

/TWO STORIES
FROM THE GROUND UP/

by

MARK LANDON JARVIS

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A REPORT

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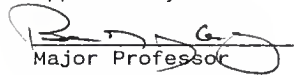
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The instant I enter on my own land, the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence, exalt my mind. Precious soil, I say to myself, by what singular custom of law is it that thou wast made to constitute the riches of the freeholder? What should we American farmers be without the distinct possession of that soil? It feeds, it clothes us; from it we draw even a great exuberancy, our best meat, our richest drink; the very honey of our bees comes from this privileged spot. No wonder we should thus cherish its possession....it has established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens, our importance as inhabitants of such a district. These images, I must confess, I always behold with pleasure and extend them as far as my imagination can reach; for this is what may be called the true and the only philosophy of an American farmer.

--J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur

Letters from an American Farmer

1782

for Leela
with thanks.

Thanks also to the unsung heroes of KANSAS, who have
inspired me for over a decade:
Kerry, Steve, Robby, Dave, Phil, and Rich.

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Parity

"Or take Nightfall." Ethan said, as the sky darkened. "Ever think about it? Why isn't it sun fall, or night rise? I tell you Pubert, it doesn't make any sense."

"Stop calling me Pubert." It was his favorite name for me. I tossed some grain in his face.

"You ought to try this." He was buried up to his neck in the wheat that filled the truckbed. "My whole body's throbbing. It's cooler too."

"It's stupid."

"Stupid?"

"Yeah. You can just lay there throbbing and thinking about nightfall. You got nothing else to do. You can just bury yourself--"

"At least I don't bury my head in the sand, like you."

"What are you talking about?"

"All you've been doing is bitching and moaning about going off to school. That's what's eating you now, isn't it?"

Harvest was all but over, and that meant summer was over too. And that meant it was time to go to college. Even if I came back for harvest next summer, I knew things would be different.

"How can you get so worked up over it, Robby. Just go for the parties. Go for the panty raids. Get some perspective."

Behind his reflective sunglasses, Ethan was a guy with perspective. He'd gone to college and protested the war. He'd seen the Northern Lights, Cancun, San Francisco; he'd been to massage parlors and tattoo shops and opium dens--a long way from the Mennonite community he grew up in.

He taught me how to bring down the hawks that hovered behind my tractor. Since they were waiting for me to plow up rabbits and mice anyway, Ethan just plunked a jackrabbit with his 22 and tied it to my tractor's toolbar. They dived for it all day.

One evening when I went to bring him in from the field, I found him standing on the roof of the tractor cab. He hoisted me up and pointed out a skull and crossbones he'd plowed in the weeds. It was a landscape mural a good quarter of a mile wide. "What's Stan Herd got on me?" he smiled wide.

This last winter, I watched him paint a naked lady on his motorcycle's gas tank. We brought in one of the tractors one cold Saturday and he taught me how to paint with his airbrush. We sprayed a big American flag over the hood. In the fall, Ethan and I were going to join the tractorcade when it came through and protest for parity in DC.

"Remember Emerson?" he continued. Our summer project was burning through a book of Emerson's writings, a book with onion skin pages with gilded edges. "'One of the benefits of a college education,'" he quoted from memory, "'is to show the boy it is of little avail.'"

"Maybe you ought to remember your Emerson, Ethan." "The reason of my deep respect for the farmer is that he is a realist, and not a dictionary. The farm is a piece of the world, the school-house is not."

"Ah, touche, Weedhopper. To Emerson, Hendrix and Cannabis." Dad never caught our inside jokes. He thought Hendrix was a philosopher and that Cannabis was a roman statesman.

"Besides," I said, "You know what matters to me. You're up to your neck in it."

Pomp and circumstance was still ringing in his ears at night. Pubert was old enough to vote, to go to war, to drink and swear and see x-rated movies, but not old enough to think for himself. I mean, he didn't think about himself, about his own best interests. Instead, he tried making everyone else happy. He thought he was a farmer; Bob and Violet thought he was a bookworm. He wanted a tool kit for graduation; he got a typewriter. No matter what he was feeling, he couldn't tell his mom and dad to fuck off and die. He was hog-tied by apron strings.

Oh, Robby shared all kinds of ideas with me about how he'd try low tillage farming or how he'd diversify--stuff he'd heard from the extension agent. I used to think like that, too. He had bright ideas, but he was pissing up a rope. He knew damn well how bad the farm situation was, but he wouldn't accept it. He was a zit about to pop and I didn't want to be around when it happened. I was not going to be around.

"Dad says after I pay expenses, I still ought to clear a fair amount. What do you think I should do with it?"

"Take it and run."

"I think I'll give ten percent to the church, ten percent to the Movement, pocket ten percent and put the rest back into the farm."

"Ten percent to the Movement?" Bloodsuckers, vultures rallying the walking dead. It was really heartless what they were doing. Once I'd seen a dead cow rocking in the field, thought it was coming back to life, but it was just parasites.

"Ethan, something's got to break. Farmers can't eat dirt. My money's with the Movement, with the strike."

I guess I'd encouraged it. During the cold, boring months of the winter we went to a couple meetings of the American Ag guys. Windbags.

"We're going to come out of this...this 'crisis,' you'll see."

"You sound like your daddy."

"Oh I do not. You know how he feels about the Movement. He won't lift a finger to fight for it."

"He's fighting right now."

Ethan Koehn was from the Holy Land but he'd been through hell since then. I took him on because he couldn't get work anywhere else--a divorced hippie with a criminal record. I knew there was a hard worker bred

in him though, him being born Mennonite, and I was right. His first summer he was cleaning out the grain bins, just shoveling like mad in the heat of the day. Violet took him some tea and found him collapsed, dehydrated. We had to take him to the hospital. No common sense, but he worked like a wetback.

Used to be everybody worked hard like him. My father had to thresh wheat by hand. His father dug the well on our place by himself. Now I rode in an air conditioned combine, drinking beers out of an ice chest, griping about my backache and how the a.c. was low on freon.

Harvest was vacation time for the boys, time away from the tractor when they did nothing but wait for me to fill their trucks with wheat. We were so far from the elevators it usually took both trucks, one travelling, one being filled, to keep up with my combine. I was cutting much slower now, overlapping more than I probably need to, but I didn't want to push it. We'd made it this far, to our last field, without a breakdown. It was Robby's first crop and it was making over 80 bushel, thick enough it slowed me down anyway.

One truck could have kept up with me, could run back and forth to town while I cut through the field. I didn't put Koehn onto something else though, just let

them alternate, let them sit on their asses another day. There really wasn't any other field work to do, it was the end of the week, they'd both worked hard all week. This was about the only bonus I could give them.

When I'd cut to the end of the field, they'd raise up out of the grain or hop out of the cab, stretching and yawning. They kept busy brushing out the trucks, calculating how much we'd cut or how long we'd still be at it, but on hot afternoons they just slept under the trucks in the shade. Robby was reading Emerson, when he wasn't jawing with Koehn. I found it in his truck seat. He was a good boy, my Robby, college material.

I didn't really like them spending so much time together. If I could have trusted Koehn on the combine, I would have been down there skipping rocks off the road with Robby and listening to the Royals games with him. I knew we'd never have another harvest like it. I couldn't see putting Koehn behind the wheel again. A couple years ago he broadsided my pickup when I let him run the combine.

My air conditioner was dribbling water, putting out warm air. I figured to hell with adding freon now, so I shut the a.c. off and opened the door and windows. It felt good to sweat. I liked the graindust and the smell of the straw. Played hell with my allergies, but

it still made me wish I had my first cabless again. I used to sit up there, bandanna over my nose and mouth, and soak up the sun. I always had the damnedest tan.

When Ethan left for town with a load, I decided to climb onboard with dad. The combine revved like a spaceship touching down as he worked the hydraulics and adjusted the throttle and turned it around for the next pass through the field. Lights shot out in every direction, bright on the swirling dust and chaff.

Last summer Dad was all hot to give me lessons, even let me run up and back through the field once solo. Other guys my age owned half interest in custom cutting crews. Ty Wilson, my neighbor, had been driving combine since he was 11. It didn't bug me that dad had started me so late; what got me was that this harvest he hardly let me in the cab.

"You look awful dad." I said, sitting down on his ice chest. His eyes were red and puffy and streams of mud trailed down his cheeks.

"Allergies," he hollered over the roar of the machine. I sat quietly as he lowered the header and adjusted the throttle for another pass through my field. I liked the hiss the straw made as we sliced through it.

"I'm getting pretty good with that scythe," I mentioned.

He wiped his face with a hanky. "Hand me a beer, will you?" Not even thinking, I fished out a couple, then sat back down. He was frowning at my bottle.

"It's okay isn't it?"

"I guess," he scowled. He was steering with his knee, prying off the bottle top with an opener. I popped the lid off mine with my teeth.

"Still playing with that damn scythe, huh?" Dad chuckled after a swig.

I nodded. I had brought an old scythe along in the truck that day. Between truckloads, Ethan and I hacked at stubble, trying to learn how to operate it. Ethan just gave up, saying that's why we have combines.

Though it gave me a few blisters, I finally got the hang of it about dark. I swung the scythe around in a rhythm of my own, humming. Ethan would probably have called it my wheatsong or something crazy like that. I liked my strength and my blade cutting the stalks of wheat, direct. There was nothing like being on my ground, working with the wheat that lapped at my knees.

"Sometime I want to plow a strip with the horses. I want to plant it by hand, even harvest it myself. Just like in the old days." I leaned in, confessing.

Dad chuckled, looked at me like I was kidding, then killed his beer.

"Think you'd be man enough to farm like that?" I asked Robby. He looked at me serious, nodded his head. He reminded me for all the world of Opie Taylor on the Andy Griffith Show, except he was drinking a beer.

"It'd be something to try," I smiled. I couldn't see myself out there, not with my allergies. I followed behind my father and his team of mules when I was little. I knew how much work it was. I didn't doubt that Koehn could do it; hell he was brought up like that, the way I figured it. And Robby was a big boy. He could have handled it.

"Probably couldn't make a living that way though," he said after a while.

"Can't make a living anyway." I turned the machine around at the end of the field, then started cutting back toward the truck.

Robby tossed his bottle out the door. I raised my foot to push in the clutch, almost yelled at him to go pick that bottle up, then I saw the tears in his eyes.

"You, me and Ethan can make it," he said. "All we need's a fair price for our crop. If the tractorcade doesn't get their attention, the strike will. They'll have to listen."

"Oh stop blowing hot air," I said, and threw my bottle out past him. "The strike'll just make more of us go belly up. A whole year without any income at all! The bankers are behind it. Them and the big farmers want to buy--"

"Don't give me that. You just don't want to get involved. You must think you've got something to lose..." Robby carried on and on, but I was listening to a noise in the machine. I couldn't see anything wrong up front, and none of the idiot lights were flashing, but I could feel something wrong, could hear it.

"What are you afraid of, anyway?" Robby yelled over the noise.

"I'm not afraid of anything. Listen. Hear that?"

"You're changing the subject--"

"Don't talk to me like that, just shut up and listen." His eyes got wider and wider as a screeching sound shook the machine.

"What's that!" he stood and pointed down at the reel.

It was hard telling what was shadows and what was real, but I could have sworn I saw something getting pulled up inside the header. Just then the reel chain snapped and the reel quit turning. Then there was an awful grinding sound and chain drives were snapping everywhere. One of the belt drives started smoking and wailing.

Dad acted fast, shutting down the machine and bringing it to a full stop. It lugged down to a long scraping noise from deep inside, then it was dead quiet.

"What the hell is it?" Dad hollered, scrambling out of the chair.

I shrugged. He pushed past me and jumped down instead of taking the ladder. On his way to the front of the machine, he tripped and fell into the combine's shadow.

"Wire!" he wrenched it from his ankles and stomped on to the header. "Fence!" he yelled, kicking and cussing the machine.

I could see it then, a barbed wire fence was dangling from the mouth of the combine and trailing out into the dark.

Dad started into a sneezing fit. I got my gloves and pliers from the toolbox under the seat. I was hoping Ethan would be back from town soon to help me. After I sized things up, though, and saw all the wire spooled around the auger, saw the post lodged in the front and the mangled sickle, I just walked down to the end of the field to get the pickup.

Once Sneezzy and Dopey had called it a night I came back out to scope the machine. I couldn't believe the old man had harvested a fence. I mean, one minute the end's in sight, less than an hour and we'd have been done cutting. The Gleaner's lit up like a carnival out there, gnawing up the wheat, and the next thing I know, it's all dead in the field.

We'd ate spacejunk before--pieces of culvert, box springs and other garbage people'd dumped in the wheat--but we'd never ran a barbed wire fence clean through the combine.

I was glad I'd just asked Saturday off. It was supposed to be another cooker and old Bob would be chomping at the bit to get that last strip of wheat cut. I thought about playing the good elf and fixing it for them, but I'd have been up all night.

I waited in the truck while dad made a call, watched a dull-eyed grasshopper dying. He cleared his head, took the kinks out of his antennae and checked his back legs for the next jump. He sprang up like popcorn, hit the windshield, and found himself again on a dashboard so hot he couldn't stand with all his feet down at once. He jumped up again and again. Each time he got a little slower, a little more confused.

I used to pull the back legs off grasshoppers. One summer I collected a shoebox full of legs and wings. My sisters worked together against me, filling a bootbox with legs, but they had cheated, picking theirs from the grills of cars. Ethan said he liked to eat chocolate covered grasshoppers, but I knew better. He was allergic to chocolate.

Dad would have been angry at the sight of that grasshopper. He tried teaching me to be angry at them too, telling me how plagues of locusts blackened the sky in his childhood. In those days locusts had cleared the fields even of the straw, ate the paint off cars, ate children's hair. Whenever he caught one he would pinch it in front of me. "Lookit," he'd say, squishing the "tobacco juice" out of it. "Damn things'll eat us out of house and home." He did the same thing to mice we caught around the grain bins, smashing their skulls

between thumb and finger until the eyes burst out of their heads.

I wasn't mad at grasshoppers. We'd harvested a thousand acres of wheat over the last week without their interference, over fifty-thousand bushels, just the three of us. Another year had gone by that they hadn't blotted out the sun.

I cupped my hand around the grasshopper gently. When he tried jumping it felt like holding hands with someone snapping their fingers. I held him carefully, identifying the parts I'd learned in biology: palpus, thorax, tympanum. His eyes were brown, his hide the color of wheat stubble. He worked his mouth back and forth, pleading for his life.

I held him outside the cab and opened my hand. For a minute the grasshopper sat there, prepping again to jump, then he kicked off my palm and flew away. He had the rest of the season now, anyway.

It was Saturday and I couldn't raise anybody on the phone but old Ernie Odom to bring us out a new sickle. Robby pined after Koehn all morning, to the point I was of a mind to leave him home for the afternoon and finish his field by myself. I would have too, but Violet reminded me, "you two might never have

another chance like this to talk, father and son." So even though he was whining about the heat and begging me to tell him where Koehn was, I drug him along.

And it was hot, probably the hottest day of the summer. Robby had turned the radio way up so he could hear it from the combine where he was still picking out wire. The minute I switched it off, he came storming up, "What's the deal, dad?" and he switched it back on.

"I don't want to hear it," I said, spitting.

"Well I do. C'mon, what's wrong with a little music?"

"Find another station. I'm tired of hearing some twerp in an air conditioned studio telling me how hot it is." Between every song the radio rattled on about record breaking temperatures and the livestock safety index.

I passed him the waterjug and he guzzled from it, water running down his chin and soaking his t-shirt. "Thanks," he said, catching his breath.

We rested through a song, both of us gazing at the combine. Finally I asked him, "How much do you think a sickle going to cost?"

"Two hundred?"

"At least," I smirked. Plus labor, plus delivery, plus tax.

He was figuring something in his head, used his fingers to keep track. "Half a truckload of wheat just to fix this one thing?"

"You haven't even figured the chains, the sprockets, the down time."

"Man, it's going to be tight."

I laughed.

"How do you do it, dad?" Robby asked. "How can you just let them get away with that?"

Maybe it was sunstroke. I couldn't quit laughing. "I can't help it," I laughed until I cried. It pissed him off. He started pacing. "There's nothing I can do," I said finally, sobering up.

"Me and Ethan can. I don't have to go to school. It'll always be there. Maybe I could stay behind this year and we could double crop."

"Where would the money come from to do that, son? What would you follow with, anyway?"

"We could get the money somehow. Always have. Maybe we could consolidate the loans--"

"Where'd you get a fool-headed idea like that? You can't do that with FHA."

"Well, Ethan said--"

"Ethan said, Ethan said," I knew he was in on it somehow. He always had something to say. Always turning Robby's head around. Just as bad as the Movement.

"When are you going to think for yourself?"

"Okay, then why not use my college money to double crop, or use my money from this field, for all I care."

"You just don't understand, son." I sighed. It was too hot for this. I was too tired. "All put together that money wouldn't pay interest through Christmas. We're in deep."

"That's bullshit," he muttered, stomping off to the combine.

"I don't need this. I don't need this," I kept chanting as I drove back from town. Bob had let me off without a question but I knew they'd need me. I didn't even drop by the trailer for lunch or to change; I went straight to the field.

Opening my pickup door was like opening an oven. It was hot enough to piss steam. Robby was laying in the shade under the combine, probably still fishing out wire. I found Bob in his pickup, draining his water jug.

"Well?" he said.

"They want me." I looked over my shoulder, back at the kid. I hadn't told him yet.

"Good for you." Bob had all the sincerity of a greeting card. "When do you start?"

"I told them I wanted to help get things squared away out here. You know."

"You can leave today if you want." He mopped his face with a soiled hanky.

"Get a chance to tell Robby anything?"

"Naw," Bob said. "Too busy."

I couldn't believe what I was seeing: Ethan Koehn with hair short as dad's. He told me once that the last time he got it cut short was when he had to appear in court. I was dying to ask him what kind of trouble he was into now, but something about the way him and dad were acting kept me away.

They huddled up around the pickup, talking low. From where I was, laying under the machine, I couldn't quite hear what they were saying. Dad kept shrugging and saying something like "oh well" or "what the hell." Ethan sounded like he was apologizing, but the way he was squinting against the sun made him look angry.

I shimmied out from under the combine and dusted myself off, then inspected the sickle again. Somehow

the fence post had caused the sickle to jam and shear about half its teeth.

"...just don't think it's the right time." I heard one of them say. They both caught me looking at them, so I waved and started toward the pickup.

Robby kept gawking at Koehn's haircut. Koehn was a sight, too. Dark as an Indian except where his sunglasses and hair had been. Looked like he'd been on a ski trip.

"Header looks better," Koehn mentioned.

"Boy's got it cleaned out inside, too."

"I found chunks of post clear to the back of it." Robby said.

"Damn, Bob, didn't you hear it eating wire last night?"

"Yes I heard it. I thought it'd make it to the end of the field, that's all." He acted like I didn't know shit. I wasn't the one that didn't pick up the fencing last winter. I'd never ran into a parked truck.

"We shut down as soon as dad saw what it was."

"Humph." Koehn snatched his gloves off the dashboard and strutted over to the combine.

"What happened to your hair?" Robby asked him again.

"This sickle's shot to shit."

"That's what we're waiting on," I said.

"Why bother?" he squinted at me, then at the strip of wheat. "Can't be two acres to go. You going to get your money out of a new sickle?"

"It'll cut what's left. That's all I care."

Koehn raised an eyebrow at me, "Humph." He started toward the rear of the machine.

"What are you doing now, Ethan?" Robby trailed behind him.

"Well," he pulled on his gloves, "I think I'll have a look around in there."

"Dressed like that?" I asked, biting off a chew of tobacco.

"It's hot in there, Ethan. I wouldn't go in if I was you."

"Hot enough to fry an egg?" He cracked a smile, then hoisted himself up inside. One day they'd found a pheasant egg in the field and stood around watching it bake on the hood of the grain truck.

"Hot enough..." Robby repeated, watching after Koehn until he was out of sight inside the machine.

"He's crazy!"

"He sure is, Robby. He's nuts."

When I was a kid I used to hide in a gutted combine on our farm and look at my stash of girlie magazines. Sometimes I'd go there just to get away from the old man. I don't think anyone ever knew where I went. But this baby was a tin casket in a crematorium. The steel fingers of the straw walkers gouged at my back like a bed of nails, and even the inside walls of the combine were hot enough to leave you with blisters.

Though years of wheat straw had blown through and polished the walls, the fence had left some deep scratches. A few fingers on the straw walkers were broken off, and Robby had missed a few splinters of fence post, too. Lucky for Bob nobody much crawled inside like this at auctions. Combines used to harvest fence don't bring much money.

I worked my way inside as far as I could, checking it out whenever I could wipe the sweat from my eyes. Nothing was wrong mechanically, but Robby had left his pliers behind. I took them and scratched "Kilroy." Unless Robby crawled in sometime before they shipped him off to school, I knew nobody'd see it. With his allergies, I knew Bob would never see it. He was too fat to get in that far, anyway. I laid there a long time, thinking of something else to write. I wished I

could just write it all out for him in there on the combine skin, "Sorry Robby, but a man's gotta eat. Always look out for number one." I wished I could write it in Latin or something.

"You never know with his kind," I said, "unpredictable."

Robby was hammering out a pin on the roller chain. He looked up at me and asked, "You mean, the kind that get going when the going gets tough?"

"Yeah. Cowards."

"What do you think you're making of me, dad, making me go to college. I want to help. Don't you see that?"

"There's nothing you can do, Robby. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"All three of us together can put this place on the map, dad, I know we can. We could get in Successful Farming."

"Ethan's a god damn no good, putting all these pie in the sky ideas in your head. He's bugging out on you, understand?"

"Is that true Ethan?" He had walked up on us while dad was talking and was now standing over dad's shoulder. "You moving on?"

"Tell him, Koehn," Dad grunted, turning to face Ethan.

Ethan studied dad's face, smiled crooked.

"Maybe I ought to tell him why, Bob." The son of a bitch had set me up, didn't let me handle it my own way. I wasn't going to take it alone.

"You fired him didn't you?" He yelled at me. My own son yelling at me.

"No I didn't fire him, he--"

"He didn't have to fire me, Robby, the whole farm's--"

"Why don't you tell him who you're going to work for, Koehn."

"The bank."

"The bank?"

"And I'm not just quitting, just like that." I stepped between the kid and his old man.

"I can't believe this." I yelled at them both. "You were just lying all along, is that it?" I pushed Ethan, hard in the chest, knocked him back into dad. "What about painting the tractor? What about 'Faaaaaaarm living is the life for me'?"

We always sang the Green Acres theme song when things were really shitty outside. "It is, Robby, but you aren't even going to have a farm, by this time--"

"Just shut up, Koehn." Bob grabbed my shoulder, spun me around.

"--next year."

"What're you talking about?" No farm?

"Why don't you get the hell out of here, Koehn. If you know what's good for you--"

"What are you, blind, Robby?"

"I'm warning you, Koehn, just shut the fuck up." He raised his fist over his head. I knew I could drop

kick him into tomorrow land, that he'd never lay a hand on me. And I wanted the kid to know everything. Not just because Bob pissed me off, but because the kid needed to know.

But Bob's face was red and scrunched up, mad. His nose was running and tears were dropping down his cheeks. He was on the brink, man. He was about to lose it. I was afraid he'd have another heart attack.

I turned to Robby, tired to pat his shoulder. "I'm just not farm material," I told him. "Why do you think I left home in the first place, man?"

Bob lowered his fist.

"I want to use my college. You understand."

"Ethan, you're lying, you son of a bitch. You're feeding me crap. We're going to make it happen. Remember? We're going on that tractorcade to DC. American Ag. Parity. You and me, man."

"He's just blowing hot air, Bob." Koehn scoffed, "Parity."

Robby spit at him and stomped off for the truck. He was crying, bawling, but mad as hell. I came up on him as he was starting the engine. "Son, I'm--"

"Just leave me alone."

"--sorry about all this. I meant to--"

"You guys don't tell me anything."

"--tried to--"

" You treat me like a goddamn kid." He threw it in gear and roared away.

The dirt swirled around Bob. He stood looking after the pickup a long time. I poked around the machine, picking up tools.

He was over my shoulder, stating flat, "Koehn, I don't know what to say." He never did. He blew his nose into his hanky. "Maybe we'd better go talk to him."

"*You'd* better go. I'll wait here for Ernie."

"But I..." Bob frowned.

"Try the pond on section seven."

"Koehn," he clamped my shoulder and shook it.

"Thanks."

"Fuck you." I smiled. "I quit."

The pond looked black and white in the plain light of the afternoon. Usually Ethan and I went there at sundown. I always liked the colors; Ethan always liked the shadows. "My favorite time of day," he told me once, "even the dirt clods get long shadows."

It was very hot and bright then, though. I parked by the old cottonwood and got out the stash from inside

the seat cushion. Usually we'd read a page of Emerson, then tear it out and roll a joint from it. Sometimes Ethan found something he really liked, and left the page in. Out of the first hundred pages, less than ten hadn't gone up in smoke over the summer.

I flipped through the book, glancing over his favorite pages. I could hear his voice, his mocking, lying voice as I read. I could almost see him, sitting in the fork of the tree, telling me how I could make a difference, how he expected me to end up being "more than just a simple farmer."

"Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist." I stopped, reading it again, aloud like Ethan would have read it. "Bullshit. I'd like to hear the 'bank clerk' read me that again!" I ripped out the page and sprinkled it with pot, rolled it up and licked it.

"Nonconformist my ass." I rummaged for matches in the glovebox. Once we didn't have any matches and used a piece of glass to magnify the sunlight.

I got out and leaned up against the tree. The radiator was ticking as it cooled down and I could smell the bugs baked on it. The pond had been going down since June. It smelled strong, too. I inhaled it all. My smoke, my air, my pond, my tree. Across the pond sat a small engine and pump we used to get the

tailwater recovered here back up to the top of the fields. I'd overhauled that engine in shop class, two winters back. The chrome valve covers dad bought me for it shined in the sunlight.

Beside it was another cottonwood we'd transplanted there, maybe five years ago. That was Ethan's first year with us, just after dad's heart attack. That year he called me Robby Appleseed. Dad thought the tree was a good idea because it'd be shady there someday whenever we had to work on the motor.

That was bullshit, too. I took a long drag on the doobie. We'd never work on that engine again. Ethan was quitting. Dad was selling out. Maybe I'd go cut a band in the bark around the trunk, show them both.

Ants were crawling all over my right arm. I swatted them away, then looked at the tree trunk. I'd been leaning across their highway. A steady stream of ants was running up and down the tree. Already they were crowding back on their roadway, never colliding, never stopping, never sleeping. Work, work, work.

I walked around the pond to the tailwater pump and sat down with my back against my little tree, looked back to the other side at the truck and the big, established cottonwood. I wished, as I sat there, that I could walk on water. I wanted to walk out over the

middle of the pond and shout "I AM!" What did it matter if I owned this soil?. What difference would it make, like Ethan said, in a thousand years? What did I care if the American Ag movement ever made it to Washington, if they ever got parity?

I would be in college. "College," I laughed, flicking the joint off into the water. I inhaled my education.

Tribute

Dear Maid:

I was only going to fill out the survey card I found under the ash tray on my nightstand, but I felt I owed you more after all the trouble I've been this last week. Yes, the bathroom was clean and the bed soft enough and the television channels were adequate (The surveying party, however, should be made aware of the growing constituency of people like myself who watch nothing but commercials and find this difficult to do when there are only thirteen channels from which to commercial hop. Commercials are the ultimate expression of my medium--make them laugh and buy in thirty seconds or less.). I was disturbed by the noises of the newlyweds above me, but I'm sure my printer and cursing and phone calls at all hours weren't popular, either.

I appreciated the clean towels you forced on me. That's really the only opportunity we had to be close, exchanging towels through the gap the chain lock allowed, and I know at times I was probably rude as hell. I noticed your curiosity at what exactly was going on in my room (especially when your manager called and asked, in so many words, "What the hell's

going on in there? I hear you got computers on the bed and papers stuck all over the walls and a Mr. Coffee...") and so thought this note might explain a lot of things.

Actually, I'm leaving you the entire log of my stay here in Kansas City because I know you're a woman who appreciates a good soap opera. I heard them blaring all around during cleaning hours, and I have been privy to several of your conversations with Broomhilda (whatever her name is, the one who smokes).

The news around your front desk is that I paid for everything in cash--the room, phone calls, room service, the works. I don't know how Stephen King expects us to believe he can flash his American Express card around without attracting a lot of attention. I suppose I've attracted a fair amount of attention anyway, but you don't know who I am, so what the hell, right? I'm a contributing writer on "What's Between Us," that docudrama you probably watch that takes real-life relationships and airs them out for the world to see. What you don't see is the fine print at the end of every episode that says, basically, it's all bogus. Sure people write in with their problems and with their success stories and those are the basis of our shows, but we use actors, change names and situations, even

alter the stories some (to protect the innocent, you know).

Actually, I'm into realism. I'm the hardboiled one in our "pit crew," the roving reporter that actually goes on site and records all the nitty-gritty details of the original setting, tries to interview the people involved, that sort of thing. Just before Christmas, however, the bottom fell out for me. I decided to take a week off, to head back out to the midwest for some R & R. As I was packing up in the office, Angel, one of our crew, asked me why I had to be so "damned hard on myself." She wanted a confession, right then and there, "Why're you so tough?"

I pointed to a philodendron on my desk, a sickly, yellowed thing that had a stem like a dried twig and only produced a leaf once a season. It was growing in an old coffee cup and it needed some fresh soil and light. "That's why," I told her snapping the case on my laptop computer.

"Because we don't water your plant?" she said. Some people just don't think metaphorically, do you know that? I know you are of keen insight and intellect, though, for I have heard your metaphors yelled to Broomhilda over the sound of the vacuum. "That guy in 411 was a real fuckstain," you said. How

very apt a metaphor coming right out of your line of work (changing beds, not staining them)! And your inside vocabulary is also very apropos. Only today, did I finally put our sexually active guests and your term for them, "rabbits," together. "The young rabbits have finally checked out," you told someone as you worked up there.

I am a frustrated fiction writer, rather than a journalist, which would make me well-suited to the job in the pits back in LA, but not really suited for this field work I do. When I do a write up, I do it as a story, try to cast it as I see it best on the air. The reason I never watch is because the rest of them rewrite so much. It's no big secret, so I don't feel funny telling you all this. I write what happened; they write what sells condoms and shampoo and Levis. (Almost all our commercials are of this nature, though the demographics of those who write in are more mature. A puzzle.)

I spent my first two days here drinking in the Armadillo lounge, downstairs, as you remember, and then left on a field trip for a few days. Good to get out of the city for a while. Just to spend the night driving across the open plains was very relaxing. I found a story out there, though, and decided to treat

it as if I were on assignment and though I am actually, officially on vacation, I called in and set up a net link and started writing. The first segment I wrote and sent through the network follows:

JACK/913/649/9505/12/27/90/14:06/KCKS/66212

TWELVE NDURS AND THREE HUNDRED MILES HAD PASSED, AND ROBBY WAS "WALKING THE BEAT" WITH A MAN HE DID NOT RECDGHIZE BUT KHEW TO BE HIS DLD FRIEND. AS THEY WALKED DOWN THE LANES, THE BUCKLES ON THEIR GALDSNES JINGLED LIKE SPURS.

TY WAS PREOCCUPIED, SCANNING THE PENS OVER THE BACKS DF CDUNTLESS CATTLE. ROBBY'S HOSE WAS JUST GETTING HUMB WHEN TY STOPPED AHD PDINTED. "SEE ANY STEAM?"

"OHLY WHEN I BREATNE."

"I MEAN DVER THERE. OVER THAT TANK," HE TDDK A COUPLE STEPS IN THAT DIRECTIDN AND BODSTED NIMSELF UP ONTD THE LOWEST BDARD DF THE FENCE. "I DDN'T SEE ANY STEAM DUT THERE, DD YOU?"

"NDPE," ROBBY NUMDRED NIM.

"TNEH THE DAMN NEATER'S BRDKE DN THAT WATER TROUGH."

"SD IT'LL FREEZE OVER?"

"YEAN. NDW I GDTTA CDME OUT HERE BUST THE ICE. AHD THAW THE DAMM HARDWARE, DR CALL MAINTENANCE."

"I'D CALL MAINTENANCE. IT'S HOT LIKE THESE CATTLE ARE GDING TO DIE OF THIRST DVERNIGHT. LET SOMEBODY FIX IT TOMDRROW."

"I OON'T WORK LIKE TNAT. BESIOES, BRENNAN WOULON'T LIKE IT."

"SO WHO CARES ABOUT HIM. WHY ARE YOU FREEZING YOUR BUTT OFF OUT HERE WHEN YOU OOT A FARM OF YOUR OWN? LET HIM BUST ICE NIMSELF."

"WELL, I OUGHTA AT LEAST BUST IT ONCE. ANO IT'O BE A PAIN FOR THE GUYS TO HAVE TO COME OUT TONIONT..."

"TNAT'S THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT. LET IT RIDE TILL TOMORROW, WHEN IT'S WARMEO UP TO, ON, FREEZING."

"WELL, WE NEED A BAR, A FENCE POST, SOMETHING SO I CAN GO BUST THE ICE ON TNAT WATER TANK." TY WAS TURNING, LOOKINO ALL AROUND. ROBBY KICKEO AT A NARO PLACE IN THE SNOW, OISCOVERING A BIG ROCK PAKED INTO THE FROZEN HUD ANO COW MANURE. "HOW ABOUT TNIS ROCK?"

HE CROUCNEO ANO PULLEO AT THE STONE, ORUNTING ANO TUOGING UNTIL AT LAST IT POPPEO FREE. IT WAS OVER A FOOT LONO, SHAPEO SOMETHING LIKE A MEAT CLEAVER WITH TEETH. TY HELO IT UP, BWUNG IT LIKE AN AX. "YEAN, TNIS WILL OO. AIN'T A ROCK TNOUN, IT'S A JAWBONE." TY JUMPEO INTO THE PEN ANO SWUNG THE JAWBONE IN FRONT OF HIM LIKE A MACHETE, SPOOKING CATTLE OUT OF HIS WAY.

ROBBY FOLLOEWO HIM OVER THE FENCE BUT HAO TROUBLE KEEPING UP WITH HIS FRIENO IN THE TNICK MUCK TNAT NERE WAS NOT QUITE FROZEN. THE CATTLE WERE SLUGOISH AT TNAT HOUR, AT TNAT TEMPERATURE. THEY SNOULOEREWO IN CLOSE, ONE STAREO WITH ORIPPING EYES, ANOTHER TOSSEO ITS NEAO. IN THE LANES ROBBY HAO GOTTEN

USED TO THE HOISES, THE NUH-NUH-SOUNDING COUGNS AND FARTS, THE OCCASIONAL HEAD BUTT AGAINST THE FENCE, A LOUD BAWL IN THE NIGHT FOR NO REASON. IN THE PEN THOUGH, THEY WERE OPPRESSIVE. WHEN HE FELL BACK BEHIND TY TOO FAR, THE CATTLE CLOSED IN BEHIND, IN HIS WAKE, ACTIVE NOW AS IF THEY WERE DISCUSSING WHO HAD JUST PASSED AND WHAT WERE THEY GOING TO DO ABOUT IT. THEN ROBBY WOULD HAVE TO WAVE HIS ARMS AND NOOT TO GAIN PASSAGE.

"HEATER UNIT." TY ANNOUNCED WHEN ROBBY WALKED UP. HE KICKED THE BOX AT THE BABE OF THE TANK. "AND ONE OF THE NEW ONES, TOO." TY BEGAN NACKING AT THE ICE WITH THE JAWBONE. THE ICE SOUNDED TOO SOLID, BUT THAT JUST SEEMED TO INSPIRE HIM TO POUND HARDER. THE CATTLE GATHERED AROUND THE TWO MEN AND CROWDED CLOSE TO WATCH FROM THE ADJACENT PEN WHICH THE TANK ALSO SERVED. THEY SEEMED TO BE GLAD THE MEN WERE GETTING THEM WATER OR JUST AMUSED THAT PEOPLE OUT HERE IN THEIR YARD. THEY WERE RUDE IN THEIR CURIOSITY; ONE WAS SO BRAVE AS TO SNIFF THE BACK OF ROBIN'S HEAD. (SOMEONE SHOULD WRITE A BOOK ON CATTLE BEHAVIOR AND ETIQUETTE.)

"I GOT A GREAT IDEA FOR THE SHOW," ROBBY SAID, MAKING CONVERSATION FROM THE RAW MATERIAL SURROUNDING HIM. HE WAS A WRITER FOR A TV COMEDY SHOW.

"OH YEAN?"

"YEAH. THIS PLACE IS PURE INSPIRATION. WHEN I GET BACK I'M GOING TO WRITE UP A PARODY OF ALL THOSE CAMPAIGNS FOR STARVING KIDS AND BAG LADIES."

"HUMPN," HE COMMENTED BETWEEN STRIKES.

"FREE THE FEEDLOTS." ROBBY SPREAD HIS ARMS WIDE AND SMILED. "YOU LIKE? 'INNOCENT COWS ARE THE SUBJECTS OF EUGENICS. STOP THE TYRANNY OF THE BIG CORPORATE RANCRER. END THE CRIMINAL OVERCROWDING OF CATTLE IN STOCKYARDS AND FEEDLOTS.' A DOCUMENTARY."

HE HAD STOPPED HACKING FOR A MOMENT, BUT THEN ROLLED HIS EYES AND SWUNG AGAIN.

"COMPLETE WITH INTERVIEWS: 'I THINK THE AMERICAN COW SHOULD BE IN OPEN PASTURE, LIKE GOD MADE THEM TO BE.' TESTIMONIALS FROM FORMER CARNIVORES: 'I'LL NEVER EAT VEAL AGAIN!' FOOTAGE OF FAST FOOD GRILLS, OVERLAYS OF BEEF PACKING PLANT KILL FLOORS."

"ROBIN ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?" HE HAD WATER DRIPPING FROM HIS EYEBROWS AND BEARD. SOON IT WOULD CRYSTALIZE.

"ON--THIS WOULD REALLY BE TOPS--CONFESSIONS OF AN INSIDER." ROBBY FRAMED HIM WITH HIS FINGERS. "YEAN," OVER HIS SHOULDER, TO THE CURIOUS CATTLE HE COMMANDED, "GET ANOTHER LIGHT ON HIM, THERE. AND KEEP THAT MIKE UP. OKAY, ROLL EM!"

TY TURNED AND WAS WALKING BACK TOWARD THE LANE. ROBBY HIMED A CAMERA, ZOOMED IN ON HIM. "AND JUST WHEN DID YOU FIRST REALIZE YOU WERE A PART OF THE SYSTEM, A COG IN A BIG, BUTCHNERING MACHINE?"

TY SNOOK HIS HEAD AND WAVED THE JAWBONE, THREATENING.

UNDAUNTED, THE INTERVIEWER CONTINUED, "OUR SOURCES TELL US YOU'RE FED UP WITH COWS GETTING A BUM STEER."

"C'MON ROB, KNOCK IT OFF. AND GET THAT CAMERA OUT OF MY FACE."

"WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU MR. WILSON? WERE YOU OR WERE YOU NOT ONE OF THE FIRST PATRIOTS TO FREE FIFTY-THOUSAND CATTLE LAST CHRISTMAS EVE?"

"NO COMMENT."

"AND AREN'T YOU THE MAN WHO COINED THAT PHRASE THAT WILL SOMEDAY TOPPLE THE BEEF EMPIRE, 'JUST SAY NO '?"

"DON'T MISQUOTE ME ON THAT," HE SMILED, FOR THE FIRST TIME THAT EVENING, "I BELIEVE IT WAS, 'JUST SAY MOO.'"

ENOTEXT/14:08/JACKSPRAT

All the gobbledy-gook is machine language and transfer codes. I don't worry about it but I haven't learned how to override it all for printouts yet, so forgive. "Jacksprat" is Shink's idea. He thinks a rival might tap our line and rob our material, so he has it scrambled or some shit and makes me write under a code name.

After I sent the above segment, I went out for lunch. I'm sure you've been in sometime while the system was up, so I don't need to describe it to you, but you do need to know how it works. I basically send

my computer's stuff over the phone lines to the rest of the crew in LA. Usually it takes a while to hear back from all three of them--sometimes Murray tells me to just go ahead without consensus. Murray's our managing editor, which is something of a misnomer. His title should be "just-managing editor," or "coping editor."

If I'm around when they "write" back, I can correspond with them on-screen. It's like a phone call with a keyboard. It's like writing letters and getting immediate response. At first I really tripped on it, but after a few years new toys are just toys. Half the time instead of typing it all back and forth I'll just call and get it over with. Then I get my ass chewed though because one thing about Murray is: he likes to document. That's why I can run you this whole damn week off from the computer log. It's all in there.

So, when I came back to the room, I called up their transmissions (from the computer's memory) and it printed:

HAGAR/905/672/7955/12/27/90/16:45/LACA/90052

J: WE LIKE THE MATERIAL BUT WHAT'S THE FABRIC? WHAT'S THE PATTERN? WE CAN'T START DARNING WITHOUT MORE THREAD. NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK. UNWEAVE THE MYSTERY.

ENDTEXT/16:46/HAGAR

We dubbed him Hagar because he's just like Dick Brown's "Hagar the Horrible" in the comics. His message is not to be confused with metaphorical thinking. Shink is being cryptic. He has given me a photocopy of code words, but any idiot could figure him out without it. He also has this problem thinking this network link is like a telegram, that he's getting charged per word or something. I logged on immediately and responded:

JACK/913/649/9505/12/27/90/16:47/KCKS/66212

WHAT THE HELL IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?

J: WE HAVE NO FOUNDATION FOR THIS BUILDING OF YOURS. WHERE ARE THE BLUEPRINTS? NOTHING IN OUR FILE CABINET. NO FRAMEWORK.

(then, before I could reply:)

J: HE MEANS, WE CAN'T DOCUMENT THIS. WE DON'T HAVE THE SOURCE MATERIAL. DO YOU HAVE IT ALL?

(Murray, of course. He likes "responsible correspondence, clearly indicating the intended receiver.")

YES. I TOOK THE WHOLE FILE. I THOUGHT I'D JUST READ UP ON IT, BUT IT SOUNDS LIKE A GOOD ONE FOR THE NEW SEASON.

J: YOU AREN'T WRITING ACCORDING TO PROTOCOL. WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO SOLID RESEARCH? WHAT'S A FEEOLOT LIKE? WHY ARE THESE TWO TOGETHER THERE? WHAT'S TNE ZERO STORY?

K: (his code name, hand picked, Kahuna) SCREW PROTOCOL. I'M ON VACATION. TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT.

J: WE'RE INTERESTED, BUT LACK CONTEXT. FAX SOURCE MATERIAL AND BE MORE DESCRIPTIVE IN THE MEANTIME. I NEED THE ZERO STORY FOR A FINAL NOO.

ENDTEXT/16:57/KAHUNA

Already you can see what I'm working with. Toys and children. A telephone would have been so much more personable (but undocumented--I can't see why anyone would want all this gibberish on file, but that's Murray.)

I set out to write the zero story segment next. Ordered in a pizza, though the delivery boy made me meet him outside, then got down to it. By midnight, I sent this:

JACK/913/649/9505/12/28/90/00:14/KCKS/66212

SETTING: (HAPPY, KAHUNA?)

EVERY FEEDLOT OR FEED YARD (THE TERMS ARE SYNONYMOUS) OF ANY SIZE HAS ITS OWN SCALE HOUSE, A BUILDING THAT QUITE LITERALLY "MOUSES THE SCALES" THAT WEIGH TRUCKS OF CATTLE COMING AND GOING FROM THE YARD. THIS FEEDLOT, GRANT COUNTY FEEDERS, HAS ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES (WITH TOYS THAT RIVAL OURS, I'D ADD), REST ROOMS, A VISITOR INFORMATION CENTER, A BREAK ROOM, A BUYER'S LOUNGE (THEY CALL IT A LOUNGE, NO LIQUOR, JUST A POP MACHINE AND COFFEE DISPENSER). THIS SCALE HOUSE LOOKS OUT ON THE YARD FROM ALL SIDES WITH LARGE PICTURE WINDOWS. IT GETS PRETTY GRUBBY, AS YOU MIGHT IMAGINE, WITH PEOPLE TRACKING IN SHIT ALL DAY, BUT IT IS SCOURED IN THE EVENINGS BY AN ACIDIC LITTLE MAN I MET NAMED, GET THIS, "BLEHM OOM." (HAGAR WILL WANT TO USE THIS SOMETIME IN A SKIT, I'M SURE.)

"YOU STILL WORKING AT THE TV STATION?" TY ASKED, KICKING OFF HIS BOOTS AND SHEDDING SOME WINTER CLOTHES.

"NO, I'VE MOVED UP A LOT SINCE THEN, I GUESS."

"I COULD TELL THAT BY THE CAR."

"IT'S JUST A RENTAL."

"A RENTAL PORSCHE?"

"YEAH."

"ISH'T THAT EXPENSIVE?"

"IT'S FIGURED INTO MY PER DIEM. NOTHING TO GET BEHT ABOUT. TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH, NOTHING IN MY LIFE'S WORTH GETTING BEHT

ABOUT." ROBBY WORKED THE WEIGHTS ON THE BALANCE BEAM OF THE SCALE BACK AND FORTH.

"YOU MEAN, BEING RICH IS BRINGING?" TY SCOFFED, "I'D LIKE TO HAVE YOUR PROBLEMS."

"RICH IS RELATIVE," ROBBY REPLIED, "AND YOU WOULD NOT LIKE MY PROBLEMS." ROBBY CHUCKLED, "HOW'S THE FARM TREATING YOU?"

"IT'S A LIVING, FOR THE TIME BEING."

(No honest farmer could answer otherwise.)

"STILL WITH ARLENE?"

"YES, GOT TWO KIDS."

"TWO!" ROBBY CHUCKLED. "WHO WOULD HAVE EVER THOUGHT--BUT YOU KNOW, ON THE OTHER HAND, OTHER THAN YOUR HAIR I GET THE FEELING YOU HAVEN'T CHANGED A BIT."

"DON'T SAY THAT, MAH. YOU DON'T KNOW, YOU JUST DON'T KNOW." TY SAID, BUT ROBBY HAD DARTED OUT OF THE SCALE HOUSE IN HIS STODGING FEET IN THE SHOW. HE RETURNED JUST AS QUICKLY, SPRINGING LIGHTLY.

"YOU HAVEN'T, TY. YOU STILL LIKE ELVIS?"

"ELVIS IS DEAD." TY SAID, FLOPPING DOWN IN A CHAIR.

"AH, THAT'S JUST WHAT THEY SAY. BESIDES, HIS SPIRITS LIVE ON, DON'T THEY?" ROBBY SMILE, HANDING TY A PAPER BAG.

"WHAT'S THIS?"

"OPEN IT," HE SAID, SITTING ACROSS FROM TY. "WHAT'S IN THERE IS WHAT'S BROUGHT ME HERE."

"NO OFFENSE," TY SAID, PULLING A GIFTWRAPPED BOX FROM THE BAG, "BUT I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR THIS ALL NIGHT."

"I KNOW IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME--"

"TEN YEARS," TY OBSERVED, SHREDDING THE WRAPPING.

"--TOO LONG A TIME. AND I'M SORRY, TY." ROBBY STOOD BACK UP TO PACE THE ROOM. TY PULLED A JIM BEAM DECANTER, A BUST OF ELVIS PRESLEY FROM THE BOX.

"WOW, ROBBY, I...I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY."

"I SAW HIM IN THE LIQUOR STORE A COUPLE DAYS AGO, WHEN I WAS PICKING UP A BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE. WHEN I SAW ELVIS, I REMEMBERED ALL OUR GOOD TIMES DRAGGING MAMA. REMEMBER? TY AND ROB, JIM AND ELVIS."

"YEAH, SURE I REMEMBER." TY CHUCKLED. "BUT WHY'S THAT BRING YOU OUT HERE, TONIGHT?"

"I WAS GETTING THE CHAMPAGNE TO CELEBRATE MY FIRST ANNIVERSARY WITH LESLIE--"

"LESLIE?" TY WAS APPRAISING THE BUST, EYE TO EYE. "WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO EVE?"

(ROBBY'S FRIEND WAS PAINFULLY UNIFORMED. SOMETIMES IT'S BEST TO LET THE DEAD BURY THE DEAD, AS THEY SAY, AND ROBBY STEADFASTLY REFUSES TO DISCUSS HER, TO BRING HER INTO OUR ARENA. IT'S TOO LIKELY THAT RELATIONSHIP WOULD BE GLAMORIZED ON OUR SHOW, HE ARGUES, AND HE'S RIGHT.)

You see, we can catch them coming and going, out of one relationship--an episode that's sad--then next season, the same people write in rejoicing, so we run them again. In this throw away society, my editors and producers think it's good to use people over and over, just alter the facts a bit. All new faces, places, and so on, so our viewers aren't disgruntled. They think things have fairy tale beginnings and then all fall down. They don't consider restarts. Of course, I'm referring to them, not you. As I've said, I find you insightful. We could use you in the pit, I think. Ground us in reality a bit. But then, I'm about as grounded as I can get.

"LESLIE WASN'T THERE WHEN I GOT HOME. SHE'D SPLIT."

"OH MAN, I'M SORRY ROB." TY SNOOK NIS NEAO.

"IT'S NOTHING, REALLY. I'VE BEEN BETWEEN WIVES BEFORE."

ROBBY SCOFFED. (I KNOW THAT ACCORDING TO HIS BIO HE HAS ONLY BEEN "BETWEEN WIVES" ONCE BEFORE, BUT I BELIEVE HE SHOULD BE ALLOWED, EVEN IN THE FINAL PRODUCT, TO ADOPT THIS DEVIL-MAY-CARE ATTITUDE.) "LET'S TOAST LESLIE."

"WELL...I CAN'T REALLY."

"CAN'T HAVE A DRINK?"

"I'M CLOCKED IN. 'CAN'T DRINK ON THE JOB."

"IT'S CHRISTMAS EVE, NOBODY'S GOING TO MIND YOU HAVING A NIP."

"I JUST CAN'T, MAN. YOU GO AHEAD," HE OFFERED THE DECANTER TO ROBBY.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS. TY WILSON REFUSE A DRINK?"

"A LOT'S HAPPENED TO ME, ROBBY. I AIN'T THE SAME MAN."

"C'HON. JUST A LITTLE TOAST TO LESLIE. YOU CAN EVEN HAVE YOURS WATERED DOWN, MIXED IN YOUR COFFEE, WHATEVER."

"I OOH'T ORIHK ANYHORE." HE SAID IT WITH FINALITY, "I GOT RELIGION."

"OH." (WHAT ELSE CAN BE SAID ON SUCH AN OCCASION?) ROBBY CLEARED HIS THROAT, IMPERCEPTIBLY. "OH, WELL...MERRY CHRISTMAS."
EHOTEXT/00:16/JACKSPRAT

I waited three hours. Nothing from LA. So it was late, I said, so what. I called the office. I called Angel. Not home. I even called Shink. "I don't even have a modem, dammit. It's Saturday night." He said, and hung up on me. That's when I threw the phone against the wall I shared with 414. I'm sure you heard about that.

It's very frustrating to work like I have, on a team but always isolated. Does that make any sense, Maylene? That is your name isn't it? I thought I heard Broomhilda call you some variation of that. You won't believe this, but I looked through the KC directory for Maylenes that night.

JACK/913/649/9505/12/29/90/02:38/KCKS/66212

WELL, WHAT DO YOU THINK? SHOULD I PURSUE THIS?

no reply

I wrote a macro that repeated the message:

"ALLWORKANDNOPLAYMAKEJACKAOULLBOY" alternating with "THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPEO OVER THE LAZY OOG." It ran until I woke up, noon Sunday. (This accounts for the much talked about bill.)

KAHUNA/905/672/7955/12/29/90/12:25/LACA/90052

J: THAT'S COMING OUT OF YOUR NIDE.

K: HAVE YOU READ THE COPY? YOU HAVE ZERO STORY AND SETTING.

WANT MORE OR SHOULD I GET ON WITH MY VACATION?

ANGEL/917/356/9291/12:26/SFCA/90400

J: ARE YOU OKAY?

A: WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN SAN FRANCISCO?

J: SHE'S ON ASSIGNMENT. SHE'S WORKING.

Murray's computer dialogue needs the authority of boldface. Our system won't do any special effects.

J: I'M WORKING ON ANOTHER AIDS STORY. WISH YOU WERE HERE?

A: I READ THE KC PHONE BOOK OVER THE WEEKEND. MORE STIMULATING THAN THE GIOEON'S STUFF.

J: I'M SORRY I WASN'T AROUND. HE TOLD ME YOU TRIED ME, SATURDAY.

J: CREDIBILITY'S WEAK ON YOUR STORY. STILL NO SOURCEWORK. GOOD ZERO STORY, BUT WHAT ARE WE TO ASSUME, THAT THESE TWO ARE OLD

LOVERS, THAT THEY'RE GOING TO RESORT TO PRIMAL FISTICUFFS, OR
WHAT?

K: FISTICUFFS?

A: YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN. KEEP THE LINE CLEAN.

(I had to laugh. Angel loves to get her ribbing into
print. It really pisses Murray off.)

K, ETAL: OLD LOVERS? THEY'RE BOTH GOOD OL' COUNTRY BOYS, AT
LEAST UNDERNEATH IT ALL. WHY BLOW THINGS OUT OF PROPORTION? LET
IT TAKE IT'S COURSE. I'D LIKE TO SEE JUST THIS ONE STORY
PRESERVED AS I'VE WRITTEN IT. DO IT FOR ME, AS A CHRISTMAS
BONUS OR SOMETHING. YOUR MAN IN THE FIELD DESERVES SOME CREDIT.
THIS ONE'S VALID, DAMMIT. RINGS OF AUTHORITY.

(one thing I like, you can't be interrupted in our
system's dialogue)

J: CLARIFY INTENTIONS. NO MORE MICKEY MOUSE. I WANT YOU TO
FOLLOW PROTOCOL, UNDERSTAND? WRITING THIS WAY IS ONLY MAKING
MORE WORK FOR US HERE, HAVING TO HUNT AND PLUCK THE DETAILS.
GIVE IT TO US STRAIGHT. THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE GETTING PAID FOR...

One thing I don't like, you can't interrupt
anyone with our system. I went to the toilet while the
printer took it all down. Murray wanted the bios on
these guys, that is, their biographies. He wanted
transcripts of interviews (I failed to get even one
interview on this story) and descriptions of
photographic quality, reporting the last minutiae of

detail that they could reproduce in the California studios. Well, I didn't want to write this one like that. It didn't seem fitting. I wanted to deliver the story the way it should be run, in its entirety, so that for once they wouldn't warp everything. Besides, I was on vacation. The last thing I wanted to do was a bunch of starchy writing.

K: YOU CAN'T DO THIS ONE JUSTICE SHORT OF FILMING ON LOCATION. HOW WILL YOU RECREATE A FEEDLOT OF 75,000 CATTLE ON A SNOWY NIGHT?

K: THE SCENERY REALLY INTERESTS ME, TOO. MAYBE WE COULD GO TO KANSAS FOR THIS ONE.

ETAL: YOU'RE BOTH BEING RIDICULOUS. IT DOESN'T NEED TO BE A FEEDLOT AT ALL. WE'LL SET IT ON A FARM. STILL HAS CATTLE SO SEGMENT ONE WILL STILL BE SALVAGEABLE.

K: AM I READING THIS RIGHT? TAKE THE STORY OUT OF THE FEEDLOT?

J: THE CATTLE ARE NICE. HUMAN INTEREST. BUT WE DON'T NEED 75,000 OF THEM. MAYBE WE CAN VOICE-OVER SOME OF THAT MUSING ABOUT COW ETIQUETTE. HAGAR LIKES IT, HE'S ALREADY DONE LOTS WITH "JUST SAY MOO."

K: YOU WILL NOT MOVE IT OUT OF THE FEEDLOT. STRIKE THE FEEDLOT AND I PULL THE STORY.

(a worthless threat since they already had some ideas of their own on the zero story now.)

J: THIS SEEMS VERY IMPORTANT TO YOU. IS IT TOO AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TO RUN WITH?

A: TRY AUTOBIODEGRADABLE.
ENOTEXT/12:29/JACKSPRAT

It doesn't matter when I terminate. If they want to write to me or each other, they can just keep right on doing it. I decided it was time I go out for a beer,

and left them work on "autobiodegradeable" for a while.

As you realize, that was the day I brought the beer back rather than having it out, and this is where I owe you the biggest apology. I should have at least been responsible enough to have picked up all those bottles myself. Once I felt better, I had every intention of cleaning that up myself, even got some cleaner from Broomhilda, then the desk called and said they held a letter Fed-exed to me, and that I had to go down there to sign for it. You slipped in to clean in the meantime. I wish I had come right on in, when I saw your cart outside my door and heard "Donahue" on my TV, but I couldn't face you, knowing you'd had to mop my vomit in the bathroom.

I stood outside as long as I dared, listening to you hum with the theme song, to you arguing at Donahue's guest. Even the puke didn't seem to affect you. I can't grasp that.

By way of commercial break, (or maybe Murray's drive for documentation is habit forming) I'm including the letter Angel sent me.

Robin,
Is your system down? Are you? I've tried calling ever since you logged off yesterday. The front desk said you weren't to be disturbed when I asked

them to try your room. This is the only way I could think of to get word to you without sharing it with Murray and Shinkle. Maybe you should think about backing off this some. No need to incriminate yourself. I know what you're thinking. Nobody recognizes their own story when we're through toying with it. I think it's damn gutsy sharing this story with us, if my hunch is right. And as a show of support, I'm fighting to keep the material as much like your original as possible. Send more, I'm eager. Love,
Angel
Angel.

I tried calling her a few times. The letter was out of San Francisco, but the phone number on the Fed-ex invoice didn't raise anyone either. It was after working hours, even on the coast. So, I ordered room service, and sat down to write. In a while, I sent my next installment:

JACK/913/649/9505/12/30/90/18:54/KCKS/66212

"I JUST CAN'T FIGURE YOU, ROBIN GARLAND." TY SAID, IN A NUFF. THEY WERE OUTSIDE AGAIN, WALKING TO THE NIDNEST HILL IN THE FEEDLOT. THE HILL RAN PARALLEL TO THE COUNTY ROAD, AND ON ITS SUMMIT WAS AN ELABORATE RECREATION OF THE OLD WEST: WADDEN WHEELS AND SODAP WOOD AND A SPLIT RAIL WOOD FENCE. IT CONTAINED BRENNAN'S PRIDE AND JOY, A HERO OF LONGHORNS.

"I MEAN, ON THE PHONE YOU SOUNDED LIKE IT WAS LIFE AND DEATH. BUT YOU'RE ALL SMILES AND GIGGLES, JUST SUCKING ON THAT

BOTTLE. LESLIE AIN'T GOT YOU DOWN. IT'S HOT YOUR JOB. AND I
CAN'T THINK YOU'RE HERE JUST FOR AULD LANG SYHE."

"I AM TOO EARLY FOR NEW YEARS, I GUESS."

"I MEAN, IT HANSH'T BEEN IMPORTAHT FOR YOU TO LOOK NE UP
BEFORE." HIS WORDS HUNG IN A CLOUD OF STEAM. A CARTOON CAPTION
BALLOON ABOVE HIS HEAD. "SONETIMES I THINK YOU'RE JUST HERE TO
GET MATERIAL FOR YOUR SHOW."

"ELVIS SAYS," ROBBY HELD UP THE NEAD AND SHOOK IT AS NE
DID HIS IMITATION, "YOUR LOSIN' YOUR NEAD BABY. CHILL OUT."

"DANNIT ROBBY, THAT'S JUST WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT." TY
QUICKENED THE FORCED MARCH, THE STEAM NUFFING HOW THROUGH HIS
HOSTRILS.

THEY REACHED THE FENCE AND STOOD TRANSFIXED BEFORE THE
CATTLE, SORROWFULLY COLD CATTLE FROM SOUTH TEXAS THAT HUDDLED
TOGETNER IN THEIR SHELTER.

"I WANTED TO COME UP HERE AND SAY, 'WHAT A PROUD ANIMAL'
OR 'THERE STANDS THE OLD WEST.'" ROBBY SAID AFTER HE HAD CAUGHT
HIS BREATH. "BUT THIS IS SAD. A DYING BREED."

"BETTER OFF DEAD. LOOK AT THEM. THEY CAN'T EVEN GET CLOSE
TOGETHER WITH TNOSE HORNS. SIX FOOT SPAH OH SOME OF THEM."

ROBBY AND ELVIS SHOOK THEIR NEADS.

"WOULD YOU CUT THAT OUT?"

ROBBY SET ELVIS OH A FENCE POST AND LIT HIMSELF A
CIGARETTE. "ONCE I REALLY WOULD HAVE SET THE CATTLE FREE."

ESPECIALLY THESE. I'D HAVE TOLD YOU THEY WERE MADE FOR THE OPEN RANGE."

"YEAH, BUT THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD IS, MAN. FEELDT'S TAKES A LOT LESS SPACE THAN RAHGEHAND."

"THEN, UNTIL LATELY, I MIGHT HAVE JUST SAID TO HELL WITH THEM. NATURAL SELECTION. YOU KNOW WHAT THAT IS?" ROBBY LOOKED AT TY, THEN ELVIS. HE TOOK A DRAG OFF THE CIGARETTE. "DARWIN SAYS, IF YOU CAN'T MAKE IT, YOU WEREN'T MEANT TO BE. ONLY THE STRONG SURVIVE."

"HUMPH."

"YOU'RE A SURVIVOR, TY. YOU GET BALLS."

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?"

ROBBY CHUCKLED THEN, GESTURED TO ELVIS. "HE'S NOT A SURVIVOR. ALL HE'S GOT IS HIS HEAD."

TY SMILED HIS SECOND, REWARDING SMILE OF THE EVENING.

"HEY, I GOTTA TAKE A PISS." ROBBY ANHANCED, FLICKING HIS CIGARETTE INTO THE CORRAL. "I'LL BE RIGHT BACK."

GROWING UP TOGETHER, THEY SELDOM EVEN TURNED THEIR BACKS WHEN THEY HAD TO TAKE A PISS. SOMETIMES WHEN THEY WOULD STAY ALL NIGHT TOGETHER, THEY HAD PISSING CONTESTS FOR HEIGHT AND DISTANCE. ROBBY STUMBLED AROUND THE PERIMETER OF THE CORRAL TO THE SIDE OF THE LONGHORN'S SHELTER. IT WAS DARKER HERE AND TY PROBABLY COULD NOT SEE HIM, BUT ROBBY STOOD A CONVINCING PERIOD AS IF HE WERE PISSING. HE LOOKED BEYOND THE FEEDLOT AND ITS LANES AND LIGHTS THAT SO RESEMBLED AN AIRPORT. HE LOOKED AT THE

SHOWCOVERED FIELDS THAT HAD ONCE BEEH TALL GRASS PRAIRIE AND THE LIGHTS OF FARMS THAT WERE BRIGHT AS STARS. THE SHOW AND THE SKY WERE INDISTINGUISHABLE. HIS VAHTAGE POINT SEEMED MILES IN THE AIR.

endtext/19:00/JACKSPRAT

It took them a day to get together and take my story apart. I walked over to the Liberty Memorial, wandered the plaza, took the rental for a spin in Mission Hills. You have a beautiful but lonely city in the winter. When I came back to the hotel, there was a message from Murray at the desk and several on the computer. They were ready to "talk." I didn't contact them right away. The time outside had done me good. I finished the story, then logged on.

ANGEL/905/672/7955/12/31/90/13:00/90052
FIHALLY. WE WERE GETTING WORRIED. THOUGHT YOU'D ACTUALLY DECIDED TO HAVE SOME FUN ON YOUR VACATION. I WANTED TO BE THE FIRST TO TELL YOU THAT YOUR STORY'S GOT THE HOD.

FIHALLY. I WAS GETTING WORRIED.

J: WE'LL START THE EPISODE THE LOGHORNS. I'M PLEASE WITH NOW YOU HAVE TAKEN CARE OF THE FEEDLOT PROBLEM.

(I just watched the cursor blink.)

J: THE CORE'S GOOD, BUT THE APPLE'S SOUR. WHAT DOES THIS STEM FROM? SEEMS A WHOLE NEW CAN OF WORMS.

H: HEY DIDDLE DIDDLE, THE CAT'S IN THE FIDDLE, THE COW JUMPED OVER THE MOOH.

J: DON'T RAZZ NIN, HE HAS A POINT. THE STORY HAS A DEPRESSING FEEL TO IT. OF COURSE, WE DON'T KNOW, BECAUSE YOU STILL HAVEN'T SENT SOURCE WORK.

(Murray discovers all caps. My life will never be the same.)

WE'RE CURIOUS WHERE IT'S GOING, BUT WE WANT TO GALVANIZE ROBBY, MAKE HIM THE SURVIVOR BY THE END.

ETAL: THEN WHAT'S THE CONFLICT?

J: TWO SURVIVORS. TY WILL BE ALCONOLIC, NOT RELIGIOUS. HE'S INCONSISTENT, AND TOO STRONG.

(What could I say, Maylene? They were taking my story and completely altering the characters, the conflict, the setting. I never knew just how much they altered my material. I never really cared.)

J: YOUR STORY RUNS IN TWO WEEKS.

K: RUN IT NEXT CHRISTMAS; IT'S A CHRISTMAS STORY, CAN'T YOU TELL?

J: WE WANT TO SET IT IN FEBRUARY, STAYING AWAY FROM THE X-MAS SENTINENT.

K: WHY NOT EASTER?

J: WE'LL LOOK INTO THAT.

It's the story of my career, Maylene. I can't be a serious writer because I'm always having to work for people like Murray. I can't get a leg up on anybody or anything because my material never goes anywhere but the cutting room. It's a frustrating life, as you might imagine, isolated. Lonely. Adrift. I couldn't sit there and read their asinine comments any longer. I just downloaded the rest of the story on them before they

got any more big ideas:

"ROBBY?" HE HEARD TY'S VOICE BEHIND HIM SOMEWHERE. "HEY, YOU ALRIGHT?"

"YEAH. NO PROBLEM." HE FUMLED FOR ANOTHER CIGARETTE, DROPPED THE PACK IN THE SNOW AT HIS FEET. PICKING THEM UP, HE NEARLY TOUCHED A TWISTED, BLOODY CALF THAT APPARENTLY HAD BEEN THROWN OUTSIDE THE PEN WHEN IT WAS STILL SHOWING. ROBBY LEFT THE CIGARETTES AND HUSTLED BACK TO TY AND THE LIGHTS.

"DEAD CALF BACK THERE," HE SAID, PANTING.

"YEAH, STILLBORH. WE HAD TO PULL IT EARLIER TONIGHT."

"I BET THE MOTHERS ARE GLAD THEY'RE NOT BORN WITH THE HORNS!" ROBBY SAID, STUFFING LOOSE CIGARETTES IN HIS POCKET.

"I BET." TY SIGNED.

"HOW'S THE FARM?"

"I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT."

"I DROVE BY ON MY WAY OVER."

"THAT WASN'T ON YOUR WAY. YOU GET LOST?"

"NO." HE RESTED ON HIS ELBOWS ON THE TOP RAIL OF THE FENCE. THE BOLDEST OF THE LONGHORNS HAD TAKEN A COUPLE STEPS OUT OF THE SHELTER. "NO IT WASN'T. I WENT THROUGH BUHLER, TOO."

"BUHLER?"

"WE HAD A BOY, EVE AND I. HE'S BACK WITH GRANDMA ON THEIR FARM."

"REALLY? HELL, I DIDN'T KNOW YOU HAD ANY KIDS."

"STUFF HAPPENS."

"THAT'S GREAT. HOW OLD IS HE? HOW'S HE DOING?"

"I ODN'T KNOW, TY." ROBBY TURNED TO FACE HIS FRIEND. "I COULDN'T STOP."

"I HOPE YDU DIDN'T FEEL LIKE YOU HAD TO RUSH TO GET OUT HERE OR ANYTHING. MAYBE YDU CAN STOP IN ON THE WAY BACK."

"NO. I CAN NEVER STOP. THAT'S JUST IT."

"BECAUSE THEY'RE AMISH AND YOU'RE NOT?"

"BECAUSE THEY'RE SURVIVORS AND I'M NOT."

"WHAT DO YDU MEAN?"

"I FLIT AROUND FROM CITY TO CITY, JOB TO JOB, WIFE TO WIFE, LIKE A GODDAMN BEE GOES FROM FLOWER TO FLOWER. I'M LIKE A BALLOON SOMEBODY BLEW UP, THEN LET GO OF WITHOUT TYING IT. BLLLLLLUPP, ALL OVER HELL." ROBBY SNATCHED THE COCAINER FROM THE FENCE POST AND TOOK A SWIG.

"MAN," TY SAID, PATTING HIS FRIEND'S SHOULDER. "MAYBE YOU'RE JUST TIRED, NEED TO GET AWAY FROM IT ALL FOR A WHILE."

"NOT FROM IT, ID IT." HE WIPOED HIS MOUTH ON HIS SLEEVE.

"YOU CAN STAY WITH US FOR A FEW DAYS, MAYBE SOBER UP A BIT."

"DON'T START ON THAT, TY."

"OKAY, OKAY." TY STILL HAD A HAND RESTING ON ROBBY'S SHOULDER. "BUT THE OFFER STANDS."

"I KNEW YOU'D BE HERE TY." ROBBY SAID AS THEY TURNED TO WALK BACK TO THE SCALE HOUSE. "YOU'RE THE GREAT AMERICAN FARMER. YOU'LL ALWAYS BE HERE, MAN."

"WITH OR WITHOUT THE FARM."

I could see them in California, frowning. Shink ranting about the can of worms, about the new element of conflict. Murray turning the longhorns into Jerseys. Angel scratching her head. I wasn't going to argue with them about suspense or characters' motivations or reality. They wouldn't understand reality.

"WHAT?"

"I'M SELLING THE FARM. FINALLY CLEARED BANKRUPTCY AND NOW I'M SELLING IT."

"WHY?" ROBBY BRUSHED TY'S ARM FROM HIS SHOULDER, STOPPED IN THE LAKE DIRECTLY UNDER A LIGHT. "WHY NOT KEEP IT?"

"IT'S BEEN NOTHING BUT A MILLSTONE AROUND MY NECK."

ROBBY CHUCKLED, HYSTERICALLY. "MILLSTONE? WHAT ARE YOU SAYING? THAT'S YOUR GRANDFATHER'S GROUND, TY. IT'S BEEN IN YOUR FAMILY FOR GENERATIONS."

"REALLY JUST FOR THIRTY YEARS OR--"

"HE WORKED FOR THAT PLACE. CARVED IT OUT OF NOTHING. YOU CAN'T JUST LET IT GO."

"I WORKED FOR IT TOO, ROBBY. THAT'S JUST IT. WHY WORK FOR THE GROUND WHEN YOU CAN JUST WORK FOR YOURSELF?"

"IS THAT REALLY YOU TY? AM I HEARING YOU RIGHT?"

"YEAH. I GUESS I GOT SOME COMMON SENSE SINCE WE USED TO TALK LIKE THIS."

"I THINK YOU'VE LOST IT ALL. IF YOU LET GO OF THAT GROUND, YOU'LL BE JUST LIKE ME, ADRIFT."

"BULLSHIT. I GOT A GOOD ENOUGH JOB HERE, AND ARLENE TEACHES AT THE--"

"THAT'S NOT WHAT I'M SAYING." ROBBY SEARCHED AROUND IN THE SNOW, SNATCHING UP A CLOD. "IT'S IN HERE, TY. EVERYTHING GOOD ABOUT US COMES FROM HERE. FROM THE GROUND UP."

"THAT'S A COW CHIP."

ROBBY THREW IT AWAY VIOLENTLY. "YOU KNOW WHAT I'M SAYING. YOU GREW UP WITH IT TOO, MAN."

"I DON'T HAVE THE SLIGHTEST IDEA WHAT YOU'RE SAYING."

"THE SWEAT, THE SOIL--THE SMELL OF THAT RICH, FRESH TURNED GROUND--I'VE BOUGHT BAGS OF POILING SOIL JUST TO SMELL THAT AGAIN." HE HAD TEARS IN HIS EYES NOW.

"YOU'VE HAD TOO MUCH TO DRINK."

"I THOUGHT YOU'D UNDERSTAND." ROBBY SAID, DIGGING NOW FOR HIS KEYS. "I CAME TO SEE YOU BECAUSE I THOUGHT YOU'D BE THE ONLY ONE WHO'D UNDERSTAND." ELVIS WAS PINNED UNDER ROBBY'S ARM, HIS FACE HIDDEN IN THE FOLDS OF HIS JACKET.

"ROBBY, I WANT TO UNDERSTAND. I WANT TO HELP YOU IF I CAN."

"I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU WANT THIS?" ROBBY OFFERED ELVIS.

"No, I...I CAN'T HAVE IT AT HOME."

"I DIDN'T FIGURE," HE GROWLED, AND STUMBLED AWAY.

"ROBBY, WHY DON'T YOU STAY. WE CAN TALK OVER CHRISTMAS DINNER. ARLENE KNOWS YOU'RE HOME, JUST STOP BY THE PLACE. SHE'LL PUT YOU UP..." BUT HIS VOICE WAS GROWING DISTANT AS ROBBY MADE HIS WAY FOR HIS CAR.

"ELVIS SAYS, 'MOO THANKS.'" ROBBY CALLED, SHAKING THE HEAD AT TY ONE LAST TIME. HE REVVED THE ENGINE AND PULLED OUT OF THE FEEOLOT, SLIDING IN THE SNOW AS HE PLOWED FRESH RUTS. AS HE WHIPPED AROUND ON THE ROAD, ROBBY PRIED THE BUST FROM THE DECAHTER BASE, THEN THREW THE HEAD OUT THE WINDOW. NOW IT WAS ROB AND JIM, ALONE.

SOMEHOW HE GOT LOST ON THE RURAL ROADS, AND SPEEDING DOWN ONE, HE SAW A BARBED WIRE FENCE ERECTED ACROSS IT. DEAD END. LOCKING UP THE WHEELS, HE WRENCHED THE CAR HALF AROUND IN THE ROAD, SLOSHING BOURBON ON HIMSELF AND HIS LEATHER SEATS.

"MERRY FUCKING CHRISTMAS," HE SAID TO HIMSELF, AND PUNCHED IN AN EIGHT TRACK. HE HAD MADE A NOBBY OF COLLECTING OLD TAPE PLAYERS AND REPAIRING THEM. THEY WERE GETTING HARD TO FIND. THE TAPES WERE EVEN HARDER TO FIND, AND ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO PRESERVE. HE LISTENED TO ELVIS PRESLEY LIVE AT MADISON SQUARE GARDENS CIRCA 1971, ON A VINTAGE KRACO UNIT HE HAD PICKED UP AT A GARAGE SALE.

"ELVIS HAS LEFT THE BUILDING," THE STAGE MANAGER ANNOUNCED OVER THE FANFARE OF BRASS THAT ENDED ELVIS' ENCORE, "THANK YOU AND GOOD NIGHT." THEN THE TAPE CHANGED PROGRAMS, AND THE STAGE

MANAGER INTRODUCED THE KING OF ROCK AND ROLL, AND THE CONCERT
BEGAN AGAIN.

K: THAT'S WHERE IT'S GOING. THAT'S WHERE IT WENT. DEAD END.
ENDLESS LOOP. A MACRD. ALLWDRKANDNDPLAYMAKEJACKADULLBDY. CURTAIN.
ENDTEXT/13:09/JACKSPRAT

Angel called me as soon as I terminated. "Murray loves it," she said. "I think he's going to try the end just about like it's written. Says it's very visual."

"He loves it?"

"He says it's hardboiled."

"But is it hard or soft inside?" I laughed. She didn't.

"Shinkle didn't like the farm stuff at first, but I argued for it, like I told ya I would. I showed him demos from the Midwest. Told him we could use a boost in ratings out there."

"Ratings."

"Yeah."

"Angel, how did *you* like it, the way it ends?" I found myself lighting a cigarette when I already had one burning in the ashtray.

"Well... I can't see why you wanted to run it at Christmas. It's a downer. We all got Robby like we want

him, hardened at the end, even though he's pretty...soft on farm stuff."

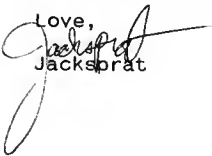
"Yeah, I guess he was."

After a long pause, "Murray wants you to take another week off. Says it's good for your productivity. I think you could use it. This story seems to have been hard for you."

"Good for me," I corrected.

I do appreciate Angel. She's always rooting for me. She's just not insightful. She wouldn't know a metaphor from a megaphone. And, she didn't have the whole story--even now she doesn't have the whole story. She doesn't know how good a homecooked meal smells on Christmas day in a Kansas farm house, or how unearthly it sounds to hear your drinking buddy say grace over it.

And she hasn't seen, like you have, that Elvis is not lying in a ditch in the snow, but setting on the TV set in room 412. He's empty, but I figured a woman of your insight and intellect would still find him interesting. He's the only compensation I could think of for the way I've acted around here.

Love,

Jack Spratt

Critical Afterword: A Crust for the Critics

Last year in workshop I mentioned I was interested in writing my Master's Report about my past, about farming. A fellow student made the offhanded comment that she had never read a successful "farm story." She said that all such stories capitalized on the farm crisis and were written in that trite world of wheat fields and checkered table cloths waving in the Kansas wind. They were always about men that wore seed caps and spit tobacco and it all was generally very dull. She warned there was a glut of them on the market already.

I also hesitated writing the quintessential Mark Jarvis Farm Story because I was not reading many farm stories in the literary magazines (in spite of what my colleague said). I had no models. Most of what I read was of academic/cosmopolitan living, Bright Lights, Big City fiction I found alien but interesting. My imitations of this urban milieu were abysmal failures, though my classmates were writing stories in that vein that were well received around the workshop table.

From my first class in fiction I have been told to write from what you know. Professor Nyberg encourages writing from personal experience in his book, One Great Way to Write Short Stories;

Because you're so familiar with it, you can draw from it with total assurance that the details are accurate. And because you understand your own hopes and motives better than anyone else, you can speak of them with energy and directness. (43)

I shared this advice with students in Professor Nyberg's Introduction to Creative Writing workshop, but before undertaking this project, seldom applied it fully in my own fiction.

The two stories here, "Parity" and "Tribute," mark my departure from writing popular, market-oriented material. Though neither story is the best I will ever do, they are both honest representations of the world I have come from, both honest explorations of my narrative voice. I set out writing these "farm stories" partially to prove my colleague wrong, but more importantly, to be true to myself. Their success will be due to their own integrity rather than my miming published authors.

Once I had committed to using my farm life as story material, I selected incidents and feelings that I felt had some universal application, some psychological impact and importance. "Parity," a maturation story based on the way I felt when our hired man took a job behind a parts counter in town, was simply to be Robby's realization that Ethan was looking out for himself rather than making sacrifices for the

farm. "Parity" was fundamentally a story of disillusionment, of a boy finding his hero to be only human. "Tribute" developed from the eerie, outcast feeling I get when returning to my hometown. In the story, Robin was to return to his hometown and rekindle an old friendship, hoping to quell the uncomfortable feeling of being unwelcome at home.

These original intentions only show how much the stories have evolved through my exploration. A large part of this report will document that exploration, what I have learned from it, and what I learned from accomplished writers who have served as my models.

At the time I initiated this project I was enrolled and engrossed in 18th Century British Novel. I found that the problems of writers of an emerging form were much like my problems as an emerging writer. Early novelists creating a genre dealt with "the problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates," according to Ian Watt's The Rise of the Novel. These writers tried to produce "what purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals," coinciding with their society's increasing individualism, an exploding readership of common folk, and the impact of philosophical realism. In their efforts, they experimented with a variety of narrative techniques--

the courtroom confession in Caleb Williams; the memoir of Defoe's Moll Flanders; the epistles used in Pamela and The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker--to lend credibility to the story, as if it came first-hand from a fugitive, or were taken directly from the pages of a diary, or were actual letters. Fielding and Sterne, on the other hand, were writing novels that were blatant fictions, parodies of these others (Shamela, for example). Their work was important groundbreaking because they asked the reader to acknowledge the piece as fiction and still learn from it.

This balance of realism of presentation and realism of assessment is important in my fiction writing. I realize that literature has grown beyond this controversy, but the issue is not settled for me. In these two stories I wanted to render The Farm as accurately as possible, yet openly experiment with narrative techniques, to step back from the story and evaluate (assess) it for the reader.

Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy achieved both effects: it seems authentically the writings of Sterne's eccentric narrator. In Booth's Rhetoric of Fiction, this point of view is classified as one of a self-conscious narrator agent; the narrator of the story is also a character/actor in the story. Both "Parity" and "Tribute" are told from this general point

of view. It lends the credibility of a first-hand, first-person account, "I was there." Since each story is told through the biased voice and perspective of a character in the story, we are invited either to accept that narrator's words at face value and agree with his assessment, or to scrutinize and assess even the narrator. The story is as realistic as the narrator telling it.

Arriving at point of view in "Parity"

The benefits of first-person narration weren't immediately obvious to me when I began drafting the first version of "Parity" ("Parity.01"). That version of the story was boring writing and reading because I overly resorted to exposition to clarify the setting and the actions of the characters. Before I ever got to the central conflict, the story was almost twenty pages long. Though "Parity.01" was centered on Robby's maturation, it was rendered in third-person, and it took place over the course of a year--my early effort at *showing* the friendship between Robby and Ethan without just saying, "they were good friends for several years."

Simply in the interest of economy, I started completely from scratch with "Parity.02" from Robby's first-person point of view. Immediately I could establish his hero-worship and internal dislike for

change. First-person narration obviated the problem I had with selection of details; I would select what Robby considered relevant and I would deliver it as he would speak it. As I wrote "Parity.02," however, I became more and more interested in Ethan's character. As Robby described how Ethan looked like Thor, how he was once a Mennonite, and how he had been in prison, I wanted to know more about him--Robby, my main character, seemed to pale by comparison.

At this point I turned to a strategy in Professor Nyberg's book. An early exercise in his short story writing course is to draft the story from the perspective of another character involved in the conflict. "Parity" readily lent itself to this experiment. I found Ethan had a great deal to say about his position on Robby's pedestal. I could draw from my experiences as a big brother--my attitude toward my brother looking up to me went from flattered to annoyed. Ethan enjoyed being admired, but not emulated. He didn't want to hurt Robby's feelings, but he was primarily interested in providing for himself which meant leaving the farm for a better paying job. After the exercise proved so fruitful, I began "Parity.03" from Ethan's point of view. It was no longer Robby's maturation story, but Ethan's--he would come to admit his self-interest at the cost of Robby's admiration.

To heighten the impact of Ethan's confession, I added that Robby's father's farm was about to fold. Though I might have been drawing perilously close to the abyss of the "standard Farm Story," I felt the new detail enhanced the conflict here, and I could again draw from my past to contribute to the characterization of Robby and Ethan. I knew, for instance, that Robby would expect Ethan's allegiance to the farm to be strong enough to weather bankruptcy with the family. But Ethan's self-interest, at the first mention of the farm going under, would motivate him to start looking for other work.

The new detail also brought Robby's father, Robert, into action. His response to his financial situation would alter the course of the story. He could react radically to his situation, pull his son out of school, enlist the help of the Posse Comitatus, join the American Agriculture Movement and strike for parity. He might take it on himself and work day and night, spurn all assistance, deny the gravity of the situation, lie about it to his family or his peers. Or Robert could be the type to resign himself and let his farm go to weeds before the auction. In any case, Robert became very important to the Robby/Ethan story: how would Robby feel toward his father? how would Ethan

feel? where would Robby's allegiance lie--with his father, the farm, or his friend, Ethan?

So I practiced the point of view exercise again, from Robert's point of view, to solidify his character before resolving the conflict between Ethan and Robby. I learned that this character was not only important to their story, but had one of his own: he was losing his farm and his son.

It dawned on me, in the earliest stages of "Parity.04," that I had three separate stories, or one story that could belong to any one of the three characters I had developed. One of my first efforts at multiple point of view was derived directly from my only exposure to such a work to that date: Tobias Smollet's Humphrey Clinker, an epistolary novel arranged in letters written by one character, then the next, then the next. Smollet's tale seems authentic, but the multiple perspective allows comparison between each presentation, so the reader can assess the situation more accurately than the characters writing of it. This multiple first-person narration clued the reader to each character's biases and station in life.

My rendition in "Parity.04" began with a composition Robby was writing in high school. I tried to capture his admiration of Ethan, his naivete, and his limits as a young writer:

Robin Garland
Description Exercise
Sophomore English
May 2, 1976

Hired Man

Gary Roper (name changed to protect his innocence) came to work for us last winter. He was a big surprise to my mom and myself, because he looked like a hippie. My father doesn't like hippies. He also looks indian, and says he is part. Gary had real long straight black hair that cascaded down to his shoulders. He was wearing reflective sun glasses, even in my father's den, in dead winter. He was wearing a pokadot hat like welders often wear, a army surplus coat, a tie-dyed t-shirt, faded jeans and heavy laced up boots. Gary is six foot tall and weighs under 160 pounds. He has green eyes. I think he looks better with his "shades" on, because they hide how big and bulging his eyes look.

His appearance changes little in the summer, except he does not wear the coat, and often goes without a shirt. He started wearing shorts when the weather got nice this spring, but quit because of two reasons. First, we all laughed at him. He has very pale, spindly legs and nobody farms in cut offs! Second, he was irrigating with one of our wetbacks one time when Juan, the wetback, got bit on the leg by a rattler.

My father says Gary walks like a rooster. Gary has a habit of brushing his hair back with both his hands. He always says "man" and "far out." He calls me "little buddy" like the skipper always did Gilligan.

Gary is married, but his wife hasn't come to Kansas yet. She's still in New Mexico until he's settled. We're buying a trailer for him and her and setting it up near the farm. He lives in a basement apartment for the time been, until we get him settled. I pick him up for work sometimes on the weekend. He listens to wild music on a huge stereo.

Gary is older than me, but I'm not sure of his exact age. I think he's thirty, because he talks like it has been several years since he was in school. (I can check his tax forms in my father's den sometime for Gary's birthdate.) He has been to college and trade school and works on cars doing body work in his spare time.

Gary has changed my ideas about hippies. I would like to be like him because he thinks about things in different ways, and because he's good at a lot of different things like mechanics and carpentry. I am tall like him, but chunkier. I might like to grow my hair long, too, but it wouldn't go over good at home.

The technique was working fine to delineate Robby's point of view, but I couldn't get Ethan or Robert into a credible situation in which they might write out their versions of the account. The epistolary was simply not appropriate for "Parity"--I was writing about a farm hand, a high school kid, and a hardboiled farmer, not aristocrats or jet setters. I tried other 18th-Century-novel techniques in conjunction with Robby's English class, such as Robert's writing a diary during his last year of farming (assuming him then to be nostalgic and sentimental), and a court transcript from Ethan's point of view (assuming he had done something illegal in his response to the events of the story that might have gotten him into such a situation). These contrivances soon proved artificial. I thought of telling the complete story from Robby's perspective, then Ethan's and then Robert's, but realized that it would be bulky and redundant. I knew that the novel allowed room for overlap in multiple narration (War and Peace, Bleak House, The Moonstone, Life Before Man), but the concept behind "Parity" wasn't big enough to justify a novel. I discovered that

some short stories are successful collections of letters, Henry James' "Bundle of Letters," for example, but I just couldn't reconcile my characters to the conventions of an epistolary technique.

In my quandary I consulted Rust Hills' book, Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular. His major argument regarding point of view is that successful stories are told from the perspective of the character most "moved" by the conflicts in the story.

This, I believe, is what will always be the case in successful fiction: that either the character moved by the action of the story will be the point of view character, or else the point of view character will become the character moved by the action. (142)

All three characters vied for voice, but none merited my exclusive attention. "Hills' Law" was very difficult to apply to "Parity.05." By this "version" of the story (actually never more than scattered notes), I had added other elements: Robby was a high school graduate being prodded toward college, Robert kept the collapse of the farm a secret from all but Ethan (who helped balance books at tax time each year), and Ethan not only tried shrugging off Robby's worship, he also was to force Robby to face reality. I simply could not justify taking any of this out of the story by this point, in an effort to intentionally limit the point of view to that of only one "moved" character. No matter

how many times I tried to tell it from an exclusive point of view, or from a third-person point of view that alternated between characters, too much of the conflict between them was forfeited.

About this time, I discovered other stories that had shifts in point of view in the anthology, Points of View. James Joyce's story, "The Boarding House," moves from the perspective of Mrs. Mooney to Bob Doran to end with Polly Mooney. D.H. Lawrence employs a shifting third-person center of consciousness in his short story, "The Shadow in the Rose Garden." The story begins from the husband's vantage point in the garden, moves to follow the wife to a church garden, and shifts back and forth when they bicker. In their talk over breakfast, Lawrence privileges the reader's point of view with intimate details of their actions and with adverbs tagged to their actions to convey feelings:

He ate reflectively....He laughed comfortably, putting marmalade thick on his bread....She again took no notice of him....He did not say any more....She helped him to another cup of coffee, solicitously....He was pleased. (444)

When coupled with the characters' conversation we seem to move from one end of the table to the other, like alternating camera cuts in cinema. I found the quick changing perspective very interesting.

Rust Hills' discussion of shifting point of view, introduced me to another D.H. Lawrence's story, "The Horse Dealer's Daughter" (Hills 146-147). The story is related from the point of view of a roving central intelligence that roosts in the minds of each of the brothers, then in a scenic manner follows the daughter for a time before entering her mind. When she exchanges glances with the doctor, the narrative view point changes to him. Fittingly as the story ends the points of view have merged and distinguishing them is difficult:

'No, I want you, I want you,' was all he answered, blindly, with that terrible intonation which frightened her almost more than her horror lest he should not want her. (777)

Reassured that writers successfully shifted point of view, I felt that "Parity" was an appropriate testing ground for such a technique. But I had no examples of multiple point of view occurring in first-person narration until I was introduced to Steven Allaback's "It's Never Bad in the Mountains," published in Kansas Quarterly.

Cues to point of view

Allaback uses the multiple narrator technique well and minimally cues each transition between monologues. Other than an extra return, no device or authorial intrusion tells us who is now speaking. Instead, names

play an important role in the first read of the story. Quickly we learn that Rogers always calls the father Bob, while Billy calls him dad. Rogers calls the boy Bill, while his father calls him Billy or son. I applied this technique to "Parity." Robby calls the hired hand by his first name, Ethan, while Robert refers to him as Koehn. Ethan calls his boss Bob, while Robby calls his father dad.

Character's language to cue point of view

A character's language and concerns can also serve as cues at the beginning of a segment. Allaback's attention to language gives the story an admirable level of authenticity. Through word choice, Billy's descriptions become those of a sixteen year old boy:

From where we were Dad looked like a cartoon character, slipping super fast down a mountain, pounding away with his ice ax, but I knew he'd be alright. (51)

I admire how Allaback differentiates characters and I practice his technique in revisions of "Parity." One of my strategies has been to rearrange the story on my computer. I gather monologues of a particular character and read them together, ironing out inconsistencies in that character's voice or attitude.

Inconsistency has been the most difficult obstacle I faced in "Parity" since I rely heavily on dialogue. People tend to talk alike when they converse. I made

some effort in differentiating between characters' speech. Robert's style is telegraphic: "Played hell with my allergies, but it still made me wish I had my first cabless again....Boy's got it cleaned out inside, too." I loaded Ethan's language with slang and exaggeration:

he was pissing up a rope....He was a zit about to pop and I didn't want to be around when it happened....Once Sneezy and Dopey had called it a night....old man had harvested a fence....Gleaner's lit up like a carnival out there, gnawing up the wheat....We'd ate spacejunk before--pieces of culvert, box springs and other garbage people'd dumped in the wheat--but we'd never ran a barbed wire fence clean through the combine.

Robby is not as easily delineated as Billy seems in "It's Never Bad in the Mountains." Robby is both adolescent and adult so I could not use language that was juvenile, since Robby was eighteen (rather than sixteen, like Billy) and probably better educated than either Ethan or Robert. Robby's admiration alternates between his father and his friend. I wanted this to carry over into Robby's language; consequently, sometimes he parrots his models, making his language an inaccurate indicator of a Robby monologue.

Characterization cues to point of view

Allaback characterizes economically by giving us the thoughts of the characters early in the story. This cues readers to who is speaking throughout the rest of

his tale. In the first paragraph we learn Bob's apprehensions first-hand:

Something closer to despair or loss was what I felt, though it wasn't quite either of those. Whatever it was, it included fear, plain old-fashioned fear. (43)

Thereafter when a reader encounters a segment that begins by expressing a fear, Bob's point of view is likely. While I had dealt with Ethan and Robert in rather mechanical ways, I think I did the most justice to Robby's voice by carefully rendering what he would attend to, as in the grasshopper scene. Emphasizing the character's sensitivities to cue the reader lends more to Robby's character development than I accomplished in either of the other characters.

Character conflict in Allaback's story

"It's Never Bad in the Mountains" tells of four characters on a mountain climbing expedition in Washington state. As in "Parity," three characters conflict. (Allaback's fourth character, Mellichamp, is little more than a sounding board for the others.) A major difference in my story and Allaback's is that Allaback directly spells out the conflict between characters, while I try to accomplish this more subtly. Rogers, a parallel to Ethan, is their guide--an admirable, experienced mountaineer who wants to shape Billy:

I really liked Bill. He wasn't scared yet and was smart and plucky. Even if I only saw him once a year for a week or so, I could still help him. I could save him from his father. (44)

Bob, the father Rogers wanted to "save" Billy from, is a teacher, not an impressive mountain guide, but his intentions seem good. Through his point of view we learn that he takes Billy on these trips because they "were the one thing we did together, more or less together, which was strong and solid." He is aware of the bond between Rogers and Billy and is troubled by it:

He (Billy) kept giving Rogers furtive worshipping glances of the kind he used to give me when he was nine or ten. That didn't bother me--a father can't and shouldn't be his son's hero forever, and I had had my day--but what did annoy me was Rogers' assumption that Billy never regarded me that way at all. Rogers...manly as hell, did things a sixteen year old boy would admire....I could see he had some sort of plan for Billy this trip. (45)

Though Allaback does not articulate the son's loyalties in the conflict, Billy alternates between admiration for Rogers and defense of his father. At one point in the story, for example, Rogers and Billy get a good way ahead of Bob and Mellichamp. Rogers stops for a water break and brags to Billy that the old men are holding them back. Billy argues that they're not old. As the others catch up, Rogers jokes, "Transfusion time....Get out the oxygen." To which Billy replies, "My dad could probably go faster" (49).

Later in the story, however, Billy's allegiances shift entirely to Rogers, for he disobey's his father and follows Rogers through a dangerous climb. The first climbers to have ascended this summit, they build a cairn to commemorate their climb. Here, the way Rogers tells it, Billy seems to become completely Rogers-like:

As we built the cairn, I noticed that his hands trembled. When it was time to write the note, I whispered, "Should I enter their names?" We both looked over at the other summit. I half expected to see Bob staring menacingly at us, but he was laughing with Melly and when he saw us looking he waved.

"Sure we should," he said.

"Really? They don't deserve it."

He turned his blue eyes on me. "They came pretty far, though."

"Oh, I know. I'll enter their names."

"Just put 'of the party of' like you said before. Because they didn't go all the way." Then he added: "We did." (57)

Character conflict in "Parity"

I found Billy's monologues the least obtrusive. Though I admire how quickly Allaback ignites conflicts, I felt the direct statements Rogers makes about Bob and Bob about Rogers were too blunt for my story. I wanted the conflicts in "Parity" to evolve more subtly.

Like Rogers, Ethan wants to contribute to the maturation of his protege. His description of the situation clearly shows he is annoyed with Robby, but Ethan does not directly pit himself against Robby's parents:

I mean, he didn't think about himself, about his own best interests. Instead, he tried making everyone else happy. He thought he was a farmer; Bob and Violet thought he was a bookworm. He wanted tools for graduation; he got a typewriter. No matter what he was feeling, he couldn't tell his mom and dad to fuck off and die. He was hog-tied by apron strings.

One of the most direct statements in the story regarding the subtle vying for attention is Bob's musings from the combine cab:

I didn't really like them spending so much time together. If I could have trusted Koehn on the combine, I would have been down there skipping rocks off the road with Robby and listening to the Royals games with him. I knew we'd never have another harvest like it.

Robert is a character that does not mince words, and so I had little trouble having him be blunt, especially when correcting his own son:

"We could get the money somehow. Always have. Maybe we could consolidate the loans--"
"Where'd you get a fool-headed idea like that? You can't do that with FHA."
"Well, Ethan said--"
"Ethan said, Ethan said," I knew he was in on it somehow. Always turning Robby's head around. Just as bad as the Movement.

The conflict for Robby is two-fold. He doesn't want to go to college and he does want Ethan around. Even before he knows how serious the farm situation is, he tells his father:

You, me and Ethan can make it. All we need's a fair price for our crop. If the tractorcade doesn't get their attention, the strike will. They'll have to listen.

Rather than having Robby defend either his father or Ethan, I have Robby espouse how well they all might get along. I take a risk by only implying how tight the tension is between Robert and Ethan until the climactic scene.

Perhaps "Parity" could be more powerful if its conflicts were heightened by more direct address. Allaback's characters report conflict directly, but they are after all, only characters, and the reader can accept or reject any statement they make. Rogers, when Bob's fear is overwhelming him, tells us, "Bob belonged to me now, and so did his son. Terrible thoughts to have, but I had them, and I admit it" (53). We learn that his statement is not true when Billy makes a gesture at the end of the story to make amends with his father. Rogers' brash statement then, serves to further characterize Rogers as an arrogant man, and even though erroneous, it makes the reader intimately aware of the power struggles.

The arc point in "Parity"

Throughout "Parity" I varied the length of monologues according to characters' interests and emotional involvement in what was happening. I distilled some passages down to one line utterances and thoughts at the most crucial point in the story.

In "Parity," that crucial moment is an argument among all three characters. In "It's Never Bad in the Mountains," Rogers is on the other peak when Billy confronts his father and so is not directly involved. At the end of the story, when it seems there might be some confrontation between Rogers and Bob at last, Billy quells Bob's anger with a simple wink. In "Parity," on the other hand, all three characters are involved in a heated argument I will refer to here as the "arc point." I wanted the conflicts of the story to be clear enough and the characters to be familiar enough by this point that I could present the fight unencumbered, lightning fast, as it might occur in reality. The stark dialogue is to carry the full body of emotions. As I drafted the scene again and again, I tried telling bits of it from the proper perspective, that is, from the character most moved at the moment. More of the lines in the scene are related from Ethan's point of view, and for good reason: he is the most moved to do something, first to tell Robby about the farm situation, and then to lie about why he is leaving. The technique seems to work well in the arc point scene for the most part, but I am concerned that the physical layout of switching point of view, that is the extra spacing as transitions, draws too much attention to itself at the worst possible moment

in the story, when Ethan admits his infidelity to the farm:

"Why don't you tell him who you're going to work *for*, Koehn."

"The bank."

"The bank?"

Here, Robert tells of his forcing of Ethan's hand. His finest hour in the story, as he would see it, he, of course, would recount that line. Here he succeeds in turning his son away from Ethan and feels he has struck a winning blow. This point in the argument moves him to a temporary triumph, so it is conveyed from his perspective. Ethan is then the most moved, as he bears the burden of confessing his job offer to Robby, so he flatly states, "The bank," and hopefully the reader by now can feel the remorse in his voice, and yet the anger he must be feeling toward Robert. Robby's utter astonishment that Ethan would go to work for the bank (the very people who probably hound the family for back payments) would hit him so hard that he would deliver the line and not be able to describe how horrible the

words were in his mouth. He is shocked, so it is told from his point of view.

I found no other way to satisfactorily convey the characters' anger and surprise short of indicating it was from their lips, and that they were recounting it; if my narrative rested too long in any one character's consciousness, the effect was diminished. I had no other way of indicating the point of view than the convention I had used through the entire story: spacing serving as transition. If it succeeds in conveying all I hope it does, and the spacing does not seem to be authorial intrusion, the arc point justifies the entire technique.

By using narrator agents to convey the story in "Parity," I allowed the characters to assess and comment on the happenings in the story without my obvious intervention. Presenting the story in their language and from their respective points of view gave "Parity" the sense of authenticity, the realism, I sought.

As mentioned earlier, "Tribute" was originally intended as a homecoming story. I set out to write a straightforward first-person account of a reunion with an old friend back home--again writing from a wealth of material from my own life (only a few of my high school

friends ever escaped the home town I left ten years ago). From its inception, "Tribute" was largely autobiographical which, at the time, seemed to give it enough credibility. The main character was raised on a farm that had gone under while he was away at college. In returning to the farm and the community, he feels nostalgic but estranged. The interaction was not so much between the main character and the static character as it was the main character coming to terms with his own changed attitudes toward his past life and livelihood. The past revisited was to be the universal interest; my attitude toward farming was to be the "farm story" central to "Tribute."

"Tribute" has been much more difficult to write than "Parity" ever was, simply because it draws on internal and still unresolved conflicts I face when I turn toward home. Always wary of writing what my colleague would immediately discard as a sentimental "farm story," I did not initially know how to deal with nostalgic impulses. On the other hand, I did not want to write an "anti-farm story," playing off the bitterness I harbored since farming had failed me (or rather, I failed at it); I had no desire to write such a story, even if it was marketable. Though the following discussion primarily deals with choices I

made to resolve this problem of dealing with sentiment, it also serves to show the development of the version of "Tribute" contained in this report.

My facade: a narrative persona

I was apprehensive of airing the main character's (and my own) sentiments publicly. I did not want to be associated with some mushy guy who missed getting dirt under his nails. I decided the best way to protect myself was with a powerful persona to speak through the story. I could then include much more of the narrator's comments and opinions (as I noted in Rogers' passages in the Allaback story) and leave that biased narrative for the reader to interpret. In other words, I first considered an unreliable narrator in the interest of realism of assessment and to extricate myself from the story.

The problem was that my persona was as reluctant to tell the story as I was to write it. I tried to use this to my advantage by generating some heightened story telling technique. I was enamored with Sterne's humorous and bizarre way of telling a story through the voice and person of Tristram, and I set to work with that kind of persona in mind.

Though that version of the story never crystallized, I learned from practicing with this persona that the digression could be a valuable tool in

"Tribute." Whenever the character was faced with something difficult, he could ramble in his narration to avoid a direct encounter. He could arrest the story's progress to elaborately comment on anything he found especially relevant. Both digression and commentary would characterize the narrator. The controlling presence of the narrator was so enchanting to me that I sought out published stories with self-conscious narrators and stories that called attention to their narration. I had every intention of writing stories like John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" and "Life-story."

Robby Garland, a potential persona

I found such outrageous narrators interesting, but I wasn't sure how to use one in "Tribute.02." For one thing, the returning-hero-character was little more than a returning-hero-character. He was drawn from me quite a bit, but I didn't want to appear directly in my own story. I had decided by this point that the main character should be like a fish out of water when returning to his hometown. I made him rich and successful, driving a red Porsche in a world of pickups with rifle racks. I had also made him a heavy drinker, in "Tribute.01," just to compensate for his rambling narration. The drunkenness was working good in "Tribute.02," though, because it indicated that though

he was rich and successful, he was unhappy. If he tried to drink his problem under the table, he would probably not openly admit it to others either, just as Robert had tried hiding the farm problems in "Parity." One way my emerging character could try to hide his unhappiness might be through sarcasm or humor, as Ethan's in "Parity."

I could not think of a more natural way to capitalize on those defense mechanisms than to use Robby again, a character who would have seen both Robert's and Ethan's systems in action and probably would have learned to employ them himself. "Parity" left Robby knowing the farm was going under, knowing he was being channelled off to college. Robby was a sentimental sort in "Parity," so it seemed plausible that he might try to re-establish a relationship with an old friend from home. The years of college would change his character substantially (I knew from my own experience) and there was no reason why he could not have become a big success in the years he has been away. Robby was a character I already had developed and was comfortable with; I had only to consider how drastically he had changed.

To do that, I wrote an intermediate story. After a couple years in college, after the farm is lost, this intermediate story finds Robby working on a custom

harvest crew. One week when cutting wheat around Buhler, one of the other hands tricks Robby into propositioning an Amish girl, Evelyn. On their date, Robby is enchanted with the Amish way of life and dreams of becoming one of them. When it comes time for him to seduce her, he is reluctant because he doesn't want his nostalgic sulk to end. She basically rapes him in a grain elevator. The action will serve her as a way out of the Amish community.

The intermediate story accomplished a great deal. I set Robby up for his second great fall. He was getting emotional about The Farm again, admiring the rough hewn Amish ways. He seemed to respect their lifestyle, yet he was also planning to deflower Evelyn.

I wanted to use this duplicity in "Tribute." If nothing else, the intermediate story helped me see Robby as a confused character. He still wanted to be a part of The Farm, but he was in college and working on a harvest crew. (Harvest crews are not a part of anything; they are hard working nomads estranged from the world they cut through.) He seemed innocent inside, dreaming of a romantic life with Evelyn, but he had every intention of bedding her down. When she proves to be more aware of the ways of the world than Robby, he

takes the hit nearly as hard as he did in "Parity," and again runs from the situation.

These developments in Robby's character, and his traits from "Parity" now ten years removed, left me somewhat confined, but very well informed. I had the general encounter in mind, and a well-developed persona to tell the story. I was excited to be writing a series of stories based around a central character, as in Hemingway's Nick Adams stories. Robby was something like George Willard in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg Ohio, except instead of outgrowing the small town, Robby yearns to be a part of the rural atmosphere. My stories were taking shape like Anderson's in that they followed a line of Robby's maturation and that they were all set in the same region if not the same community. I intended to have not only Robby, but other characters and references to characters, carry over from one story to the next.

Creative Collision

Even with such big plans for a collection, "Tribute.02" just didn't have anything special about it. Robby met up with Ty and they jawed over old times. Robby missed the farm and Ty said that was too bad. Robby went back to Kansas City having re-established the friendship but without settling anything for himself. I knew there was something salvageable there,

and having nothing to lose, tried what Nyberg calls "Flint on Steel or Creative Collision" (159), simply putting random elements together, to make "Tribute" vibrant. I went back through my journal and discovered several bits and pieces that I then tried to incorporate: the peculiar setting of a feedlot, a silly Jim Beam decanter of Elvis Presley's head, and my father's working as a night watchman on Christmas Eve.

I had mixed a "fiction stew" that worked well. Starting from the psychological conflict, I had then built a character, adopted his point of view and then, with these new ingredients, had a story with a symbolic flavor and subtext. A major episode in the final version of "Tribute" has been preserved from this hodgepodge: the scene where Robby and Ty are "walking the beat." The fiction stew of "Tribute.03" only lacked one ingredient, a resolution.

Sighting an End

I kept seeing Robby throw the Elvis head out the window as he left the feedlot, but I didn't know why he would do that or what it might mean. Since the stewpot story was so vivid for me at that time, I decided I might be able to render it as a screenplay, or from the point of view of a screenwriter. Robby *had* said, in the intermediate story, that he was studying theatre, and screenwriters more frequently than most other writers

skyrocket to enormous success, so I considered re-writing "Tribute" something along the lines of Steve Heller's "Auteur." In his story, the narrative focus pans around at the direction of an eccentric movie fanatic (the Film Phantom) who lurks around the coffee shop:

Gradually focus on the girl working behind the counter--notice the soft eyes that remind you of Jeanette MacDonald. She speaks only of sweet rolls and coffee, but you can tell from the way the camera lingers that she is the main character. Close-up of her smile as she greets a customer.
(41)

Though the Film Phantom remains behind the camera, he is involved in the waitress' story as a bystander. I wondered if I could have Robby tell his own story as audience rather than actor.

I began again with a prominent, self-conscious narrator telling a story he found difficult. In fact, he found it so difficult he tried to pass it off as someone else's story, not a scene from his own life. He told the story as if it were happening to Ty and Rob, and he was merely trying to capture it on film. He now had excuses to digress, to complain about the differences in fiction and film, and these were strategically located at pressure points with which the narrator didn't want to be associated:

"Been a long, long time. What's wrong, that'd bring you out here Christmas Eve?"
"Because it's been a long, long time."

"Why tonight, man?" Crossing his arms over his chest.

"Maybe I'm the ghost of Christmas pa--"

"Maybe you're full of shit, too Garland. Now what do you want?"

"Jeez, Ty," the drunk snorts, "What's with the third degree?" He smiles, fans at the exhaust directed toward him due to a change in the wind. This is uncommon in a film: subtle, seemingly irrelevant day-to-day things like car exhaust wafting in the main character's face. This is largely due to the fact that a movie going audience is not all that perceptive, and trapped up with the larger reality of the full screen, they often miss such detail. It is just such details that attract me now to fiction. It is not the exhaust that is relevant, *but the change in the wind.*

In this example, Robby as screenwriter evades Ty's question as much as Robby the story character that asked, "What's with the third degree?" The screenwriter persona goes off on a tangent about details of filming the encounter rather than letting the scene play itself out. The problem with this technique as I was using it, came in carrying the story to completion. When a confrontation took place, it was larded down with digressions so my persona could avoid feeling awkward recounting the events.

Though the technique itself wasn't working well for me, experimenting again provided a new angle on the story. The screenwriter also saw himself (or "the character") throwing the Elvis head out the window, and chose to describe it matter-of-factly. To the persona telling the story, tossing the head was a perfectly

good place to end "Tribute." He had his say about fiction and film and had carried Robby through a difficult encounter and that was that.

But I wanted to capitalize on my persona's reluctance to tell it as his own story. I added a very revealing coda to the end of "Tribute.03."

THE END

Why do you keep reading? Are you like those that go to movies and stay behind to read all the credits? Are you unsatisfied with the conclusion? You already know that he sat in the Porsche for a prolonged period, listening to the King. Are you expecting me to do something else with him? Perhaps that he would drink himself to oblivion and freeze to death in the car? Then the presumptuous title, Tribute, might seem most fitting, especially if you are familiar with the recording Robby could have listened to as he drank himself into oblivion.

Though killing my character seems fitting, or even leaving him there to sulk seems apropos, I am obligated to tell now the most difficult part of this story. It is difficult only because it is hard to confess, in this day and age, that I returned that night and retrieved the Elvis head, and that he sits to this day on my mantle.

This confession changed the entire story. No longer was I hiding behind my persona; he (Robby) was hiding behind devices of his own (cinematic digressions). Robby the screenwriter wasn't so tough as he seemed--he kept the Elvis head even if his efforts to renew the friendship had failed. The only problem I had with "Tribute.03," then, was even I could not ferret through Robby the screenwriter's devices to discern what his motives were underneath: why did he

want to rekindle that friendship so desperately? The crux of the entire story, I had missed it because I was so concerned with building a story to hide my nostalgia for the farm.

And that, as this latest version of "Tribute" will attest, was the horrible thing that Robin Garland did not want to admit. He was, underneath it all, homesick. He was, though materially successful, an abysmal failure because he was no longer his father's son, the next generation farmer. He felt he had gone bad:

I flit around from city to city, job to job, wife to wife, like a goddamn bee goes from flower to flower. I'm like a balloon somebody blew up, then let go of without tying it. Bllllllupf, all over hell.

At the core of his confession, Robin preaches the myth of the physiocrat, that some inherent goodness in the land is shared by the people who work it. The passage from Crèvecoeur's Letters from an American Farmer, circa 1782, at the beginning of this report, establishes the mind-set I had growing up two hundred years later. Crèvecoeur's persona, James, clings to this myth in spite of all that befalls him. Robin, also driven from his land, clings to the idea that somehow it would have made him a better person, a "survivor." Without the land's stability, he considers himself "adrift."

This is what I had been wanting to say about the farm all along. Sure it was a great place to be from, a good incubator, but a man can continue finding nourishment after the cord is cut. I am no less than I would have been had I never left the farm. In "Tribute.04" I was determined to dispel the myth that had held me land-locked for so long.

I tried to do that through the use of irony. When Robin makes his most philosophical statement, that "It's in here, Ty. Everything good about us comes from here. From the ground up" he is holding a cow chip. A second example is in Robin's attitude toward his actions in the frame story. Though he tells the maid about the experience at the end in the loftiest of terms, he seems unchanged by it. He still allows the California people to ruin his story, never giving them the true, seemingly happy, ending.

Framing the story

In "Tribute.03" Robin the screenwriter builds a frame around his narrative, telling us everyone has a difficult story to tell, then *after* the end, admits to why this was so hard for him to tell: it was his own story. I preserved that strategy, but pared away all other contrivances (film making jargon, etc.) around the core story of Robby and Ty at the feedlot.

I began reconstructing the frame in an epistolary form in my continuing interest in realism of presentation. People don't just sit down and write stories about themselves, even screenwriters, without some purpose. "Tribute" didn't seem like a story that would be marketed, it seemed rather an artifact someone left behind documenting an important moment in life they had to write down. I wanted this story to have a reason to be, so I harkened back to my journal again and found this entry:

6-2-89 Telemail. Interactive correspondence...why not just use the phone. I first heard of this with computer games like RISK and D&D, kids linked up nationwide playing interactive computer games, war games and stuff. Scott in Marlatt was on a system like this and one night we wrote back and forth with some kid in New York at the prompt instead of giving our next play. Juxtaposition, when it asks for your next move to kill somebody on screen, we're making friends. Wonder what a love letter would be like on one of these.

Robin became a screenwriter on location for a weekly show. That also accounted for his feeling adrift and isolated. He could report his own story under the guise of material he had found for the show. The entire text of "Tribute" could be collected computer transactions and Robin's script for the show--a satisfying way for me to justify how it all came to be preserved. This frame allowed Robin to comment on the story, and to stand back from it; it allowed me to see the story as a credible artifact in the evolution of a script for

Robin's TV show, especially with someone like Murray requiring everything be in writing. I had resolved all my problems with "Tribute" except one: I still had no way for Robin to make that leap to confess the story was his own.

In the version of "Tribute" presented in this report, Robin writes the entire 30 page text apologetically to his maid because "I felt I owed you more (than a survey card) after all the trouble I've been this last week." Though this, of all techniques considered for this story, seems a contrivance, I feel it works well to further characterize Robin: it is one thing to write a story about yourself and end it at the point it will be most accepted--as Robin the screenwriter chose to do in "Tribute.04;" it is another to be willing to confess you were, at a moment in time, sappy, and that you are still, at heart, brimming over with sentiment (to the point of *going back* for that Elvis head); it is still another to confess something so intimate anonymously to an innocent, uninterested bystander.

Though Robin in this version of "Tribute" might seem pathetic, I still consider the story to have a positive ending. Even if he is trapped forever in his frame, even if he never fully comes to realize the myth he has bought into, he is at least making gestures

within that frame that are more admirable than the actions of his peers. I leave the reader to consider the validity of his confession, of his change in character to decide whether it's really all that noble.

Though it was a chore, I have told a difficult story. I managed to stifle the direct address, and to channel the digressions and commentary toward particular characters in the story (Maylene and Murray) rather than readers of the story. In this way I have made my statement about the farm without bleeding all over the pages of my story. Though I feel I have used Robin again as a fall guy, "Tribute" is at last becoming my persona's story (Robin's), not my own, which is more than I could have anticipated.

Through the course of this writing, I have come to adamantly agree with the claim a character makes in John Barth's End of the Road: "Fiction isn't a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion everyone makes of life." My aim has been to craft the happenings of my life and world into a couple of successful "farm stories."

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TWO STORIES
FROM THE GROUND UP

by

MARK LONDON JARVIS

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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Department of English

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ABSTRACT

My report includes two short stories, "Parity" and "Tribute," and a critical afterword. The stories, rooted in a rural milieu, are my efforts at writing from the known, and my experiments with narrative techniques. "Parity" looks at the dissolution of a family farm from the point of view of each main character, a father, a son, and a hired hand. Multiple narrators allow deeper exploration of conflicts between and within characters and a more comprehensive, balanced portrayal of the crisis. Thus, parity is achieved. The son from "Parity" becomes the narrative persona of the second story, "Tribute." He presents his own difficult story as material for a television show, distancing himself from his story. "Tribute" is a confessional story, delivered in epistolary form to a maid in a motel; it is an experiment with this narrative framework in the interest of realism. The afterword describes the progressive development of these two stories to emphasize not only the ultimate techniques I chose to employ, but the exploration that led to those choices. Generative techniques from Ben Nyberg's creative writing text, and a number of short stories, including Steven Allaback's "It's Never Bad in the Mountains" and Steve Heller's "Auteur," are also discussed in the afterword.