

MAN AND THE ARTIST OF FATE:
A STUDY OF THE MAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP
IN THE NATURAL WORLD

by

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INTRODUCTION

The study of nature is an integral part of the world's literary heritage. From the Greeks to the twentieth century, artists have been absorbed in a quest to understand, to predict, and to interpret the forces that control the universe. And an integral part of their study is the attempt to comprehend the relationship of man and nature. Carl Jung has said that "people who know nothing about nature are of course neurotic, for they are not adapted to reality." Although exaggerated, Jung's statement is valid; for where else but in the natural world can one find the reality of good and evil and of survival and death exposed to the scrutiny of any observer.

The intent of this collection is to present nature's multifaceted personality and to explore her relationship with man. In this study certain questions are vital--questions artists have doubtless always been concerned with. Is nature basically antagonistic, or is she indifferent? Does nature determine man's fate? And, are there terms for coexistence? Each of the following stories deals with at least one of these questions, but none attempt to provide definitive answers. Instead, there is an attempt to provide objective observations of nature and man, and their respective roles in the universal drama.

"A Whisper on the Wind," the first selection, deals with a man's interference with the balance in the wilderness and the consequences of his action. The protagonist is an old man who finds himself in conflict with the natural world and who suffers

constantly with the fear of losing the struggle. He has killed an eagle, and he knows that Nature, as protector of the wilderness, will take her revenge; he just does not know how or when.

Nature is the superior figure in the story, both antagonist and avenger. She manifests herself in many forms: in the role of the eagle, in the wind, and in the snowstorm. She represents to the old man a judge who holds his life in a delicate balance. But equally important is her role as hunter; it is as a hunter that she seeks her revenge, calculating the intricate details and sequence of events to insure her success. Nature as hunter, then, reduces the old man to nothing more than a prey; and he must face his role as the hunted in light of what he has done.

Another significant comparison of roles can be drawn between man and eagle. At one time both the old man and the eagle are hunters; but both suffer role reversals and become themselves prey to a superior being. (Only Nature remains superior as hunter.) Thus the man and the eagle are brothers in their fate. The old man many times equates himself with the eagle. He even longs to be like the eagle, free and strong; but he forgets that the eagle he longs to be like is dead. The roles of the man and the eagle, then, are more than parallel; there is a fusion of man and bird, and in the end both face an inevitable destiny.

"A Whisper on the Wind" makes significant use of light-dark symbolism. Daylight, sunshine, and fire are equated with life in the mind of the old man; and he can sleep only in the daylight hours. Night, darkness, and ashes represent death; and at night

the old man must stay awake to tend his fire, his only hope for survival against the fear of nothingness. Equally significant as the light-dark symbols is the role the snow plays as Nature's messenger of fate. The paradoxical characteristic of the snow coupled with the changing personality of the wind provides Nature with a deceptive weapon for her revenge; and in the storm she manifests her anger. The light-dark symbolism and the snow combine in the climax to provide Nature the means for her revenge.

The story is unified by a compression of time and space which serves to intensify the impact of the climax. The necessary background material that aids in the understanding of the old man's condition is given either in a dream sequence or in occasional retreats into the thoughts of the old man. The story itself moves chronologically. "A Whisper on the Wind" is not a plotted story. It is, instead, a study of the effect of fear on the mind of an individual and a study of how one man sees his relationship with the natural world.

"The Mountain," the second story in the collection, views man and nature in different roles, different from their roles in the first selection. Though their relationship is the same, nature again the superior force, the protagonist takes the active role as revenge-seeker. "The Mountain" deals with the exploit of an ambitious young man obsessed with the idea that the mountain he has chosen to climb is evil, even murderous. Four of his companions have disappeared, and he is certain that the mountain has buried them in an avalanche. It is revenge for these deaths that is the chief motivation for his completing the climb to the

summit which, at one time, had been the eventual destination of the entire party.

The mountain embodies untamed nature; but in the eyes of the young avenger she is more. He sees her as a conqueror, a fiend, and a murderer who has executed countless challengers to her superiority; and he feels nothing for her but hatred. In reality, however, she is totally indifferent towards the adventurer.

The young man's quest is the focus of the story; and primary in the quest is the man's changing feelings and reactions towards himself. In the beginning, the young man is fully aware of himself as a man, as an individual, and as a part of a collective group--in this case the climbing party. But as the story progresses, he loses the initial hold on his identity, and he begins to see himself in different terms. In paragraph five, he has the following reaction: "The biting wind had stiffened the muscles in his face, and as he rubbed the frostbitten flesh, he felt as if he had touched the face of a corpse." Here he is losing the conception of himself as a living human being. In paragraph nine, he drives a piton into the mountain and reacts: "Hate surged through him and he was startled by a sudden alien strength within him. It was as if he had sapped her of a strange power." At this point, the young man feels that a part of the mountain has become a part of himself, as if their emotive powers are being fused. And finally, he begins to see himself apart from himself; it is as if another man were in his body. "His limbs were numb; and though they moved at his bidding, to the touch they felt as if they belonged to another man." From this point

on, the young man is a different person; he loses the coldness and regains his strength. The mountain and the man are strong together.

The young man eventually succeeds in his quest, somewhat victorious. But in reality, he is merely an arrogant child of nature, finite and insignificant in the presence of the untamed world; and he is where he is only because she (the mountain) has allowed it. But the true irony of it all is revealed in the final paragraph when the reader realizes that he has succeeded for nothing.

"The Mountain," like the first selection, is unified by a compression of time. The story moves fairly rapidly through a matter of hours to avoid detailed description of the climb since the primary concern of the story is to study reaction rather than action. More detailed analysis of the adventurer's mind and feelings could enhance the climax; but since the initial design was to maintain as much objectivity as possible and to dilute the emotive appeal of the man, analyses were minimized. But part of the success of the story depends upon the reader's ability to identify with the young man, and identification is only possible if a reader is allowed to think and feel with him.

The final two selections deal with the beneficent character of nature. They are concerned with the necessity of the peaceful coexistence of man and nature and the benefits to be derived from such an understanding.

"Solitary Flight" is the story of one lonely woman trying desperately to regain the past, to atone for a hurt she inflicted

upon herself and the ones she loved ten years ago. Ellen Carter tries to go home only to discover that she seeks a life that has disappeared, that is only real in her memory. But this realization is hers only after a series of confrontations, sometimes unsuccessful and sometimes painful.

When Ellen returns to Pendleton after ten years, she finds a town that has stagnated; and she immediately identifies the town's predicament with her own condition. She is apprehensive and ashamed; and while she is in town, she tries desperately to avoid human contact. She has returned home to enact a reconciliation, only she is not to the point where she can admit openly that there is a need for it.

Ellen's first two confrontations are far less painful than those she eventually must face. The waitress in the diner gives Ellen an opportunity to admit the truth of her return; but Ellen lies, subconsciously justifying her deceit. Then, she is given a second chance when the old cab driver questions her; and this time she openly denies the truth which stings her, but only for a moment.

The third and fourth confrontations occur at her old home. The family cemetery and the house itself serve as permanent reminders of what she has deserted; but Ellen chooses to look away from the graves and to wander through the house trying desperately to relive only pleasant memories. At this point, Ellen cannot bring herself to accept the reality of what she has done or admit that the solution she has chosen will not work.

Then, the design of the wilderness enters the picture. The

role of nature in this story is that of teacher; Ellen's role is that of pupil. Ellen's refusal to face the reality of her predicament is challenged by the natural world, and Ellen sees the challenge in the guise of an eagle. The eagle is a natural-born individual who survives by instinct, cunning, and power. The young bird must be taught that once he leaves the nest, he is never to return, that he is on his own. Ellen is allowed to watch a mother bird force her young offspring from the aerie. The resemblance of this young bird's fate to Ellen's own situation is striking; and it is significant that Ellen sympathizes with the bird. Although nature teaches, Ellen must be susceptible to the lesson; and after the birds have gone, it is obvious that Ellen has learned from her experience. Her responses to the final four confrontations attest to the fact.

When Ellen returns to the house after the birds have gone, she faces a wave of mixed emotions and unmade decisions; and she responds by making choices in light of the realization of her situation. Ellen realizes that she, like the young bird, must be a "solitary flier," that to return to the physical house is neither a satisfactory substitute for her guilt nor an adequate reconciliation. Her second confrontation with the memories embodied in the house and especially the cemetery reassure her that the past must be buried, that her future depends on the acceptance of herself and her destiny. With the cry of the eagle in the background, Ellen walks away from the painful memories, from her mistakes, and from her fears and guilt. But the reader knows that although Ellen has made a choice, a difficult

decision, she has unconsciously reserved a sanctuary for herself as a protection against what she must face: she has left the door of the house unlocked.

"Solitary Flight" develops its story line through the series of confrontations, the first four occurring in the short span of one evening, the last four the following morning. The two series of confrontations are separated by Ellen's experience with the eagle which balances the plot and enhances the awareness of the change that happens within Ellen after her experience. However, this "before and after" contrast is meant to be subtle and slight.

The final story, "From Dust to Dust," treats the starker realities of the man-nature struggle and focuses upon the phenomenon of the natural balance in the wilderness. It deals with a man's obsession with and hatred for a "curse," and with a little boy's confrontation with the reality of life and death. In essence, it is an initiation story.

Caleb Cotter is a little boy who is caught up in the fury of an all-out war waged on the coyotes of Calloway County by a posse of gun-toting farmers. Up until this time he has been aware of the coyote curse, but never before has he witnessed such overt or collective response. Thus, Caleb's initiation begins. Caleb's father Jess is with Caleb every step of the way, but he proves to be a very unsatisfactory teacher, making Caleb's confrontation with the bloody realities of life and death more difficult. For example, in the Chick and Feed store, Caleb is made to stand in a stuffy corner while the men discuss their "battle plans." After the meeting, Jess and a neighbor alone discuss the matter, but

Caleb is sent to find his mother; when he returns, Jess cuts the talk short and they leave. Later, during the drive home, Caleb shows his first real interest in what is happening which gives Jess a second opportunity to prepare Caleb for what is to come. Instead, Jess, impatient with the boy's questions, scares Caleb with verbal attacks: "You can't feed a wild critter! They take what they want, and they are ruinin' us. They have to be destroyed. We're going to have to kill 'em!" Jess immediately tries to dilute the effect of the outrage, but it is too late; Caleb cannot understand.

Caleb's third confrontation is possibly the most significant if not the most devastating at the time. At the end of the first day's hunt, Jess returns with nine corpses piled in the back of his pickup. Caleb, who has already had visions of manhood, wants to participate in the hunt by hearing all about it. Jess tries to send him to his mother, but Caleb insists. So Jess complies by dropping the tailgate to confront Caleb with nine bloody coyotes. There is no reinforcement, no attempt to prepare the boy, only the confrontation. Again Jess has failed his son, and Caleb learns a lesson the hard way.

The fourth confrontation occurs when the dead coyotes are burned. This time, Caleb does not seek out his father but, instead, stands away from him and all the hunters to watch. In a sense, Caleb is segregating himself from the men who are representatives of manhood, and he chooses to continue his initiation alone. He does not realize that there is yet a better teacher: the wilderness. Caleb has for three days witnessed

death and destruction; now, nature offers him the alternative: life. Caleb is suddenly given the responsibility of saving the lives of two coyote pups orphaned by the war; and by this challenge nature is counteracting the purge using Caleb as the instrument to preserve natural order. But once again, Caleb's father interferes and threatens to undo the effect of nature's instruction. However, there is a bit of wisdom in the innocent which proves to be Caleb's victory.

Caleb is still a child after the ordeal, but he has received severe training for manhood. He has struggled in the initiation without the help of his father, yet he has achieved a level of understanding still elusive to many of the men. He has learned to respect the dead; and more importantly, he has learned to revere life.

Unlike the other stories of this collection, "From Dust to Dust" is a story with a plot. Although it is concerned with human thoughts and emotions, these thoughts and emotions are shown by a character's behavior rather than by an analysis of his mind and heart. Therefore, action is primary, that which moves the story from beginning to end. No moral is intended. Instead, the story attempts to deal with the question of the relationship between man and nature and, more importantly, to emphasize the fact that man and nature's destinies are linked.

A WHISPER ON THE WIND

A light snow continued to fall as the first shafts of sunlight trickled through the frost-draped foliage. A cold, biting wind blew hard across the scene and humbled the ice-laden pines with undefiable force. It was the coldest winter the Blue Ridge had ever seen, and the persistent snowfall gave no promise of an early spring.

In a cabin on a hill, an old man huddled close to a waning fire. A worn quilt had given him barely enough warmth for the night, and instinctively he felt for his frozen feet. A thin beam of light sifted through a frosty pane and rested upon his face, but there was no warmth. Slowly, he rose to his feet, shed the cover and let it fall to the floor. He shuffled to the

window and peered out into the blanketed valley. In the town below, smoke had begun curling from the chimneys into the morning mist, and the signs of life restored a peace in the old man. Now I can sleep, he thought.

The old man retrieved the soiled quilt from the barren floor. Wrapping it around himself, he lay down on his bed and rested his head in the dent of the stained pillow. He tried to think of pleasant things to dream, but he could feel the same dream coming on him again, the one he would dream over and over again in his daylight sleep. As the old man dozed, the sound of the wind in the valley stirred him. He began the dream of the eagle.

. . .With wings spread, the eagle soars through a sun-blached sky turning only to escape the jagged peaks of the cliffs that encompass his domain. Magnificent and powerful, the creature descends with inimitable grace, his iron-like claws poised, fixed upon an unsuspecting victim. Slowly, the bird of prey falls with increasing speed, unfaltering, steady, indestructible. In anticipation the eagle screams the cry of death, death for the conquered. Then he senses an alien presence; the assault is halted as the bird surveys from a rugged precipice. He cries out a warning that reverberates among the cliffs . . .a blast pierces the silence, the cry of the eagle clashes with the echo of recoil, and the undefeated falls from his rocky cathedral into darkness, blackness, nothingness. . . .

The old man awoke with a start. He raised his head from the sweat-drenched pillow and gazed about the cabin. The chill of dusk had settled upon him and he searched for some sign of warmth, but the fire of the night before lay in cold ashes. Outside the last rays of sun retreated through the forest, leaving only a stiff breeze and increasing snowfall. If only the light had stayed a little longer. He longed for the warmth of the morning sun.

The shadows of the night began to engulf the surroundings, and a rising fear moved the old man from his bed. Crippled by the cold, he painfully pulled back the cover and shifted his lifeless feet onto the floor. His only hope for the survival of the night was a warm, bright fire; and he had very little time.

The old man was greeted by a stinging wind as he opened the door. The solemnity of the frosty evening was interrupted only by the whispering of the wind in the trees. The tinderbox was almost hidden in the snow, but the logs were dry enough to warm his cabin. Choosing three large pieces, the old man again retreated into the shelter of his cabin. Carefully, he laid the logs upon the hearth and rolled them into the ashen grey carpet of the blackened fireplace. With swift motions, he set the logs on fire. He turned to a small basin of water set on an upturned crate beside the door, and with habitual ceremony the old man drenched his hands and face in the icy water. A cry pierced the silence. He thought of the eagle and drenched his face again. I will not become as the eagle, he thought; I will not let the

darkness overtake me.

A heavy snow began falling and a swift stinging breeze whipped through the cracks in the cabin. The sun had disappeared completely and the only light radiated from the blazing fire. The old man, wrapped in the blanket, huddled close to the warmth. Residual images of the dream passed dirge-like through the flames and the old man thought of the eagle, once free and unfaltering. The cadence brought fear into his heart; there was an echo of revenge. He shuddered. Someday, he thought, someday I, too, will be as the eagle, strong and free. Then there will be no fear.

The smoke of the blazing fire curled into the night air. The wind had subsided, and the trees were weighted with the freshly fallen snow. The branches of a large pine hung heavy over the cabin. The old man did not notice the thin stream of water trickling down the chimney onto the heated log, but he continued to dream. The old man did not notice that the wind had ceased.

The fire continued to burn and the pine continued to share her burden with the smoke filled chimney. The old man continued to dream. Slowly the ice melted, and the fire began to dim. The old man stopped dreaming. His tired eyes focused upon his waning life. He became afraid and a tear ran down his weathered cheek. The time had come. She had come for her revenge. I'm sorry, he whimpered. I'm sorry. And he lay in defeat on the cold, stone hearth.

The last bit of ice and snow fell onto the wavering fire,

and the cabin fell into darkness. The old man lay on the hearth wrapped in the tattered quilt, alone in the night, in the darkness, in the nothingness, still. Outside the wind blew across the hill and sent a whisper of victory into the valley below.

THE MOUNTAIN

A stiff wind blew across the snowscape and, like an artist, sculptured eerie shapes in the snow. Snow always fell on the mountain and the coldness was almost unbearable. A small form huddled in the white mass, stirring only occasionally as a strong gust whipped past.

He had been on the ledge for less than an hour, but sense of time had escaped him. He felt lucky to be alive. He rose to his knees and gazed at his surroundings. There had been five of them at the beginning of the trek up the mountain, five men determined to accomplish a feat never before achieved by any man. There had been intensive preparation and training with such perseverance that every action required of them, every reaction,

was habit. But there is no preparation intense enough to protect a man exposed to the severity of wind and snow at 19,000 feet.

The young man now surveyed the autograph of the storm. He had been about 100 yards from camp and his companions, within visual contact, when the mass of moving snow separated them; now he could see no one. And the only response to his futile shouting was the sound of his own voice ricocheting off the slopes. He was all alone, the sole survivor and the only one to complete their task: to reach the summit, to conquer the mountain.

The mountain had always been the conqueror. Few had lived to return from her icy peaks and never had anyone reached the summit. The mountain had made four more conquests and he was determined not to let her claim another life before she herself was the conquered.

The young man got slowly to his feet and prepared himself for the last leg of the journey. The biting wind had stiffened the muscles in his face, and as he rubbed the frostbitten flesh, he felt as if he were touching the face of a corpse.

He could see the summit from where he stood, and from its looks it was not going to be an easy task. The climb was almost straight up a jagged wall where the footholds were many, but treacherously slick. One false move could send a man hurtling to his death. He gathered his hammer, his pitons, his pick, and his rope, the necessities for the completion of his task.

A wave of weariness passed over him as he trudged to where he was to begin. He knew he could not stop, he had to push the very thought of sleep from his mind to force his muscles, his

limbs to move. Yet, the bitter cold persistently weighted his eyelids.

The first piton was easy to drive into the icy rock. He made sure it was secure before placing his weight upon it. One false move He drove in another one and the same feeling of fatigue passed through him again. He stopped to rest. I can't stop, he thought. I've got to go on.

It had been over an hour, and he had made only slight progress up the icy slope. The coldness pressed against his chest and there was pain in every breath. A gust of wind whipped the snow against his face with such velocity, visibility was at a minimum. He drove another piton into the icy mountain. I wonder if she feels any pain, if with each stroke of the hammer she winces as the stave is driven into her side. NO. I must not pity her, she is proud, she is strong, she is murderous. Hate surged through him and he was startled by a sudden alien strength within him. It was as if he had sapped her of a strange power. Or was she deceiving him?

The wind had begun to die down, but a slight snow continued to fall. He was making progress, nearing the last bit of his journey when his mind wandered to his companions and their fates. He had seen no trace of their bodies, but he knew she had buried them, bidding the wind for the elegy. He thought it to be a fitting ceremony since she had claimed them in victory.

He wondered why the pain was so bad. His whole being ached, his body, his mind, his soul. He wondered why they had to die.

Why did you kill them, you fiend, he shouted to the mountain; but she did not hear. Stiffly, he pounded a piton in disgust. He knew he had to reach the summit to show her she was not God, the taker of life.

The last part of the climb was up a straight cliff. No one had ever survived it. The last twenty feet was the judge and the executioner.

Stealthily he began the upward climb. The hammer became heavier and heavier and his whole body ached with pain. His limbs were numb; and though they moved at his bidding, to the touch they felt as if they belonged to another man. His head was spinning, and his energy went entirely into forcing his arms and legs into rhythmic movements. I must not stop. I must keep moving. A third wave of fatigue forced him to rest. He pressed himself close against the ice-covered, his breathing becoming more difficult, the coldness more unbearable. But as the numbness settled over his entire body, the coldness began to subside.

Just a few more feet. Each step was taken with extreme care. He would conquer the mountain for them, he would beat her for them. He would show her she was not invincible.

His breathing became labored. I should stop to rest, but there is no time. Darkness would be coming soon. The pain had gone and there was no more coldness. He felt good, he felt light-headed, he felt strong. With the summit in sight, he felt a sense of pride. I have beaten her--almost. Slowly, he began to pull himself up, digging the pick into her side.

The wind began to blow. Just a few more feet and the journey

would be over and she would be defeated. The pick slipped. He threw himself hard against the slope, breathing deep and hard. There was a steady pounding in his ears, and he felt strangely as if it were her heart he heard, not his. He thrust the pick into the ice again. It seemed to be secure now. Inch by inch he neared the peak, just a few more feet. Then with one final and powerful lunge, he flung himself to the pinnacle. In victory he looked down upon her. "I have made it," he shouted. "I have made it for them! You have been defeated and I am still alive!" He relaxed a moment and another wave of fatigue hit him. Now I can rest. He lay down in the snow and slept.

In a cabin at the base of the mountain, four men talked. They talked of a journey up a mountain. They talked about how she was unconquerable, and how she was proud and strong. She is a god, they said, and she is angry. They talked of a sacrifice.

SOLITARY FLIGHT

The interstate was a long, empty runway except for a few lonely truckers making their usual runs. The only intrusion on the night silence was the grind of passing diesels. Ellen scanned the half-deserted bus for some stirring life, but the only movement was the occasional heave of a mid-dream sigh. She, too, wanted to sleep, but a fear of her dreams subdued the inclination. Instead, she stared out the smoky window and watched the passing panorama of the countryside. It had been ten years and the strange familiarity of the landscape brought alien thoughts to her mind.

"Pendleton--A Community of Neighbors" the sign read. There was still time to change her mind. She could stay on the bus

and no one would know she had even been there; but somehow she couldn't turn back, not without a token reconciliation. Besides there was always the 2 a.m. south-bound Greyhound.

The bus stopped abruptly and one lonely passenger disembarked. The driver unloaded a battered suitcase, withdrew into the warmth of the bus and drove away. Ellen adjusted her coat about her neck, picked up the suitcase, and was immediately drawn to a solitary lighted diner. She walked hesistantly down the deserted street, glancing into dark, empty storefronts; the sight was repulsive. Oily dirt caked the panes, broken webs draped the darkened corners, and decaying victims littered the window sills. She felt a kindred spirit; it was as if the life of the town and her own life had atrophied. She hurried down the street; the cafe would make her forget for awhile.

The place was devoid of people except for a single, sleepy waitress.

"You come in on the bus?" the waitress asked as Ellen seated herself in an obscure corner next to the front window.

"Yes," she answered without looking up. She consciously adjusted her wrinkled clothes and smoothed her tousled hair in a futile attempt to avoid facing the talkative waitress.

"What'll it be? Our midnight special is pimento cheese on rye; and even though it's only 10:30, you can have it anyway with a slice of pie thrown in if you order the deluxe special for \$1.05, so what'll it be?" The waitress chewed a wad of gum competitively.

"Coffee, please."

"Sure." The waitress shrugged her shoulders and went to the

bar. Ellen felt the puzzled stare of the waitress and hoped she would not be recognized. She wasn't up to an explanation, not yet.

"You got business here or just passing through?" The waitress slopped a mug of thick black coffee down on the table.

"Passing through." She wasn't ready for a commitment, either. Ellen forced herself to look up. The face was strange, the eyes inquisitive, but there was no sign of recognition by either. She sipped her coffee with more ease. The waitress rambled over to a beat-up juke box, reached into the soiled pocket of her undersized uniform, inserted some coins, and punched several selections. She then wriggled dance-like back to Ellen's table and began a one-sided conversation.

Ellen was oblivious to the chatter. She stared through the plate glass window and down the street as far as she could see. She tried to remember how it had been ten years before, but the memory was merely a wave of blurred images, meaningless.

"Hey, you all right, dearie?" The waitress had noticed she had lost her audience.

"Sure, fine. Say, could you tell me where I could find some means of transportation at this hour?" Ellen drained the last bit of coffee and grounds.

"Yeh, ol' Edgar should be parked outside somewheres, asleep; but the hotel's within walkin' distance.

"Thank you." Mechanically, Ellen paid for her coffee, plus a small tip for the monologue, and left the waitress dancing and conversing with the juke box.

Outside, Pendleton's lone cab driver lay snoring in the front of his '62 Chevy. Ellen knocked on the window, arousing a rather curious old gentleman.

"Excuse me, are you for hire? I need to get out to the Carter place. Could you take me?"

"The Carter place? That ain't no place to be goin' at this hour." He rubbed his eyes and looked directly up at her, the street light illuminating her delicate features. Ellen drew back from his stare. "There ain't nothing but. . ."

"Please." The urgent tone in her voice startled the old man.

"Sure, get in. You some kin to the family?" He didn't wait for a response. "We was all real sorry to hear about Ol' Jake. The saddest thing about it all was that there wasn't no family home for the burying, but with both kids dead well. . . . A cousin would 'a done all right, I reckon. Ol' Jake would 'a liked that, but no matter. At least he ain't lonely no more; he's with Amy. But I guess you knows that bein' kin and all. You come to claim the property? You won't be able to see much in the dark."

"I didn't say I was kin to the family." Ellen bit her lip. The denial hurt.

The rest of the drive out to the old farmhouse was quiet--a time to think. She was tired of running; she'd been running for ten years. Then, it had seemed the thing to do. She could still see the pictures from the magazines that had deluded her. The skyscraper apartments, the towering office buildings, the promise

of a high paying job. She had dreamed of a plush apartment, going to work for a top executive, and never a lonely Saturday night. But it had all been just that . . . a dream. When she thought of what it had really been like, she shuddered. The cold one-room apartment, the stuffy typing pool, and empty Saturday nights.

"You're always trying to ruin my life," she had said to them. "I'm moving to the city and I'm going to get me a job and there's nothing you can do to stop me." Her mother had cried and her father had threatened. In her selfishness, all she could see was the dream of her life being blocked by the two people who had given that life to her. She hadn't realized at the time that they cared. Robby, her brother, had died in the war; she was all they had left. But she hadn't cared about that.

She had kept her threat. What had followed was ten years of misery and maturity. She had learned what it was like to fight for survival and to live in loneliness. She had cursed her folks at first and had learned what it meant to deny one's own family. In that lesson, Ellen cursed herself.

The old man pulled the cab up the dirt road to her old home. The house stood on a hill two miles off the highway and a half mile north of a river canyon. Nothing had changed, just aged and decayed. She was the one who had changed. As they wound up the road, she could not help but notice the family cemetery. She re-directed her glance. When they pulled up to the front of the house, Ellen got out and paid the old man.

"You want I should wait? It's a might fer piece back to town."

"No, thank you."

"Hate you should stay out here alone. I'll just take a short snooze whiles you takes care of your business." He paused. "By the way, what is your business out here? Unless you is kin, I can't see you got cause to be snooping around." He seemed to stare right through Ellen. "You sure you ain't some kin?" he continued. "You sure do look like a Carter."

"No . . .I mean, yes," Ellen stammered. "I mean I am related to the family. The house is mine, now. See I have the key." Ellen showed it to the old man to try to quell his curiosity.

"Well"

"I have some very important business to take care of here, and I thought I would just stay in the house. I don't have much money and"

"Well, I suppose it's all right."

"Thank you, and I guess I won't be needing you anymore tonight," Ellen replied in relief.

"Sure you wouldn't want to go back to town tonight?"

"No, thank you."

"Wouldn't mind waiting on you."

"No. Thank you." Ellen repeated firmly. "I'll be fine. Good night."

The old man shrugged and drove away, leaving her alone before the dark decaying frame house. She tried to swallow the lump in her throat. She had come this far; she had to make her peace. Besides there would be another bus, tomorrow.

Ellen ascended the decrepit stairs and turned the key in the

knob on the wind-scarred door. For a moment she just stood on the porch. She wasn't sure if she was ready to face the memories. Then with determination, Ellen walked boldly into the house and into her past.

For the next hour, she sauntered through the house, reliving the years. She had found an old oil lamp in the kitchen cabinet, and it now rested in her room on top of a solid oaken chest battered with childhood scars. She remembered the time Robby had swung at her with a baseball bat and hit the chest instead. Then there was the scar from the time she had let a candle drip all over the finish as she was absorbed in a chilling novel after lights-out, a scar kept company by the fragrant rings of perfume caps set negligently aside to eat the glossy stain.

Downstairs there was her father's prized red leather chair, still placed comfortably before what was now the barren fireplace. Ellen dusted the cushions and nestled herself down into the indentations left by the many long hours of use. She slipped off her shoes, drew her feet into the chair, and settled in for a short nap. Before long, the late hour took its toll, and she was sound asleep.

A cry piercing the silence of dawn stirred Ellen in the early hours of the morning. The oil lamp, still on the side table, was burning low, and she turned up the wick to lighten the room. As she stretched herself out of the chair, she surveyed the room. The night before she had not noticed the shabbiness of her once immaculate home. The furniture was caked with dirt, and the rugs

and curtains were moth-eaten and drab. Ellen thought how disappointed her mother would be if she were to see the condition of her pride and joy. It was going to take a great deal of hard work to make it look like home again. Ellen stopped herself. Had she unconsciously made a commitment?

The cry echoed in the canyon. Conscious of the disturbance now, Ellen walked to the back window to see what was going on. In the faint light of the rising sun, she saw the shadowed profile of a bird coasting above the cliffs. Her curiosity led her out the door and down the back meadow.

The sunlight now trickled through skeletal trees of the early spring, transforming the scattered clouds of a passing shower. As Ellen stepped off the back porch and into the brittle meadow grass, the morning breeze filtered through her hair. There was a reviving quality about the wind in the face, and Ellen turned to receive the full force. As she waded knee-deep in the grass, she turned her eyes to the sky. The bird was soaring in the face of the sun as if to receive its full share of the warmth. As Ellen neared the cliff's edge at the end of the meadow, she recognized the familiar silhouette of an eagle. By the size, she guessed it was a female, and there was something about the bird's behavior that made Ellen think her aerie was close by.

Ellen found a safe ledge away from the bird's view and perched herself near the edge. The bird circled the canyon, nearing the steep wall at only one spot. Each time she let out the same cry that had aroused Ellen's curiosity. Ellen strained to see. Perched cautiously in the aerie was a young eagle, the object of

the mother's coaxing. As Ellen watched silently, the adult bird made sweeping passes by the nest, unsteady the fledgling.

Ellen remembered what her father had told her about the eagle. Once the mother bird had coaxed her young from the aerie, they were on their own. It was now their turn to make a life for themselves, to find a mate and teach their young. Though the parent bird returned to the same aerie year after year, the offspring never came back.

The young eagle was sending up screams of protest as the mother passed. Ellen sympathized with his resistance. There was cruelty in his mother's insistence, yet she responded only by instinct. It was her nature, part of the design of her world. The eagle had to be a loner, a self-assured hunter, and dependent on nothing but instinct. Ellen knew it was this instinct that prompted the mother to train her young one.

Again the young bird cried. Then with bold determination he spread his massive wings and lifted himself effortlessly into the air. Still unsure of his potential, he stayed close to the nest venturing only a few yards beyond. Gradually, however, the radius of his circle grew. The mother watched carefully. Slowly she traced designs across the sky, coaching with tireless effort; and it was not long before the young eagle was following her lead. Ellen watched in awe of the magnificent pair. Side by side they performed their acrobatics against the backdrop of the dawn, flawless form with least amount of body motion; it was as if they sensed an audience. But the performance was a short-lived one for Ellen. As she watched, the mother bird drifted away from her

offspring. She descended into the canyon and then lifted her head to the sky and disappeared over a distant ridge. The young bird continued to circle for a moment; then with a quick pass of the aerie, he was off in rapid descent.

Ellen sat on the ledge for a while after the birds had gone. They were powerful individuals, alone and free; because there was strength in their solitary life, and there was survival. Ellen slid down off her perch and began the short walk back up to the house. Her mind was racing, charged with unmade decisions. As she stepped up on the porch and opened the backdoor, her confusion and frustration created within her a feeling of alienation. In full morning light, the house looked strange. This could not be her home, not the home she remembered, a home full of joy and warmth. Her home would never be cold and empty like this one.

Ellen felt worse than she had the night before. She had wanted a reconciliation, but now she realized she could not have it, not here. She repacked her bag, replaced the oil lamp in the kitchen cabinet, and made one last tour of the house. When she finally stood on the front porch, suitcase by her side, she once again saw the old cemetery. This time she acknowledged its realities. She found the once-worn footpath grown over with neglect, but her memory served her well. She set her suitcase beside the gate and went inside the iron fence. As she looked at the three graves lined up in a row, those ten years came flooding back upon her and she was deluged with fear. Then she heard the eagle cry in the distance, and she said her goodbyes.

As she walked down the winding dirt road, her spirit rose.

She paused and turned to view the house one more time. The strangeness was gone, and she sighed. The past would no longer haunt her.

As the sun rose higher over the canyon wall, Ellen walked away. Instinctively she shoved her free hand down into her coat pocket and unconsciously fingered the key she had used to open the house. Then she remembered: she had left the door unlocked.

FROM DUST TO DUST

A dry dust wind had picked up to relieve the torment of the sweltering June night, and in a stream of light emanating from the smoky backroom of the Chick and Feed Store, the grit swirled furiously. Occasionally the dirt fury would sift part of itself through the half-dollar hole in the side window and onto the bare wood floor, unnoticed by all but one small pair of watery eyes.

Caleb shifted his forty-five pounds from one foot to the other. He had been standing in a corner of the backroom for over two hours, and his legs were almost numb. Had there been room, he would have set himself on the filthy floor in his stuffy corner; but the crowd had left him barely enough room as it was.

Caleb did not know why they were all there, nor did he care; at that moment he would just rather have been anywhere else but where he was. He was conscious of the constant rumble frequently interrupted by distinguishable voices, but he had lost interest early and had sought another source of entertainment. The dust continued to filter onto the floor.

"We've got to do something about them now!" Caleb's father was saying. "We can't let them ruin us; not like last year."

"We're all behind you, Jess, whatever you say," Gus replied. Gus Bishop's farm was next to Jess Cotter's place. "We've all been hit and hit hard, and if we don't do something about those critters, they'll run us off our land."

"Hunt them and kill them. Poison them. Shoot them. Whatever it takes to rid Calloway County of those dang coyotes." Jess's fist hit the splintered table top in a resounding thud. Caleb's attention shifted. "And the sooner the better."

The rest of the men who had gathered about the time worn "conferrin' table" grumbled affirmatively.

"Tomorrow," Jess continued. "My place. Bring your guns, your traps, and the deadliest poisons you got."

They shifted in relief. They had made a decision; they had declared a war.

Caleb sucked in a fresh breath as the first self-appointed soldier disentangled himself from the crowd and left through the back door. It was late and all were anxious to get home to their families. As the crowd thinned, Caleb revived. He looked up at the face of his father, who was still conferring with one of his

neighbors. It was a face marred by years of struggle, struggle epitomized by the present crisis, but Caleb only noticed the wrinkles.

"When are we going, Pap?" he whined, as he tugged at Jess's trouser leg.

"Hush, boy. Go find Mother." Caleb's mother had ridden to town with her husband to visit the wife of the Chick and Feed Store owner. She seldom had an excuse to sit for two hours and gossip with one of her neighbors. Caleb found her without a search, and with much insistence convinced her Pap was ready to leave. When they returned to the backroom, the place was empty except for Jess and Gus. The smoke still hung heavy over the parley.

"How long do you think it'll take, Jess?"

"'Bout a week, I reckon," he replied, thoughtfully rubbing his whiskered chin. "At least that'll get us enough for a starter. Then if everybody will keep setting traps and baiting them with the poison we can at least control them."

"Wish we'd done something like this last year. We had a rough winter, and I don't want Jenny to suffer like that again."

"We all did, Gus. We all did." Jess laid a reassuring hand on his neighbor's sagging shoulder. Then he noticed his wife and son and hastily said his goodbyes.

The drive home was solemn. The dry wind whistled through the rolled-down windows of the pick-up. Caleb, seated between his father and mother, was puzzled by the quiet.

"Why are you sad, Mama?" he asked.

"I'm not sad, dear, just tired, I guess."

"Of what, Emily?" Jess intruded harshly.

"Of the obsession, the hatred. I know the coyotes have to be run off, but your obsession with it scares me."

Caleb picked up the conversation. "What's a 'session?"

"Ask your father."

"Huh, Pap? Does it have something to do with the coyotes?"

"Yes, son," Jess responded. Then he looked over at Emily whose penetrating eyes were focused on him. "They are killing our chickens, and they're even carrying off Mr. Cospers' and Mr. Bodin's sheep," he continued.

"Can't you give them some food?"

Jess, tired with the late hour and losing patience with his son's queries, snapped, "You can't feed a wild critter! They take what they want, and they are ruining us. They have to be destroyed. We're going to have to kill them!"

The intensity of his father's voice scared Caleb. Jess, noticing his son's sudden lack of enthusiastic inquisitiveness, backed off his verbal campaign.

"Listen, son. The coyotes have just about taken over our land. You remember how we have had to shoot at them at night when they come around the chicken house? Well, if we allow them to stay around here, they will kill all our chickens and all the sheep in this county. And if we don't do something about them now, we won't have enough money to go through the winter. Do you understand, son?"

Caleb nodded, but he could not really understand his father's

anger.

Calloway County was used to the curse of the coyote. Although corn was the chief crop and main revenue for most of the people, many handled a chicken enterprise on the side; two ranches in the area raised sheep. And coyotes lived handsomely off chicken and sheep. The farmers and ranchers had for years fought solitary battles against them in the tradition of their fathers and their fathers before them. But they had run out of patience and stamina for their private wars. The coyote population was growing, and it seemed that only fight en masse would work now. Thus the war on the curse began.

The hunt started at dawn the next day. The picture of a posse of gun-toting farmers smacked of a matinee western. Caleb watched the gathering from his upstairs window. He sensed the excitement in the air and felt the urge to become a part of the army. He could shoot a coyote; his father had taught him; and if he were only a man, he could go with them. He was contemplating his impending manhood when his mother called him to breakfast.

The men had gone when Caleb set about his morning routine of egg-gathering and chicken feeding. He was alive with battle fever when he went into the chicken yard; and with the blasts of hunters' rifles echoing in the background, Caleb imagined himself a hunter, scattering the enemy before him. With courage, he captured his squawking enemy and narrowly escaped ferocious attacks to gather the spoils of war. And after the heat of battle, Caleb stood triumphantly amidst the feathers, clutching his basket full of eggs.

The day dragged on unmercifully as Caleb waited in anticipation of his father's return. And when dusk finally came, it hung heavy with the smell of death and the cries of the dying. The first day's battle was over. When Caleb heard the sound of the caravan of pick-ups coming across the field, he ran anxiously to meet them. As they approached the farmhouse, the hunters scattered their separate ways. When Jess parked the truck, Caleb scrambled onto the running board.

"How many did you shoot, Pap?"

"Bunch, son." Emily appeared on the front porch. "Evenin' Em'," Jess added as he stepped down from the cab.

"Hungry?" she asked, as she glanced in the back of the truck.

"Yep," he answered. Emily went back into the house. Then Jess added, noticing his son's insatiable interest in what had happened, "Go help your mother, Caleb."

But Caleb wanted to hear about the fight. He followed his father all over the yard pumping him for some story about the battle, but Jess offered very little to satisfy him. Instead, Jess went about his business of storing his guns and ammunition in the barn where Emily made him keep them where Caleb couldn't get at them. He had started back up to the house, Caleb still trailing on his heels, when he stopped abruptly behind the pick-up. Caleb, still chattering, hadn't noticed Jess had stopped and walked right into the back of him. For a moment, Caleb stood silently, awaiting the expected reprimand. But Jess walked over and began to unlatch the tailgate.

"Come here, son," he ordered. Caleb stepped up beside his

father. Abruptly Jess dropped the tailgate and confronted Caleb with the bloody reality of the fight. Piled in the back of the truck were the carcasses of the enemy, red with the wounds of defeat. Caleb stepped back and away from the sight and the smell of the blood.

"We got nine of them, son. These critters here won't be bothering us anymore." Jess reached in and lifted up one coyote's head by its ears. The glassy eyes stared right through Caleb as Jess scrutinized the animal. Jess tossed the head back and slammed the tailgate shut. As he walked up to the house, Caleb remained motionless. His glazed eyes were fixed on a slow stream of blood that had begun seeping from the truck and into the dust.

The men followed a similar routine for two more days, each evening burying the carcasses of the day's hunt in an open grave. By the evening of the fourth day, the coyotes shot, trapped, or poisoned numbered twenty-nine. Caleb had lost much of his initial interest in the war; the reality of what his father and the other men were doing was too stark, too real. And he no longer played the vicious hunter.

In the late afternoon of the third day, Caleb returned from a day of "exploring" with his friends to discover the men had returned early. They had all gathered out behind the barn, near the pit where they had buried the dead coyotes. Caleb watched from a distance.

Gus Bishop, with the help of one of the farmers, was removing carcasses from the back of Jess's pick-up and pitching them into the open pit.

"What are you going to use, Buck?" Gus shouted to one of the other men.

"Kerosene. That should do the trick."

Caleb continued to watch.

After Gus and his co-worker had dumped all the dead into the pit, Buck emptied a can of kerosene over the bodies. Then as every man backed away, one of them threw in a match that set the entire hole ablaze. Caleb watched as billows of rank-smelling smoke poured from the mouth of the crude grave. Several men were laughing while the others congratulated each other on the success of their campaign. They had killed the enemy and felt like celebrating; Caleb felt sick. He was forgetting his own imaginary blood lust.

As the black smoke rose against the backdrop of the waning day, the men departed. Caleb, alone, was left to mourn the dead.

The following morning, Caleb did not get out of bed to watch the men leave; he waited until they had gone. The sun was blazing hot when he finally left the house to do his chores, and the air was thick with the smell of smoldering flesh. As fast as he could, Caleb finished his work; he wanted to get away from the putrid smell and from the smoldering pit. After he had delivered the eggs to his mother, he set out on a solitary trek across the open range. Soon he had almost forgotten about the pit and about the smell.

After about an hour, Caleb had covered quite a bit of territory; the sun was boiling, and the exercise had made him hungry. He was running across the grassland toward home when he heard the noise for the first time. He slowed to a trot, unsure if he had

heard anything and really in too much of a hurry to stop and investigate if he had. Then he heard it again, a muffled sound, and he came to a full stop. He must have been close to the source for when he heard it a third time, it was a distinct whimper. Caleb, his curiosity aroused, searched diligently through the grass until he located it. Nestled comfortably close to one another and hidden in a small recess in the dirt were two coyote pups. They were at least six weeks old; and orphaned by the purge, they were hungry and helpless.

Caleb stood over the pups for quite a while. He wanted to help them; but he knew that if he took the pups home, his father would kill them as he had their mother. And if he left them alone they would eventually starve to death. As Caleb stood there thinking about what to do, one of the pups crawled out of the den. Lack of food had weakened it, and the sight of the dying coyote convinced Caleb of what he had to do.

The killing continued for two more days while Caleb battled to save his coyote pups. He had hidden them well in an abandoned plow shed, but was concerned knowing that one mis-timed whimper would mean their death. His chief problem, though, was their feeding. He fed them on insects at first, then field mice; but he had to resort to appropriating some food from the house.

A week passed without incident. The hunt had officially ended, and coyote raids had diminished significantly. The farmers had again turned their attention to the crops, feeling certain that they had dealt a severe blow to their enemy. And although

they continued to set and poison-bait traps to stop the remaining marauders, for them the war was over. Caleb continued to harbor the refugees.

But what followed in the wake of the destruction was not a peace. In their obsession to rid the county of its curse, the farmers had loosed upon the land a plague so devastating it threatened to destroy them. With the decline of the coyote threat came heightened rodent activity. Packs of field mice advanced from the range and infested the grain bins; and nothing could stop them. The farmers had traded a curse for a crisis.

Only Caleb and his coyotes benefited from the plague. Caleb felt better seeing his father and neighbors direct their war effort against rodents and not coyotes. But Caleb knew the hatred still existed; and his pups were growing restless for their freedom. He knew, too, it would not be long before he would have to let them go.

But the time came soon and unexpectedly. One late afternoon, Caleb was on his way to the plow shed to feed the pups. In the beginning, he had taken every precaution to insure the safety of the pups; but the feeding had become routine and Caleb had become careless. And in this particular afternoon, he slipped out of the house without locating his father.

He was toting the usual brown paper sack with the pups' dinner. Tonight they were eating leftover chicken. Caleb casually tossed the sack in the air as he walked across the yard toward the back gate. Any apprehensions he had entertained of being discovered with the pups' food had apparently been superseded by his

present interest. As he rounded the corner of the barn, he braved a bolder venture and proceeded to drop-kick the sack across the back fence. The sack flew in the air, and Caleb landed bottom first in the dirt. As he sat for a moment, laughing at his antic, a figure of a man stood before him, silhouetted against the afternoon sun.

"Is this yours?"

Caleb was no longer amused.

"Yes, sir," he replied weakly. He knew the explanation was next.

His father stood stiffly by as Caleb gathered himself up off the ground and slowly brushed the dirt off, trying futilely to delay the inevitable.

"Well?"

Caleb stammered for a lie.

"I want to know where you are going with the food."

"It's for a friend."

"Who?"

"Pete and I are going on an adventure, and that is our lunch."

"Pete went to town with his father. Won't be back until evening. Now, just where are you going with it."

Caleb swallowed hard.

"Caleb, I want the truth." Caleb could already feel the seat of his pants warming up.

"I was going over there." He pointed in an indiscernible direction.

"Show me." Jess handed Caleb the sack.

Caleb walked as slowly as he could, Jess prodding him every few feet; he wanted to delay the discovery as long as possible. But Caleb knew, as they neared the vicinity of the shed, that there could be no further delay. The pups, having sensed the approach of dinner, began to bark in anticipation.

Jess's hand came down hard on Caleb's shoulder.

"Coyotes! Have you been wasting that food on those dang coyotes?"

Caleb nodded.

"Go on back to the house. I'll take care of this." He yanked Caleb around by the arm and propelled him in the direction of home. Caleb began an immediate protest.

"No, please! They're not hurting anybody," he wailed.

"Go!" Jess shouted as he disappeared into the shed. In a moment, he reappeared holding each yelping coyote by a hind leg.

"What are you gonna do?" Caleb cried, following his father closely as they walked back across the field.

"I'm gonna get rid of them. Then, I'll see to you."

"No, Pap, please don't kill them!"

"They are killers."

Caleb's face was red and blotchy when they reached the barnyard. All his protests had fallen on deaf ears; Jess was determined. The pit behind the barn had not been completely filled in, and Jess tossed the pups into the hole to contain them while he went for his rifle. Caleb stood over them feeling helpless.

"I want you to see this," Jess directed when he came out of

the barn. "I want you to see how we take care of killers."

"They didn't eat much," Caleb insisted.

Jess raised his rifle.

"Mostly mice," Caleb added quietly. He closed his eyes and waited for the blast.

But all Caleb heard was the sound of the hungry pups. It seemed like hours before he could open his eyes. He looked up at his father; Jess had the gun trained on the coyotes. Then, as Caleb continued to stare, Jess lowered the rifle to his waist, stood motionless for only a moment, turned and walked back into the barn without saying a word. When he came out, he did not have the gun.

"Go to your room, Caleb," he ordered.

"But. . ."

"Now!" Jess added firmly.

"Yes, sir," Caleb replied as he shuffled toward the house. He was confused, and he wanted to know why his father had not shot the pups.

Caleb sat in his room, alone, for over half an hour. The barking had stopped and the quiet had shifted his attention to his own fate. Within the hour, his father entered the room, dealt his punishment, and left Caleb alone, again, to sit on his troubles. For a long time Caleb thought: he thought about his pups, about how mean his father was; he thought about running away, about being alone. And he thought about being a man.

Caleb never knew what happened to his pups, and his father never talked about that afternoon. The pit behind the barn was

filled in; and the only war remaining was the private war between a man and the land. The men still met once a month around the splintered "conferrin' table" in the backroom of the Chick and Feed Store, but only to chew the fat, to boast about their crops, or to recount tales of their individual skirmishes with the "dang critters." And Caleb continued to go with his father to the men's meeting, to stand in his filthy corner, and to listen and watch while the wind kicked up the dust and filtered it through the glass.

MAN AND THE ARTIST OF FATE:
A STUDY OF THE MAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP
IN THE NATURAL WORLD

by

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The study of nature is an integral part of the world's literary heritage. From the Greeks to the twentieth century, artists have been absorbed in a quest to understand, to predict, and to interpret the forces that control the universe. And an integral part of their study is the attempt to comprehend the relationship of man and nature.

The intent of this collection of short stories is to present nature's multifaceted personality and to explore her relationship with man. In this study, certain questions are vital--questions artists have doubtless always been concerned with. Is nature basically antagonistic, or is she indifferent? Does nature determine man's fate? And, are there terms for coexistence? Each story in this collection deals with at least one of these questions but none attempt to provide definitive answers. Instead, there is an attempt to provide objective observations of nature and man, and their respective roles in the universal drama.

"A Whisper on the Wind," the first selection, deals with a man's interference with the balance in the wilderness and the consequences of his action. It is a study of the effect of fear on the mind of an individual and a study of how one man sees his relationship with the natural world.

"The Mountain," the second story of the collection, deals with the exploit of an ambitious young man obsessed with the idea that the mountain he has chosen to climb is evil, even murderous. His objective is to reach the summit; and although he eventually succeeds in his quest, somewhat victorious, he is merely an arrogant child of nature, finite and insignificant in

the presence of the untamed world. And he is where he is because she (the mountain) has allowed it.

The final two selections deal with the beneficent character of nature and are concerned with the necessity of the peaceful coexistence of man and nature and the benefits to be derived from such an understanding. "Solitary Flight" is the story of one lonely woman trying desperately to regain the past, to atone for a hurt she inflicted upon herself and the ones she loved ten years ago. Ellen Carter tries to go home only to discover that she seeks a life that has disappeared, that is only real in her memory. But this realization is hers only after a series of confrontations, sometimes unsuccessful and sometimes painful. The role of nature in the story is that of teacher; Ellen's role is that of pupil. It is the natural world who challenges her to face the reality of her predicament.

The final story, "From Dust to Dust," treats the starker realities of the man-nature struggle and focuses upon the phenomenon of the natural balance in the wilderness. It deals with a man's obsession with and hatred for a "curse," and with a little boy's confrontation with the reality of life and death. In essence, it is an initiation story. The story deals with the question of the relationship of man and nature and, more importantly, emphasizes the fact that man and nature's destinies are linked.