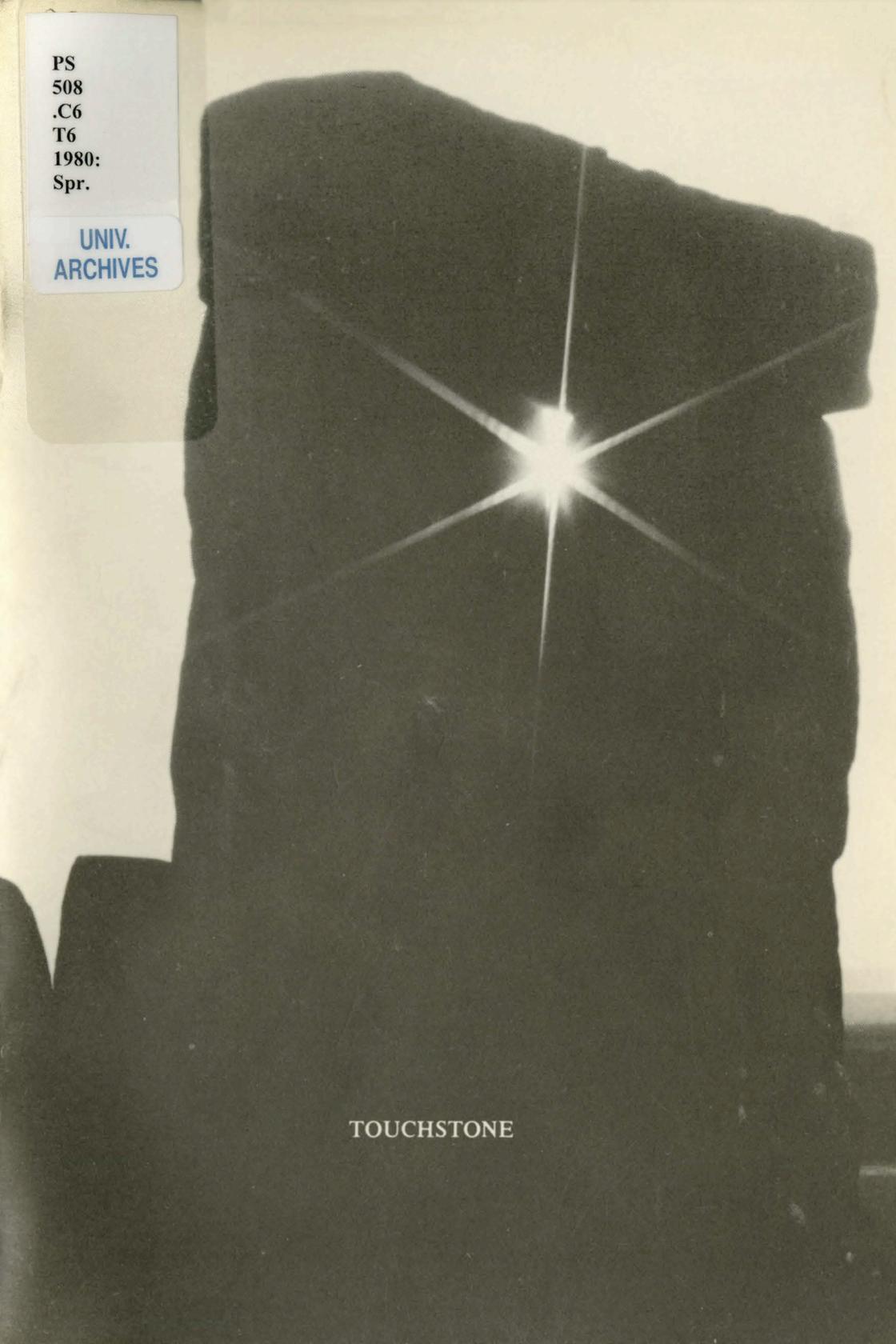


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TOUCHSTONE

TOUCHSTONE
Spring, 1980

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Interior Photography
by Sue Sandmayer



THE DAY OUT

Shelagh Stromberg

“Kathy, it’s for you, dear. It’s your father.”

The wet red paint was mingling with the purple paint. It was like branches. Trees, even. Fingers intertwining. A forest of hands. Magic. Blood and water . . .

“Kathy! Did you hear me?”

The phone lay on its side on the highly polished chest of drawers in the Sisters’ sitting room. The room smelled of polish, perfume, adults. The younger children were seldom allowed in there. But she too felt nervous, tongue-tied. And it was her father. She had not heard from him in months, and now, would she like a day out with him? A trip to London tomorrow? His quiet voice seemed too familiar. It was as though there had never been any time between his last being there, and now, yes, she’d be ready, she’d meet him at the bus stop outside the main gates of the Home, early.

“Kathy, clear up the mess on the dining-room table, would you dear?”

“What mess?”

“The paints, dear, and your sketch pads.”

The magic forest had gone, become blotches of bright poster paint on clean white cartridge paper. Images of bridges and banks and crowds of umbrellas and rain on pavements and noisy fruit stalls and hushed art galleries now floated through her mind in a whirl of excitement. She watched the colours swirl away from the shiny dark squirrel hair of her brushes. A whole day in London. And with Dad.

Dust-filled upholstered seats, Third-class carriage on the 9:28 passenger train, St. Albans-St. Pancras. He looked smaller, thinner than last time. Thin streaks of yellowed hair above a tired face. Were his eyes always so deeply set? His coat looked too big. Third button down, missing. Kathy felt angry and sad. What was the world doing to him? Why were they being kept apart? He was fumbling now in his pocket. His bony hand fished out a packet of cigarettes, then a lighter. As he lit one with a shaky hand, he looked at her with twinkling eyes. The large shaggy eyebrows setting them off, the lines down his face deepening with his grin. Yes, he was glad to be with her for the day. And she too. And they would never need to say it. But they might, anyhow.

THE DAY OUT

The fields fled by radially: the near hedges, trees, cattle moving faster than the far ones. The telegraph wires went up and down like waves in an ocean drawn entirely of parallel lines. She could do that sometime. With pen and ink. It would have to be smooth paper. First a wash of watercolour . . . greens, yellows . . . then over that, thick dark lines. Bold.

He was crushing something into her hand. She looked at him, startled. Then at her hand. It was a one pound note! She had never had that much money before. It was a good quality paper, heavy, crinkly, finely embossed with an intricate design.

"Buy yourself something, Kath."

"Oh, but . . ."

"No, that's yours. I want you to get something that you'd really like."

It was too much. He couldn't afford it. He had no place to live. And there was the button missing from his coat.

The train clicked rhythmically over the rails. "I love you Dad," "I love you Dad," "I love you Dad," "I love you Dad," it seemed to be singing in . . . what was it now, from her Latin class? . . . iambic metre. Then a curve, a tunnel that made the song echo like sea in a cave, then a change of rhythm to "We're almost there now," "We're almost there now," "We're almost there now," "We're almost there now," the last two beats of the phrase clunking heavily like spondees. Then the train screeching into St. Pancras, the great arched ribs of the station swallowing them, the clanking of tons of iron and brass, halting and expiring in steam at the very end of platform 14. They were flush up against the heart of London, brass bumpers against brass bumpers.

Two tomato soups, rolls and butter, two teas, one apple pie and one apricot pie. They were hungry. All around them, chrome, glass, plastic. Smooth, cold, slick surfaces. He was there, in the fake-marble wall. A thin hunched figure, his huge coat hanging over the back of his chair. His ribs seemed held together by the dark blue waistcoat of what was once a good suit. Pinstriped shirt. Dark brown pants. It was the best he could do now, probably. Oh, Dad.

Her pocket was heavy with half-crowns and shillings now. It seemed like a great deal more money than the pound note. It was solid, noisy. And yet there was nothing in particular that she wanted to buy. It did not seem necessary. She had a day, a whole day with her father, and in London. She was consuming his presence, and the textures and sounds and shapes of the city that enfolded them.

"What about some jewelry, Kath? Do they let you wear that at the orphanage?"

"Oh, yes. Once we're fifteen."

"Now these would look pretty on you."

Kathy fingered the green glass beads . . . heavy, cool, clicking like mar-

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bles, sea-green. She moved to the tray of wooden bangles from India. Warm colours, smooth texture, a different ring. She left them there. She had already had from them all they had to offer.

“How about a blouse?”

Kathy tried to picture herself in their pastel shades, their frills, their small pearl buttons. She? The uniformed schoolgirl. The wanderer in the wilderness. The artist. Still, the way the light played over their silky folds was interesting . . .

“Kath, come on. It’ll be from me. You can show your friends.”

So that was it. It had to be tangible. Something she could hold out and say “Look, it’s from my Dad. Isn’t it beautiful?” And that would be it, for months. The gold letters of Woolworth’s glared dully against their red platic ground. Harsh. Cheap.

In the gallery, a cathedral hush. Light slanting in to pick out the gold of Fra Angelico’s Christ Glorified in the Court of Heaven, the lapidary crimson of Masolini’s St. John the Baptist and St. Jerome, the blue silk folds of Massacio’s Virgin. He took her from room to room, and sat hunched on the seats in each one silently looking at the triptychs, canvases, sculptures. The Spanish School. The Dutch School. English Landscape Artists. The French Impressionists. Expressionism. He was peaceful now. The anger in both of them had subsided. It was always a part of their ritual together to go to a gallery. And it had come from him. That was where Kathy had begun to sense the other world, the magical one.

It was dusk now. The new beech leaves were forming halos about the street lamps alongside the Embankment and down to the river. The lamps on the bridges were bobbing about in the water. Tramps lying about on benches, in doorways. And here, as they turned a corner into Norfolk Street, a magnificent stained-glass window done in chalks on the pavement. Behind it, with back against the wall was a shrunken, grizzled old man, and next to him, a cloth cap placed upside down close to a threadbare knee . . . She felt her father withdraw his arm from hers, fish into his pocket and throw something into the cap. One yellowed, heavy half-crown. His last, she knew. It would buy a meal. Or a couple of beers. Or a pack of cigarettes. It would buy him another day. It was as much as all the richest tapestries and gilded triptychs.

But the urge was on him now. She could tell. And it always ended this way. He was heading for the nearest wharfside pub. And he would need the cash she had left. Nine shillings and sixpence. She felt along the seam of her pocket. Yes, she still had her return ticket and enough money for the bus.

The Dockers’ Arms. Yellow light behind thick frosted glass. Then smoke, noise.

“Well, if it isn’t our Fred, then!” someone yelled. “And who’s this sweet young thing?”

THE DAY OUT

Mugs of beer, spilled beer, the smell of beer, red faces and

Oh we ain't got a barrel of money

Maybe we're ragged and funny

But we travel along

Singing a song

Side by side.

She just made it back to St. Pancras for the 8:15. Grateful for a compartment to herself, she sank back into the dusty plush seat and looked against a sooty window that held out against a dark night. But every once in a while her thoughts were punctuated by lights in tunnels, on bridges, on station platforms as they flashed by. "Saying goodbye, saying goodbye, saying goodbye, saying goodbye" sang the train as it rocked and sped her back to the home. It was always as though she would never see him again. And yet she knew that somehow she would. There was something beyond the dim compartment light, the cigarette butts on the floor, the darkened windows. And the floor of her mind was widening into a city square. And to the sides in every direction were great stone pillars of a cathedral forest. And underfoot a deep green carpet gilded with sunlight. And great pageants of people were coming and going in creations and coronations, singing and dancing, and dying and returning in different form. And she loved the old man with yellow hair and beer dribbling down his stubbled chin as much as Massacio's Virgin. Would take it with her everywhere.

Shelagh Stromberg

TRIUMVIRATE

Thomas Iver Bradley

ONE

The ruts in the gravel walk made his three-tipped cane jerk side to side and Douglas Flammer, Sr. tottered like cardboard. Douglas Flammer, Jr. vaguely wondered if it hurt and tried to keep out of the way.

"Today you have to decide on a new school, Douglas."

"Can I go back to Episcopalian school when I'm in eighth?"

"I suppose. If they've forgiven you." Doug's Dad stopped his creeping walk and grinned at his son for a long time. It was sometimes hard to tell when he was being funny.

"Are you mad at me?" asked Doug.

Doug's Dad didn't answer, but said *sshhh* and nodded stiffly toward the trees in the back yard. The grey hazy wind had decided to blow back there for a second.

"Do you have a school in mind, Douglas?" asked Doug's Dad, moving again.

"Good private school somewhere."

"Yes."

"The children are nicer to you at private schools," said Doug, proceeding phrase by phrase. "They don't pick fights with you. Especially when you're big for your age like me and I am not strong for my size."

Doug's Dad nodded pleasantly.

"And when you have some small little thing they can make fun of you about, like how big I am."

"Yes. Do you have any particular private school you'd like your brother to take you to see today, Douglas?"

"Redeemer Lutheran."

"And why Redeemer Lutheran?"

"Because I maybe should get some of your religion exposed to me so it will help me make up my mind."

"Do I insist on that, Douglas?"

"No. You give me freedom to decide my own religion for when I get big. But still I should see Lutheran things too. Because that's a perfectly good

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religion to decide too.”

Doug remembered it all, what he was supposed to say.

“Fine,” said Doug’s Dad. “Let’s go ask your brother to take you to to Redeemer Lutheran. We have to be very diplomatic because Gerald has been fasting since yesterday afternoon and he may not feel that he’s strong enough to drive safely.”

Doug went up the ramp first and peeked in the window. He saw Gerald old all wrapped up in blankets on the couch, eating a banana. Doug opened the door for his Dad and followed him in. They both saw Gerald slip his banana under the pillows.

“Gerald—”

Gerald moaned weakly.

“Gerald, Douglas would like to go to Mr. Hildegard’s little school on the hill.”

Gerald rolled over and buried his face in the couch.

“You might drive him. Do you feel up to it? Can Douglas get you a little something for strength?”

“I don’t feel up to it,” said Gerald.

“You may drive my Thunderbird, Gerald . . . Now, can Douglas get you a little something to eat?”

Gerald lifted his head. “What would you suggest?”

“Cold chicken broth,” said Douglas.

“Just a little. Just a teaspoonful,” said Doug’s Dad.

In the kitchen Douglas thought about his big brother. Huge-ungus and thirty-two. Used to be a scientist, and he fasted sometimes to lose his tub of lard. And he said the F word all the fucking time.

* * *

Gerald was talking nasty to Douglas in the T-bird in Redeemer Lutheran’s parking lot:

“Why the fuck don’t you go to public school instead of religious schools? That’s what almost ruined *me* for life: religion. But I finally figured out, kid, that God’s not gonna take over after Dad’s dead and be wiping your butt for you. It’s a fucking shitty world out there and not God or Jesus or the Fucking Virgin Mary’s gonna come bail you out when you’re facing down in the gutter choking in your own fucking retch. There’s just two sorts of people in the world: shitheads and assholes. The shitheads are the filthy bastards that fuck over the assholes and the assholes are the ones that take all the shit laying down and expect God or some other fucker like that to come bail their ass out. Just two types of people. Remember that.”

“Shitheads and fuckers?”

“No, assholes,” said Gerald. “Okay now, ask them how much. See if

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these Lutheran shitheads want a thousand dollars too like the Episcopalians.”

“Don’t you want to come with me?”

But Gerald was trying to get comfortable. Douglas reached in back and got a blanket for him so he wouldn’t get a chill.

There were a lot of children having pleasant recess outside in the greyness on the grass. Douglas pried apart and peeked through some thorny roses at them. A tall teacher in a grey suit the same fuzzy color as black and white television after sign-off, wearing a crewcut and glasses shaped like TVs—Mr. Hildegard probably—was showing the boys and girls how to make a human pyramid. A lot of big boys and one big fat girl with nylons were groaning on the bottom, with middle-sized children kneeling on their spines and squealing small children on top of that. Mr. Hildegard took a thin serious girl with a broken arm in a white cast and lifted her up on top of the whole shebang. For a second there was silence. Then the big fat girl with nylons darted out sideways, rolled over on her back and everybody came tumbling down on top of her, with the teacher rolling on top of it all, wild eyes behind his glasses.

“How much to go here?” asked Doug to himself.

“Twenty-seven-twelve *per*,” said Douglas back in a lower voice.

“ ‘Kay, bye.” Douglas let the roses snap back in front of his face.

In the T-bird Doug tried not to grin about such a low, low price for such a fine Lutheran school, because Gerald might suspect Doug wanted to go there, and Gerald wouldn’t be quiet on the way home. Douglas wanted to imagine about the fine little school he’d go to, cheap. Such a *deal*.

* * *

Three main things controlled and twisted young people’s lives: Mattel; Hanna-Barbera; Kelloggs. That’s what Doug’s Dad said: The God damned Mattel/Hanna-Barbera/Kelloggs triumvirate. Doug’s Dad said it on Saturday morning when Gerald and Doug accidentally turned on cartoons too loud. It woke up Doug’s Dad and he came down the hall mad. The Darwin, Marx and Freud of the kiddies’ world he said, vaguely, on his way to get coffee. Then was the time Douglas got thrown outside for fresh air and exercise.

Outside Douglas forgot about TV and amused himself. He melted plastic things in the garage with matches. Left over from when Gerald was little there was a special set of clear plastic zoo animals that you could see bubbles in. Doug selected the giraffe and decided to melt him in the garage and let the odd air in the bubbles escape, a scientific experiment.

Douglas seriously held the giraffe in the very tip of the fire, but soon forgot about it; he got a sudden strong rush of imagination. For a second he thought he knew exactly what it was like to be Gerald years and years ago.

TRIUMVIRATE

Gerald used to help do scientific experiments in the University, experiments on the theory of evolution where he took monkeys or dogs and put corks in their heads that made them act sleepy or hungry depending on which wire you pulled. One of those monkeys or dogs Gerald brought home as a pet, a long time ago. And that was the reason why Dad used a cane and why there was no Mom—something about the monkey or dog in the car on the freeway, screeching and scratching and making them wreck.

Douglas looked back at his giraffe and saw that the clear plastic had turned shit-brown in the fire. It dripped on Doug's thumb and sizzled a big hole there.

"Ass hole," said Doug, like Gerald, but quiet.

TWO

"The thing is, *day* in Jewish meant a couple thousand years; so evolution believes in the Bible, too!"

Douglas Flammer, Jr. knew that at any second Mr. Hildegarde might drag him to the office and use the black leather belt on him. But Douglas maybe was a hero to the students in home room who weren't too ignorant to understand. The fat girl with nylons just sat and rubbed her nose and, for some reason, she was the main thing on Doug's mind while he stood all alone and tangled with Mr. Hildegarde.

"God created Man in His own image," whispered Mr. Hildegarde from behind his desk, crewcut starting to crackle all over his head. "That means, Mr. Flammer, that we are not sons and daughters of apes or monkeys. We are *God's* children." Mr. Hildegarde paused, and added as an afterthought, "In Christ our Lord."

Douglas got impatient and thoughtless. "What's wrong with being sons and daughters of monkeys?" he said. "They are good strong smart coordinated animals."

Some of the girls went, "Eeeew," and "For *ick!*"

"Have you been to Hogle Zoo lately, Doug?" asked Mr. Hildegarde with a sour tone. "Have you been to the chimp house and seen the way they pick themselves and eat it? The way they hang their private parts between the bars?"

The girls went, "Gol you're rude."

"Well, that's what they do," said Mr. Hildegarde. "They may be Doug's family, but sure not mine."

Ignorance like this was connected with things like Anita Bryant and KSL radio and conservatives. That's what Gerald said. Gerald said go ahead, argue with him.

"What about amino acids?" said Douglas. "You can't argue with amino acids. That's not even a theory any more."

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“Posht,” sputtered Mr. Hildegarde. He sputtered with contumely. *Contumeliously*. (Doug dug up that word from somewhere.) “Amino—posht. You can’t even explain to the class what that is,” said Mr. Hildegarde.

“It’s *amino* acid,” said Douglas, forming the idea with his hands earnestly. “It’s soup they shot electricity through and made some evolution start in their lab.”

“Monkey soup?” asked Mr. Hildegarde.

The class cheered, even the smart ones.

Douglas thought of what big brother Gerald would want him to say right now: “Fuck you, Hildy,” or “Cram it, Hildy,” or “You are a shithead, Hildy.” Douglas held his lips tight. He stomped his foot and the class kept cheering.

Mr. Hildegarde suddenly got serious. He started acting like a grown up man. Now he was dangerous. He looked into Doug’s eyes. “You’d better come to my office, Douglas,” Mr. Hildegarde said. He stood up. His baggy pants bunched out beneath the black leather belt.

In the secret back of Redeemer Lutheran was Mr. Hildegarde’s office, where children sometimes came staggering out with bleeding belt welts on their arms—or so some of the seventh graders said. And this is where Douglas followed Mr. Hildegarde now, with the door clicking softly shut behind them.

“Why did your father send you here, Douglas?” Mr. Hildegarde’s voice quavered. He turned his back. He began sprinkling lunch into his tropical fish tank. A big green one shot out from between the porcelain skindiver’s legs and bullied its way to the surface where the flakes were floating. “I mean, why aren’t you in public school?” asked Mr. Hildegarde.

Doug was silent.

“Did your father have some *reason* for sending you to me? Does he sit up with you evenings and brief you on what to do and—” Mr. Hildegarde stopped talking and put the food shaker down. He had been so agitated he’d sprinkled too much, and Doug knew that was fatal to tropical fish who were too stupid to stop eating before they exploded. Mr. Hildegarde fumed. He rolled up his sleeve part way and began scooping through the water, straining out fish food flakes with his fingers. (Lord giveth Lord taketh.) The fish were scared. One tall flat fish bashed his head right into the aerator, sank down and was buried in a cloud of colored beads—Tahitian Paradise Sand, it said on the bag. Mr. Hildegarde’s arm came out flecked and nasty-rank. With it he motioned Douglas to sit; he used it to gesture with while he spoke:

“Douglas, you’ve been blessed with a fairly good mind, but a bit inquisitive, like all youngsters will. But I don’t see why you have to come here and disrupt my pupils with it. There’s smaller children than you in that room. They can still take things on faith, they still have pure children’s faith. But they look up to a bigger boy like you just enough, though, to allow their

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faith to be shaken by what you say. Fortunately, many of them come to Sunday school and I am able to take them aside on break time and fortify their faith a little bit, suffer the little children to come unto me. But I don't feel I should have to spend my break time on Sunday picking up after somebody as big as you, Douglas. So I have a serious suggestion. And here it is: If you want to learn evolution, why don't you go to public school where they have laboratories but no chapel? You really should, for the sake of your very soul, before it is too late." Mr. Hildegard's voice cracked; still he continued, "Corrupting the faith of little children is the most contemptible form of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, Doug. And blasphemy against the Holy Ghost is the *one unpardonable sin!*" Mr. Hildegard suddenly slapped his arm down flat against his pants. It left an imprint of smelly fish food flakes.

Douglas got up and ran out with his hands over his gasping face, trying to appear like he was sobbing but actually holding back the biggest belly laughs. Once outside on the noisy parking lot, right in the middle of the first graders' four square game, Doug let go what he thought would be a great big satisfying hilarious belly laugh. But, surprisingly, his laugh came out mirthless and low and gravelly, like somebody else's voice; rough strength came tearing out from underneath his lungs, and Douglas felt his chest expand and contract by itself.

The first graders were all around his legs, kicking, biting and scratching like many different kinds of little animals.

"Get off our four square!"

"We'll tell teacher, you piece of poo!"

Douglas deeply laughed down on them.

* * *

"Don't you hate this lady?" asked Douglas from the floor.

Jocelyn Spokes the Mormon newscaster was on TV.

"Yeah," said Gerald. "She can tell us about whole race wars in L.A. without batting her eyelashes, but when she comes to porno or liquor here in Utah she gets all huffy. Plus she's entering menopause and she thinks secondals will cure it, so that's why she slurs her words together like that."

"I used to pretend that I was a little kid," said Douglas, "about having Jozzie Spokes prisoner downstairs in our basement, all in chains, and I'd stomp her bare butt with big black leather boots shaped like Italy."

"You've been reading Gerald's magazines," said Doug's Dad, sipping on sherry and in a relaxed mood. "Why don't you read something wholesome for you. Such as *Green Mansions*."

"Yeah, asshole baby. 'Cycles and Sex' is just for grownups," said Gerald.

"I *never*," said Douglas. "I don't care about your dumb magazines. I

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don't even know where they're hid anymore."

"Bullshit," said Gerald.

"No, I swear to God." Doug jumped to his feet and made the Indian *How* sign, "Christ as my witness."

"Don't be sacreligious," said Doug's Dad.

"You just imagined all that about this lady?" asked Gerald.

"Yes."

"Black boots? Chains?"

"Yeah, all by myself I imagined it."

"Must be an archetype," said Doug's Dad, sniffing.

"Arche—What's that?"

"It's a thought everybody thinks but only smart guys know they think," said Gerald.

"You've thought up an archetype, Doug. That's very good," said Doug's Dad.

"Yeah, Doug. That's very good. Means you're smart."

"Darn right I'm smart. 'A' in everything but catechism."

"No, no. Not that kind of smart," said Gerald. "Archetypes are when you're *imaginative*, like an Indian or a coyote out somewhere on the prairie-desert. Or something like that. Huh Dad?"

"Mm-hm," said Doug's Dad, trying to get reabsorbed into the news.

Douglas went outside to the garage, pleased. He had archetypes. He was—what would it be?—arche-typical?

If everybody had them, archetypes probably were like thin grey chemicals born right in everybody's brain, probably something like amino acids, because lots of people were too ignorant to have thoughts that weren't already homogenized right in them—like Hildy. He was *ignorant*. And, according to the theory of evolution, *dogs* must have some form of this grey juice, too, because of—what was it called?—*common ancestorage*. Like Randy, who was snoozing on his belly on the cement floor of the garage.

"Hi, Randy-Rat-Fur."

Big brother Gerald got Randy in one of those mothery-fluttery moods he used to have, and now nobody ever paid any attention to Randy, but just left him fenced in the back yard and garage. So Randy was all paregoric (that was Doug's Dad's funny way to say paranoiac), all paregoric from being cooped up alone, just like Gerald himself was. For example, Randy never was around real dogs so he never did learn the real way to go to the bathroom properly like a boy dog should, but just went to the bathroom with his leg down, eyes and ears drooping for shame like a girl dog. Gerald, too, was too paregoric to piss right: He sat like a girl to give his legs a rest. Gerald and Randy both led lives that were *circumscribed*, like Doug's Dad said: they were cooped up alone so much they went to the bathroom from excitement when strangers came. Big brother Gerald didn't actually piss, but he did

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start acting tough like he was pissed off at the strangers, and so did Randy, barking and growling. But Randy actually pissed on the strangers, he was so scared. He wasn't nearly as good at hiding fear as Gerald.

Randy scooted to Doug on his belly. His tail sprang up as his dick scraped along the gravelly cement. Randy put his face on Doug's knee and moaned like he was comfortable.

"Rat-Face. I should know exactly what archetypes you are thinking now."

Randy had old rat fur, and chipped thumbnails on his elbows. He was huge-ungus as Doug, with yellow bloody-cruste'd teardrops stuck to the furry bags under his eyes, king of the neighborhood. Soon he was asleep, yipping and twitching a dog dream. About running or something? Yes, running down the street under yellow aspen trees, that's why Randy-Rat-Breath twitched his legs. Now his breathing slowed and his toes spread out—he was dreaming about yawning in the sun in the park.

At that moment Randy snapped awake and nuzzled for Douglas to pat him, but not vigorously. Douglas saw the bald spot where the cork used to be.

Manhattan, '78

Thomas Iver Bradley

“FROM THIS VALLEY . . .”

Ann Carrel

Rachel Simms sat on a pile of cut wood near the cellar door, her knees tucked up under a dress of yellow taffeta and white lace. The collar rubbed against the back of her neck, and she pulled at it with one finger.

Across the dirt street, across Mrs. Willy's yard, she saw the back door of the Rose place open and Bronco Rose step out into the porch light. Under his arm he held a grocery sack full of something—magazines for her, she guessed. An old lady whose lawn he cut always gave him back issues of *Newsweek* to look at. Rachel watched him as he strode across the yard to the street, his head down, intent on each step, his free arm swinging out a little as he walked and his boot heels clicking on the sidewalk as he stepped over the curb. On his head he wore a black Stetson, pushed back, and the forty-five year old paunch hung over his chrome belt buckle.

When he saw her, he clattered backwards on his heels a few steps in mock surprise, like always, his mouth gaping a bit, “What *you* doing?”

“Just nothing,” she said, burying her head in her arms again.

Bronco's lips curled a little, “Ain't you supposed to graduate from grade school? Tonight?”

“I ain't going to go,” she said, jerking her head up and fastening her eyes on him.

“Not?” he said softly, rubbing his hand on the corner of his mouth. “Don't you got to?”

“No, all they do is mail it to you,” she said, daring him to argue. She had already walked a thin line that afternoon, stalking out of the room when her aunt said she looked like a jonquil in her graduation dress. She had walked a thinner line a half hour ago when she told her grandfather she would sooner get cremated than go to graduation. Now she was ready to argue with a neighbor on the back porch.

Bronco took a draw on his stubby cigarette and threw it to the ground, grinding it with the toe of his boot. “Why ain't you going?” he asked.

She didn't answer him, making a face instead. Bronco grinned, pulled off his hat and ran a hand over his grey crew cut, then nestled the hat smoothly on. “Want these?” he asked, changing the subject, pushing the bag toward her, the sound of the “these” squeaking like a rusty hinge. She

“FROM THIS VALLEY . . .”

pulled a *Newsweek* out of the bag and thanked him very politely, feeling a little sheepish. Saving those magazines for her meant a great deal to him. He couldn't read them, she knew, although she remembered sitting in his lap when she was little, listening to him make up stories about the funny papers. Now he brought them to her, and though she thought the news was too depressing to read about, she did appreciate the thought.

After she thanked him, Rachel thought Bronco would go in and speak to her grandfather, but he turned on his heel to go. Then half-way down the walk he turned round again and said, “You know I got to go away?”

Rachel glanced at him curiously, “Where?”

“Topeka.”

“You mean right now?”

“No, day after tomowow for a little while. Then for wonger,” he said, slurring the words so it was hard for her to understand.

“What are you going to do down there?”

“Wive.”

“Live?” she said surprised, “You and your mother are moving to Topeka to live?”

“No, they're sending . . . juss me.” He took off his hat and began fiddling with the band. Sometimes Rachel forgot that there was anything wrong with Bronco. Sometimes he was so near that she didn't really see him as other people saw him, but the idea hit her now. Her grandfather told her once that Bronco had fallen when he was a child, and that he would never be right again. She wasn't sure what right was, but she had known something was wrong with Bronco long before. He couldn't pronounce words the way she could, substituting the wrong letters so that he sounded like a child—sometimes he got so excited he couldn't talk at all. He told stories, too, about breaking wild horses and catching coyotes with his lariat, and when she and the other children on the block took turns riding bikes, Bronco would stand at the corner looking on, never asking outright to ride but asking just the same.

His father was an educated man, a veterinarian, but before he died he was able to teach Bronco only one thing: how to drive a truck. The teachers in school couldn't do anything with him, passing him along until his mother finally took him out and kept him home. After grade school he hauled grain for an alfalfa mill, until the men began to tease him into fights. And he was a fighter; some said he fought like a crazy man, both fists flying, until the others began to steer clear all together. The mill let him go. Every summer since then he had been mowing the old ladies' yards around the neighborhood, picking up a little money, and every night he sat on Guy Wilson's back porch until the street lights came on and all the children went home.

“Why are they sending you?” she asked him.

Bronco's face grew gradually red from his denim collar to his crew cut.

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Shifting back and forth on his feet, he tried to speak; his lips would make a round shape but no sound would come through. Then, at last: "I . . . I hurt somebody."

Rachel laid the sack of magazines on the cellar door, wanting to go inside. She had started something. But Bronco went on rapidly, "Jim and them down at Western Auto sayin' I don't know nothin' about it and then they take that yardstick and they keep pokin' and say where was you? where was you? about me and I said quit it they wouldn't stop. I took Jim. I hit him and he went down. Then he got up and his mouth was bweedin' and I come home." Bronco stood stiffly, not crying exactly, but standing as though his whole body was clenched. Rachel wanted to go inside but something held her there, and she sat looking at his blue eyes and his nervous fingers for a long time. His mouth worked hard but he said nothing, staring at his boot tops. Finally he looked shyly up at her, "I ain't goin' down there."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm weavin' tomowow—goin' out west," he answered, pulling himself up. "I . . . I'm goin' to see Gene Autwy. Get a job down there with him on his wanch in Cawifownia." He paused for effect, lighting another cigarette.

"Who's Gene Autry?"

Bronco glanced at her with surprise, then narrowed his gaze. "You know who he is: he's a movie staw, and he sings, and . . ."

"Oh *that* Gene Autry, sure," she said quickly. "Does your mother know? I mean, is your mother coming too?"

"No," he said. Then his eyes got a little wild and he looked at Rachel hard. "She doesn't know . . . nobody knows. You know, that's all. And you got to *pwomise* you won't tell." Twice he made her promise not to tell, and looked back at her more than once as he crossed the street toward home.

After dark, Rachel's grandfather leaned out of the screen door. "Rachel, who was you talking to?"

"Bronc."

"Did he bring you some more magazines or something?"

"Yeah, he did," she said softly. All she could picture in her mind was Bronco Rose driving down some length of highway going west, going absolutely nowhere. Her heart began to beat quickly with what she knew she was going to say. "Grandpa . . . Grandpa, he says he's takin' off west."

Her grandfather stepped out onto the porch, barefooted in his overalls. He paused, looking out in the yard. "When?"

"Tomorrow, he says." Rachel looked at her grandfather's face in the shadows as he put his head down, thinking. She felt sick.

"Well," he said finally, "Bronc's a big talker; he'll tell you most anything. Still," he sighed, "I'll tell the old lady about it in the morning." He glanced toward the Rose house. "She'd be gettin' ready for bed by now; gettin' on to eight-thirty. Look here, Bronc ain't goin' nowhere; just talk. Ain't

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goin' nowhere 'cept Topeka, and he's goin' there by God Almighty. Hit the wrong fellow this time.”

The old man turned and stepped up to the screen door, then looking over his shoulder at her on the wood-pile, asked, “Rachel, you goin' to graduation?”

“Nosir.”

“Why?” he asked, and waited for a reply. There was none.

“Well what am I supposed to tell your Aunt? Huh?” He waited a moment, peering down at her small head in the shadows. “Would you like to call her up?” he asked, stooping closer to her ear. “Would you like to ring her up right now and say ‘Sorry Aunt Margaret but you don't need to go to the graduation tonight. Too bad about the time and money you put in makin' me that fine dress but I ain't got the appreciation God gave . . .’”

“I got all kinds of appreciation!” she said, jerking her head around to glare at him. “I got all kinds! But she *knew*,” Rachel sputtered, grabbing the skirt with both hands and bunching the taffeta, “She knew I couldn't stand up there in front of all them damn bunch of people . . .”

“Rachel.”

“. . . with Julie Campbell and everybody and this yellow thing clean past my knees!”

“My God. Your knees.”

“Well,” Rachel choked, wiping her nose with the back of her wrist. “It's not just that. It's Mr. Casey. He said I was the *best*, the best one he'd ever had. His best student and that it was a shame I had to leave him.”

“But in high school you'll have another good professor just like that fella' there.”

“Grandpa, they're not *called* professors. They're teachers. And besides, they don't have any more teachers like him! You have to take calculus and typing and sewing, and you have to go to dances and . . .” She began to cry again.

“Rachel,” her grandfather sighed. “Rachel, can't you quit bawling? Now quit. I swear, the state you're in, I don't want you to go to any graduation tonight anyway. Now look here,” Rachel took several big gulps, eyeing him carefully. “Tomorrow you're going to march over to your Aunt's house and explain to her why you weren't to the graduation and why she went to all that trouble for nothing. Then you're going up to the school . . .”

“But I . . .”

“Hush up. You're going up the hill to that school and apologize to every one of them professors for missing graduation.” Pausing as if to say something else, her grandfather put one big hand on the door latch. Then clearing his throat, he spoke quietly, “Now git on in the house before you ruin your dress.”

Inside the brown parlor, Rachel could hear the clocks ticking, smell the

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heavy furniture polish, and it felt as though the sound of Bronco's slurry voice and the sound of children's patent leather shoes walking past their front porch and up the hill toward the school were pounding against the back of her head. In the other room her grandfather talked in low tones to her aunt on the telephone. Rachel went to her room and shut the door quietly. When she was small, grown-ups had patted her on the head and told her she didn't know how lucky she was to be a child. She remembered standing at a family reunion under some pot belly with grey trousers while a voice told her "Someday you're going to look around and these days will all be gone." But she had always known. She knew then, and she knew now that this was all the farther she intended to go.

Rachel put the "Billy the Kid Suite" on the record player and lay down on her bed; and as the opening movement filled the room, she could feel the pull of horses, the conestoga wagons flowing across her bedroom walls with the reflected car lights. Did Bronco know what state Gene Autry lived in? Did he even know if Gene Autry was still alive? She saw herself perched on a rail fence, looking out on a range of wild grass, with rivers in the distance, red rocky buttes and long mesas. Bronco was riding his horse toward her, his silver buckle gleaming. He took off across the grass again, his black hat bobbing in the distance, waving in the heat. The long fence seemed to curve around, to surround her then. She was penned in a corral, and the higher she climbed, the more rungs there were on the fence. The corral grew wider, circling out until it caught Bronco, and his horse came charging back, wild eyed. The fence rails grew together into red brick walls, the circumference narrow as a well, and looking up from the bottom they could see nothing but a circle of black sky and stars. Bronco stood to one side, his cigarette dangling and glowing red against the shadows of his face. She woke with a start and sat upright in bed.

It was very late. Her grandfather snored deeply from his room as she slipped out the screen door. She was wearing her favorite brown shirt and cow-girl jeans, and in her hand she carried another bundle of clothes. She unlatched the hook on Mrs. Willy's gate and darted across her yard to the Rose house. Tripping over Mrs. Rose's fat calico cat in the darkness, she crawled to a basement window she hoped was Bronco's. Pushing herself between an evergreen bush and the wall of the house, she put her ear against the glass but could hear nothing. She tapped softly with one knuckle, then louder with her whole hand; Mrs. Rose was pretty deaf anyway. A light flicked on and she saw Bronco standing in a corner of the basement in his shorts and t-shirt. The walls around him were covered with cowboy pictures cut from magazines, calendar photos of wild steers and rodeo riders. Over his bed was a picture of a cowboy standing at a half slouch with silver studded chaps and a big grin.

When Bronco saw it was Rachel at the window, his eyes grew wide. He

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told her to wait while he came to the door. At the door, Bronco's face was a mixture of surprise and fear. “Wachel!” What do you want?”

“Bronco, just listen. You got to get out of here . . . My grandpa knows you're leaving and he's going to tell your mother. You got to get out tonight.”

He put his hand up to his forehead and began to cast his eyes around. “What do I do?”

“First get your pants on. Then throw some clothes in a bag, and bring whatever money you got—I got ten dollars graduation money—and get the truck keys.”

When Bronco came back outside, the two of them carefully slid open the garage door and went inside. Rachel climbed in the green Ford pick-up and shut the door; Bronco stood blinking for a moment, then got in with her.

“But you ain't supposed to go!”

“I got to get out of here too; I'm coming with you. I'm going to make sure you get to Gene Autry or someplace you want to be, someplace west. The west is a nice place,” she went on to herself, “They got ranches out there, dude ranches where you help with the trail rides and stuff. If I stay here they're going to send me to high school.”

Bronco put his hands on the steering wheel and stared out into the street. “Okay,” he said finally. For a long time he didn't move. Rachel began to wonder what was wrong; he just stared straight ahead and said nothing. “Bronco,” she nudged, “Bronco, why aren't you moving?”

“I can't. I can't dwive at night.” Rachel watched his hands flex on the wheel.

“You sure you can't?”

“Yeah, I can't.”

“Well, soon as it's light then,” she said.

“Yeah.”

Rachel stared out at the street lights with him. After a while she fell asleep.

When she woke again, it was daylight, and the plowed fields were running by her, unfamiliar fields. “Where are we?”

Bronco's hat was pushed back far on his head and his eyes were dancing. “You been asleep! We goin' west, gal!”

“But what road is this?”

“This is the way to Texas!” he said with a measure of surprise. Then he smiled again and honked his horn a little.

“Don't do that. I thought you said he lived in California.”

“Who?”

“Gene Autry. I thought you said he lived in California.”

“No, he wives in Texas,” he said smiling.

Rachel sunk back in her seat and let the nondescript fields and farms clip past her in a blur. Bronco didn't say much either. He just looked at her

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every now and again, smiling and chuckling to himself. She had never seen him so long at one time before, had never noticed how big his nose was and how sappy that grin looked, how flabby his cheeks were. She didn't know if she could look at him all the way to Texas. Glancing at the watch on her wrist she saw it was only eight o'clock: They'd probably been on the road an hour.

"Bronco, is this the way to Texas?" she asked quietly.

Bronco turned to look at her. "I can dwive!" he exclaimed. "I used to dwive down this way all the time. I bet you didn't know it." He laughed "Boy you got the big eyes now; you didn't know I dwove a twuck! See my buckle?" he asked proudly, twisting the belt so that Rachel could see the picture of an eighteen-wheeler embossed in the chrome.

"I know, Bronco. I know you drove a truck. All I'm saying is that if we'd turn south at the next junction up there, and keep heading south, we'd get to Texas quicker. That's all I'm saying."

Bronco furrowed his brow, turning the question over in his mind. "But Texas is out west," he said slowly.

"It is to people who live in the east," she said calmly, putting her feet up on the dash. "But we already live out west, see? Now all we have to do is go south."

"You mean you know a short-cut?" he asked, his face brightening.

"Yeah. That's what it is. You turn up there and we'll be on it."

"Well, *okay*," he said seriously, turning the pickup south at the junction.

Rachel looked at her tennis shoes on the dashboard. This was silly, she thought. Silly, silly. Everything looked clearer now that the sun was up, her shoes, the road, Bronco's hands on the steering wheel, the hair glowing around his knuckles. Silly. Stupid. He wasn't going to turn around and nothing she could say would stop him. She was in big trouble.

"Bronco," she began, not knowing what to say. He smiled at her, the dimples etching themselves into his pasty cheeks. "Bronco, why do you always smile?" Bronco didn't answer but his grin dropped a little. She wasn't sure why she had asked him that; you didn't ask Bronco questions like that. You could ask him what he was doing or where he was going. But you didn't ask him why. "Gene Autry doesn't even know us, Bronco. Why do you think you're going to find him, least of all get a job?" He turned his face, so that all she could see was the black felt rim of his Stetson. "Huh?" she asked, leaning forward, trying to see around his hat, "You going to go up and say 'Excuse me, Mr. Autry, but I'm Bronco Rose and I want a job on your . . .'"

"He knows me," Bronco replied, turning to Rachel with a benign expression.

"What?"

"Gene Autry knows me. I used to . . . I worked for him, so he wrote to me one time. I wrote to him back." His bushy eyebrows were raised high, his

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eyes daring her to contradict. She did not. She was staring into the eyes of Moses, just returned from the burning bush. She was scared.

As the sun rose higher, they entered the outskirts of another little town, past the gas station, Rachel spotted the wooden sign for a cafe. “I’m kind of hungry for some breakfast, Bronco; aren’t you?” she asked sweetly. “Why don’t you just pull in there?” He turned the wheel obediently and stopped beside the door. Rachel was hungry, but she needed a minute to think alone. Watching him through the cafe’s dirty window as he laughed with the counter-girl, she saw him differently; he seemed almost like any grown-up man, like any old truck driving cowboy who might stop there and laugh with the counter girl. Bronco returned with four egg sandwiches and a couple root-beers. She held out her hand to him, palm up, after awhile, but he only looked at her with surprise.

“Give me the change, Bronco.”

“I don’t have any.”

“I gave you ten dollars.”

“I don’t have any more.”

The rest of the afternoon she rode in silence. She wasn’t mad at him; she just knew he wasn’t real. None of this was real—going to Texas, Gene Autry, Bronco Rose—not even her hand resting on the open car window seemed a part of anyone genuine. She wanted to go home.

“When we goin’, gal?”

“In a *while*, Bronco, now don’t bother me any more about it; I told you I’m sick.”

“But we been sittin’ at the station for a wong time; it’ll get dark.”

“I called ahead and there aren’t any motels so we might as well stay here for the night.”

“I don’t want to,” Bronco whined, banging his hand on the steering wheel. Rachel didn’t know how much longer she could keep up the argument; pretty soon he would just turn the key and pull out on the road, with or without her permission.

She looked anxiously past his head to the even, green landscape beyond, cars skimming past every minute or two.

“Wachel, come *on*.”

“Shh,” she said, putting a hand on his sleeve. They were here.

He didn’t say anything. Even when she got out and stood behind her grandfather at his car, even while two men guided him out of the truck, his Stetson set at a crazy angle, even then he didn’t say anything. Nobody was talking much, not the forty-five-year-old man in the Stetson, not her grandfather, only the police radio was talking and talking about nobody that anybody knew or cared about. The man in the Stetson in the back of the police car sat resting his head in the crook of his arm in the rolled-down win-

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dow. The man in the Stetson was so real. She had to know.

“Bronco, tell me your name.”

The man in the Stetson smiled.

“Tell me your real name.”

“Bwonco Wose.”

The car was pulling away, the man in the back cocked his head and watched the first stars that were moving overhead.

“Say your real name.”

“My name is Bwonco Wose.” The man in the Stetson was gone.

She felt herself ask again. She felt her grandfather’s hand slip on to her shoulder. “His real name is Eldon Rose, Rachel. Get in the car.”

ROWING OUT TO AN ISLAND OF SWANS

Karen Heckathorn

Lately I grow dizzy happy rowing, rowing slowly
Only older sings the rock where I am leaning
We sing to each other alone and again
We sing and the spirits of flowers scream on the wind
And a bland breath whispers in our hearts
And we remember being ashes blowing across the sea
Fish songs and lace bones
Separating everything that holds us together

And we have never been nearer to weaving swans, rocking the water
Until we feel feathers rising from our limbs, out of goosebumps
In a shiver of white who is our mother
We freely swim from the trees
Where round bits of light still sleep in the nest
And we have surrendered peacefully our fires to the wetness
quietly
The voices sing of every other bird soaring and landing
And there are feathers of every color
falling across the wind

All evening long dream the swans, they kiss our faces
Long and lovely as the waves within their necks
our necks
Kissing like sleep and the sky stretching out from clouds
Blessing our bodies, grazing on our bones
And as we row, give in to our knees
Quivering under spears of light from almost stars
Away from the blazing shoreline that has disappeared like a fox
Into a hole in the air, into the inner herbs of a woman's ear
Soaring into a smooth field
the easy plain of the moon

And on to an island which we envision in the early distance
From our place in the forest where the animals have turned into shells
We collect them in our hands
and bend to listen
Savage breaths crawl in us like prayers
And so we kneel looking into the water's eyes
Which once reflected wild horses about to run
Through liquid
Out from the green blades trampled with mud
into the familiar blue face

And proud among the sand and seaweed
Under the gentle air of immortality we are dancing our lives long
In the moist twilight
we row the whole sky
Every season beats in our breasts and storms
And thunder falls across our features silently
Clapping us within the depths
In all the earth a love, a natural tune
A group of children singing
a single man

Nothing to be learned in the naked day
The sea undresses
We are drawn along the curves of the breeze
Blown from the nostrils of every breathing thing
The moon sees us rowing on the water
Reads our dreams and ploughs us through the waves
We fly with new wings
Easy as the swans hum
Highly flaming spirits
The candles in our eyes flicker
rowing out to an island of swans.

TREE POEM

Karen Heckathorn

When I was little I
wanted to
be a tree
a dogwood for
my mother and
for
my dog
Some
unconscious
thing that
knew everything growing under birds and
leaning out the
open window of weather
To leave the
little girl
in her bed on the inside
alone

(cont.)

A WOMAN'S QUARREL WITH THE WORLD

Karen Heckathorn

This woman broke down all the doors
Her house is a heap of saw dust
Cat and clock alike
the window and the teacups
all a splinter stack changing color with the light

And now that she is free she hardly moves
The trees bark at her back and in her eyes
Dropping dirty leaves onto her head
Slitting their veins across her hair
Pooling round her shoulders like a collar buttoned to the top

She never notices because she never swallows, or sees, or hears
like a woman should.

Inside her own veins breathe mutations of wild horses
Muted because they were born inside these tiny tubes
not round enough to cleanse their mouths of sound
let alone to allow space for unfolding legs
Tiny teeth nip notches in her bones to suck the marrow, then rest
their muzzles
when they fall asleep

Within their tiny brains they run and weep
They run because their instinct will not let them rest
They weep because the heart that gives them life is female
When they eat their tails grow and fill the woman's body with infinite black
lines
And when they sleep their dreams are sun and rain and magic
at one time flying high above cloud or star

The woman swallows these and in a moment all the colors arc before her eyes
Her lips release a smile
and soothing laughter races in her ears following the tingling of tiny hooves
like bells making love with the wind in a high steeple
She only moved her feet to kick down doors and once outdoors she ceased to
move
Except her shadow dances light.

DAGUERREOTYPE

R.J. White

The sun will sometimes strike the glass
and turn the windows of a house
blank, gleaming sheets of mocking black;
Thus I turned the picture in my hands,
a great grandfather's frozen frame,
a stranger in his stiff black suit;
Within a dark familiar house, no light,
no footsteps hurry to my echoed knocking.

To put a light within a house forms man
to fellow creatures pacing darkness by,
but nothing certain of intent
remains beyond the inference.
The stranger, eyes heavy with his walking,
pacing hours like ages past upon the road,
sees dark shapes and phantom lights,
ahead, behind, mercurial stars,
until he ends as he'd begun,
to find that no one's home.

Upon the stairwell of my house are stains,
patina of hands and shallow tokens
of the slow despairs and skipping joys
which passed that narrow corridor.
The shadow on the wall gives sign
that here there is a fretting flame.
A breath draws fire to flame,
A breeze as if a passage on the stair,
As if the phantom or the man were there.

And so I come this far,
as if between a mirror and a door,
waiting at the top of stairs
to grasp the human hand behind the glass.

SPOLETO

G.T. Cook

No change in the ancient city.
From the recessed
stores of memory
surface the olive trees,
the dark green oaks;
the mossy stones
covered with cyclamens
under the arched bridge
that also spans my years.
And the pain remembered,
like a cloud overhanging
the castle that grew on the hill.
The prisoners within
locked in the circle
of then and now and then
watch the sands
slowly descending.
The viper on the mountain,
lightly crushes the grasses
grown over the child's footprints.

*DANTE AND MATELDA

G.T. Cook

Matelda, smiling, gathered the flowers
beyond the serene waters of the Lethe,
sung with the birds in the sunlit shades
of the divine garden's perfumed bowers,
and to him whose fame among poets towers,
inquiring of her mirth, this answer made:
"Of love, which moves all things here created,
beauty is the first of manifested powers.
The shining sun sets the brook singing,
the water's melody (to lift the bloom above),
and joy and beauty in harmonious blending,
form a continuous, perfect exchange of love.
Caught in the eternal motion, I rejoicing,
lead the praising in this hallowed grove."

(*XXVIII Canto, Purgatory, Divine Comedy, Dante)

IPHIGENIA

Shelagh Stromberg

movie about, yes
the Greek one, the classic one,
cancelled
because of the storm.
on the staircase down
to the bowling alleys
you were sheltering
like the rest of us,
a thin woman
with a long grey braid
down your back
daughterless now—
a truck driven by a drunk
who never came back—
as the tornado won't
at any rate not yet.
What could we do
but hold your frail shoulders
in our arms
and regret
the film would not be shown tonight?

REUNION

Dan Safford

It was your idea and
I said okay—it's been
nine years, after all—
so we sit in dim old
Eddy's Bar, sipping
Miller beer, watching
Diamond Lil undo the
buttons of her blouse.

As we crack salted peanuts
and grab bits of each
other's lives, washing
them down with beer,
the light of the Hamm's
sign reflects off the table—
I can see your fingers
gripping the glass.
Remember when we built
that balsa wood glider
and you did the fine
work? My fingers were
short and too blunt, but
yours were slender enough
and long—they played the
sax, too, later on,
opening valves at the
top and the bottom
simultaneously; now
they are like metal pins
turned on a lathe in
your father's shop.
You pour out more beer,
set it before me; black
grit runs down the
side of the glass.
Diamond Lil dances on,
minus her blouse, and
now her black panties
slide down her thick thighs;
we hoot and clap with
everyone else, then I
drain my beer and
stand up to leave. You
smile at me, one eye on
Lil, whose glittering pastie
pops off a fat nipple;
your stiff fingers close
cold on my hand as your
eyes widen and I
move quietly to the door.

THERE, I TOLD YOU, THE RIGHT FORELEG TWITCHED

Steve Bark

“Don’t you ever brush your teeth?” Jones said.

“Being’s crazy’s a full-time job” the other said.

“All right, that’s it” Jones said.

“Somebody hide
the kitchen knives” said the other.

“Are you sure
a cigar is just a cigar?” Jones said.

“I wish I had a dime
for every small child you’ve frightened”
the other said.

“That’s definitely it” Jones said and
unholstered a ball-peen hammer which screamed for want
of activity and yet weeped
through the screams
aware of its own erratic nature.

“Somebody call a doctor” wailed the wall.

“Somebody call the police” whispered a lamp.

“Don’t you ever
brush your teeth?” Jones said.

or

“That’s definitely it” Jones said and walked
straight out the door and into the street
where a bored metropolitan
bus, willing to try anything
to break the monotony of its gas-and-money-saving mission
etc., etc., smack.

“Jesus Christ” said the lamppost.

“The crazy bastard’s walked in front of a bus”
the other said,
puffing on his cigar.

LINES FOR MY MOTHER

Taviishi Tewari-Malhotra

It is the season
when the sap climbs up
the maple tree and drips
through the hole men cut
to hold it all before it runs dry

And I think of my mother
far away, brave, noble
there is pus in her tear ducts
she writes to me and her eyes
grow dim with cataract

I can only write back in a large hand
words that are not me,
but then how else
would she know the difference
between the absent and the palpable

Through those sprawling black blots
I try to show her places
that she may never see,
as her past and future
become one in her eclipsed memory

I still see her as she was,
a higher Venus to my father's
Vulcan, yet in clothes so voluminous
even now I close my eyes
and mingle in the scent of her flesh

**EUGENIC POEM IN THE FORM OF AN ADMONITION,
SERVED TO THE DUSTY LITTLE ELEVEN- OR TWELVE-
OR THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL WHO IS LEANING AGAINST
THE BULLETIN BOARD OUTSIDE MINI-MART IN THE
NIGHTTIME, DISPLAYING HER LOBSTER CLAW**

Thomas Iver Bradley

So.

(One lonesome finger- and/or thumbnail
peeping out from under a hood of wrinkles
clipped back. Webs of pores
in weird configuration with flecks of grit.)

Your parents do not love you. I can tell from the way
the stuffing is coming out of your little parka.
I'll bet your Dad is military. I'll bet you gestated
around someplace nuclear and military.

Congenital or inherited—big difference:
one, you're Daughter of the age; the other, you're inbred.
In either case, never doubt that lobster claw betrays
some corresponding bend or rift
in the essential fiber of your very soul.
Don't deny it. That lobster claw *is* you.
And if already you are mature enough to appreciate your own rareness,
you certainly cannot ignore the fact that you will always be
somewhere deep repellent.

Lean for hours outside Mini-Mart
and watch people intensely to see if their eyes blench away.
Until someone with singular tastes—not necessarily old or filthy,
but definitely suffering self-image problems—comes along
and gives you a ride and winds up
examining your lobster claw *very* closely—?
Walking garbage can?
Well, you were born that way for *some* reason.

If what you have to do is bent, at least it is not trite.
You are not trite. Though you do happen to be in vogue right now
among the literati of the current generation.

Like for example *me*.

I didn't flinch away. I got a good, long careful look.

I knew you wanted me to; and the only reason I didn't say hello,
is that I *never* do. Not with anybody.

Whatever becomes of you, do keep in mind that
you are an organism. Maybe more so than most of us.
Claim your individual rights as an organism,
and much of your physical discomfort may be avoided.

That you're outside Mini-Mart already, at your age, seems auspicious.

SUNFLOWERS A LA VAN GOGH

Ron Koehler

Five or six neatly-combed brown heads
Paying strict attention
To the instructions of the
Photographer.
A few others,
Probably brothers,
Lounge idly in the Vincent vase,
Bored with the whole affair.
"Timothy! You're wrinkling your
New suit."
Timothy, too green to be anything
But adopted,
Peers suspiciously at the floor,
Checking for ants.

THE TREACHEROUS DEATH OF JESSE JAMES

Ann Carrel

“It was little Bobby Ford,
That dirty little coward,
Who laid poor Jesse in his grave.”

It would be Eddie
Sitting on the wooden porch
After breakfast, leaning
Against the screen door and
Making it bang with his elbow maybe.
Inside,
Jesse smells the grass
Through dusty screen wires,
The creak of the springs on the wind feels
Sharp on his shoulder blades.
Standing on a chair in the parlor,
His sock feet clinging
Slightly to the crack in the cane seat,
He wipes the haze of dust from across a face,
His face when he was twelve
Or someone's face who was
Or likely was,
Framed in wood with gilded edgings
Rubbed with his sleeve and bang
As he turns his head,
The gilt edges blending in his hair when he was twelve;
Son not so hard.

AT THE FAMILY REUNION

Marilyn Mann McCulley

we in-laws form a desolate group,
shunted to the outside circle, our
memories as totally blank as the
bald heads on level without eyes.
Snatches of conversation drift past the bloated
furniture, secrets emerging from the overstuff.

“Mamie took all the home farm that was
supposed to be divided.”
“They chased right after Harold’s son.
The cops said he was doing 85 before . . .”
“Yes, an early baby, but worth it—huge
violet eyes with black lashes.”
“. . . and all her kids were fat too.”

My eyes shift to a woody ring
rising on the polished floor. Termites
are bursting into the open and taking fatal
doses of fresh air.

FOR A HUSBAND UNLIKE MATISSE

Marilyn Mann McCulley

Mirror-imaged pears are possible
To be ravished of eye and more:
 To be respectable in form.
He liked sand-shifted amplitude—
Would never have complained
 About this Bartlett rear.

THE CALICO CAT SLEEPS

R.T. Wilson

the calico cat sleeps
curled in towards its center
the tail wrapped up towards its head
a partly-closed crescent eye
shining in the center

the calico cat sleeps
curled inwards like the eye of the storm
the circular streakings and patterns
of multi-colourous fur
swirling about its shiny eye
tucked in a somersault—
the fetal gymnast

how many times before
we saw the calico cat
prance white-pawed to the one red window
or stride soft and sure-footed
upon the white linen table top
and gave not a thought to the eternal implications
of such sinuous symmetry
and the mottled colors
arranged in such a form
wound in a pattern like the egg
tail running to head
flanks curved inwards
to the eye of the storm

now asleep
here she is fallen
like a raindrop at my feet
all the intangible secrets
of the gene and yellow eye
and the fragile, tilting orbits of stars
etched in the colors of her rounded form
stretched out on her tenuous limbs
tucked within the circular pattern
and gilded on the molecules of her curved spine

the calico cat sleeps
in the original pattern of yin and yang
elliptically formed
like the egg
like the orbits of stars
or the orbs of her feline eyes

the calico cat illustrates the mystery
through being by being of being
and elucidates in every feline gesture
each languid stride
every flash of her fire-orange eyes

was it any wonder that the ancients strove
to put on the power of the beast
as they felt it quiver
in the bases of their own beings—
the feline rhythms and forms
were ritualized and imitated
as in the dark temples of Shaolin
hidden from the eyes of the careful Mandarin
and the ancient kings of Egypt
instructed the workers of fine metals
to cast the image of the cat in bronze and gold
and flashing gems were placed
to emulate the flashing eyes of the cat

long ago
the barges floated down the slow river
draped with fine cloth, flowers, and perfumes
buoying the small sarcophagus to the sun
and when it was placed within the vault
the cat was placed within as guardian
so that when the boy-king arose once more
he could read the feline pattern like a chart
gauging distances by the chocolate markings
and direction from the elliptic eye
translating a course back
to where the Sphinx grumbled
with sound like falling stone
each time the cat
raised its head

STEP RIGHT UP

Kerry Val Taylor

Cast:

- MAN:** older; dressed in jeans, blue workshirt, leather belt and boots; with a wad of chewing tobacco.
- WOMAN:** also older; dressed in full length blue and white gingham dress, with stained white apron; rolling pin in her possession.
- TEACHER:** timeless; dressed in starched, black, Victorian style dress; hair pulled back into tight bun.
- GIRL:** young; dressed in slinky purple dress (?), black high heels, blonde wig which falls over front of dress since the neckline of dress isn't; with small silver cosmetic case with lipstick and cigarette.
- BOY:** between young and older; clad only in denim overalls with the suspenders unfastened so that bib and suspenders fall below the waist; lugs around a heavy volume bound in leather.

Curtain rises on a very dim stage. From stage left enter MAN and WOMAN pushing a 12' plain wooden ladder on coaster wheels. From stage right enter TEACHER with another ladder of same descript but painted a crisp white. Also enter GIRL from stage right pushing a shiny 12' aluminum ladder on wheels. These four characters and their ladders meet in center stage and engage in a painfully slow, quiet ballet of motion, where ladders intertwine. Offstage sounds indicate loud disruptive bursts of hammering that builds as the tempo of dancing ladders increases. Tapping sounds eventually cease, ladders disperse. GIRL and ladder move to stage left; TEACHER and ladder move to stage right; and MAN and WOMAN position their ladder in center stage—enough variation in positioning of ladders should be allowed so that an acute triangle is formed between all three ladders. They do not lie in a single straight line! Lights gradually warm on this hushed setting—but it is a strange plain white light generally NOT used by itself. Eerie shadows are cast by the sharp unnatural light. Enter BOY hefting book and shuffling to center stage, often stopping to glance upwards. BOY moves to apex of ladder in center stage, scratches his head, and poses his question to the pair above him—WOMAN on one side of ladder steps, MAN on the other side of steps, slightly more elevated than WOMAN.

WOMAN: Is that you buoy?

BOY: Yes ma'am.

MAN: (spitting out wad of tobacco) Sit down, buoy.

BOY: Yes sir. (seats himself under apex of ladder) Ma . . . do you think it'll rain today? Sorta looks like rain . . .

WOMAN: I dunno. Go ask your father.

BOY: Pa, ma sez for me to ask you if it'll rain today. Sorta looks like rain, don't you think?
MAN: Of course I think!! What do YOU think buoy? Don't you know nothin?

(take note here that **TEACHER** is situated behind her ladder on an upper most rung so that she commands a complete view of stage/audience, as well as having the steps of ladder lead up to her. **GIRL** leans provocatively against one side of her ladder, half way up, diligently applying lipstick.)

TEACHER: "don't know nothing" (deliberately clears throat) Double negatives . . . HHARUMPFFF . . . mind you, it's don't know anything. Memorize, memorize, memorize . . . One times one is one, one times two is two, one times three is . . . (she proceeds to go through entire multiplication list up to ten times ten, whereby she repeats the entire process in a buzzing monotone)

(**GIRL** casually, but with great show, pulls out a white hanky from the folds of her dress, waves it around without much energy, dabs forehead, and proclaims in a bored tone)

GIRL: I think it might really rain. (she drops hanky to floor and stares after it, then to **BOY**, and back to hanky. **BOY** rises from floor to move towards **GIRL**)

MAN: BUOY!! WHAT do you say?

BOY: (returning to place, humiliated, and sitting down) Mother may I?

WOMAN: (glances at **MAN** who nods) Yes, you may. (dismisses him with rolling pin, climbs ladder to top and mimes rolling dough)
When do you suppose that boy will make sumthin' outa hisself? (**MAN** spits disgustedly)

(in the meantime **BOY** has retrieved hanky and stands below **GIRL**)

BOY: (earnestly) Can I help you?

GIRL: (bored) I don't know. Can you?

BOY: What I meant was, may I help you?

GIRL: (still just as bored) Yes you may. (**BOY** then tries in vain to step up ladder to return hanky, but each step slips from underneath him, leaving him helpless and frustrated. **GIRL** laughs in a shrill hollow manner)

BOY: Dagnabit! Why can't I . . .

GIRL: (teasing) It takes a man, boy . . .

MAN, WOMAN, TEACHER, AND GIRL as **CHORUS:** (in echoing whispers) . . . boy . . .

GIRL: This isn't yours . . .
CHORUS: . . . isn't yours . . .
GIRL: Go back to start . . .
CHORUS: Start. Start. Start.

(offstage a bell rings twice)

TEACHER: (sweetly and in a sing-song way) Recess!

(all characters climb down their ladders, meet in center stage—some of them sitting on the edge of the stage, others stretching and yawning)

BOY: (remaining aloof) Hey, has anyone seen my script? (draws stares)

TEACHER: Ain't it a bitch up on those ladders?

GIRL: Well listen to her complain . . . You'd think she had a lot of hard lines to memorize. This damn wig is driving me crazy! (she pulls off wig to reveal short brown hair under a hair net)

BOY: Anyone seen my script laying around? (more blank stares)

GIRL: (to MAN) Say, you got a light? I 'bout had a fit up there (indicating ladder with cigarette pulled from silver case)

WOMAN: (undoing apron and tossing it aside) This whole thing is screwed!

MAN: (sarcastically) Well, what the hell makes you say that. . . .

BOY: (urgently) Has anyone seen my script laying around? I'm sure this part called for a ladder. . . .

(offstage bell rings once more, and characters return to places. Apron and wig being replaced, cigarette ground out)

BOY: (advancing towards TEACHER who has started in on her multiplication again) Excuse me miss. (TEACHER ignores him)

BOY: (louder and raising hand) Exx-cuuuse me . . .

TEACHER: (peering down nose) Yes boy?

BOY: Have you seen my script anywhere? I just know this part calls for a ladder.

TEACHER: (in disbelief) A ladder?

CHORUS: (in mock disbelief) A ladder?

TEACHER: Let me tell you a secret. Step right up boy.

CHORUS: . . . boy . . .

TEACHER: Step right up.

CHORUS: Step right up . . . ppp . . . pp . . . p

BOY advances to her ladder and steps onto the first rung which snaps in two. He tries the second rung which also breaks, as does the third rung as he grabs ahold of it to pull himself up—almost desperately clawing to get upon ladder.

Filled with failure and frustration, BOY dejectedly shuffles towards center stage and stumbles over the book he first entered with.

BOY: (joyfully) My script!

(BOY proceeds to thumb through book, pace across stage, and study the contents carefully)

BOY: (wondering outloud) So, that's how it's done. . . .

He then darts to GIRL's ladder and pushes it across stage while GIRL laughs and waves her purse in the air. The entire contraption is wheeled offstage completely. BOY rushes to TEACHER who has since resumed her mathematics and she too is wheeled offstage. The MAN and WOMAN are treated in similar fashion until stage is bare except for 'script.' A single white spotlight illuminates BOY, now seated on the floor, lost in thought with his 'script.'

After a minute or two of intense concentration, BOY shuts book and places it off to the side. His body arches into a slender, graceful, stretching type movement of exploring the distance to his toes, finding the entire range his arms can encompass, etc. BOY eventually rises from floor and in a slow motion effort of concentration he fastens the right suspender to his overalls—an intense act of defining the length of the single suspender strap and then snapping it into place on the bib of the overalls. Spotlight fades as the dim white light returns to blanket center stage in a strange light of semi-warmth while the rest of the stage recedes into shadowy depths. Enter CHORUS pushing a 12' wooden ladder with great effort and obvious disdain. Seated on top of ladder is the BOY's DOUBLE—dressed in overalls, suspenders fastened, and holding a large leather book in his lap.

CHORUS: (after placing ladder and DOUBLE to near center stage, and then huddling off to the side) Yesterday, we were. . . .

DOUBLE: (emphatically) Today, I am!

CHORUS: (pointing, leering, and advancing to BOY) But you!
You are . . .

BOY: (his bloody scream sends CHORUS scurrying offstage) NO!!!

(slight pause while BOY regains some semblance of calm composure)

BOY: Tomorrow . . . (triumphantly) . . . I will be!

DOUBLE: (nodding in appreciation) Then, let's get started.

BOY claps hands once and CHORUS re-enters from stage left pushing a wooden platform base on wheels. CHORUS delivers it to BOY and then they randomly scatter offstage. From stage right enter GIRL with a hammer which is given to BOY. TEACHER enters from stage left with a can of nails

delivered to BOY. In this continuous frenzy of action, enter MAN and WOMAN, stage right, with the wooden A-frame of a ladder. GIRL and TEACHER return with about sixteen wooden steps. CHORUS keeps pushing these materials onto BOY, taunting him, but never coming close enough to get in any real contact with BOY. Swinging the hammer wildly, BOY lunges after members of the CHORUS screaming at the top of his lungs until they all disappear. BOY returns to ponder over the cluttered stage.

DOUBLE: Are you ready now?

BOY: Yes, yes I think so.

DOUBLE: (reciting from book) Step one: Secure a firm foundation.

(BOY fits A-frame into prefabricated support braces on the wheeled platform.)

DOUBLE: Good! Good. Next, test the strength.

(BOY embraces a section of the A-frame and rocks it to and fro. It rests securely on its base)

BOY: I think I understand . . .

DOUBLE: Then sweat and toil to completion.

(BOY grabs a wooden step, hammer and nails, and with a burst of energy begins to hammer the first lower rung on backside of ladder repeating same efforts on front side of stepladder. NOTE: all steps fit very securely into prefabricated notches. Nails are driven into wooden frame for the effect of building only. Quickly and quietly, BOY builds his way up to the top of his ladder. DOUBLE nods and smiles appreciatively.)

(After placing the last, uppermost step in place, BOY seats himself on the top of the ladder he has built for himself, wipes the sweat from his forehead, and shakes hands with his DOUBLE . . . BOY surveys the entire stage and audience from this completely new perspective. In a flash of excitement he races half way down the ladder—jumping the rest of the way down to stage floor. Laughs wholeheartedly and triumphantly.)

BOY: So! That's how it's done!

(BOY begins to exit stage left—still laughing with pleasure at his accomplishment. He suddenly stops, returns to ladder and runs one hand over it gently and fondly. BOY picks up his book, and fastens the remaining loose suspender strap with ease. Stage lights warm to a soft golden glow. Houselights too begin to warm, and at once the entire stage and theater itself bask in a glorious, bright golden glow. BOY laughs once more and then instead of turning to exit offstage. BOY jumps off the front of center stage into audience, where he strides up the center aisle to rear of theater. Smiling.)

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Carl Buchanan assumes sole responsibility for the contents of this issue of *Touchstone*. The next issue will be edited by Dan Safford, whose office is in Denison Hall 116.



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