed that "he would die with defiance on his lips, and that the shout of his denial would ring with the last pulsing of his heart into the maw of all-engulfing night." There is a distinct shift of emphasis here from death as the total and humiliating extinction of human life to the courage and defiance with which the end is confronted. In the prose-poem at the commencement of *Of Time and the River,* Wolfe had stated his earlier pessimistic view as follows: "The tarantula is crawling through the rotted oak, the adder lisps against the breast, cups fall: but the earth will endure forever . . . ." To this view of human life as a biological existence, ennobled only by a quest for love and certitude, he now joins an insistence upon the dignity and courage with which man faces "the all-engulfing night" and the eternal skies which witness the transient drama of his life. This fresh note in his later books is not, however, a radical departure from his earlier ideas, but is a logical extension and a natural development of his original philosophical stand and of his view of time. This idea is carried forward, at the conclusion of *You Can't Go Home Again,* to envisage physical death as a consummation and a passage to "a greater life . . . a land more kind than home, more large than earth — Whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which the conscience of the world is tending — a wind is rising, and the rivers flow." Although Wolfe's reference to death is now divested of the note of despair which dominated his earlier utterances about life and death, this new accent arises from his belief in social progress and his faith that society, as in the Goethean metaphor of the drunken beggar on horseback, "however, unsteadily, was going somewhere." Obviously there is little similarity between this and the individual, private, mystic experience of transcendence beyond the confines of time referred to in Eliot's lines quoted above.

Early in *You Can't Go Home Again,* Wolfe describes the view from the front windows of George Webber's apartment on Twelfth Street where The Security Distributing Corporation had its warehouse. Enormous motor vans would drive up before this building and the air would be filled with the furious unrest, the harsh exacerbated voices of the workmen. Amid all this din, George sees one man sitting at his desk

in the warehouse in a posture that never changes, watching the noisy scene around him with a fixed, abstracted stare. In an instant of vivid perception, the sight of this immobile man becomes deeply embedded in George's memory and his face appears to be the face of darkness and time, silently counseling patience and faith, for though time might appear to be an all-destructive force, yet man's life endures.

> All things belonging to the earth will never change — the leaf, the blade, the flower, the wind that cries and sleeps and wakes again, the trees whose stiff arms clash and tremble in the dark, and the dust of lovers long since buried in the earth — all things proceeding from the earth to seasons, all things that lapse and change and come again upon the earth — these things will always be the same, for they come up from the earth that never changes, they go back into the earth that lasts forever. Only the earth endures, but it endures forever.
>
> The tarantula, the adder, and the asp will also never change. Pain and death will always be the same. But under the pavements trembling like a pulse, under the hoof of the beast above the broken bones of cities, there will be something growing like a flower, something bursting from the earth again, forever deathless, faithful, coming into life again like April.

In this passage, echoes of the prefatory invocation in *Of Time and the River* are clearly recognizable. But with these now is another ring of hope and faith in the future — a faith which was previously subdued and is now affirmed in an emphatic, almost strident tone. And if the workmen and the truck-drivers are considered as living within the dimension of time, the immobile watcher is seen as standing back from the temporal world to observe them more objectively — a symbol of eternal time, holding out the promise of a future in which mankind will continue its march to greater achievement. In the posthumously published novels, eternity, instead of offering a sad contrast to the transience of individual life, becomes a pledge for collective social progress, transcending individual lives and deaths and opening newer, wider, vistas where "there will be something growing like a flower, something bursting from the earth again, forever deathless, faithful, coming into life again like April," and "toward which the conscience of the world is tending."

The relatively superficial and mundane view of eternity held by Wolfe was clearly stated by him in *The Story of a Novel,* in a passage

which inevitably makes its appearance in every critical discussion of his concept of time.

> All of this time I was being baffled by a certain time element in the book, by a time relation which could not be escaped, and for which I was now desperately seeking some structural channel. There were three time elements inherent in the material. The first and most obvious was an element of actual present time, an element which carried the narrative forward, which represented characters and events as living in the present and moving forward into an immediate future. The second time element was of past time, one which represented these same characters as acting and as being acted upon by all the accumulated impact of man's experience so that each moment of their lives was conditioned not only by what they experienced in that moment, but by all that they had experienced up to that moment. In addition to these two time elements, there was a third which I conceived as being time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth; a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which would be projected the transience of man's life, the bitter briefness of his day. It was the tremendous problem of these three time elements that almost defeated me and that cost me countless hours of anguish in the years that were to follow.

Wolfe's critics have been generally content to treat this as a comprehensive statement of his concept of time. But this is only a sketchy description of Wolfe's ideas on the subject. In the total context of his fictional world Wolfe's ideas of time and eternity are found to have a greater sweep and coherence than could be summarized in the brief passage above in which he outlines some of his ideas about time. Nevertheless, it explicates certain important concerns of Wolfe's novels and betrays the unphilosophical and secular nature of his view of eternity which he envisaged as a prolongation of time rather than a timeless order. This view of eternity is, on the one hand, linked with his concept of the moment as impregnated with futurity and his generally impersonal, scientific and mundane view of time as opposed to the psychological and mystic views found respectively in Bergson and T. S. Eliot: on the other hand, it reflects his constant desire to escape not *from* life but *into* it and his distrust of animistic philosophies that readily venture into the region of the incorporeal. Wolfe expresses this distrust while satirizing the self-styled playwrights in Prof. Hatcher's drama class at Harvard, where Eugene Gant found that "it often happens, when one

thinks he has extended the limits of his life, broken the bonds, and liberated himself in the wider ether, he has done no more than to exchange a new superstition for an old one, to forsake a beautiful myth for an ugly one." Earlier, in *Look Homeward, Angel,* Eugene had discovered that "it was not his quality as a romantic to escape out of life, but into it. He wanted no land of Make-believe: his fantasies found extension in reality . . . ." Avoiding the rarefied altitudes of spiritualism, Wolfe confines his gaze to life upon earth. His secular view of eternity, thus, is in consonance with his central vision of life.

Wolfe's reluctance to accept metaphysical bases for his ideas and his constant insistence upon the observable and the verifiable have prompted some critics to remark that he was not able to formulate a clear idea of time. This is the view held, among others, by Louis D. Rubin who observes in *Thomas Wolfe: The Weather of His Youth* that "Wolfe's fiction constitutes a search for lost time very much as did the work of Marcel Proust. But while Proust worked out a detailed theory of the time experience, and wrote his great novel according to the theory, consciously structured by it, Wolfe more or less stumbled into the time experience, and never worked out his ideas very precisely." Ihab Hassan in *Radical Innocence* concludes that Wolfe "does not understand in what sense experience is wasted and in what sense it is permanent. Between innocence lost forever and experience preserved eternally there remains a large vacuum Wolfe can fill only with the omnivorous ego of his protagonist." Herbert J. Muller in *Thomas Wolfe* also finds that "Wolfe did not attempt a minute analysis of all his sensory impressions, or an elaborate rationalization of his whole method; he did not erect his intuitive practice into a Bergsonian philosophy of intuitionism." Such comments do not take sufficient note of the evolution of ideas in Wolfe's novels.

This development is marked by a logical progression almost as close-knit as from enunciation to demonstration in a Euclidean theorem. Wolfe begins by questioning the place of man in the universe of time and space. His concept of time is progressively evolved from his view of a single moment. A transitional point in the sequence of time, pressed onward by the impact of history and alive with the hopes and forebodings of unrealized futurity, the Wolfean moment has roots deep down in the past and has also the promise of fruit and foliage in the future. Wolfe's persistent attempts at recreation of the past originate from his

desire to trace this pattern of growth, to unravel its design and thus to attain certitude about life, its nature and purpose. His unphilosophic view of eternity as an endless prolongation of time leads him from poignant grief at the brevity of human existence to a sense of hope in the enduring life of mankind and its continuous progress. This is a natural extension of his concept of the moment as a precursor of the future.

The transience of the individual in the dimension of time is paralleled by his isolation in the other dimension of space. But though loneliness is one of the major themes of Thomas Wolfe, he speaks, not of an ivory-tower escapism but of the essential loneliness of every man locked up within "the incommunicable prison" of his own self and struggling against a hostile universe of eternal time and infinite space. The confrontation here is between man and the universe, not between the individual and society. It is because of this perspective in Wolfe that his descriptions of the loneliness of his characters often include a reference to the vastness of space. Thus, in the dimension of space, man is an insignificant atom in the infinite universe while in the dimension of time he has a tragically brief existence in the eternal, everlasting universe. This significant correlation between Wolfe's ideas of time and space gives a coherence and unity to Wolfe's view of man pitted against the adversaries of time and space. Wolfe's quest for certitude, "the search for a father," is, in effect, the endeavour to seek an issue to this struggle. The driving force in this struggle of the individual is what Wolfe calls the fury. In *Of Time and the River,* Eugene's journey away from the constricting hills of home to the wider world of the North is described in Book One which is captioned "Orestes: Flight Before Fury." Reminiscent of the Eumenides who drove the matricide Orestes from land to land, Wolfean fury is the relentless power which motivates the struggle in every man's life. Each of Wolfe's characters is seen as being inexorably pushed by this inner fury towards the fulfilment of this quest for certitude. And since his men and women are under this compelling extraneous pressure which almost renders them helpless and which allows no choice or deliberation, there is in his attitude to them no conventional moralism, no censoriousness or disapprobation. Yet it would not be true to say that Wolfe is indifferent to moral values. The commonly accepted notions of morality are here replaced by an emphasis upon the courage and defiance with which man encounters the antagonistic universe. What he deplores is the fear of life which paralyzes men, brings about a denial and suppression of the inner spirit and hinders their quest for love and

wisdom, certitude and power. The connected themes of time, loneliness and the quest for certitude appear together even in his earliest writings. His last novel concludes with the affirmation that to die is "to lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to lose the life you have, for greater life." Thus Wolfe, at the end of his journey, finds relief from mortality and isolation in the continuity of human life from generation to generation and in the historical fact of progress to which individual endeavour contributes.

The Customer's Story

In every bank in America
there is a lovely girl
sitting behind the desk
to whom you entrust

your first secret, and
there is a man counting
bills all day who would
fracture the vault for her.

She is not meant for him;
you are, of course, to fall
in love with her. He wishes
you were old currency

consigned to fire. Later
he will count your bills,
she will know the face,
and you will nod, smiling.

RONALD MORAN

Chanty

Found an old darkness standing around.
Put it in a sea chest, heard it murmur.
The board said, Wind. The wind said, Warped.
In the wardroom time grew lax.
Out of my hand it fell. And it is falling.
Past the sea ways, and past the ship we saw burning,
    and past the searchlights
Cutting us open to the harsh sky and to the
    inquisitive submarines,
And past a radarman's thin voice leading the way in darkness,
A darkness inhabited by near ships whose lights had vanished,
A murmur of a darkness which I inhabit,
Having even forgotten when I disposed of the sea chest,
My Japanese pistol having been stolen by a shipmate,
The beautiful enemy sword long dwelling in my father's attic.
Is the lock gone rusty? So are the hasp and hinges.
Is a judge sober? I knew a time he wasn't.
Was a channel narrow? I missed the bank in turning.
Is the darkness steadfast? Marrow bone and marrow.
The winds are turning ghostward in its moon.

PAUL RAMSEY

Burning the Bed

Doris Betts

Isabel tapped lightly on her brakes to keep from ramming the long ambulance which was bringing her father home. Its tail lights winked and the painted cross on the rear doors swayed down the clay road which had washed ragged with winter rains, then frozen in lumps and craters. Now the last snow had sunk into the soil. The mud was cold, rust-colored.

Isabel rolled down her car window, leaned out, pressed her horn. The ambulance turned left. One minute, Isabel thought. That's all it would take to check the mailbox. It seemed to her the aluminum door was cracked, that even as she drove by something white with her name on it could be seen. She braked harder, and the rear wheels floated slightly to one side on the slick mud.

"Goddamnit," she said aloud, pulling into the ruts left by the ambulance. She'd probably have to walk back for her letter, through the mire and after dark.

While she parked in the far corner of the yard, the hospital driver rocked back and forth, then swung in a slippery crescent and backed toward the front steps. Both attendants got out, opened the ambulance doors. Then they looked toward her car.

"I'm coming," Isabel said. She put her key ring in her pocketbook next to Brenda's postcard. She checked the handbrake.

When she was halfway to the house the driver said, "If you'll just hold open the front door." Isabel did not like his tone.

Into the ambulance the other man said, "Get you right inside, Mr. Perkins." They slid him out as carefully as a pane of glass. Isabel was looking down at his head. A skull under tissue paper.

"How deep was the snow?" he said to them all. His smile looked raw. Isabel was carrying his false teeth in her pocketbook.

"You rest, Papa."

"A couple of inches." The orderly moved to the foot of the stretcher, looking at Isabel.

Quickly she said, "It's all gone now except in the shady places."

She could have gnawed off her tongue. Now, of course, he would want the men to carry him around the north side of the house and show him those last patches.

"Papa!" she said, even while he was pointing, "Lay back and hush! Let's get you inside. You'll catch your death of cold."

She ran ahead of the bearers onto the porch, held open the door. Her eyes felt cold in her head, like silver spoons. She could have cried. Turning away, she looked down the hall where they would carry him, through a doorway to the old bed which filled the room like an abandoned river barge, washed up askew and catty-cornered. The counterpane was turned back, the pillow as white as a square of snow below the eaves, or somebody's flat grave marker.

The two men maneuvered the stretcher past, grazing her waist.

"That room straight ahead," Isabel said, standing thin against the wall. The men did not like her. She could tell that.

Then they carried him beyond her, toward the bed where he had jerked with joy when he fathered her, the same bed in which she had been wetly born, and Jasper, too. Twice her father had stood and looked down into that bed at what would survive him, and half the time he'd been wrong. Now he had a month or two of dying to do in that mammoth bed. After that, Isabel thought, she might burn the thing. Might leave it burning in the back field, below the old orchard. Might fly through the smoke of it, headed north, and not even look out the airplane window. She pressed her pocketbook where the stretcher had touched her and followed them down the hall. Brenda can help burn it. Brenda wouldn't let me go through that funeral all alone. I doubt I can carry the bed outside by myself.

They laid him down and drew the sheets to his chin. Isabel signed the slip which said Marvin Perkins had been delivered with due care by the county ambulance service. On the way out, the short man pulled a small jar of pear preserves from his hip pocket. "Mama sent it," he said, and thrust it toward Isabel's front. "She's in his church. She said he liked pear preserves."

Isabel caught the jar against her purse. She'd forgotten what Papa liked and didn't like in the years she had been gone. Between now and Easter she could not learn it all again. She was more grateful for

the information than the fruit. She wanted to smile at the man but she was a head taller, and he kept his face down.

She held out her hand to the big one. "I believe you were in school with my brother."

"I played basketball with Jasper." The handshake was quick. "Got boys of my own playing now."

"That's fine," said Isabel, though really she thought it was depressing. "Thank you both."

Her father had gone instantly to sleep, the way a tired child will when at last he is dropped someplace familiar. Isabel stopped with her mouth open on the cheery word there was no need to say. On the pillow, his face even looked like a child's face, one which had been slightly crumpled. There were only a few wisps of hair on the pale scalp. Isabel laid his false teeth on the bedside table. He snuffled juicily in his sleep, like a baby or a bulldog. If she hurried, she could be back from the mailbox before he even wanted supper. She set the pear preserves beside the teeth.

The telephone rang in the hall.

It was Papa's preacher. She craned to see the clock. "Yes, he's asleep right now." Isabel felt through both pockets of her corduroy coat but could find no cigarettes. The preacher said something about food left on the kitchen table. By the churchwomen. Isabel said that was very nice. She braced the telephone on her shoulder and poured out her pocketbook and found cigarettes but no matches. "You'll tell them how much we appreciate it? Since I don't know the names? . . . Oh. Yes. Certainly."

Isabel made an ugly face at the framed picture of Washington Crossing the Delaware on the opposite wall. George, the boat, the tumbling waves: all painted in snuff, tar, nicotine. There was a pencil in the clutter from her bag and she wrote on the telephone book names the preacher spelled for her. With the eraser she poked Brenda's postcard into view. Cypress Gardens, for Christ's sake. "Yes." She thanked him again.

In the kitchen she found chicken broth and potato salad, two loaves of yeast-bread, jars of beets and spiced apples, a bowl of ambrosia, a tall coconut cake on a cutglass pedestal. They can't mean all that for a man who has cancer of the stomach, she thought. Most of that

is for *me*. Deep in her throat there rose something smooth and solid, like a hard boiled egg. They must have seen the coffee cups stacked in the sink, maybe even smelled the sticky glasses. What do I care if they poked through the kitchen? At home, Brenda won't even let me make toast.

Isabel poured the broth into a small pan, set it on the front burner of the stove and looked at it. Globes of fat skated on the surface as if they were alive. Pushing the other food to one end of the table, she took her stationery box from a chair seat. There was a pack of matches inside with her pen. She wondered if the Baptist women had opened her stationery box and read the letter which still lay inside, face-down. She took out the two sheets and, lighting a cigarette and clicking her pen, read what she had written.

Dear Brenda,

Here I am in this ghastly hospital; I wish you could see it. No matter what waiting room I pick, somebody always sits beside me with a running sore, a bloody bandage, or a scar on his face where the skin was burned and snatched off. They don't get sick here, they get hurt. Axes and car jacks and hunting accidents. Even Papa still thinks it was carrying hay bales and feed that gave him his cancer. First he got hernia and then the hernia got mean.

But today they're sending Papa home and I have to feed and nurse him to death. I do believe in mercy killing, I do. How could you watch this day after day and not believe in it? But if I had that power I don't know where I would stop. Two perfectly healthy boys have just walked through smelling of beer and motor oil, and I could poison them both.

I can't tell yet when I can come home. You can't imagine how far away from you I feel. This is some other planet. Papa's preacher is in and out, talking in whatever his language is — it can't be English. I never liked it here and it's worse now, at my age, when I've been living my own life so long. Nights I've been leaving the hospital to sleep in that house I never wanted to live in anymore. It's cold and empty. Everything you do in it makes a loud noise and everything Papa owns is made of tin and falls down in the night.

Nothing here is comfortable to me, and I don't mean the old plumbing or the mattresses that have fallen in. Even the parts of the house I thought I liked aren't there anymore. Four of us lived here and two are dead and one is dying, and it

makes me nervous. The people who used this furniture don't use it anymore.

Isabel pinched off a piece of the cake icing and pushed it back in that space on her gum where a wisdom tooth should be. She drew a line across the page, deliberately sloping it upward in case Brenda should be looking for clues about her mood. Then she began to add in a firm, angular hand:

That reminds me of what I wanted to tell you about the bed.

She put out her cigarette. No point in pressing on with this letter when, even now, a long one from Brenda might lie in the mailbox. She buttoned her coat, hurried out the back door. As soon as she had gone halfway, Isabel began to fear Papa was calling, or the chicken broth had boiled all over the stove. She tried to run, mud spattering on her broad shoes and freckling her ankles. I must look like a grizzly bear, she thought, aching. The mailbox was empty.

She took her time walking back. Let him call. He'd be calling in an empty house if she was home in Baltimore where she belonged. Her shoes were such a mess she unlaced them at the back steps and left them there. The broth still waited over an unlit burner on the gas range. Isabel took off her coat. She ate a tablespoon of ambrosia. The linoleum was cold on her bare feet.

It was too soon to tell Brenda about the bed, how they could burn it together in the back field. At night. With Isabel pointing out the constellations. Save that for a surprise. Brenda would say, "What makes you think of such things!" And Brenda would giggle, carrying the slats out just the way Isabel said, and backing downstairs with her end of the stained old mattress.

Isabel sat down again to her letter. "That reminds me of what I wanted to tell you about the bed." She wrote:

Now we're at home and Papa's asleep in his big bed. I've moved it at an angle because the footboard is too tall to see over. God knows what makes Papa so cheerful, even about the snow he couldn't really see from the hospital. He's happy to have me here and says daughters will always come home when you need them. You know what a lie that is. But I want you to see this bed. It's a hundred years old, maybe two, and some-

> body built it out of trees cut down on the farm. It's put together with wooden pegs and they made it to last forever.

She got up and put some more ambrosia into a bowl and spooned it between sentences. There was a little sherry stirred into the juice.

> Brenda, I wish you'd write more often. I need your letters. I don't see why you're going to the movies with Katherine Moose even if she is lonesome and has trouble getting her support checks. When did you ever have anything in common with Katherine Moose? (Which I mean as a compliment to you.) I thought you were going to make a decouppage table while I was gone, for the living room? After this house, I'll be glad to see something colorful. All Mama ever hung on these walls was that fellow hoeing in the fields, the Horse Fair, cathedrals, that St. Bernard in the woods with the children, George Washington, and Gainsborough's Blue Boy. All of them, even the blue boy, painted in brown gravy. I am so depressed . . .

Papa was calling. Isabel flicked on the gas under his broth and hurried to the bedroom.

"Who's that?" he cried when she came in. More and more, Isabel thought, he comes out of sleep into a world he's half forgotten. Maybe the world was for him like this house to Isabel. Not even the good parts looking like they used to.

"It's Isabel," she said, as gently as she could. She knew her voice was too loud for a sickroom. The nurses had said so. Even the doctor whispered, while touching her father with rapid, hairy hands.

"Isabel? That you?"

"You're home." She eased to his side and laid one hand on his arm, to show she was real. If he asks about Jasper, I don't know what I'll say.

"You've got things fixed up real nice. Even the cobwebs swept down. You've not been washing this old woodwork?" He struggled higher on the pillow. Isabel shook her head. "It looks whiter. What time is it?"

"I'll bring you some soup. You never saw so much food. Mrs. . . . Mrs. Bradford. And two others. And somebody sent you pear preserves." She nudged the jar but he reached beyond it for his teeth in their gauze wrapping. "I'll get your supper now. You need anything first? You need the bedpan?" Isabel didn't know why she asked since, by now, she

knew he was like any other animal and did not defecate until after a meal. She and Brenda had an Airedale at home the same way. "You get your teeth in," she said, although he was already settling his jaws with a few bites of empty air.

She arranged his tray carefully by the bed, then sat in a chair where the high footboard hid him. She did not like to watch him eat. Tonight she looked at the room itself, improved somehow just because it had Papa to belong to. The wide floorboards had mellowed from years of traffic. Two braided rugs were faded gray. Under the bed the lint curled back, and softly under Mama's treadle sewing machine, behind her domed tin trunk stamped with flowers, then under the bureau with its three-foot mirror.

The mirror was in such a condition nobody was safe looking into it. Its surface had peeled and bubbled along jagged stripes of gold and gray. Isabel had glanced in it her first day home and discovered a face that, for all its broadness, looked frail and insane.

Neither she nor Papa could see themselves in the mirror now, after her struggle to move the furniture. Getting ready to bring him home, Isabel had lain in the big bed where he would lie, just to be certain. No need, she'd thought, for Papa to see how his skin had yellowed, his eyes shrunk away from their boney cups. Papa's fine black eyes lay now in their sockets like two butterbeans. Isabel smiled. Brenda wouldn't know what a butterbean was. The Baptist women will bring some when Papa dies; Brenda can taste them, then. She'll feel sorry for all I've had to bear these last weeks. She'll be sorry she didn't write more letters.

In front of the mirror on an embroidered spread was Papa's stopped cookie of a watch, two combs, shaving mug, brush. A china heart which held buttons, cufflinks, and mouldering tie-clasps. In the bottom corners of the leprous mirror two photographs were stuck: one of Isabel, age 10, riding a mule; and one of Jasper in his army uniform. She'd been tempted to put these in a drawer but decided she didn't have the right. From where Papa lay, they wouldn't look much larger than postage stamps.

Behind the high wall of his bed Papa said, "How's it feel to be home? Not counting me sick and all?"

"Not the way I remember it," Isabel said. She was glad she could not see the way he siphoned up his soup.

"You never did come home much. You sure you can get off work this long?"

"I'm sure. I'm good at my job, you know."

"I hate costing you money. You was always tight about money, not like Jasper." The slurping stopped. He said, "And that's a good thing. Here you are, independent. No worries. Nobody telling you what to do. I'm that way myself."

He did not know how long ago his insurance money had been used up, couldn't guess how much Isabel had paid the hospital. With her cruise money. She and Brenda had meant to go to Greece this summer. She said, "Your preacher called, wants to come see you. I told him tomorrow morning. Get you over the trip. Get your strength up." She could not tell whether he laughed or choked.

Then at last came the question she had dreaded. "When's Jasper coming?" He had already asked it once, just after the operation.

"Papa," she said, but he was ahead of her.

"That's right, Jasper's dead. It's the fault of the medicine. With the medicine I can't tell what time it is."

Isabel said it was seven o'clock. "Soon be time for . . . well, not for bed. For sleep."

"I don't mean clocks," he said crossly, and the dishes rattled when he put the tray on the table. "They's not a thing wrong with my mind and don't you forget it. The medicine flattens things out, that's all. It can send you into any year it damn well pleases."

Isabel thought this was not a good time to remind him to take another dose. She cleared the dishes, slid the bedpan under his blanket, and went to the kitchen to put food away. She carried her cigarettes to the back steps because when he was awake smoke made Papa cough, and coughing made Papa hurt. The mud had hardened on her shoes like concrete. When she put them on the earth dragged at her soles. She clumped around the yard. I told Brenda it was like another planet here. Even gravity pulls harder.

She could barely see the mailbox in the growing dark. Tomorrow, at least, one of Brenda's damned postcards. Brenda taught third grade in a private school for Jewish children, and all year long she made them bring in postcards showing vacation spots in fifty states. Brenda

would never have to buy a postcard in her entire life. Especially being so stingy with them. So far, Isabel had only received Natural Bridge, Virginia, and the Cypress Gardens, both with a hole where they had once been thumbtacked to a display board. Both said much the same. *Busy at school. Had to get new battery your car. Hope things aren't too bad. Letter follows love Brenda. Can't write going to movie with Katherine but got your letter and will answer soon.*

Isabel had jammed that one inside her pocketbook so hard the shiny surface folded, and made a long crease up the Southern Belle in her hoop skirt.

She flattened her cigarette with a weighted foot. When she padded in bedroom shoes to Papa's room, carrying the medicine bottle and spoon, he was already asleep and the bedpan waited for her on the table, as neatly covered with the napkin as a plate of cooling rolls. It won't be long, thought Isabel, before I'll be giving him a needle in his arm, the way the doctor showed me. "You've got a real knack for this," he said when she plunged distilled water into the orange. "You'd have made a good nurse."

"I don't talk soft enough," said Isabel.

She woke her father and made him take the medicine, though he swore he didn't need it tonight. They had an argument. In the end she jammed the spoon into his mouth while he was still fussing, and made a small reddening dent on his upper gum. He pulled back, stiff, on the pillow and held the liquid in his mouth. His cheeks blew out like a squirrel's.

"You swallow that now," she said. He would not.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. Please swallow it down."

Still he lay, rigid, his eyes black, neck hard, chin sharp.

She said, "Jasper would want you to take the medicine." Her father closed his eyes. The bulb jerked in his throat. His face relaxed. Isabel laid her hand on his forehead, but he would not move and he was not going to open his eyes. "Goodnight, Papa," she said trying to make her voice soft, and thinking Goddamn him, damn Jasper, damn Brenda, damn them all.

Jasper's bedroom was the most comfortable place in the old farmhouse and that was the only reason Isabel was sleeping there. A late addition, the room had electrical outlets in the baseboards and less bulky, gloomy furnishings. Jasper's old books still lined the shelves he and Papa had built, and she and Jasper had painted.

A broad map of Korea was tacked on one wall, a green peninsula touching the Sea of Japan, Manchuria, and the Yellow Sea. A snakey line of black crayon marked the places Jasper might have been, battles in which he might have fought. Papa had kept this record against the day Jasper came home to tell them everything. Near Wonju the black line broke off. Once Jasper died, in February, 1951, the whole Eighth Army, the War itself, stopped dead and hung uncompleted on Jasper's wall.

Isabel looked at the fading map while she put on pajamas. She plugged in Jasper's reading lamp and ran one finger along his books. Tom Swift. Zane Grey. Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar. Kidnapped. Wuthering Heights. Boy Scout Handbook. Dog and horse stories. True stories of the F.B.I. Tobacco Road. Duchess Hotspur. Frank Harris.

From the flyleaf of Robin Hood she read the blurred lines scrawled across the treetops of Sherwood Forest:

> You steal my book
> And I can tell
> You'll go to Hell.
>
> Marvin Jasper Perkins, Jr. Age 9½

Sometimes on the map of her own mind Isabel tried to draw the rest of Jasper's life — to crayon him home across the Pacific, over the continent to Carolina, to some good northern college on the G.I. Bill and what money Isabel would have given him. What was a cruise to Greece compared to that investment?

And now Jasper would be . . . . forty-one years old, two more than Isabel was now. And they might be sitting here tonight, in Papa's house, waiting out Papa's death together.

She had always been larger than Jasper. By now he, too, would have added weight. Maybe his pale hair would have thinned, the capillaries begun to surface in his cheeks. Her income would have been

higher than his – and how Jasper would have hated that! He'd have told her the hundredth time to let her hair grow long. Isabel took a bottle of Scotch and a glass from a drawer. They could have shared a drink, talked about things. About Brenda. About whoever Jasper might have had to talk about.

Papa called out. Isabel put her drink behind the photograph of Jasper in his high-school mortarboard. She went to the back bedroom but he was asleep again from the medicine that could send him into any year it pleased.

"I'm still here, Papa," she said, just in case he could hear.

Then she went to bed.

. . . Jasper moves swiftly ahead of me through the thick forest. Sometimes he swings from vines; at others he is simply thrown lightly from one great tree to another. I am riding more slowly behind him on the ground, on the back of something shaped like a mule but much larger. Nearly the size of an elephant. I am happy, but I wish he would wait for me. We are going to a cleared space he knows, to build our house. He calls down to me that the Indians are coming. He calls down that we will need help in building our house. I am to choose some Indian to help us. Now I see the line of natives marching, a column in single-file. All are women, very dark brown, young, healthy, as tall as the animal which carries me. They wear nothing but short skirts made of black feathers. I pick a girl I think Jasper will like. She looks very strong. Now I see another who resembles her; she says the two of them are sisters. Perhaps they are even twins. I decide to choose both girls to help us in the clearing where Jasper is waiting for me . . .

When Isabel woke the thick forest turned into a network of tree-branch shadows thrown by the morning sun on the walls and floor and across the four-legged bed. Her mouth was dry. Her head ached and seemed to be full of fungus. She got up, feeling tired, and put the Scotch back inside Jasper's bureau. She decided to wear her wool slacks because the preacher probably wouldn't like slacks.

She made Papa's oatmeal and soft-boiled egg and woke him. He looked into her face as if he had never seen it before.

She said it twice. "Time for breakfast."

His eyes, slowly, remembered what breakfast was. She put another pillow behind his head and shoulders. "Want you to eat early and get cleaned up. Your preacher's coming."

"Good morning, Isabel," he finally said. In a minute he smiled.

He ate as if he were really hungry. It depressed her to think of all that good food, falling down into that internal ruin. "You're not a bad cook, Isabel," he said, not noticing as she did the oatmeal spilling onto the sheets. "For somebody that always hated cooking. You fix your own meals in Baltimore?"

"Anybody can make oatmeal." She stored his empty suitcase in the closet, under the suit he would likely be buried in. "Maybe we'll have time to change those sheets."

"You should of got married," Papa said.

"I'm better off than plenty married people. Tomorrow you want a poached egg?"

"I never could stand an egg looked like it had just fell out of the nest. You really don't miss it? Your friends married and all?"

"My friends aren't married."

"You're not old yet. Maybe you're courting? You and your roommate go out much? You and Sheila?"

Isabel gave him the yellow capsule. "I haven't lived with Sheila for over a year now. Sheila turned out to be somebody I couldn't respect. I don't even see her anymore. Want some more water?"

"What you getting so mad for? You and the new one, then. You find any bachelors to take you to supper?"

"Brenda. Her name is Brenda." She decided to brush the sheets off and leave them. Why make the preacher think a dying man was neat? "Anything else?"

"Open the window," Papa said. "Maybe it's started to smell like spring."

Isabel took the preacher to Papa's bedroom, waited politely while they talked about Easter, baseball, plans for the new church — none of which Marvin Perkins would live to see. She had never met so tactless a man as that preacher, and she stood behind the high footboard and made disapproving faces until even her scalp was tired. He kept right on telling Papa what a fine time the youth club would have camping by the river when it got warm, and how they'd moved the revival to August.

At last he began to read Scripture — which was all he was supposed to do in the first place, thought Isabel. He started the Sermon on the Mount, but Papa said he'd like something older than that, something sterner.

"I've got to like the Old Testament again," he said, sounding embarrassed, as if this were a breach of taste. "What I really like is the wars against the Philistines."

"I see." The preacher began leafing back.

"After Moses, though," said Papa. He settled back and spread his arms wide on the counterpane, palms up. Like a horizontal shrug. "I never thought it was right Moses got shut out of the Promised Land."

That would have tickled Brenda! The preacher began to read about armies, battles, the Fear of the Lord. Isabel excused herself, took down her coat from its peg in the hall and went into the yard, knocking clay off her shoes. The jonquils were already up, their buds like cartridges. There were red knots on the twigs of the maple she and Jasper had climbed. Jasper once climbed to the very top of that tree because it had been his ambition to spit down the house chimney; and he did, but he missed.

Through Papa's half-open window she could hear that the story was about Moab, the Canaanites, and Deborah the Prophetess. ". . . for the Lord shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman . . ." the preacher read.

Isabel circled to the backyard. Here the orchard spread downhill to the back field, bottomland, a winding creek. There were broken limbs still caught in the fruit trees, jelly-filled wounds in trunks where peachborers waited out the winter. Last year's caterpillar webs flapped on the cherries like wet old flags.

"You've quit tending the orchard?" She'd asked Papa that in the hospital, on some choking, long, steam-heated afternoon.

"Not much point after your Mama died. Too much to eat raw, and nobody to make jam or cobbler." Talk of the orchard revived him, though he was very weak from surgery. "I never liked sprays and poisons. Used to go out and kill everything by hand. That way a worm knew who it was, and I knew who I was." His cheeks grew red as apples. At that time the doctor was saying he would live either a day or two months, depending on which his heart decided and how fast his stomach

ate itself. "It still blooms, though, down that whole hillside. Not as much fruit, but how it does bloom!"

Now she paced downhill, wondering if he would wait to see it blossom one more time, ducking her head under the limbs of the Bartlett pear. Bartlett was self-sterile; she heard him say you needed another variety to cross-pollinate. He's set another pear far down the hill. Isabel looked for it, but all the bare trees looked alike at a distance.

When Papa's done with the bed, I'll burn it there. In the bottomland. Primitive ritual, I'll tell Brenda. Like putting a Viking to sea on his flaming barge. It'll be just pagan enough to suit an anti-Semite Jewess like Brenda. She'll shiver while she's laughing. "Isabel, there's nobody like you in the world!" she'll laugh. But she'll be uneasy about it, too, and we'll need a drink when we get back inside, in Jasper's room.

Then Isabel thought one more step: she saw herself home and telling the other women in their apartment building. Katherine Moose. And Rhonda. She imagined how easy it would be to boast, to repeat when she was drunk and maudlin. "So the country Baptists got the body to bury, but the real ceremony was mine. Father and off-spring, just like that." Off-spring. I could make a pun on bedspring if I was sober. And Brenda would echo the telling in mock horror, "I said, Isabel, you can't do that! But you know Isabel, she'd been down there till she needed to be *cauterized*, or something, so I took one end and . . ."

In the distance, Isabel heard the preacher's car. Hurrying to the house, she forgot to bend her head and some tree — the pear? — raked a limb through her short hair.

There was still no letter and that night Isabel tried to call Brenda Goldstein. The telephone in their Baltimore apartment was first busy, and later unanswered. She tried the number several times. When she finally got through at 11:30 there seemed to be a party going on.

"Brenda? It's Isabel. What in the world is all that noise?"

"Turn that thing down. Hello?"

"I said it's Isabel! I've been calling for hours."

"I went to an art lecture. What's the matter? Has he died?"

Isabel was angry and said, too loud, "NO, HE HAS NOT DIED!" She wondered if Papa could have heard. "He's about the same. I just wanted to talk to you. I haven't had a letter for two weeks."

"Well, I mailed you one." A crowd was milling around that apartment, talking, laughing, shaking ice cubes.

"Listen, it gets lonesome down here." Isabel decided she must speak softer, much softer. She stared at George Washington who seemed to her afloat in rapids of Scotch and Seltzer. She eyed the canal in Venice on the other wall, painted in shades of bourbon whiskey thinned down with spit. "Listen," she hissed, "Where were you all night long with me calling and calling?"

"I told you. I went with Katherine Moose to an art lecture."

Isabel said it sounded like they were having a goddamn party.

"Well, Ron's here from next door. And Sheila. We ran into Sheila at the museum."

Isabel paced up and down on the gleaming heart-pine boards. "It's all right for Rhonda to be there but you know, Brenda, you *know* Sheila's not to set foot in that apartment! Brenda, you know that! As many times as I've said . . ."

"Yes," came a stiff, polite voice, "It was a *very* good lecture. Manet."

"Oh Christ," said Isabel. "And Sheila just can't wait to see what changes you've made in the apartment. Rode her home in my car, I'll bet! I can imagine. She can't wait to tell you all my faults while I'm down here keeping a death watch. You hear me, Brenda? A death watch! I never thought the minute my back was turned . . ."

"Well, you try to get some sleep and not break your own health over it," Brenda said, and hung up.

Isabel couldn't sleep at all. She rolled from one edge of Jasper's bed to the other. She was almost grateful when Papa cried out with pain in the night, but the hurt was gone before she got to him. He was sleeping. The gray folds of skin under his neck hung loose. He breathed in and out, in and out.

I meant to offer him those pear preserves for supper, thought Isabel. I'd have thought of it if Brenda had stayed home where she belonged, and my mind had been easy. In and out he breathed. She moved her arm toward his tall mirror where reflected light showed up her wristwatch. Three thirty. Isabel wound the watch. She did not look at her image.

She went into the hall and dialed, direct, the number of their apartment. Out of a dry and swollen mouth Brenda said, "Hello?"

Isabel said nothing.

"Hello? Who is this?"

Isabel breathed heavily into the telephone. In and out. In and OUT.

"What number are you calling?" said Brenda.

(She's sitting up in bed now and reaching for her robe. She covers up with that fluffy robe even to talk on the phone. Her throat's probably scratching. In the morning her head will ache right over both mastoid bones. Oh, I know her. She'll look older than 35 in the morning, and there'll be lines on her face where the pillowcase wrinkled...)

Shaking with the laugh she was holding back, Isabel blew two hard puffs of air into the mouthpiece.

Then she heard a second voice, a woman's voice, say, ". . . answers, just hang up."

There was a single click, then the long singing as emptiness rushed along the black highway, beside the asphalt road, by the rutted road, down the wires to Isabel, across the state of Virginia, humming inland over the muddy yard, into the house and through her ear and into her brain like that old tent peg the Hebrew woman nailed through the brain of Sisera, when he took refuge in her tent.

The Memory

Somebody came into the room just now
Where you are, and where I am, and the past
Was with us for a moment, as you cast
A look beyond things visible. Your brow
Knit, then was calm, no gesture would avow
The presence, but old anguishes, amassed
Quiescent in us, moved once more, then fast
We found again what peace our hearts allow.

Be patient, love. Throughout so many years,
You saw that ghost, not I; or I, not you;
Separately it roused our differing pain.

Not that at last more rarely it appears,
But that we sense it jointly is our gain,
Made one by what so long had kept us two.

GIRDLER B. FITCH

Contributors

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