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Oh You Wonder

MARCIA VOOIS

On a plane in the afternoon the sun is bright on silver wings and hurts the eyes. The plane dips and seems to turn. A postage stamp becomes the airstrip. Waiting for me at the gate was a tall young man.

"You must be Rollin," he said, and his warm friendly eyes met mine as we shook hands. "I'm Paul." We went together for my baggage, then for a milkshake which we relished together in silence. On our way to the car, I struggled to keep my stride next to his long pace. The car was a bright red Volkswagen.

Houses began to disappear and soon the roads were banked only by trees, and grassy patches with cows, sheep, horses, and dogs here and there along the way. Then the houses were completely gone, and the red car flew by the road like a small jet.

"How was your flight, Rollin?" Paul asked.

"Okay," I answered, looking at him with interest. He had big shoulders which hunched over the wheel of the small car, and his hair was blond and curly and very thick.

"Say, you're tall for your age, aren't you?" he asked and glanced at me with a quick appraisal that seemed to honor my size too and drew from me a quick breath of pride. I was nine and was big for my age.

"Have you ever met Mrs. James, Rollin?" Paul asked.

"No," I answered. "Have you known her long?" Things whirled by the little car.

"About ten years," Paul said.

"Wow." That seemed like a long time.

"I boarded in her house during college, and then left for several years, travelling and working, and now I've been here for the last four years or so." He was silent for a minute, then continued. "I don't know why I decided to stay here, but I sure love it. It's got everything I want and need—peace, beauty, trees, a lake nearby. It's wonderful." After another pause he said, "You know it's very possible Mrs. James won't know you."

"You mean because I never met her before?"

"Not only that. She's slipped a great deal since your mother was here last year. Sort of 'non compos mentis'."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, her memory has slipped; and not only that, but her ability to take care of herself and deal with ordinary situations is pretty much gone."

"How come?"

"Well, man, she's old! She's 83 years old. Day by day in the last year I've seen her go. It's pathetic, but you know it's inspiring too."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's as if she's lost all the superficial trappings of things, and only the essence is left. The way things come back to her is in their essential form. She's like the crystallization of what she was—only the heart of things can pass through, none of the outer stuff. Her insights into people are really startling." I didn't know quite what Paul was talking about, but listened to him intently nonetheless. He was the kind of person you listened to. He had a fluid musical way of speaking, and I enjoyed his voice. He asked me if I had known she was an artist. I said no, and asked if she still painted.

"Not any more," he said. "But she was damn good in her day. Some of her paintings are still around. She's an incredibly sensitive person. And she has a heart and soul just full of love. Why I've seen her coax a robin up on the back porch and eat right out of her hand. And her garden was the most beautiful one around for years." Paul spoke with a lot of admiration, and I began to feel eager to meet my aunt. "She never had children, Rollin, but she should have. She'd have made a great mother. She married late." Paul spoke now with deep sincerity and enthusiasm. "She is a marvelous woman. I really love her and respect her more than any other woman. The young ones you can't trust, Rollin, but a guy could do a hell of a lot

worse than Catherine James. I'm really happy just taking care of her. It's even like having a little girl. And that's enough for me, too. I don't need the hell of marriage. My parents showed me enough of that. No thanks. No thank you." He broke off and was silent for several minutes. Then the whirling stripes outside began to slow down and became spots, then animals lazy in the late afternoon sun, and we entered the small town.

A petite old lady stood on the back porch. Her hair was white and blew in the breeze like corn silks, her cotton housedress flapped around small but sturdy legs. As I came up to her on the porch she looked intently at me with large liquid eyes, as blue as a June sky. Her face became radiant and she placed her small delicate hands on my cheeks. Her fingers were gnarled but the skin was soft and smooth.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "you wonder! You wonderful boy! Oh my dear, let me kiss you." She gently and warmly kissed my cheeks, first one, then the other. She was rather pretty, even though she was old.

"Rollin," Paul said, "you are looking at one of the finest souls I have ever known. She's wild about kids, by the way. You've made a big hit with her, Rol." He winked at me and I smiled. Paul gently hugged her and she laughed and cried.

"Oh you little dickens you, and me looking like Hogan's Alley!" she said. "Dear, you dear. You wonder!"

"I'm your Paul, honey. Don't you remember me? I'm your Paul." He winked again, largely. He spoke to her the way one would to a child.

"Are you Paul? Are you? Oh how wonderful. And I tried to remember and I couldn't do it. Inside my head my words all go tatatatadadada," and she tapped her thumb and fingers together, smiling wistfully, "and I can't keep track." She turned to me again. "And you, dear, who are you? Do I know you?"

"Well no, I guess so," I said. "I'm Rollin."

"Rollin?"

"Yes. I'm your nephew, I mean grandnephew." I felt embarrassed and grinned over at Paul. He was smiling. The lady seemed very happy.

"Oh, come in, dear. I'm so glad you came. Yes. Yes. Come in." She took my hand, looked again warmly into my eyes. Looking into her large blue ones, it was as though I could go in and in and be lost in them.

"You are dear, dear, dear," she exclaimed. "You are so *good*." She pronounced good like "goo-wot" accenting the first syllable. "Goo-wot," I said to myself, feeling my lips so rounded. "Goo-wot."

"Mary, this is Rollin," Paul said as a girl came into the kitchen. "This is Mary Wilson." The girl was staring at him and finally turned

to me. I thought she'd have to look hard to see anything at all, her eyes looked so pale and weak. "He's Mrs. James' grandnephew and will be here a few weeks." Paul took some letters from Mary and left the room without saying anything to anyone. Mary said hi and I said hi and smiled, though I didn't want to. She was ugly and she was odd, with pasty white skin, eyes exhausted, drained, with pink rims, puffy as though she never slept but spent every night swelling them up. She was big, with long messy hair, orangy blonde in color. It also was ugly.

"Why don't you come upstairs, Rollin?" she said and laughed a loud, horsy laugh as if that were an incredibly amusing proposition. She said she'd help take my things and lugged a suitcase into the next room, then dragged it, lumbering, upstairs. I followed.

"I practice my cello in there," she said, pointing to the bedroom. "This is your room here." She seemed to demand the entire house for her audience.

Mary fixed dinner and we all ate together at a round table on a screened-in porch. It was late. The sun was setting, birds singing outrageously, and the air was fresh, fragrant, sweet. There were four or five small colored jars with candles in them. Paul lit the candles, and arranged them, one near each plate and one in the center.

"Just look out there at those gorgeous trees, Rollin," he said, stretching his hand toward the open vista outside. "Too bad about all those city skyscrapers and smog and stuff, huh?"

"Yeah," I laughed, "too bad about that!"

Every now and then Paul would place a forkful of his food in the old woman's mouth, and she would chew and smile and he would kiss her cheek. He ate rapidly, ravenously, and Mary seemed to eat as much as he did. None of us said very much during the meal, but I liked watching Paul and my old aunt. When we were all finished, Paul began to speak. Leaning back in his chair, holding a huge coffee mug in his hand, he told me about his adventures as a boy living in Alaska. He had gone to high school there, and told about some of his old friends. Then he told of going hunting and being chased by a wounded moose into the freezing lake water. Of walking into a vale infested with gigantic mosquitoes and being swollen up like a balloon from their attack. Of sitting freezing in a boat far out in a lake in the Alaskan wilds, trying to light wet cigarettes with stiff shaking hands, sitting with his friend and wondering how to get home, and quivering. And of being stranded out on the mud flats with Boots, his beautiful golden retriever, and running laughing from the tide, and then running through ankle-deep water and not laughing, and then running and falling and running again through knee-deep water foaming, swirling, tugging at his legs and not laughing but crying and saying God, God, oh Jesus God. Then being waist deep when he came to the cliff that ended the flats and climbing up crying, and

halfway up, clinging to a heavy root, looking down at the vicious black and white sea and being paralyzed, immobile. Until Boots with great black extended claws, golden back surging with the muscles of a constrictor snake, scrambled all at once, soaking wet up the cliff, and he in a wild burst flew up too!

As he stopped speaking, I looked at him with awe and longing. Supper had passed like a lifetime of adventure and glory. Paul's face was a hero's face to me. It was dark now.

"How about a swim, Rol? You swim?" Paul asked, after several minutes of silence.

"Yeah," I answered eagerly.

"Good. That'll set us both up for a good night's sleep." He smiled at Mary.

"Are you going to the lake tonight?" Mary said, not smiling.

"Why not?" Paul snapped.

"You said we would play together tonight, duets." Her voice was whining. "I've been practicing my cello."

"Did I say that?" Paul said, looking at both of us. We all sat waiting.

"Ummmm, dear dear dear." The old woman began gently rocking back and forth, murmuring.

"Well then we will—later," Paul said slowly and quietly, looking at her.

"Get out of here! Get out of my house!" the old lady said harshly, and I jumped with fear, until I saw her staring, glaring unmistakably at Mary.

"Mrs. Catherine James, I'm shocked!" Paul said mock sternly, pointing his finger, then laughed in Mary's direction. He seemed to enjoy what followed.

"She belongs in a home!" Mary snapped.

"Then is this *your* house?" the old lady asked belligerently.

"Oooh she's feeling her oats," Paul said.

Mary answered, her face distorted, "No it's not."

"Then stop laughing in my house and get out," the woman finished.

"I wasn't laughing," Mary snarled. But Paul was laughing—laughing and chuckling, leaning back on his chair surveying the table and the faces around it.

"You're all right, Aunt Catherine, you're all right. Here—" bringing his chair down he took a fork of dessert and leaned toward her, feeding her. She ate, smiling moistly at him, moaning quietly as she chewed, her mouth delicately closed and small, both hands in her lap. She looked at me, nodding and smiling. A strange feeling of compassion welled up in me. I leaned to pat her shoulder.

"Are you okay, Aunt Catherine?" I said. "Are you okay, dear?" I had never said dear to anyone before. Her face seemed to shine like the moon in the soft cool light of the room. The candles were flickering blue, green, purple, gold and white. The old lady reached

for the blue and white cups and pulled them in front of her. Folding her hands, a seer ready for prayer and meditation, she leaned over to see, then rocked gently, admiring the glowing colors. We were all watching the candles now. Paul looked at Mary, and then began laughing again and rose from his chair.

"She doesn't like you much, Wilson," he said. "She's got good taste." Mary looked at him, then began that freakish giggle that made no sense. I got up and left the room and went upstairs. Paul called up the stairs to get my suit.

We rode on Paul's red motor scooter to the lake, about two miles from the house. Tearing along the road, wind whipped my face and arms. I held to Paul's large body, arms loosely around his waist. I had become one with his motion by the time we turned into the dirt path that led through a woods, then gently sloped, winding through bumps and ruts, down to the edge of the lake, and stopped. The sky was pitch and filled with stars that blinked at me again in the black lake surface. The water lapped softly at my feet and the breeze began softly working through rushes and weeds. The air was warm. We stripped down to our suits.

"Whew it's cold!" Paul said, wetting his toes.

"It's not too bad," I said, touching the water.

"Once I'm in I'm fine," he said. "But getting in is rough. I'm convinced I'm going to step on the only snake in the state or be bitten by the only snapping turtle in the whole lake." We went in and swam for forty minutes. He was the fastest swimmer I'd ever seen. He went back and forth, around and around, but never more than a dozen yards away from me. He knew exactly where we were, he said, by the outline of certain trees on the shore. He towed me for a long time, doing the breast stroke while I held onto his hips and floated, and thus I rode into shore.

We dried off and dressed, then lay on our backs to count shooting stars, listening to the noisy, insistent crickets and cicadas. We talked about Indians and predatory monsters and Paul told some stories he knew about incredible beasts whose remains had been found in Siberia and other places. He talked about our kinship with animals and with the sea.

"Who can deny the tug of the sea," he said in a low voice, half raised up on his elbows. "That's our source, our origin. Aeons of time ago we all came from the sea—animals, plants, people. It all started there. You know, Rollin, we are just one point on a long, an infinite line of change. That line is going somewhere but we'll never know where. Why our point is so minute in the large scale of things, it's almost an abstraction, almost not there." Paul was silent. And I was silent, too, because though I liked to hear him speak, I did not really understand his meaning. After a while I asked him if he swam here alone.

"Sure. Every day," he answered.

"At night?"

"Yes." Paul saw a shooting star. "Hey, you see that!" he exclaimed. "What a sight." I hadn't seen it. I waited, and the excitement rose into the silence, then fell and passed slowly away, as the crickets and cicadas returned.

"Aren't you ever afraid?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm always afraid by myself. Last night there was a huge black cloud in the sky, and halfway across the lake I was suddenly convinced the cloud was coming after me, a huge black monster."

"What did you do?"

"Well, I got mad at my absurdity and convinced myself that this was ridiculous; and kept right on going."

"Gads."

"But as soon as someone, anyone is with me, I'm okay. Same at home. When I'm alone I fall asleep and have two or three nightmares. Wake up and my pillows are all over my room."

"How come?"

"I bombard my unknown enemies. Look!" A white streak wheeled across the sky in a huge burning arc.

"Boy!" I said. "Did you see that!"

"That's the closest I've ever seen one," Paul said. "That was well within our atmosphere. That was damn close." We leaned back on our elbows, breathing deeply. "That was *damn* close," Paul repeated. The sky was like a blanket, the stars seemed within reach. I sat up and pulled a blade of grass neatly with two fingers and put it between my lips. "Goo-wot" I said softly, feeling the word on my lips with the blade of grass hanging there. "Goo-wot." I suddenly felt very happy and very glad I had come. We enjoyed the silence a little more, then got up to leave. We were very close and friendly. I felt like a man. The scooter ride home bounced and spun me through dark trees and open grassy fields. I was cold now.

The house was dark, except for one reddish light in an upstairs window. We went in. Someone was playing an instrument upstairs. Paul said it was Mary riding her cello, and that she did it only when the moon was full. I giggled but Paul didn't even smile, but just said goodnight and that he'd see me in the morning. I waited a moment, hoping to stay, but then said goodnight and went upstairs.

I grew sleepy in the dark room under my blanket and began to feel warm, though deep inside I was still cold. The cicadas seemed far away, so did the cello in the next room. Wind, cicadas, cello, footsteps were far away. Then voices were close by again.

"I still want to practice," she said in a whining voice.

"No more, Mary. Come on."

"You said we could play together."

"Let's."

"Play cello, duets."

"Let's play cello my way, honey. Like last night—you were magnificent."

"I want to play." The cello began again harsh and out of tune, grating, and everything seemed mixed in with the wind.

"Time for a change, baby, come on."

"No, not now."

"Honey, I've been waiting." His voice was fluid like breathing, low but clear. "You really sing, believe me, and you make me sing in all keys, honey; come on." The cello went on harsh and careless, sounds rose again, and the crickets were like singing drums.

"Damn it, Mary, God damn it!" His voice was tight and angry.

"Oh you always talk nice, but—"

"But what?" he snapped.

"You take long."

"Meaning?"

"I mean why do I have to do all those things?"

"Not so many." His voice was tight again.

"Yes. And for a long time."

"Not too long. *Stop* that playing!" he shouted.

"Yes! I never did those things, even heard of them before."

"Shut up!" There was a muffled crash, and the cello stopped.

"Yes! and I don't like them. I don't want to do them." There was some silence, then voices were softer again.

"Look, we won't do them, we'll do what you want."

"Sure. Besides, you hurt me."

"Honey, you taste so good. You're like a ripe sweet melon." Voices dwindled and merged with the night sounds, they rose and fell like breathing.

I thought I was falling out the window, gently drifting through the dark air to the ground. It was quiet and still. I landed without bump or jar. The stars were huge and shining, all colors—purple, gold, blue, green—flickering in the sky. A long wail of loud laughter echoed from star to star and caught on fire from the candles and burst into multicolored flame, filling half the sky, dancing, writhing, thrashing wildly. I was frightened and decided to leave.

Come on, Bootsie, I said to my beautiful dog, and began to walk. I looked back. The flame turned into a great black ball, a huge melon gashed with garish pink flesh, pink sticky water and seeds swirling from it. It became a cloud, a dark cloud, and I was running, and it chased me into the water across the lake; it was a monster, a dinosaur. I was clutching the water, trying to hang on. Paul was there, running, and I watched. Suddenly the cloud was after him, not me!

"Look out!" I screamed, but my voice wouldn't work, and I remembered the dark cloud was after Paul. It was turning into a thin whining funnel, buzzing like an insect, sharp, pointed, stabbing

at him. He ran one way and another, on top of the water, and it flew wasp-like after him. It would miss, fly past, turn around and come again. I tried to swim to him but couldn't move. It was going to kill him. I could see vivid sweat spilling around his eyes, burning and stinging.

"Look out," I tried to scream. "Please!" I tried to scream. It dove and got him. "No! No!" I cried and cried, sobbing, shaking. Huge burning arcs filled the sky. Look at those stars, those are damn close, *damn* close. Paul was next to me, talking. Those are damn close. Or was it the old lady? Someone stood over me, talking for a long time, slowly. "Paul, Paul dear, Paul." He's being called up from the dead, I thought, by a singer. The chant went on. "Paul, Paul dear, Paul." My cheeks were gently moistly touched and I began to waken. It took hours to waken. There was much walking and talking. I felt troubled. I finally opened my eyes to an early sun-filled room and caught a glimpse of the old woman going out the door. She was speaking softly and very slowly.

"Who am I? Won't somebody tell me who I am? Mother and father knew. Yes. Yes. Mother knows." I got up and stepped out my door. The house was silent, doors closed. The old woman was halfway down the stairs, descending one foot at a time. She was barefoot, and wore a white shawl. She wore glasses. "Paul dear. Paul dear. dear, dear. Yes." She sighed a long sigh. "Somebody tell me who I am. Who am I?" She reached the bottom of the stairs, turned and looked up at me. "Do you know?" she said.

"You're Aunt Catherine," I said. "You're Catherine James," I said, "and you're in your house, 561 Downing Street," I said, suddenly wanting very much to make sure.

"Oh you wonder!" she said joyously. Then she stopped, seeing me, and just stood there looking up the stairs. "Please tell me who I am. Won't somebody?" She walked slowly away from the stairs. "Paul dear . . ." I could hear her saying. "No. No. Paul dear. Mother knew, but nobody knows now. No."

I hopped back in bed, thinking, poor Aunt Catherine. I thought of her walking around with no shoes and with her glasses and shawl and her wisps of soft hair. "When I get up I'll tell her," I thought. "I'll tell her she is Catherine Marie James, 561 Downing Street, Cambridge, Illinois, 83 years old. And I'm your nephew, Rollin Christopher James, here visiting you. You are my mother's aunt," I'll conclude triumphantly, "that's who you are. That's what I'll tell her." It was warm and so comfortable under my blanket in the bright fresh room, morning air, birds singing. The uneasy center in my stomach disappeared. I wonder what we'll do today, I thought. I began to daydream about having a motor scooter in Alaska and a beautiful hunting dog. "Goo-wot," I said softly to myself, "Goo-wot."





The Generations

PRIZE WINNING SELECTION IN TOUCHSTONE '66 CONTEST

LOU BOOTH

Hank rolled over tightly in the blankets, then untangled himself, got out of bed and started to dress. Damn! Why does it have to get so damn nippy out this early in autumn? Just Thanksgiving time. Hell of a time for it to start to freeze. Thanksgiving, ha. What do I have to be thankful for? Now them neighbors, they got lots to be thankful for. Leikers a mile yonder got the best crop of corn they ever got since they settled almost fifteen years ago. Schneider's brood over on the old Langford place all got new shoes this fall. Jen Wheeler and his bunch of Cherokee brats even got a new '54 Chevy. Hell, fate's against me. Damn corn just didn't come up right. Fate's just against me, that's all. Thanksgiving, hell!

Hank stumbled into the kitchen. Sure enough, the damn kids were gone already, he thought, as he noticed that the kitchen was empty except for Nanny. "Where in the hell is everyone?" he asked in his usual whiney drawl.

Nanny didn't answer him. She just continued her monotonous rocking. Her persistent silence prevailed, much to Hank's irritation.

That's right, don't say anything, sneered Hank to himself. Think you're pretty smart, don't you, just sitting there making that damn racket. Think you've really got it made. Damn old lady.

"You talking to someone, Hank?" Peg slammed the back door shut as she lugged in a bucket of milk. Peg had borne seven kids in a ten-year span, and her figure looked it—what there was of it. Her dress hung in folds over her body. It had once also served as a maternity dress.

"Where are all the damn kids?" he grumped. "I bet Ched, Jake, Charley, Fred, none of 'em are out plowing the field, are they? Hell,

no wonder the damn corn weren't ready before frost, not with them bums. Am I supposed to get up and do everything myself? What am I feeding the damn kids for?" Peg had shoved Hank a glass of tomato juice and spilled out two aspirins on the table. Hank drank.

"The boys are all out hunting rabbits. Ain't got any idea where Amy is. Went out with Jen Wheeler's boy again last night. He had that new car of theirs. Don't seem right those half-breeds getting a new car while we slave away and our corn freezes. Maybe she's out with him again this morning. Said something once about going and eating Thanksgiving dinner with his family. Wouldn't be surprised if she comes in married one of these days like Ann and Jane did."

Hank thought a moment. "Yea, it's about time she settled down on her own. I can't support her all her life. She don't appreciate none what we've done for her already. Any girl seventeen should be making her own h---"

"She ain't seventeen, she's sixteen," Nanny interrupted as the floor missed a creak.

"Shut up, Ma," Hank spat, "I'm sick 'n tired of your damn yakking. She's seventeen. I should know how old my own daughter is."

Nanny retracted to silence. The creaks were regular again.

* * *

Years before the rocking chair had tread back and forth, back and forth. Pa lazily slid along with the movement. It was autumn—the time of the year when the wind moves more briskly and the squirrels scamper among the trees hurriedly gathering their winter's supply of nuts. Everything accelerated movement in time with the colder weather except Jed. Jed was tired. He had had a hard life. The neighboring folks near the Cummins had large families, with many sons to help with the tiring farm work. Fate was against poor old Jed. Hank was his only son—his only child.

It was Thanksgiving. Nanny plodded around in the kitchen fixing a small dinner. Jed looked listlessly on.

"Where's Hank, Ma? Them fields aren't going to be plowed by themselves."

"Pa, you know I can't keep track of that boy of yours. Why should I look after him? He ain't no more concern of mine. I gave up on that boy long ago. He's nothing but a lazy good-for-nothing. Ain't helped around the house since we stopped thrashing him. Might as well git out on his own far as I'm concerned. Time he looked out for himself. Then he'd see how much we done for him."

"Get out, hell! He ain't going to get out. I can't do the farm work by myself. I'm old. When a man's forty-five, he should be looked after by his kids. Hell, he ain't going to leave now! Not when there's crops to grow."

The door slammed. Nanny and Jed stopped and turned to watch Hank saunter through the door.

"Where you been?" Jed growled. "You should be out working."

"To hell with the farm, Pa. I'm leaving. I'll be twenty-one next week, and me and Peg are going to get married and move to Dover. I just seen her, and we decided."

"The hell you are! You're staying right here. You ain't running out now. You're taking care of this farm. Know damned well I can't. You ain't going no place. You're staying here. Hell, if you ain't!"

Hell it would be, too! Jed always had his way. Hank became sulkily silent, knowing that he would stay. Jed would see to that.

Jed triumphantly lapsed back into silence and rocked. Nanny indifferently went about dinner. The rocker made the lazy movements back and forth, back and forth. And so, things continued on just the same.

* * *

Morning came and went as it always did. Dinner, too, came and went as always. The boys snuck in just before dinner time, ate, and begrudgingly set out to work the fields under Hank's supervision. A half hour passed. Hank went in to sleep.

Time passed: 2:30. 3:30. 4:30. Hank woke regretfully and went to the window to peer out on the boys. He stared at an empty field.

"Peg! Where are those damned kids? They're gone. Why didn't you watch 'em?"

Peg looked up from mending. "I swear, I can't watch them all the time."

"Ain't that just like kids. You slave over 'em, raise 'em, and then when you want anything out of 'em, they always run off. They're a hell of a lot." Hank took a drink to warm up. In the summer he took them to cool off.

It was three weeks later into autumn. Hank looked disdainfully at the fields covered with the first season's snow. Damned snow. Wood's all been gathered at the neighboring farms, thought Hank, as he stared out the window towards his empty woodshed. Damn kids of mine never do anything. Now it'll be harder 'n hell to get any wood. Damn to hell that snow!

Hank took a drink to keep warm, gathered a blanket tightly around him and slouched deeper into the rocking chair. "Damn, it's cold in here," he muttered. "Damn!" Peaceful, too, he thought, since Ma stopped her infernal rocking.

A heavy wheeze, a cough, and then a sound of gagging phlegm came from the bedroom. "Not peaceful enough, though; Ma just got to make some noise to get on my nerves." The gagging became louder and louder.

Peg came from the bedroom. "Nanny is worse agin. I swear it takes all my time trying to make her stop gagging."

Hank ignored her. Nanny had been a bother to him for years now.

Not a concern, just a bother. Just another mouth to feed, and this winter there wasn't enough hardly even for him. Nanny was old. Old people always get sick. Now he not only had to tolerate her feebleness, but he had to listen to a sick, old woman.

"No telling how long she'll keep that up," he griped. "Old people, once they get that way, just seem to keep being sick all the time. Hell, that's all I need!"

Peg disappeared into the bedroom and left Hank alone to mumble. Then an idea came to him.

"Peg," he hollered, "what was it you needed in town?"

"Flour and coffee," the reply came back.

"Well," he continued, "I think I'll ride in and get that stuff now. I think I'll take Ma with me to a doctor's in Dover, too."

"What?" Peg's head popped from the bedroom. "Hank Cummins, are you plumb crazy? How are you planning on paying for a doctor now? On our wood supply?"

"Just shut up," Hank retorted. "I said I'm taking Ma to the doctor's."

The road to Dover was long—over twenty miles. It's damn long, thought Hank, as Nanny continued coughing and wheezing. When he entered Dover, he drove along Main Street until he saw a sign saying "Dr. Joseph A. Miles, M.D."

"Well, Nanny, this doctor's office looks as good as they come." He pulled in front of the building and helped Nanny out of the car. He was almost in amiable spirits.

The two of them entered the office. Nanny weaved back and forth and leaned on Hank to keep from falling. Hank seated her in a chair. "There, Ma, we're here."

Hank could see Nanny watching him helplessly as he gave a side-ways glance at the empty office and strolled out without looking back.

It's cold outside, Hank thought. Damn cold. He got into the car and drove back towards home. As he passed a liquor store he repeated, "Damn cold." Well, I guess I can afford just one bottle. Things are going to be a lot easier now with less to feed, he reasoned. The car idled. Hank returned from the store, shivered, and started back down the road. I hope as hell it ain't this cold at home. Wonder if those kids got any wood found yet. Bet not. House will still be cold when I get there. Damn kids!



Chance of a Lifetime

JOHN E. MORRIS

I walked up the stairs to my room on the first floor of the large hotel. The first floor was a little more expensive, but after all I was on a two-day vacation to ski and forget the slush of winter in the city. I unlocked the door and stepped inside, wondering why I chose the name Tom Smith to sign at the desk. Maybe it was because the two names above were Smiths. If everyone wanted to remain anonymous, I was all for that game too.

The room was richly furnished and had a beautiful view of the snow-covered mountains. As I glanced about the room I noticed that one of the doors had a bolt-type lock. I tried the knob and it opened, revealing a room similar to mine. Glancing at the door, I noticed there were locks on both sides of it. I stepped cautiously into an empty room. The dresses and fancy luggage told me it was wholly or in part inhabited by a careless woman. I returned to my room, locking my side of the door.

The shower was refreshing and almost made me forget the four-hour drive to this "best ski resort in Vermont." As I put on my sports jacket, I saw my gun and shoulder holster on the dresser. I paused for a moment, then slipped the coat off and strapped the holster into place. I put my coat back on and looked into the mirror. "You ham," I thought, grinning.

I walked through the lobby into the cocktail lounge. The room was sparsely filled with men and women. Occupying an empty stool between a man and woman, I ordered a scotch and soda. As a second drink was placed before me, the man at my side turned.

"This must be your first time here," he said.

"Yes, it is."

"I didn't think I'd seen you here before. I'm the ski instructor. Bill is my name."

The conversation continued. The middle-aged woman at his right spoke only to him. Her dress and attitude suggested to me that she was one of his students seeking his attention. I accepted an invitation to join them for dinner. The woman was polite and attentive, but she seemed mainly to be interested in Bill.

The dinner was served, steaks all around. I wanted to order something less expensive. My budget, I thought, would give out too quickly if I lived outside my usual means. But, when the waiter asked for my order, I repeated, "I'll have a steak too." After dinner, we had a few more drinks. The check was placed face down on the table. I was afraid to look at it.

As I reached for my check, the instructor snatched it from my hands and held the two of them together. He made no attempt to reach for his wallet as the waiter approached. The woman, Lisa, had placed her hand out, and Bill gave them both to her. I said I would pay for them. Bill looked at me as if I'd said something stupid. Lisa answered, "I'll take care of them. Don't worry, it won't break me."

She reached into her bag, and from the loosely crumpled bills she handed the waiter a fifty.

We returned to the lounge as the band in the adjoining room was playing the introduction number. When Lisa went to powder her nose, Bill told me he had met her a week ago.

"She's loaded," he said. "And all I have to do is let her think she's trapping a husband and I get anything I want."

When Lisa returned, I paid for my drink and walked toward the band room. I entered the room and walked along the wall. Bill's confession had left me with an uneasiness that I hoped I could walk off.

A stocky man of medium height staggered against my shoulder and shoved me against the wall. I felt my gun jab into my ribs. I turned to catch the man and placed him against the wall for support. His eyes were bloodshot and his breath stunk with whisky. A taller man was breaking through the crowd to hit him again. He kept repeating, "That's my girl. That's my girl." As the taller man reached us he tried to shove me out of his way. The stocky man lunged toward the door. I faced the taller man. He made a gesture as if to swing and I was halfway hoping he would. I would have liked to take my disgust out on someone. He made a few mumbling remarks and then walked back to the tables at the other end of the floor.

I retraced my steps to the door and walked through the lounge where I noticed Lisa buying another round. I walked through the lobby and out the front door.

The night was cold and dry, dry enough so I didn't notice the cold at first. "I should lend Bill my gun," I thought. "Certainly that

would be more honorable than using Lisa's emotions to steal from her."

About midnight, I awoke to the sounds of voices from the adjoining room. Bill and Lisa were having an argument. Bill said he couldn't get away just yet and slammed the door. Lisa slammed a door, and the night was quiet again.

The next day on the intermediate slope I saw Bill again.

"You got a dinner date yet?" he asked.

"No."

"Well, why not join Lisa and me again?"

"Okay."

Descending the slope I was sorry I had accepted the invitation. With my limited funds, I could not act the part of a playboy. I determined to eat and pay for just what I could afford. I avoided Bill by staying on a lower slope and experimenting with stunts I learned when I was a younger and better skier.

That night, before I left my room, I counted my funds. I could have a time tonight and not eat tomorrow, or I could live easy and get through both days.

The lounge was full when I entered. After I had ordered a drink, I saw Bill waving to me. As I joined them, Lisa looked up and greeted another Mr. Smith and continued picking her nails.

"Where have you been?" Bill asked.

"Oh, I took a little nap," I said, lying. I knew I couldn't afford too many drinks and had remained in my room until I would have time for just two or three.

Lisa joined in the talk of skiing and football. I felt she was willing to put up with a freeloader, if that was what Bill wanted. When we ordered dinner, I ordered what I could afford. Later when I paid for it, I noticed a quizzical expression on Bill's face.

I joined them again in the lounge. After a few more drinks, we began to talk a lot more about nothing.

When Bill left, Lisa, who was a little high, said, "I suppose you think I'm nuts."

"No."

"Well, I have money and I'll be damned if I'm going to die old and alone. I'm going to enjoy my money and I don't care what the rest of the world thinks."

When Bill returned, we started in with the small talk again. After another drink, I excused myself and went to my room.

In my room I lay on the bed thinking about Bill and Lisa. I wondered if she'd bolted the door yet. I got up and tried it. No, it was still open. With all that money you'd think she'd be more careful. Hell, anyone could take it. I'll bet he could get away with it without it being missed, if he wasn't too greedy. If a person took a little, he might even save that dumb dame a little heartache; she might lose the freeloader. The set-up was perfect: anonymous name

and the door was opened. I smiled as I thought how it would keep the local law guessing about how I got in. I sure could use a couple of bucks.

The next day after breakfast, I looked at my wallet. Not enough for a good drunk, I thought.

In the idle moments on the ski lift, I thought of the perfect crime. I would only take a hundred or so. She probably loses that much every week from getting the wrong change. At the top of the slope, I noticed another instructor. He mentioned that he was the substitute. Bill had taken the day off. One hell of a hangover, I thought. Why not, after all that free booze? I descended the slope several times with a girl companion, but left before I felt I had to entertain her at the hotel.

As the sun started to disappear behind the snow-covered mountains, I tried the door adjoining the two rooms again. It was still unlocked. The room was empty and in an utter mess. I closed the door. Oh, hell, I won't take much.

I opened the door again. The room was lit only by the fading sun seeping through the drawn drapes. The third drawer revealed her reserves, a roll of hundreds and fifties. She'd never miss a couple, I thought. Anyway, the state the room was in, she could misplace a couple thousand.

I had the money in my hand. Then my mind caught up with my act, as I had anticipated it would. The choice was mine right now. I thought and then I made my decision. I wiped my prints off everything I had touched, bolted the door from her side, and escaped through her front door, locking it after me. I returned to my room and bolted my side of the door. As I was packing, my heart was pounding and my legs felt weak.

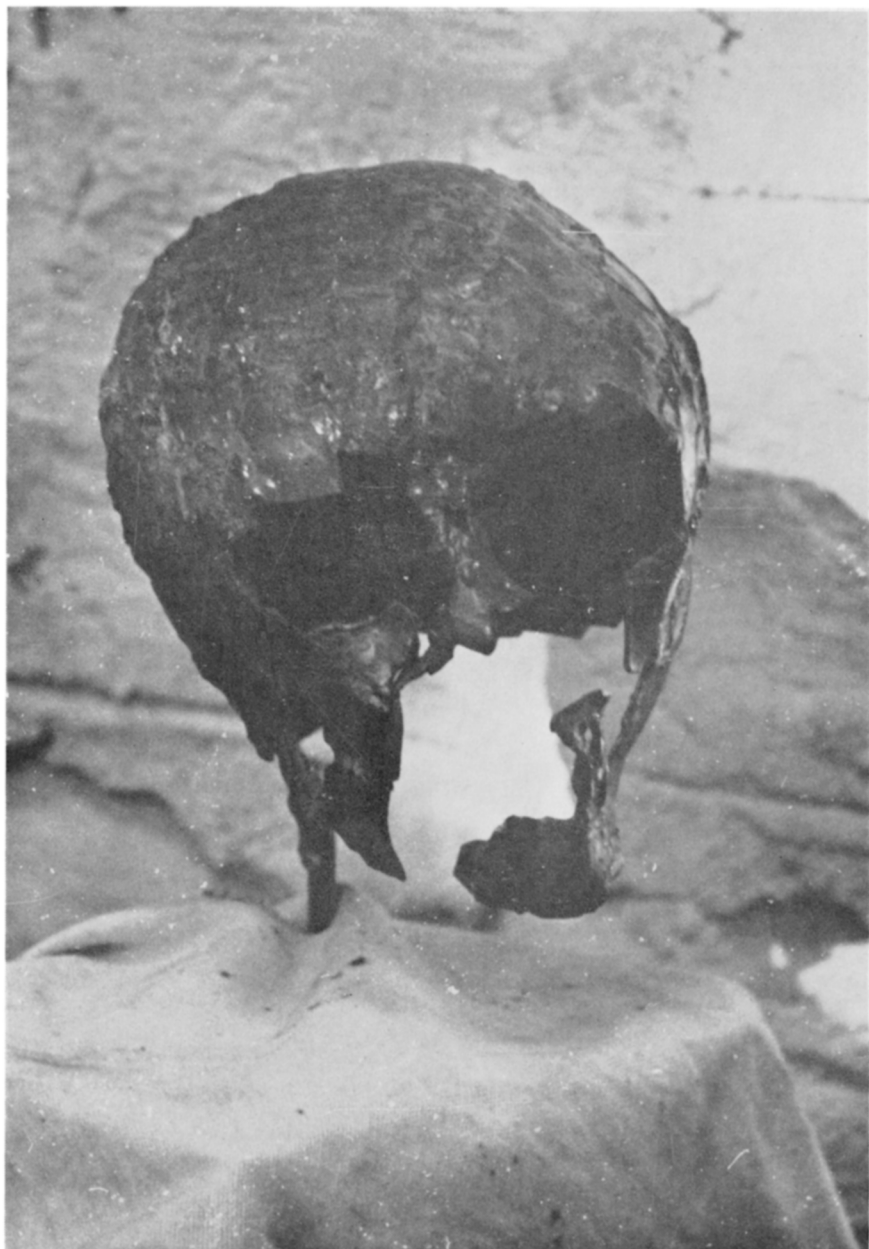
I hurried down the stairs. The desk clerk was not there so I threw my key on the counter and walked toward the door.

Bill and Lisa walked through the door as I approached it. I felt as if my heart had stopped. They were all smiles. Lisa's eyes caught mine and she announced that they had been married. I stood there frozen. Lisa suggested I congratulate them and I did. Bill's eyes, embarrassed by my frank stare, remained on the back of Lisa's head. They hurried away and she was the last to say goodbye.

The air outside was first warm, then cold, as my sweat started to chill. The drive home was long and tiring. I just wanted to forget everything.

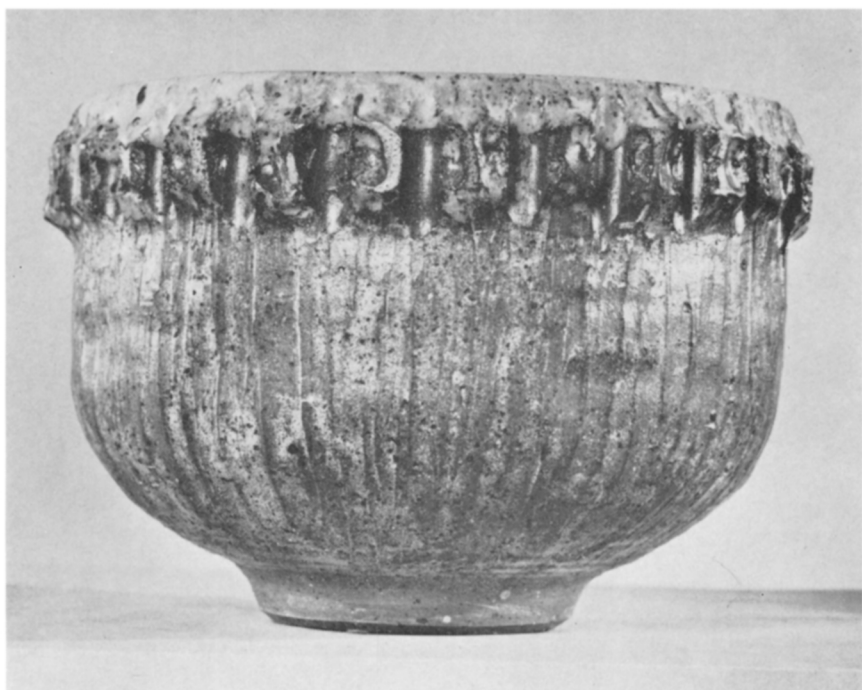
That night I walked. This was my job. The hat pulled down to just above my eyes and my gun on my belt under my dark overcoat. Married. Bill and Lisa married. Who was he kidding, I thought. Some gigolo. And why didn't I take the money? The set-up was unique. It was a game, I thought. We were all playing a game.

As I walked under the street light, I wiped the badge with my sleeve and, twirling my night stick, continued my beat.



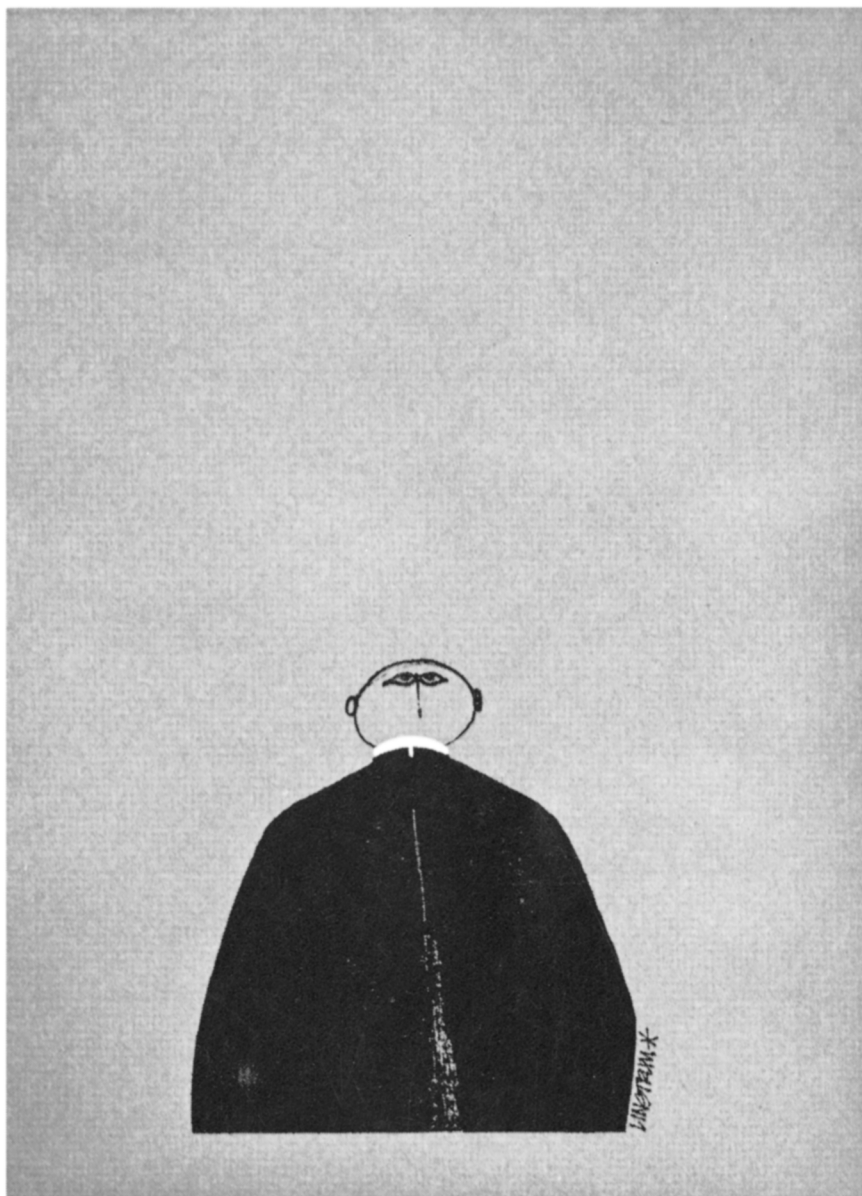
"SCULPTURED IRON"

By ALAN SHIELDS



“STONEWARE”

By RAY KAHMEYER



"PREACHER MAN"

By DAVE LINSTRUM

The Ax

BRUCE BAIR

Deep in the Amazon River basin, near an obscure tributary of the Rio Juruena, where the closest civilization is a nearly unpronounceable town called Jarareacanga, there once lived a people who had not been anthropologically classified. They were happy people, Polytheists, who had a god or goddess for nearly everything inexplicable. There were jaguar gods, monkey gods, good gods, heinous gods, fertility gods, manioc and cassava gods, fish gods.

If you were a person who was used to popping bread into the toaster every morning, frying eggs on a gas stove, brewing coffee in an electric coffeepot, getting into your car, and driving to the office for another day of paper work, you would have termed them primitive. It was true that their highest technology produced boat, blowgun, and pottery, but they were not without a large amount of knowledge. They knew a great deal about survival, their genealogy and the classification of their gods.

These people, the Nalanda, lived easily with their gods. Their environment, although harsh, improved them. Sick or unintelligent people simply did not survive.

Stories of the Nalanda had drifted from tribe to tribe in the great jungle, from tribes to missionaries and traders, down the Rio Juruena to Jarareacanga, and finally to Rio de Janeiro. Gradually their existence and whereabouts became known to anthropologists; and anthropologists, being what they are, could not resist an expedition to discover, classify and write reports on the Nalanda to publish or illustrate lectures in freshman anthropology courses.

Bearded anthropologist Thomas Smith, discoverer of many pre-

viously obscure cultures, and friend of the current Brazilian government, was the first to organize an expedition. He, two minor anthropologists, an interpreter, bearers, rowers, and boxes of equipment slowly worked their way up the Rio Jurueña.

Thomas Smith beat mosquitoes into a bloody anthropological pulp, cursed in nine different languages, evoked rare and powerful unpronounceable gods against the mosquitoes, the sun, the rain, the boa constrictors, the clouds, the night and enjoyed himself thoroughly. The lesser anthropologists looked on him in awe, grew beards, and listened rapturously to his tales at night about cultures he had studied and dangers he had faced. After a month of mosquito slapping, cursing, poling flat boats through mud, drinking and eating Squanas for supper, they arrived in the area in which the Nalanda roamed.

Contact was established easily. The Nalanda were not a hostile or a fearful people, and they were an inquisitive people. They had observed the expedition for several days, and had decided that the white men could do them no harm. And so they had appeared on a bank of the river, where the white men could see them easily.

When Thomas Smith saw the Nalanda on the bank, he ordered the rowers to bring the boats to the shore, and stepped out, signaling with his upturned palm the friendship sign of the jungle. He offered the Nalanda some colored beads, gesturing for them to accept them as an offer of friendship. The Nalanda, a color-starved people, accepted these gifts, and returned dried fish as their friendship offer.

After this it was a simple matter to explain through the interpreter and the experienced gestures of Smith that he and his companions would like to visit the Nalanda village.

The anthropologists settled easily with the Nalanda. They were no burden to them, since they had brought their own supplies. The initial feeling of strangeness the Nalanda felt for the anthropologists passed, and they resumed their usual way of life.

Thomas Smith was fascinated. He had never before studied a society so primitive and so he decided to stay with the Nalanda when the rest of the expedition returned. He had traveled farther alone with only a boat, and therefore did not doubt his ability to return to Jarareacanga. He had learned in his month with the Nalanda much of their language, and was beginning to understand the culture, and so he thought he had the ability to get along perfectly with the tribe. Left with a few tools, some food, and a few bottles of his favorite liquor, Thomas Smith began to live alone with the Nalanda.

As the weeks passed the Nalanda began to take an interest in Tomac (They could not pronounce s's.) that transcended their original curiosity. It was not his skin, or his ever-lengthening beard that interested them, but his tools. With his metal knife he could fashion small carvings, or cut vines many times faster and better than they could. With his needle and thread he could mend fabric

almost miraculously. Their stone knives and bone needles were no match for his steel tools. But what interested them most were his axes. Such mighty tools they had never seen. With it he could cut through a dead tree (There was a taboo against cutting down most live trees.) in fifteen minutes, a job that would have taken the Nalanda hours to finish.

The anthropologist constantly attempted to interview members of the tribe, but he had found most of them reluctant to speak. The leader of the tribe, Quina, however, was always happy to verbalize at great length on any subject.

One day, while talking of the Nalanda's gods, Quina asked the anthropologist what the magic of the ax was.

"No magic," said Thomas Smith, "just steel."

"What is steel?" asked Quina.

"A very hard material."

"Harder than rock?"

"Yes."

"With such an ax we could become very prosperous."

"You prosper now," said Smith.

"True, but with an ax such as this I could be a great leader."

The conversations between Smith and Quina constantly centered around the ax. Many times they would begin talk on some other subject, but Quina would always guide the conversation skillfully toward the ax, so unobtrusively that the anthropologist was scarcely aware of it. Quina's fascination for the ax became an obsession.

It took weeks for Quina to obtain an ax from the anthropologist, but he had found that if he talked about things that Tomac seemed to be interested in, he was more responsive to his requests. And finally, after expounding for hours on many aspects of the tribe, and completely exhausting Tomac's ability to listen, he was given an ax. The anthropologist parted with the ax much more reluctantly than with Quina.

Now among the tribe there had always been a rivalry between the family of Quina, and another family whose head was Wara. It was one of these families whose head had usually been leader of the tribe.

Wara was an immensely strong man, with the strong, square face and straight black hair of his ancestors. The muscles of his brown chest showed through his skin as clearly as those on an anatomical chart. Once the anthropologist had observed him pick up one end of a fallen tree, for the same reason, it seemed, that an animal sometimes runs, to feel the joy of its body working.

The anthropologist became enthralled with Wara, for Wara was a white man's concept of the "noble savage." Even with all of his anthropological training, Thomas Smith could not help thinking, "What a magnificent savage, what a beautiful animal!"

It was the custom of the tribe for the leader to be chosen by a

duel. Anyone past his twenty-fifth year could challenge the leader, and if he won, was accepted by the tribe as the Chief. The duel did not usually end in death, or even a fight, because the combatants were first given a test by the elders on the tribal genealogy. In this way it was assured that no senile man was kept as leader (or any stupid man become one). But Quina knew the tribal genealogy well, and it was acknowledged by the tribe that Wara would make no mistakes either.

Wara had taken everything that he wanted from the jungle, just as he had won his wife from a rival by smashing him to the ground with the back of his forearm, and just as he had planned to take the leadership of the tribe from Quina, when he felt that the time was right. He had been ready to make his challenge, but now Quina had the ax, and for the first time in his young life he was unsure of himself. He knew that Quina was a strong and experienced fighter, and he had seen him chop great pieces of wood out of the less sacred trees with the ax.

Wara became interested in the anthropologist, for he knew that he had another ax. Wara felt that if he could get that ax, he would be able to defeat Quina.

Thomas Smith and Wara gradually became friends. The anthropologist began to admire Wara, not only for his magnificent savagery, but also for his quick mind and honest, blunt replies to his questions. It was from Wara that he learned of the old tribal ways of choosing leaders. And he came to believe that had he not interfered with the tribe, Wara would have become the natural leader.

He watched with gradually increasing alarm the power that Quina's ax began to take. It seemed to acquire a symbolic power of leadership. He realized that he might have broken the old tribal laws of ascension. It might no longer be he who passed the ancient tests who was leader, but he who held the ax. He felt that Wara was the natural leader, but he had thwarted him by giving Quina the ax.

One day as Wara and Tomac were talking about the methods the Nalanda used for catching fish, Wara suddenly said,

"Give me your ax."

"What?"

"Give me your ax."

"Why?"

"I have waited long enough to be leader; I need the ax to kill Quina."

"No, I must think about it."

Wara grunted and went about showing the anthropologist the proper way to throw a fish net.

That night Thomas Smith sat sleeplessly in his tent, thinking about what Wara had said. "Perhaps," he thought, "if I give Wara the ax all will be equal between the two families again. But if Quina should make a lucky strike, Wara would be dead and then there

would be two axes. Even if Wara won, there would be two axes."

Thomas Smith thought far into the night, and made his decision. He took up his ax, and walked quietly out of his tent, through the village and towards the river. When he arrived at its bank, he pried the ax head off of the handle, and threw it far out, into the deepest part of the river. He had carried with him enough supplies to get him back to the nearest semi-civilization, and placed them in one of the Nalanda's boats.

He walked back to the village and stepped quietly toward Quina's hut.

Wara too had spent a sleepless night. Tomorrow, with or without an ax, he would challenge Quina, and he tried to think of a way to counter the ax.

Thomas Smith crept on his hands and knees through the door of Quina's hut. He nervously lit a match and saw Quina lying asleep, his arm over the handle of the ax. He quickly snuffed the match, and began gently moving the ax. Quina awoke very abruptly. The struggle was short, and decisive. It consisted of a very short left hook, and Quina slumped with a slight grunt to the matting on the floor. Thomas Smith crawled from the hut with the ax and walked toward his tent. He picked up his box of notes from the litter on the canvas floor and began to backtrack through the village to the jungle.

Wara heard the sound of a twig snapping, and quickly rolled over and looked out the door of his hut. He saw the silhouette of Tomac in the middle of the clearing. For a moment the clouds broke, and Wara saw the quick flash of moonlight on steel. He watched as the dark figure disappeared into the jungle.

Thomas Smith was halfway to the river, when he heard the voice behind him.

"Give me the ax."

He dropped his notes, turned and saw Wara facing him only a few yards away. Wara stepped up to him, his hand held out. The anthropologist hit quickly and viciously with his left hook. But Wara was quicker. He ducked and caught only a heavy glancing blow that brought him to his knees.

The anthropologist did not stop to see if he had stunned Wara. He picked up his notes and began running to the river.

Wara was enraged, and slightly dizzy, but he got up quickly and began to run after Thomas Smith. He caught up with him a hundred yards from the river. The struggle was nearly non-existent.

Thomas Smith, bearded anthropologist, lay dead in the jungle, his brains spilled out on an ant heap, through an ax wound in his skull.

Wara led the tribe briefly. He died bravely, painfully, and rather quickly, from the bite of a poisonous snake. His hunting companion picked up the ax and was unchallenged as leader. Many years have passed. The ax lies rusting in the jungle, and the Nalanda are gone.

Moment of Change

OTTO LEWIS PFEIFF

I drove along a mountain road today
Where air was pungent and the sky was clear;
Immense and deep beneath my vision lay
A valley deep with pines; a lithesome deer
Emerged an instant and then disappeared
Into a darker thicket close at hand.
In all, I must confess, my heart was cheered
To be a traveller in this fertile land.
But once I was reproved by turning age:
Half-yellowed aspens held my eyes intent,
Reminding me that Nature has a wage
To charge for each glad moment she has lent.
At home tonight a mirror did display
An almost-hidden strand of caustic gray.

nude and ascending

HJOHNSANDERS

one steps so easily on
moving up
with no volition required
beyond the first step

the machine
having already been put into motion
moves on into a cyclonic
yellow swarming
stung
a man drops
and his government grinds on

jacob walks bleeding in a hall of mirrors
seeking his angel
eschewing sackcloth and ashes
as too mild a form
of exorcising the self

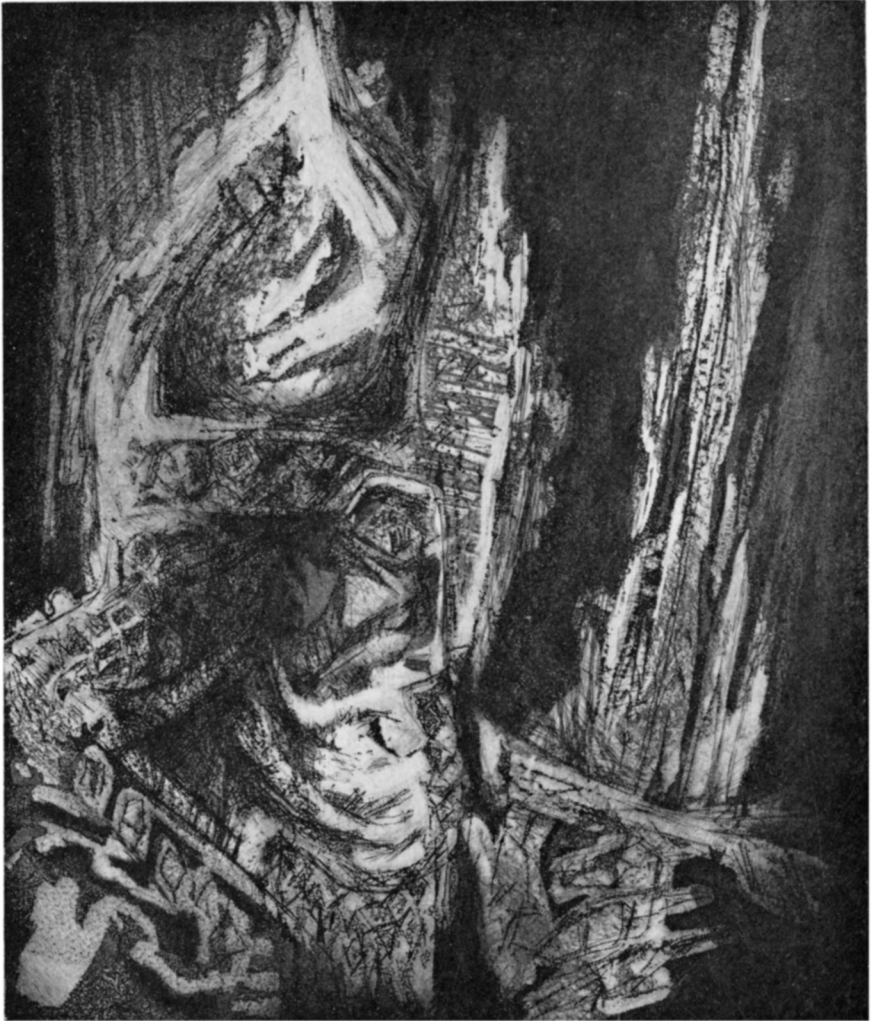
torn rather than lame
slivers crunching underfoot
he stops lashing out
and gazes quietly
upon the glittering
fragments of his former reflections

thomas marches in the corridors
munching chocolate
while mary of magdalena
flares screaming in the lobby

knee-deep in muddied paddy
a soldier lunges forward
muttering
not mine but yours
be done
sergeant



DRAWING
By LARRY DUNHAM



“THE CRUSADER”

By ELLEN DICKENS

A Debt to My Parents

JOSEPH MICHAUD

Their death is darkening, remotely
Slipping down the fuzzy past.
A word, a thought, is all that's left.
But it's not fair I should forget
And let the flash that was a life
Slip dumbly from my brain.

They sought their immortality
In death and all they found was dust.
And since they never wrote a line,
And I am all they left behind
Their spirit in my brain should live;
As in my body does their flesh.

A Dying Warrior Speaking

LOUIS TIJERINA

"Come and seek this music,"
Says the lovely lady,
Who I found dancing gayly
Between wet blood and swords,
Where now a red river runs.

Mihira, the Mongol Horseman

LOUIS TIJERINA

On the gathering plains of Asia Minor,
Mihira and the shaggy horse had ridden hard
Across the waving seas of summer grass,
And in this endless sun-kissed journey
The windy heat and vulture cries rang high.
Now only the visit of the strange god
During summer nights,
Gave Mihira, the Mongol warrior, the courage
To go beyond a dream.

The Mongol warrior had left his people
Far behind the mountainplains
To follow the new god,
For great was the god's power that led
Mihira to cross the steppes alone and face
The fury of seething summer winds
That could tear with screaming ease
The warrior who slept with restless thoughts
Of a raging god who enslaved the hearts
With dreams of gold and beasts.
And cries from the ice-blown north
Came with hungry blood-eyed beasts
Who could rip with claw and teeth
The restless flesh in search of dreams.

The god striking with storms and lightning
Threw his mystic might across the seas,
And the power of searching dreams urged Mihira
Over the mountains and to the great river,
Where the towering city of the blackmen stood.



PRIZE WINNING POEM



Across the seas, across the endless
Waving seas of summer grass,
The Mongol horseman made his lonely way.
On the crest of the slowly rising hill
Mihira and the shaggy horse were silhouetted,
Golden ingots, against the evening sun.

With casting of golden shadows
And echoings of summer dreams,
Mihira pulled his horse to a halt,
And resting his battle spear
Against the horse's thick mane,
He gazed quietly on the plain
That rolled on to touch
The inverted bowl of the evening sky.
And there with the stars flying
On silver sails in the evening sky,
The first breaking of the legend mists
Revealed to the seeking Mihira,
The golden city, towering in splendor
By the magic river.

Mihira, stretching out his soul
To the evening sky,
Cried with a warrior's wonder,

Strange God,
To thee I chant this hymn,
A sage, in camp among my people,
I dreamed of plunder and plenty,
Then shaking thunder and showering
Wildfire in the star-filled night,
You came in resplendent glory
And put asunder a warrior's dreams,
Where now, only the mists of legends
Give Mihira, the Mongol horseman,
The dream of a golden city, towering
In splendor by the magic river!

No Tantalus

OTTO LEWIS PFEIFF

No Tantalus with heart of evil cast,
I wilt beneath a curse as great as his
Who for his wicked ways was made at last
To wither in a sham of truthless bliss:
Deep polished fruits before his fingertips,
But he could not reach out to take them in;
Sweet wine before his sight, but on his lips
A parching drouth reminding of his sin.

You offer wine to one in eager thirst,
You bring rich fruits to taunt his hungry eyes;
But when he reaches out the vision's burst,
And guiltless soul beweeeps the sordid lies.
Why will you punish one who has no thought
But tasting of the wonders you have brought?

Lecture

KAREN NICOLAI

Nervous, it jerks from end to end
Painting an extension of self in white chalk.
Restless children sit in glares
Feeding on the scrawls.
While I, disembodied in their midst,
Think of a blue sky.



WELDED STEEL

By ALAN SHIELDS

George's Girlfriend

MELODIE BOWSHER

"No, George, I don't WANT to be your girlfriend."

A skinny little five-year-old girl ran shrieking down the street. Her wispy blonde hair, although cropped in a pixie cut, flew in her eyes. She tripped over her own untied shoelace but regained her balance and darted on. As she ran, she dodged behind a tree, a car, a house, and then another tree. She stopped momentarily to pick up a crayon drawing of a rather lopsided house that she had been clutching in one fist and then scurried on.

Following her at a somewhat more leisurely pace was a chubby little boy with a round face and devilish eyes. He was George, the clown and daredevil of the first grade. George was determined for some reason unfathomable to the little girl to be her "boyfriend."

Breathing a sigh of relief at the sight of her house, she dashed inside, slammed the door behind her, and locked it hurriedly. Then, knowing that George was relentless, she ran through the house to lock the back door.

Her eight-year-old sister, Joyce, watched her in bewilderment and then opened the front door.

"Hi, George, com'on in," she invited innocently, "Mamma's at work but Melanie's here."

"Hi, Joycie, where did she go?" George grinned angelically.

"She just ran into the kitchen," Joyce replied, perplexed.

Panting, her shoelace untied, her hair disheveled, and her dress sash torn, Melanie walked back into the living room.

At the sight of George she wailed, "How did YOU get in?"

"Joyce let me in."

George's plump form advanced towards her. Melanie jumped upon a chair.

"Leave me alone, George Anderson, go away!"

As George leaped on the chair, she jumped from the chair to the coffee table. Leaping off the table, she raced into the kitchen and George chased her around the kitchen table. Crawling under the table she ran back into the living room, knocking a lamp off in the process. Joyce watched in horror as George chased Melanie through the house, making it a shambles. Finally George pinned Melanie down and gave her a wet, cocker spaniel-type kiss.

"Let's go to the movies Saturday morning."

"No!"

"I'll buy you popcorn," he tempted her.

"NO!"

"Joyce, don't you wanna go to the movies Saturday with Melanie and me and eat popcorn?" George suggested craftily.

"Yeah!" Joyce replied eagerly. "Com'on, Mellie, let's go to the movies with George."

"O.K.," Melanie agreed, trapped. "But, George, you go home 'cause Mamma's going to be mad when she sees how you messed up the house."

George went home, elated.

Saturday morning a car honked and a reluctant Melanie followed



her eager sister out to the car. George insisted on sitting in the back seat with Melanie while Joyce sat in the front seat with his mother. Then he proceeded to tease Melanie mercilessly all the way to the theatre.

In the theatre, George put his arm possessively around Melanie and remarked loudly to the man sitting near him, "This is my wife," and motioning to Joyce, "That's my mother-in-law."

The man laughed. George and Joyce munched on popcorn happily as Flash Gordon's latest adventures unfolded. Melanie, resigning herself to her fate, reached over and grabbed a handful of George's popcorn.

After the Sunset

ARTHUR STREETER

Theirs was the Earth
And the fullness thereof;
They built a nation;
They called it a civilization.
Maybe it was,
But everything must stand the test of time;
Their hour of strutting on the stage is almost over.
The earth revolves, and the light of the sun
Travels its path,
Uncovering the sins of men.
There were those that despised the light,
And those who shined the light of truth
Upon their hidden faces;
But they turned from the light

To the false lights of others
 Resembling the dark,
 But the earth kept turning,
 And they ran, and the light followed.
 Once they believed in God
 And they built a nation.
 Now, faithless, there is no protection;
 They scramble for the darkness,
 As worms from rain,
 Pure rain. They have become nothing but moles,
 Blind, hiding from the light;
 But there is no hiding place from God,
 No secluded spot He cannot see,
 None at all,
 None.
 What are they running for? Why?
 When will they stop? What do they fear?
 The source of all wisdom is God,
 Whom they have rejected.
 Perhaps they are running from the unknown.
 But they can't run forever.
 The relentless reality of God
 Is stalking its prey.
 Soon—too soon—the trap snaps,
 The door shuts, and time stops.
 But God is forever;
 Judgment must come;
 Darkness can only end in light.
 Standing in the darkness—
 Running from the sunrise—
 On that day, the sun never sets,
 And the God of earth steps forward
 In the wind and clouds.
 The sun blinks out
 The last breath of the candle of time.
 All is darkness but the throne of God.
 It is the tall mountain, the high cliff,
 The rolling plain, the ocean, the earth;
 The earth is the throne of God.
 But these slinking, hiding creatures,
 These jackals, so foul when left alone,
 Now cringing before their Master,
 These beings in darkness;
 These are not of earth—
 Not God's earth.
 God's earth is cleansed
 Of the darkness which was man,

And man has been set aside in the solitary confinement of self,
 Cold black,
 The absence of love, concern, or knowledge.
 Man in his own sepulchre like a monkey in a cage
 Awaits the final judgment.
 The light shone out from the throne of God,
 And passed through the darkness
 And split it as a cleaver,
 Testing each man separately.
 The criminals and the murderers
 Were suddenly transported in flame
 Into the sun, the red hot sun.
 Then followed after them
 Drunkards, blasphemers, cheaters,
 Liars, bullies,
 And many more,
 Until there remained but a few:
 A colored boy in dirty blue jeans,
 And a T-shirt torn open at the front;
 A doctor, with his stethoscope
 Still in hand;
 A preacher, and a few of his most confessed disciples.
 There were others,
 And they were slowly eliminated
 Until the light shone steadily,
 Like a pointed finger,
 On the doctor's face;
 "Please, Lord, spare me,
 I have saved lives, helped people,
 Served the world.
 I saved the life of the richest man in Texas,
 I—"
 "You? Saved his life?"
 "Yes, I did, I— I— I didn't, did I?"
 Oh Lord, forgive me, please forgive me, forgi—"
 "Tomorrow. Tomorrow,
 You waited till tomorrow;
 Tomorrow is never too late
 Until there is no tomorrow.
 I tell you, doctor, I know you not,
 Today is forever."
 The doctor followed in a flash of flame
 The other members of his world.
 Now the light passed on to the preacher and his disciples . . .
 The preacher looked up from his prayer book,
 And trembled at the sight of the Lord;
 "Why tremble so, what have you to fear?"

"I— Nothing, nothing, I fear nothing;
I have preached your word;
I have brought my disciples."
"Preached my word?
If you had preached my word,
You would have shone like a light out of the darkness;
But I saw you not.
You kindled a fire,
But you drifted away from its fuel
And it has gone out.
You and your disciples are not of mine;
You preached what they wanted,
Not my word, not the Truth,
Not the Truth."
The disciples and their preacher
Followed the doctor
Into the sun and eternal fire.
The light finally came to rest
On a solitary figure—
The young Negro,
Fresh out of the coal mines,
Sprinkled with coal dust and soaked in hard work;
Proud at having taken his father's place
But humbled now in the sight of the Lord.
The light became a radiant beam
Of emerald, gold, and crimson.
The voice of the Lord boomed forth
From the once barren land.
"Arise, my son, and behold your home."
It was a new earth, unspoiled by the darkness of man.
Morning dew was dripping from every leaf.
It sparkled as a new-cut diamond.
Half-blind, rubbing both eyes with blistered fists
The young boy rose and looked down to the earth
And was suddenly there, like a cloud, low-skimming,
Scanning the ragged mountains,
The writhing plains and the silent rivers,
Listening to the trickle of spring water
And the resounding "Pop!" as a trout fell back in the lake,
Then, somewhere in the distance,
A young pup greeted the new day
And nature's orchestra took wing
From flower to flower
And tree to tree,
And out of the depths of a young man's heart

"But Lord, why me? Why me?"

Magdalene

LOUIS TIJERINA

We have found
The simple faith.

The glass of wine,
The broken crust,
The young man dying
In springtime.

We have found
The simple faith.

The marble tomb,
The blood-stained napkin,
The long-haired whore crying
In springtime.

We have found
The simple faith.

The fleeing angel
Who opens gates.

The young man
Yearning to kiss
A third morning dawn.

The long-haired whore
Burning to feel
This virgin's warm embrace.

We have found
The simple faith.

An empty age
Of shell-made men
Through endless morns,
Prayed lovers bare
A kiss of dawn,
A warm embrace,
Then separate ways
To seek a lover's barren place.

We have found
The simple faith.

In midsummer nights,
The maiden's ghost
Sighs for
Jewish boy.

We have found
The lover's fate.



DRAWING
By JIM HAGAN



STUDY FOR "MIHIRA, THE MONGOL HORSEMAN"

By LARRY DUNHAM

Muddy River

FOLK SONG BY PATRICK O'NEILL

MUD-DY RIV-er flow down —. MUD-DY RIV-er flow down —.

TAKE MY — DREAMS AND float them a-way — DOWN TO THE SEA — WELL

2. IN THE SUMMER THE RIV-er runs slow AND IT'S RUNNING FAST IN THE SPRING I've been told BUT

IN THE WINTER THERE'S ICE EVERYWHERE AND THE WIND BLOWS COLD THROUGH MY HAIR.

CHORUS:

Muddy river flow down,
Muddy river flow down,
Take my dreams
And float them away,
Down to the sea.

In the summer the river runs slow,
And it's running fast in the spring, I've been told,
But in the winter there's ice everywhere,
And the wind blows cold through my hair.

In the summer the leaves they are green,
And they're turning brown in the fall, so I've seen,
But in the winter the limbs they are bare,
And the wind's a-cryin' but no one's here to care.

Wind in the trees and sun on the hill,
And the rain is a-tappin' at my windowsill,
But I lie here alone with nothing much to do,
Trying to forget someone I never knew.

Summer may come and summer may go,
And the wind and the cold will come with the snow,
But I'll ask myself the question until the day I see
Who she was and what she was to me.

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Talkin' Chicago Blues

FOLK SONG BY BRUCE HOPPE

1.

G C
One time I lived in Chicago town,
D G
And now I've come back to look around.
G C
The things I've seen there I couldn't believe,
D G
We've come a long way from Adam and Eve. . . .
C D
Tall buildings—all the people living on
top of one another.

2.

Every morning at about daybreak
You can see the old sun sittin' on the lake.
He looks at the skyline and the haze that it's in,
And then tries to sink back into the water again. . . .
But he can't—gotta keep rollin' along . . .
Man that's showbiz.

3.

About this time I 'woke from my dreams,
And jumped right into the traffic streams
Of people goin' to jobs they fought to get,
And not one of 'em seems very happy yet. . . .
Never seen so many people hurryin' to
places they didn't want to go.

4.

This town has museums, parks and beaches,
And baseball fields with lots of bleachers.
And every time the man hits a home run
The scoreboard lights up like World War III has just begun. . . .
That's a nice thought—every time they
hit a home run. . . . The fella who made that
must've been thinkin' about peaceful coexistence.

5.

Well I left that town to go sing some songs,
But I didn't stay away very long.
I was thumbin' to Northern Illinois University one sunny day
Looked up over the hill, saw a thousand students goin' the other way.
Suitcases in their hands— Must've been an air
raid drill. . . . Or if it was Kansas State
University, it was probably a fire drill.

6.

I lived by the lake in a beautiful park,
But you can't go out there after dark.
They say it's dangerous out there at night,
So all the people lock themselves in and shut their windows tight. . . .
Then they all turn on the TV's— One time
I took a peek outside; there was nobody
around— It was nice and peaceful . . .
'Cause they were all locked in.

7.

This city is tall and deep and wide,
And I guess it'd take years to see its other side.
The only thing I know from my short visit
I'd have to stay longer to understand it. . . .
Yep, this Chicago town is a great place
to live—but I wouldn't want to visit there.

La Vida de Amor

LOUIS TIJERINA

La vida de amor is like a single glow
In the night, a touch of white drifting dreamy
Through the magic music of the deep,
Fighting to outgrow the web of life.

La vida de amor like the threads of angels' garments
Flying through blue stars that were a poet's first vision
Among the green trees gray sea and silent wind,
Seeks to form a pattern of unity in sleeping men,
As they lie naked twisting their bodies in prayer
Of gentle kisses through the forgotten night.

La vida de amor dies as the comet dies,
(an echo of gasping breath, screaming
burning light in web of night and human sighs)
For her glow never spreads and the threads
Are never patterned in unity among the sleeping men
As they lie naked twisting their bodies in prayer
Of gentle kisses through the poet's unfinished
Poem of night.

Eros

KAREN NICOLAI

So this is love.
This puny pulsing act.
A ridiculous pushing,
An animal pleasure.
If this is passion
Then let me never know.
Leave me in solitude.

Troy

LOUIS TIJERINA

Of the many that pass
Through the city,
Only a youngman in search of flight
Finds the greenlight and quiet walkways.

I walked through your country alone

LOUIS TIJERINA

I walked through your country alone,
And no one followed me, no one.
Alone I saw by the red sand and sea,
That the grass was very sleepy and
The rocks slept soundly by the fields,
As the pale girl with long black hair
Stood still and stared through your country
Of dead walking lovers who thought
They knew love and a nation's song.

I walked through your country alone
And desired to believe in your people,
But the pale girl with long black hair
Stood still against the wind of destiny
And told the sea and I together in darkness,
That the grass would sleep and dry black
And rocks would never wake again by fields,
While your dead walking lovers forsake
A giving love and universal song.

A Time for Everything

LAURA SCOTT

With the closing of day,
as the sunset stills the symphony of light
 into murderous finale,
Thoughts of you play my mind,
 silent, omnifarious thoughts
that rumble in my head
and set my cold heart
 beating once again.
Guarded thoughts, they are;
secrets that belong only to me, and which will,
with the passing of time,
 be worn to mere blisters in my brain.
But there, nevertheless.
Always the same thoughts—thoughts that my time for love
was here
 and now is gone,
that youth betrayed its day,
and that my bed ever will be empty,
 save my small frame.

Love

DALE PRESTON

Your heart is open and free,
Beating like a drum to a fast march.
Swelling with pride, your spirit, is set free to
Soar to the heights, then
Roam the vastness of your joy.
And you know you love her.

Your hands and bodies entwine in love.
Sacrificing to the night, then
Reveling to the day. Your love,
Consuming love, which is
Reborn without Spring, an eternal flower.
And you know you love her.

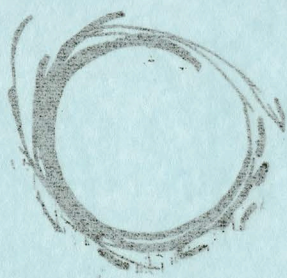
Your years pass, and the fires of Passion
Burn to embers. But your love still
Soars to heights unequalled, then
Plunges like a fallen star to the
Depths of the Universe. For she is gone.
And you know you loved her.

I shall be a child like Yeats

LOUIS TIJERINA

I shall be a child like Yeats,
To ponder on the roses red,
And sail to Byzantium in starry nights
Where winds sing lyrics in the reeds,
And there I shall die in the winding tower,
As the full blast of moon and stars
Die young in splendor!





The Light

HARRY OPPERMAN

Hillsdale was a small town, with a population of 1,200. It was located in a rolling hills area near the southern edge of the Great Plains. It was a pretty town, with elm, poplar, and cedar trees lining the blacktopped streets. The business district lined both sides of Main Street for three blocks. At the east edge of town was the park, a dense grove of cedar and fir trees, with a dance pavilion and three tennis courts in the center. To the north of the park was the athletic field with its combined baseball diamond and football field.

The citizens of Hillsdale considered it to be a progressive community. Although it had some small industry, it remained primarily a rural center, serving the many nearby farmers and ranchers. It boasted of a new hospital and a newly consolidated school district, with 350 in the high school and a somewhat larger number in the grades. In it were six churches, two liquor stores, a tavern, and five filling stations.

The people of Hillsdale were normal small town folks. On the whole they were a rather nosy, gossipy group. Everyone knew if the preacher's kid was at the Saturday night dance, or if the schoolteacher was seen trying to sneak a six-pack of beer in his back door. But they were good country people, even though a little prudish.

All in all, you would have had to call Hillsdale a normal small town, until—

One day, several years ago, at the Roy Anderson ranch, two miles

north of Hillsdale, Roy's foreman, Cliff Jones, was pleasure riding on his favorite pony through the north pasture. He noticed an odd glow beyond a small hill. Thinking that he might have discovered a grass fire, he hurried over the hill and found, not a fire, but a very strange phenomenon indeed. Cliff Jones had just discovered the Light.

Cliff wheeled his pony and began to gallop towards the ranch house to report his discovery. About halfway to the house, he began to doubt what he had seen. He returned to the spot where he had first seen it, and found that it was still there. It didn't appear to have moved.

He now raced his pony at a full gallop straight to the house and burst in on Roy Anderson, who was reading the afternoon paper.

"Roy, man, I just seen a light in the north pasture! A light, it was, just sittin' out there in the north pasture, a light!"

"What in God's name are you talking about, Cliff? Calm down and tell me what you saw."

"I was just ridin' through the north pasture; it's the truth, man, and there it was, I seen it!"

"What did you see?"

"A light!"

"Dammit, what kind of a light?"

"I don't know what kind, it was just a light."

"In the sky?"

"No, it was just off the ground."

"A fire?"

"No, I thought it was at first, but it weren't no fire."

"What did it look like?"

"Like a light, just like a light, any light."

"Hell's bells, Cliff, let's go see your damned light."

They took Roy's jeep and drove the three-quarters of a mile in a couple of minutes. And there, just as Cliff had tried to describe it, was the Light.

"Well, Roy, there it is, just like I told you."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"Don't cuss in front of it, Roy. What if it's God or something?"

All Roy could manage was another irreverent, "I'll be damned!"

The Light appeared to be hovering about four feet off the ground. It was a light, a glow, a luminescence, a something. It was a white radiance that came from nothing; it was just there. It was very bright. Looking at it directly was like looking into the flash of a camera. It never moved, never flickered.

When darkness came, the Light was much more noticeable from a distance. It could easily be seen from town. Several of Roy's neighbors called to tell him about a fire. The volunteer fire department from Hillsdale made two runs to the Anderson ranch before Roy convinced them that there was no fire.

It took very little time for news of the phenomenon to spread.

Within two or three days it seemed like the entire population of Hillsdale had been to see it. People from nearby communities, hearing of the Light, became curious and came to look at its strange glow. About a week after its discovery, a team of scientists from the state university came to survey the Light and to try to determine its cause. In the ensuing weeks several other teams of scientists also came. Their scientific reports contained such phrases as: ". . . entirely contrary to all known physical laws," and, "may lead to the eventual disproving of the theory of relativity." Theories and counter-theories were proposed, but no one could give a plausible explanation for the strange appearance of the Light.

Rumors soon began spreading about the nature of the Light. Some claimed that it was a bad omen, that some great calamity was sure to follow its appearance. Others merely laughed it off as a freak of nature. There was even one large group who ascribed to the Light divine properties, and began to worship it. Two or three of this latter group claimed to have had various maladies cured merely by standing in the radiance of the Light and "believing."

Several weeks after the Light's first appearance, one of the ladies of Hillsdale packed a basket of food and took her family to Roy Anderson's ranch for a picnic lunch. Before long, it became the thing to do. Several families each day would eat a picnic lunch while satisfying their curiosity. Soon there were larger, group picnics, and finally a bazaar was organized. The people of Hillsdale now played Bingo and other games in its radiance. Monthly bazaars came to be the vogue, with a different group sponsoring each one.

At first the Light worshippers were steadfastly opposed to this social activity. Even though their cries went generally unheeded, they were able to have one day each week set aside as a day of reverence and worship. A ritual was established and soon the cult of Light worshippers was gaining new converts. Eventually, the Light worshippers were reconciled to the fact that the bazaars would continue, and many began to take part in this social activity.

The Light, in the meantime, had become a tourist attraction, and Roy Anderson, not being one to pass up an opportunity, had a road built up to it. Then he sold some nearby land to a restaurant concern, and a modern eating establishment was built. A motel chain built a modern motor-hotel, complete with swimming pool, within sight of the Light. A filling station sprang up and several other businesses were started in the vicinity.

The commercial activity was bound to attract residents to the area. Several families built new homes, and soon a tract of land was sold to a contractor and subdivided. Other areas were subdivided and the area surrounding the Light became a boomtown. The town of Hillsdale also grew in the direction of the Light, and two areas combined to form the new city of Hillsdale, all because of the strange new phenomenon.

Before long the people began to grow accustomed to the Light. Although they were glad of the tourist trade it provided, it now failed to arouse the enthusiasm of the people as it once had. However, the more devout of the Light worshippers never faltered in their zeal, and they complained to no avail of the complacency of the others.

One night as a man was driving through Hillsdale, his car swerved off the road and struck a tree. He claimed that he had been blinded by "that damned light." People staying in the motel began to complain that it shone in their windows at night, keeping them awake. Customers of the restaurant said that it was like an eye, staring at them as they ate. Residents of the area said that the Light was bothering them too.

And so the civic leaders got together and decided that the Light constituted something of a public nuisance. It was proposed to house it in a building. A magnificent structure was planned and built to surround it. The Light was housed on the main floor, with enough space present so that the Light worshippers might hold their meetings. A full basement was also built so that the monthly bazaars and other social events, traditionally connected with the Light, might continue.

The life of the city of Hillsdale no longer revolved around the Light. The city that had been built by and for the Light no longer needed it. With a population of 20,000, it had become the largest city in that part of the state. New industries had moved in, older industries had grown larger. Hillsdale was a progressive, growing city with too many problems of taxation and sewer building to be bothered with the Light.

Now the Light was put in its place. Those who wished to pay homage, and those who appreciated the social whirl surrounding it, might do so at their leisure. But those who were unconcerned with or indifferent to it need not be bothered.

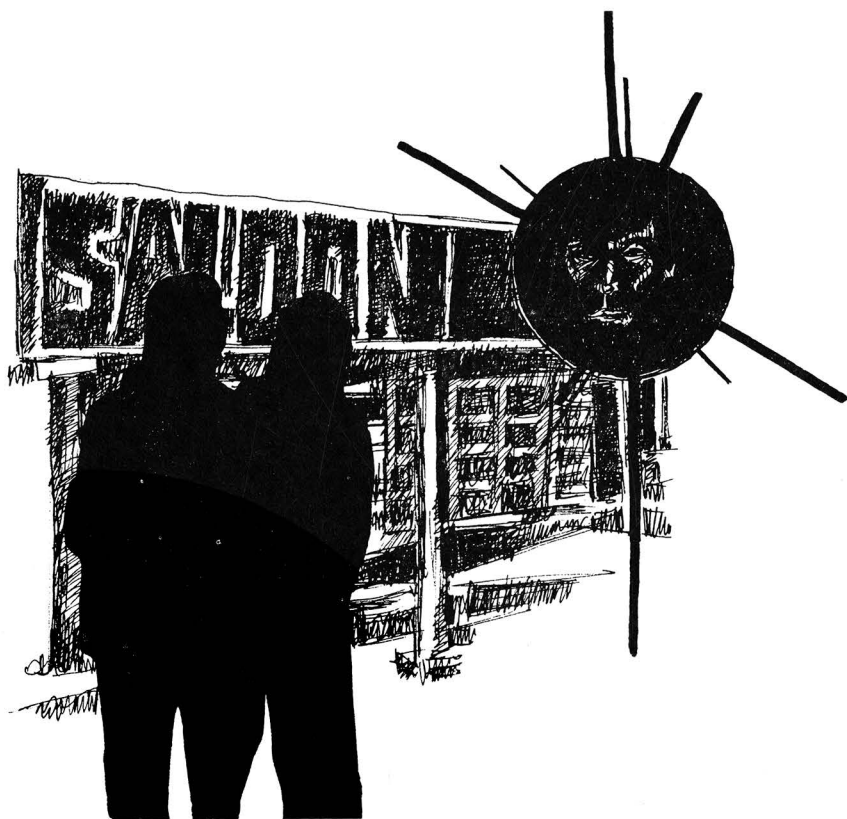
The Light was alone, it was being ignored. True, it shone just as brightly as ever, but some of the radiance seemed to be gone. The weekly services of the Light worshippers continued, but they had become little more than rituals. The attendance at the rituals remained good. However, many who attended did so because of habit, or out of a sense of duty, or because it gave them a group to which to belong. The group of devout believers gradually dwindled. The monthly bazaars continued, but they now had no connection with the Light. In fact, it was very seldom indeed that the Light was mentioned or even thought of outside of the building.

Several years later the Light disappeared. One day it was there, the next day it was gone. There was no great cry of anguish. After all, very few cared about the Light any more. Even the worshippers were not too much disappointed. A ritual is a ritual; what does it matter if there is nothing to worship?

Sea Sonnet

JUDY HELMKE

Incessant water rolling in to land
And crashing white wave beating on the shore.
They call me to obey their dread demand
To worlds beyond; I falter at the door.
To love the sea, and yet to fear its call:
This is my lot. I hear the sound for hours
And I go to it; ensnared as if in thrall.
A monster tempered with unholy powers.
The edge encroaches, grasping at my feet,
Enticing with foul offerings on the sand.
A terror, yet at once a rapture sweet,
Enraptured, I deign to put forth my hand.
How long must I remain, so near the sea,
Ere impulse comes to set my spirit free?



“Eyes to Behold the Sun . . .”

THOMAS A. KONDIK

“Three miles to the city limits of Peaceful Lookout,” sighed Bill as he squinted at the old, weather-wrung sign.

His companion, Nick, answered back, “Come on, Bill, let’s see what this town has got to offer.”

There was a solitary, dirt road leading into the town and it serpentineed around some bare-brown hills and into the main part of town. The smoldering sun was no unknown visitor to Peaceful Lookout and the dirt road churned up sweltering dust around the two travelers as they walked toward the town. Nick shaded his eyes as he looked straight up and thought how welcome a sprinkle of rain would be on the dusty road, but the sky was cloudless, as it had been for a long time. Finally the two men reached the town.

Two rows of wooden buildings were lined up parallel to the town’s

only street. Walking down the middle of the street, Nick and Bill surveyed the entire town, taking no longer than fifteen minutes to do so. All the windows were boarded up, while the absence of paint on the buildings added to the dreary desolation. Some of the doors on the houses were hanging limply on loose hinges and when the wind blew they banged back and forth. The structures looked like looming geometric hulks blanketed with a dusty bark of chipped wood scales. Everything was subject to the sun.

"Say, Nick. It doesn't look like anyone's living here."

"Let's find out. Most of these old towns have saloons. I doubt if this one is any different."

"I'm so damned tired of walking—."

"Hey," interrupted Nick, "there's someone over there, on the other side of town, sitting on a rock. Come on."

They saw Jeb. He was sitting on a blanched rock with a pad and pencil in his hands and he was facing the sun. Nick and Bill walked up to the lonely figure whose back was facing them.

"Hello there," called out Nick as they approached.

A surprised old man jerked around and nervously watched the newcomers as they came forward.

"We're just traveling through and were wondering if there is any place to stay in town," said Nick warmly. "It looks deserted."

After gaining some of his composure, the old man answered back, "It is, except for me." Realizing that he sounded frightened, Jeb countered with a defiant "I've been taking care of things around here."

But Nick had a way of making people feel at ease, whereas Bill was likeable, but only when he put forth a conscious effort. "We don't want to be a bother to you—just want a place to sleep, then we're traveling on."

The old man, impressed with Nick's kindly countenance, asked, "Heading anywhere in particular?"

"We're reading farther west, but taking our time. Trying to live and learn."

Jeb smiled. His mouth was a thin, red line and when he smiled the ends of his mouth didn't curl up, they just got longer. He was very tanned. On top of his furrowed leathery face his matted hair rested like burnt-crisp, brittle bacon lacking arrangement so as to leave part of his scalp exposed to the sun. His eyelids were slits and his once-blue eyes were now a blanched blue-white. At one time his jeans were blue and his shirt a striped brown, but now all the colors were homogeneously faded out by the sun.

"The sun seems to have taken something out of him," thought Nick to himself.

After the first-glance appraisals were over, Bill inquired as to why Peaceful Lookout was deserted.

Old Jeb began.

"Peaceful Lookout used to be a mining town. I came here looking for gold, like a lot of other prospectors. There was a little but not enough to keep the prospectors here. When most of them went further west, the people who built the town lost their only source of trade, so most of them left too. The few remaining tried to make a go of it but a terrible drought finally convinced them, too, to pack up and go. I'm the only one who stayed."

"Where do you get your food?" asked Bill.

"Ben Stanford from Red Rock brings me provisions that last me about a month. I did him a favor once and he never forgot it. Once a month he rides out here in his wagon and leaves me food, notebook paper and crayons. He comes over thirty miles."

"You must have done him a big favor," snapped Bill.

"Not really; I'll pay him back. Pretty soon I'll be going into the city to sell my pictures."

"Pictures?"

Jeb's voice lost its sprightliness and became quite serious. Nick noticed it and realizing the old man felt deeply about his pictures asked solemnly, "Are they landscapes?"

Jeb found it uneasy to draw out the words but overcame his fear to please an interested Nick.

"All of my work I sketch in my notebooks with my crayons or pencil. I try to duplicate the effect of the sun on Peaceful Lookout." Jeb's voice seemed distant and his words passed over Nick and Bill. It was as though he was in a dream and he was really enjoying sharing it with someone. Bill looked at Nick, but Nick was intent on Jeb, as he went on.

"A long, long time ago I bet all this barren land here was teeming with life—birds in the trees, fuzzy squirrels in rich, tall grass and a cold spring—yes, over there in those distant hills, a cold bubbling spring coming out of those hills. Then things changed. It didn't rain any more and the sun began its work. If you stop and think, it's not so bad now. There are lots of trees and flowers in other places—most of them. Peaceful Lookout is unique. It's like being a scientist here, watching and studying the sun, and I put down what I see on my sketches. And when I have enough pictures I'll go to the city and sell them and pay back Stan for the food. I'll be leaving any day now."

Bill, beginning to show signs of impatience with Jeb's monologue, asked him when he was leaving, but Jeb was still in the midst of his narrative and he continued on.

"I bet the cactus plant was a beautiful, flowery plant at one time. Then the sun came and changed it. A man has got to change too. He can't go on his whole life doing the same thing. I used to search for gold. I still do, but not in the hills any more. I'm glad I made my change."

"Don't you get lonely for people?" Bill inquired.

"Sometimes, but that's part of the change." Jeb seemed agitated by Bill's pertness and he focused his conversation on Nick. "What do you think of Peaceful Lookout?"

Nick looked out across the steaming, sprawling desert visually groping for an answer. In the distance the wide expanse was loud with silence. There were no animal sounds, nor wind movement. Nick attuned his senses to their highest key and wondered if he could hear the sun extracting the last remnants of life out of this dying piece of land.

"I'm a stranger here, much more of a stranger than I thought. There's a peace here—a Kingly serenity. There's an answer out there. If I could just get the right question for it. Did you ever ask the right question?"

"I think so, my pictures . . ."

"Your pictures what . . . ?" popped Bill.

"I am an old man." The conversation brought Jeb to a halt. He looked up into the clear sky, then glanced at the travelers. Putting his pencil into his shirt pocket, Jeb asked Nick, "How would you like to see my pictures?"

"Sure."

"I've got them upstairs in the saloon where I live."

Slowly Jeb got up off the rock and led the two travelers over toward the saloon. It was mid-afternoon and the white-orange sun enveloped the trio in the sticky-hot air, wetting their brows and arms and clothes, and there was moisture in the tips of their boots. As the dust-and-sweat threesome came up to the saloon, they crunched up the creaky steps and into the saloon. The shade of the saloon was a welcome relief. Jeb pointed out two nearby chairs at a table and told them to sit down while he got his pictures from the room upstairs. Jeb went up the stairs and into the first room he came to.

While he was getting the pictures, Nick and Bill stretched out. Leaning over the table Bill said in a low voice, "Quite a character."

"I like him."

"He sure has some strange ideas about the sun."

"The man is content. You can see it in his eyes."

"His eyes," Bill continued, "are damned near burned out of their sockets. He must stare at the sun from sunrise to sunset. I wonder if he eats during sunning time. What do you think his pictures look like? Did you see the one he had on his scraggly pad?"

"No."

"I tried to look over his shoulder but he turned the page just as I got close enough to see."

"What did you do that for?"

"Why not? I just looked—that's all. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. He's been taking a long time."

"That sun is really scorching."

Some time later Jeb came out of the room with an armful of pads

and notebooks. At the top of the stairs, he paused and looked at his new acquaintances. They looked back. An amicable smile stretched across Jeb's mouth. His washed-out blue eyes filled with deeper color, sort of a mild transfiguration. He stood up tall and erect as never before. There was something Kingly in his attitude; at the proper moment he would descend the stairs. Jeb was a proud-looking man. Nick saw it and glanced over at Bill, but Bill was busy kicking dirt off his boots. Jeb waited for Nick to look back up and when he did, Jeb was ready.

Slowly, carefully, Jeb came down the steps, one hand gliding down on the wooden railing, the other clutching onto his pictures—his intense eyes all the time on Nick. A spring-tight tension was mounting with each step; an ordeal sacred to Jeb was about to happen. In the middle of the stairs Jeb paused, looked down on his pictures and then up again at Nick—only Nick.

As Jeb came up to the table, Nick got up, to the surprise of his companion, and said to Jeb in a solemn voice, "These are your pictures?"

Jeb nodded to Nick. They were face to face. Bill felt awkward but said nothing. It was as though only Jeb and Nick were in the room.

Inside a worn manila folder were pieces of paper, 8½ by 11, bearing the work of its master, the signature being feeling, intensity and understanding. A new life, a new meaning was about to be uncovered. Jeb's question was to be unveiled.

With offertorylike deliverance Jeb set the manila folder down on the table top, sifted through four or five pages, selected one and, holding it in both hands, began.

"In this picture I realized the immensity of man's conflict with nature, his reliance on the sun, but disdain of its discomfort. This illusive quality I have captured on paper."

And handing the drawing to Nick, Jeb went on and on and on. All the pictures were the same—a simple black circle with five or six straight lines radiating out from the circle to the edge of the page.

Picture after picture Jeb went through narrating his interpretation of the sun. Bill looked to Nick for an explanation. But Nick was listening to the stories. When he was through, Jeb's eyes looked for a judgement.

"I like them, Jeb," replied Nick in hushed reverence. Jeb smiled and left.

After an exchange of looks, Nick and Bill got out their sleeping bags and went to sleep on the saloon floor. When they awoke, Jeb was gone. They searched the other buildings, the old rock where he drew and the hills. Late in the next day they found Jeb lying face up in the desert with the pictures under his arm—he was dead.

After Nick and Bill buried him, they took a long look at Peaceful Lookout. It was night now and the sun was gone.

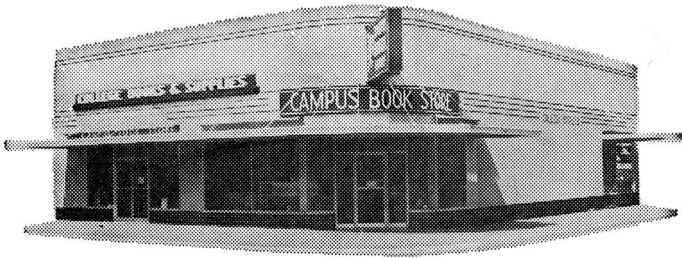
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