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CONTENTS

A Place to Die, <i>a story</i> , by Charles Powers	5
The Gods of Easter, <i>a poem</i> , by Thomas Eagles	15
Search, <i>a poem</i> , by Patrick Kelley	16
“Mine Eye Runneth Down with Water,” Evocations, <i>a prose-poem</i> , by John Stearns	21
Target Practice, <i>a poem</i> , by Patrick Kelley	23
In Thinking of All My Dying Friends, <i>a poem</i> , by Richard Gunn	24
The Sound of Water Only, <i>a story</i> , by Brenda Robert	25
The Birth and the Death (from <i>The Principles of Cendarius</i>), by Leon Frick	33
For You, <i>a poem</i> , by Charles S. Lovell	37
Sharing, <i>a poem</i> , by Charles S. Lovell	37
Rak’ah, <i>a poem</i> , by Keith LaQuey	39
“This, That You Call Love,” <i>a poem</i> , by James G. Van Buren	40
Waiting for the Ducks, <i>a story</i> , by Michael Dry	41

ART

Karen McAuley	17
Suzy Clark	18
Royce Keyser	19
Marjorie Moore	20
Richard Eugene Johnson	29
Hal Lund	30
James McKinley	31
Mary Ann Kice	32
Cover by David Haines; Illustrations by David Haines, Charles Howard, and Bill Taylor.	

Kansas State University
Student Literary Magazine
Winter 1962
Volume IV, Number 1
35c

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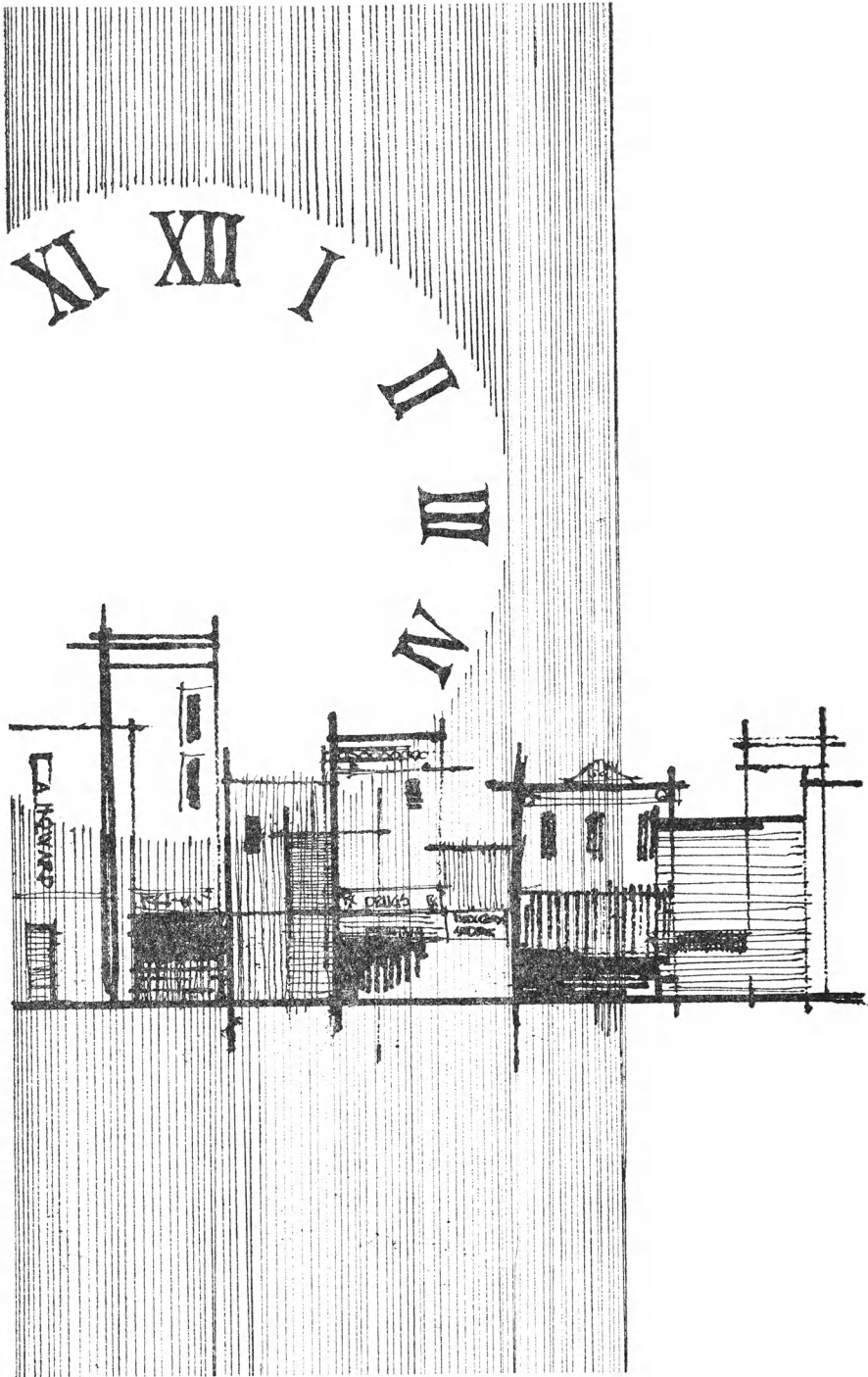
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A Place to Die

CHARLES POWERS

Old man Kline leaned on his wooden cane as he descended his front porch steps. It was a very sunny morning in early autumn, and a few fallen leaves were scattered across his lawn. He limped out to the sidewalk and started his usual morning walk to town.

Down the street he saw that Widow Stover was sweeping leaves from her sidewalk. She was always outside doing something when he passed.

"Good morning, Mr. Kline," she said as he approached.

"Morning, Widow," he said. The old man was the only one in town who called her "Widow."

"Looks like fall's coming early this year," she said.

"It's going to frost in a couple of days," Mr. Kline said. The widow's eyebrows lifted at this prediction.

"It's those bombs," he continued. "They're knockin' the weather cockeyed."

"I guess I'd better hurry and get my plants in, then," she said, looking at him as if for confirmation.

"I would, unless you want the frost to get them."

"I've got a vine over here, Mr. Kline, that's just barely hanging. . . ."

"Yes, yes, Widow." He cut her sentence short and limped on toward town. He didn't want to get mixed up with the widow's flowers. He was pleased when she asked his advice, but he hated to mess with flowers. He told her how to get rid of her bagworms last spring and he damn near had to do it for her himself.

Old man Kline walked to town the same way, passing at the same time, every morning. He noticed any change in the familiar street. He commented to himself when a new car or a new house remodeling appeared, wondering about the owner's financial status. However, Mr. Kline never entered into gossip, pro or con. He simply observed the happenings on his street and drew his own silent conclusions. The only person he ever talked to about the events in the small town was Jonesy, the proprietor of the drugstore down-

town. Although they sometimes talked for hours, the topics they covered could hardly be called gossip. In regard to someone's new Buick, for example, their conversation would be limited to its probable speed and gas mileage.

The courthouse clock chimed eleven as old man Kline limped into Jonesy's Drugstore. He hobbled to his usual seat in the booth closest to the front window, sat down and hung his cane on the edge of the table. On the table were a chocolate soda and two glasses of water. It was what he ordered every morning, and the soda-jerk must have remembered it. Kline looked up at the pimply-faced boy behind the counter.

"Sonny!" he called.

The boy looked up, and walked to the table, wiping his hands on a dirty apron.

"Sonny, you better ask me what I want next time. I might change my mind." The old man smiled at him, but the boy ran a hand through his greasy hair and turned from the table, eyes down and jaw clenched. Mr. Kline was sorry the boy got mad, but he'd be hanged if he was going to forever commit himself to chocolate sodas he didn't want.

Jonesy came out of the back presently and sat down to talk with the old man. They exhausted the daily topic of the weather while Kline drank his chocolate soda. Then they sat quietly listening to the whir of the big overhead fan.

"Business is a little slow right now," Jonesy said.

"It'll get a lot slower, too," said the old man.

"Oh, how's that?"

"Soybean crop was poor this year. Awfully poor."

"Yes, that's right," Jonesy said. He wrote something on a piece of paper and put it in his shirt pocket. "I'm gonna cut my order the next time the salesman comes around," he said. This reminded Jonesy of a joke the salesman told him, and he related it to Mr. Kline. One joke reminded him of several more and he told them all. Then the two men were quiet for awhile.

"What's today?" Jonesy asked presently. Then, looking at the old man's whiskers, he said, "Monday." Mr. Kline always shaved every other day because his face was tender. People who saw him regularly could tell almost what day it was by seeing whether or not he had a beard.

"They're voting at the council meeting tomorrow night on the sewer project out past your place," Jonesy said. "Are you going to have your say?"

"No, I reckon I won't be going," the old man answered. He waited for Jonesy's "How's that?" and then said, "I got a call from my boy, Adam, the other day, wantin' me to come to California and stay with his family for a few weeks."

"You don't say," said Jonesy, mustering all the profundity he could.

"Yeah, Doc Simms was there when he called. He said a trip would be good for me. He even offered to take me to the city to

catch the plane. So, I guess I'll go out for a couple of weeks or so. I got the plane tickets in the mail this morning."

"Whatcha plan to do while you're there?" Jonesy asked.

"I don't know. I haven't seen Adam in years. They got a couple of kids now, you know."

"You don't say."

"Yeah. I guess Adam and I will do some hunting or something."

"Go see Hollywood for me," Jonesy said, and they laughed. Mr. Kline extracted a huge pill from his pocket and Jonesy watched with interest as the old man used the extra glass of water to swallow it. Kline got up to leave.

"Hey," Jonesy said, "I'm taking the boys squirrel hunting this weekend. Where's a good place to go?"

"Old Harv Curtwright's place is pretty good, if you can sneak onto his back forty. I went out there last week."

"Way out there?" Jonesy asked.

"Yes, it's a real good place for squirrels along that creek. I go there whenever I feel like hunting." The old man walked on toward the door, glancing at the soda-jerk. He turned to Jonesy and said quietly, "I hope the boy don't step on his lip." They both laughed. Old man Kline opened the door and stepped out to the street while the big clock was striking twelve.

The next day Mr. Kline went to the city to catch the plane. He had never flown before, and he dubiously boarded the big jet that was to take him to Los Angeles.

He wanted to appear confident and used to flying, but he didn't know how to act. He sat down and looked out the window for a minute, and decided to light a cigar. Doc Simms said he could have one a day. "No smoking on the ground, sir," said a stewardess, smiling as if to temper her admonishment. The old man grinned back at her, his hands fumbling with the seat belt. She had to help him fasten it.

In these unfamiliar surroundings, his nerves were on edge. He tried to sleep, but it was useless. The seat, despite his efforts, refused to recline and he was embarrassed to ask for aid from the stewardess. A baby cried loudly somewhere in front of him. Later, during the mid-flight meal, he spilled a glass of milk. He wondered if Adam and Mary would be able to find him at the Los Angeles airport.

His fears evaporated when he got off the plane and saw Adam, Mary, and the children waiting for him. The hugs and kisses were hurried, as if more important things were being delayed. An awkward silence prevailed as they stood apart and looked at each other. Mr. Kline was much thinner now, and Adam's surprise at this was revealed in his face. The old man was a little awed with the sight of his descendants. The children stood silently by, staring at their grandfather's shoetops. Mr. Kline smiled down at them. He turned to Denny and struggled to lift him.

"My, you're a big boy. How old are you, young man?"

"I'm seven."

"He's six!" little Mary corrected him by right of her two-year seniority. Mr. Kline laughed as they walked to the car.

As he was getting into his son's new Thunderbird, the old man banged his head on the low roof, and muttered a few short curses as he rubbed the pain away. Adam gave his father a quick, reprimanding glance across the seat.

"It's kind of small, isn't it?" Adam said.

Mr. Kline stifled another emphatic curse as he agreed with his son.

He was fascinated by the myriad of lights around him, and he asked if they could go see Hollywood.

"We'll go some other time," Adam said, "but it's out of our way now. Besides, there isn't anything to see anyway."

At the house, Adam, Mary, and the old man talked of home. Adam asked his father about Doc Simms, which surprised Mr. Kline somewhat. He hadn't realized that Adam knew the doctor. He sat silently wondering about it until Mary spoke.

"We thought we'd go down to the house in Escondido, Saturday, Dad. Adam and I like to play golf there, and the kids like it. It'll be nice for you there."

"Lots of sunshine," Adam said. "It'll be good for you."

"I guess so," said the old man. "Got any mountains there?"

"A few; not real high ones, though," Adam said.

"Anything to hunt down there? We could go hunting."

"Not much of anything to hunt for, Dad."

"We could go target shooting, then," Mr. Kline offered.

"I don't even have a gun. Besides that, it's pretty rough country for you, Dad." Adam showed no notice of the disappointment in his father's face.

"How about a glass of milk before you go to bed, Dad?" Mary said. "I bet you're tired."

Mr. Kline declined the milk with a slow turn of his head. He looked at the scotch and water Adam was sipping. He would have liked a shot of whiskey like he had every night from the pint bottle by his bed at home, but Adam probably didn't think he should drink. Mr. Kline went on to bed, thinking about his shot of whiskey and that he wasn't going hunting.

The old man rose early the next morning; he couldn't sleep well in the strange bed. He sat in the unfamiliar living room until Adam and Mary got up. As they ate breakfast together, Mr. Kline looked out the kitchen window.

"You have a lot of fog around here, don't you?" he said.

"That's smog, Dad," Adam said. "We have it almost all the time anymore."

"I tell you, it's those bombs they're settin' off. It even messes up the weather out here," the old man said.

Adam laughed and the old man said, "It's true; I read . . ."

"I've got to go, Dad," Adam

said, still chuckling. "Mary, where's my briefcase?"

He went to work and Mr. Kline returned to his chair in the living room and sat there almost all day, getting up periodically to pace the floor. He wanted to take a walk about eleven, but he was afraid of getting lost. Mary asked him if he wanted something to read. He said no, but she put a stack of magazines in his lap anyway.

Mary talked with the old man for awhile, but they soon ran out of things to say to each other. He offered to help her clean up the kitchen after lunch, but she wouldn't hear of it. There wasn't much to do, she said, so Mr. Kline returned to the living room and resumed his pacing.

That night was just as uneventful. Adam had some work to do, so they didn't go anywhere. Mr. Kline didn't get to visit with his son, and he went to bed early, but couldn't sleep for a long time.

In the morning the old man decided to take a walk. He picked up his cane and a jacket and limped out the door. He went two blocks, and seeing a young housewife out in her front yard trimming an odd-looking bush, he stopped and watched, wondering what kind of a plant it was. The woman turned, saw him looking, and, in spite of Mr. Kline's smile, she went quickly into the house. He stared after her for a moment, puzzled, and then returned to his son's home and spent the rest of the day and night sitting in front of the television.

Friday started the same way.

The old man's nerves tightened during the idle hours, and he fidgeted while soap operas cried away the day.

When the children came home from school in the afternoon, Mr. Kline played with them until he became tired. He nervously sat watching his grandchildren romp on the floor. They were boisterous and shrill. Later, he sharply scolded them for ripping the covers off some of the magazines on the floor. The children ran wailing to their mother.

Mary related the incident, with everyone present, over dinner. The children cowered, heads down and eyes on their plates, as Adam looked at them sternly.

"I'm sorry they bothered you, Dad," he said after dinner, after they had returned to the living room. Adam was standing in front of the old man, who was seated uncomfortably in a straight-backed chair. A badly positioned reading lamp was shining unreasonably on his face. Adam smiled at his father, but Mr. Kline caught a flicker of annoyance that came through Adam's veneer of casualness.

"They weren't bothering me," the old man lied. "I just thought you might like to keep your magazines." He looked into the glaring light, and shifted on his chair.

"They were old anyway," Adam said. "Didn't hurt anything. If they bother you again, Dad, just call Mary. She'll take care of them."

I bet she will, the old man thought. He was mad, but he kept



his expression indifferent. "Kids need a good talking to every once in a while," he said. "Like castor oil."

"I hope they don't need castor oil, too," Adam said, and laughed, apparently forgetting the matter. Mr. Kline laughed, too, but he didn't forget it. Adam stood looking down at his father, not speaking. It was making the old man nervous to look up at him.

"Why don't you sit down?"

"I have some work to do, Dad."

"You always do." Mr. Kline fought to keep an easy tone. "You haven't talked to me five minutes since I came here. What do you think I came for, Son?" Adam looked uncomfortable as these words were spoken.

"I have to do it, Dad. I'm sorry, but I don't know what I can do about it," Adam said, turning on his heel and walking out of the room. Mr. Kline, after sitting still for a minute, got up and limped to the small room where Adam worked.

Adam was sitting at his desk and rummaging through the briefcase, which stood beside his chair. Mr. Kline stood in the doorway, watching his son arrange some papers before him on the desk. He wanted to say something—anything—to Adam, and he was about to speak when his son looked up abruptly.

"Really, Dad, I'm busy as hell," he said. He stood up, walked over to the door and laid his hand on the knob. He opened his mouth, as if to further encourage his father's exit, but Mr. Kline walked

away, his cane thumping on the floor in time with his steps.

He went to the kitchen, where Mary was washing the dishes. He sat down in a chair by the table and leaned forward on his cane.

"Adam always work like this, Mary?" he asked.

"He has a lot to do," she said, without turning around. The old man grunted and was quiet for a while, wondering what to say.

"Denny. Mary," she called. "Come dry these dishes." The children came in, and Mary directed Denny to the dish towel, which, Mr. Kline noted, the boy had trouble locating every night. After Denny found the dish towel, no one spoke. The children seemed to avoid looking at their grandfather, and their silence was emphasized by the clatter of dishes. The old man sat still for several minutes. He couldn't talk to Mary, he said to himself, returning to the living room. A western was on the television, turned up much too loud. Mr. Kline had sat down before he noticed this, and he stared at the television defiantly, determined not to move a muscle to lower its volume. Mary came in from the kitchen and turned it down. She went back to her dishes, hands dripping, not giving the old man a glance. He sat there until midnight, watching what he considered to be completely idiotic programs. Adam didn't come out of the room all evening, so Mr. Kline went to bed without seeing him.

He lay awake for a long time. He had spoken to no one all eve-

ning long after his attempt to talk to Mary had failed. He had kept his anger completely to himself, and it was beginning to gnaw at him. Adam could be hard to live with sometimes, he thought. He wasn't always so big. He'd like to tell Adam that, too. He began to wonder why he came to California. Adam was busy every night and never would talk. Adam should have asked him out during his vacation. But he probably worked even then. Tomorrow was Saturday, though, and they were going to Escondido.

Maybe Adam would talk there.

The next day everyone got up early and piled in the Thunderbird—the old man bumping his head again—and headed south from Los Angeles. The hundred miles to the cottage were grueling. Denny and Mary crawled all over their mother in the back seat. The old man silently looked out the window, young voices rasping on his nerves. Adam whistled contentedly.

The Southern California heat was growing bothersome, despite the early hour. The country, flat at first, became a series of sandy, red hills. The sparse cedar scattered over them was short and scrubby. In places, rock slides smoothed the jagged outline of a hillside from top to bottom. The old man realized, as he watched the strange country slide by, that

he'd seen very little in his lifetime.

As they gained altitude the heat diminished somewhat and it began to get cloudy. The mountains had the same desolate look, but they were higher now and more numerous. The Thunderbird left the main highway and traveled for several minutes on a narrow ribbon of black-top road that hove to the perimeter of a beautiful bowl-shaped valley.

They were at the cottage soon. It sat at the foot of the western ridge, facing the golf course on the valley floor and the

mountains that bordered its other side. The cottage was like several others close to it: shuttered windows, four small rooms, knotty pine interior, crabgrass lawn.

Mary fixed some sandwiches and hustled the kids off to the country club nursery. Adam, munching a sandwich, stood looking out the door. He took a long drink of beer and said he hoped it wouldn't rain. Adam and his father walked around outside the house for a while, and Mr. Kline felt comfortable and happy. Adam pointed out to his father the big antenna that he and the men of the weekend community had put on top of the mountain behind the house. "TV comes in clear as a bell now," he said. The old man looked up at the antenna.

"Mary and I are going over for a little golf, Dad," Adam said



quickly. "Do you want to come or stay here and catch some peace and quiet?"

"I think I'll just stay here and putt around, Son." Adam laughed. The old man thought, the phrase "peace and quiet" was as painful as it was disgusting. Another minute of it would be unbearable.

"Better shave, Dad. There's some people coming over after we play golf today. You'll like them."

Mary came back and said something to Adam about a calcutta, and they left hurriedly, promising to return in the afternoon.

Mr. Kline lay down on the couch for a few minutes, and tried to sleep. He didn't want to shave. He didn't want to meet any people. He angrily wished he were home, with someone to talk to.

Growing restless, he got up and ate a sandwich. He looked out a back window at the mountain. It wasn't so damn rough, like Adam had said, he thought. The old man sat down again, then got up and paced through the house, looking for something to do. He found nothing to interest him, but he kept pacing.

On a nervous lap through the house, he turned to the window once more. To hell with it. He would go for a walk, he thought, desperate to relieve his gnawing boredom. He gritted his teeth. Right up that mountain, too! He picked up his cane and went out the back door of the cottage.

Behind the house, the mountain sloped gently for a hundred yards before rising abruptly to its rounded top. The ground was

dusty and full of small holes and wash-outs. The old man walked slowly over this uneven ground. The clouds made it cool now and he enjoyed winding his way through the rocks and clumps of brush. He had walked almost half the distance between the house and the steep slope when he stopped and stared intently at the ground. He brought his cane up and down several times, jabbing at an ant-hill. It was very large, almost three feet across its sandy surface. He thrust his cane into the hill and pried the dirt up and watched the chaos that followed.

The old man squatted on his haunches and held the cane like a shovel, digging and rooting into the nest. The ants seemed to come from everywhere. The ground was covered with the frantic insects, running in senseless circles. He shoved the cane down again and again and scattered ants and dirt high into the air. He stood up and flailed the ground with the cane. For a minute he watched and then kicked out furiously, wrecking what was left of the ant-hill. Again he stood still, leaning heavily on his cane as sweat rolled into his eyes. It was getting hot.

The ants hadn't seemed to diminish in number, and the fact irritated him. His eyes picked out a single ant and followed its inane movements for a minute. "God-damn, you're stupid!" he said, shocked afterward with the pleasure the words gave him. He remained watching for a few minutes and then continued up the hill. He had, by now, reached the

point where the slope steepened, but he was too close to notice it. He was only unconsciously aware of the increased effort he was making; his mind was on the ants.

Stopping in front of another anthill, he squatted and watched. It was bigger than the first one. It gave the old man a weird pleasure to destroy the ants. He hovered over it, wondering if the ants knew the hand of a god was about to smite them. He poked one of the holes in its surface and several ants swarmed out, running in the same chaotic circles. He watched and wondered if they knew it *now*. Then he destroyed the anthill as he had the first one, but more quickly and more excitedly.

He perspired heavily as he turned to go further up the hillside. Dirt ran in muddy rivulets over his gaunt cheeks. The stubble on his chin caught the dirt and held it, giving him a dark mask. His bad knee was weak from squatting and his cane sank deeply into the ground with the weight put on it. He climbed steadily upward, his eyes searching the ground.

He found two more small ant-hills and wasted little energy on them. The old man was having trouble breathing. The sun found its way from behind the clouds and bored into the back of his neck. He was tired. Turning around to look behind him he found he was almost a third of the way up the mountain, more than a mile from the cottages below. He could see the whole golf course plainly from his vantage point.

The people were tiny specks against the green background. Once in a while a voice would drift up to him from below. He glanced up at the harsh sky, wondering where the clouds had gone.

Old man Kline turned and walked onward a few more feet until he spotted what he'd been looking for. The anthill was as huge as any he'd seen. Once more he squatted down, wondering whether the ants knew. He pushed at a hole, watched the activity around it and then proceeded to tear the nest to pieces. Ants and dirt sailed into the air, some landing on his back. He smashed white larvae and hunted for the queen. Sweat rolled off his chin, dropping onto the sandy ground. Ants crawled on his shoetops to be smashed under his thumb.

The old man repeatedly brushed ants from his neck, but he kept digging. Some of the ants had crawled up his arms and under his shirtsleeves. He felt a sharp sting on his shoulder. As he turned to pinch away its source, his eye caught the form of a huge rattlesnake, not two feet away.

Kline's arm remained frozen between his knee and shoulder. His open mouth made no sound. For a minute, knowing he must not move, he watched the tongue slide in and out of the hideous head. Then, the snake started slowly toward him. Panic stricken, he knew he must run before the snake got closer. He turned and darted away, his cane trying to keep up with his leg. It couldn't, and the old man fell. As he crawled to his

feet, he thought he saw another snake slithering toward him. He had to get down fast; they were probably all around him. Suddenly, he was very tired. He crashed through the brush, stumbling, and falling, and aching. "Oh God," he thought, "I'm weak." His cane caught under a root and jerked from his hand. He tried to keep going without it, stumbling on and on until his legs wouldn't keep up with the downhill momentum. He fell and outstretched arms refused the weight. His face slammed against the ground and scraped along it.

Now he couldn't get up—couldn't move at all. His chest ached dully and he choked through his constricted throat. He vaguely realized that he was lying across

one of the big anthills he had destroyed. The sun was pleasantly warm on his back now, and he didn't want to move. "But I shouldn't be *this* tired," his voice croaked. "It shouldn't be *this* bad."

He lay still a long time, wishing he were home and wondering why he wasn't. He thought of home and Jonesy, and, for a second, of Doc Simms. Yes, Doc Simms. Suddenly he knew. He realized why he was so tired, why he was here. He thought of his son, of this place—and why. "They tried," he said, "they tried to . . ." His mind would no longer support the weight of the thought, and with one open eye, he watched a lone ant crawl searchingly over his hand.



The Gods of Easter

THOMAS EAGLES

I've lain upon the shores of Easter Isle,
Where gods inscrutable look down upon
The empty sand which stretches mile on mile,
And men of native blood are all but gone;
And as I lay as one with earth and light,
The gulls above me skimming pools of air,
I watched the regal figures, lest they might
Come all at once to life and turn this fair
Bright cloudless day of my unbounded ease
Into a hell of unleashed pent-up rage.
I lay rock-still, in efforts to appease
These deities, omniscient, of an age
When man was new; I also wondered why
The gods had come. And—what?—are we to vie?

Search

PATRICK KELLEY

The hills race in dark figures
toward the stars.
Stand there in the night,
for on the deep-misted valley floor,
a light waves and arcs,
an old voice cries a name.

The wind laughs across a leaf,
the light pauses, listening.
A leaf ripples a pool.

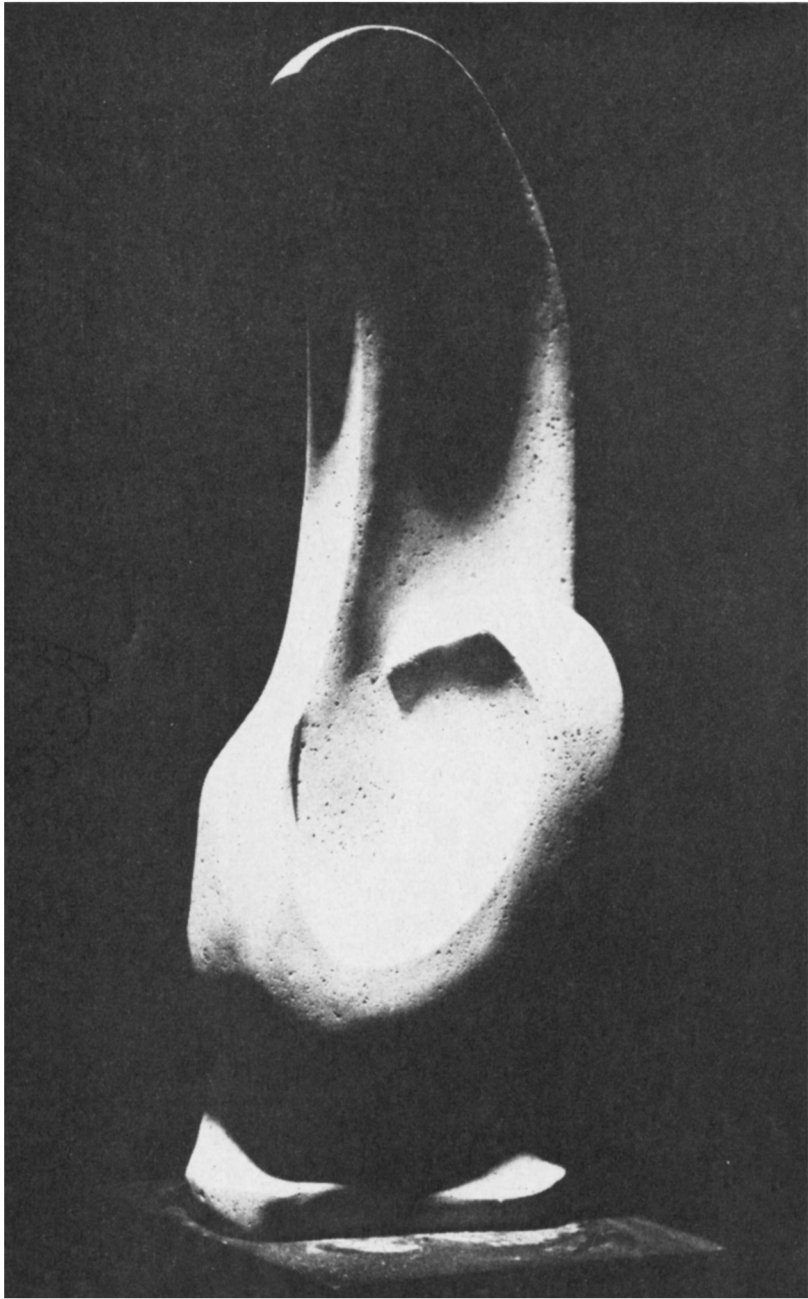
The light dims, recedes,
stumbles through the twisted trees,
around a hill,
and is gone.



KAREN MCAULEY



SUZY CLARK



ROYCE KEYSER



MARJORIE MOORE

“Mine Eye Runneth Down with Water”

Evocations

JOHN STEARNS

I

“Ride the west wind,” it whispered to me. “Ride the west wind.” A blade of grass moved and I saw a muddy stream winding slowly, savagely through a brown and barren land. The water went slime green and the blade moved no more.

From where I sat I could see, or thought I could see, all humanity below me. The giants had come to stride the valley, to walk the valley, to crush the beetles there. A cricket moved beside me in the silence of the sun and would not rub legs for heaven or nature, nor for me. He—I say he for I had learned to tell the difference—he only moved and moved a blade of grass, not stopping to ponder what he had done. He scared a green snake, though, with his blade of grass. Dinner bells, friend snake. I had always thought death black and life green. Not so on a day when black cricket served green snake a breakfast on moving a blade of grass. Tell the grass, the grass tells all. So nice of you, Mr. Cricket, to be wearing your coat of mourning on a day the giants came to the valley, and a whisper rode the air.

II

I saw a blade of grass move, I did; I saw it. You run longlegged through the grass, it whispers and I can smell it. You race the plains with a long stride. Your feet touch lightly on barren earth, and scare a green snake with black cricket in belly. I think you scare it anyway. The winds are your legs now. Once, a long time ago, your legs were the winds, or seemed to be. You ran faster than I could, and topped hills to see the other side. The grass pointed after you, long headed, and told the winds. "Winds blow 'way." The earth loved you, the barren earth, and held your feet lightly for the passing wind. The earth loved you, the barren earth, and was loath to see you go. It lived the day you raced a small sailing cloud, and topped a hill too high for me, riding your wind, and reached for the sky.

The land is dead, the barren land, the brown land. The wind blows cold and whispers to me, but the grass does not move. Winds blow 'way. Part the long headed grass. Sweep the barren land. . . . She's not here today.

I saw a bright green snake eat a black cricket.

III

The giants are striding the valley. The beetles lie dead in the dust. The dust, I taste the dust, my nostrils are full of it. It creeps like a killing fog up the mountainside, up rock, up grass, up nostrils, up from the feet of the giants in the valley. A bright green snake is coated grimy brown and becomes sick, coughing up his breakfast of black cricket, now a sticky clump with here and again a recognizable feature to let me know that I knew it once and was able to define it by sex. Dead black cricket becomes a brown organic clump and attracts flies and ants in the dust. They too are brown-coated, as is a carrion beetle, an American sexton I think, who stops for a moment to smell, with loathing, then passes on into the valley to be crushed before the sun is blotted by the dust.

A small sailing cloud calls for aid and is soon joined by friends who contrive to blot out the sun, and rain, driving the dust down to mud, rolling, turning, flowing mud; mud flowing down rock, down grass, down to the valley where giants stand dripping, looking stupidly, unable to understand, and are drenched while a bright green snake, American sexton beetle, ants, flies, and the vomited carcass of a black cricket in mourning coat and washed clean in the cool falling water. I snort my nostrils and feel relieved.

Target Practice

PATRICK KELLEY

At the pressing of my finger,
a tin can died into the
snag-riding river.
A bird rose from the grasp of
a winter tree,
remembering the sound of death,
but not the meaning.

When the hills had ceased to care,
I alone remembered the elation
of the sound of death.



In Thinking of All My Dying Friends

RICHARD GUNN

And when he shall see his days poured out
As a libation, scarcely spotting unaging sand,
Will he weep, or will he turn to the
Coachman and quietly offer up his hand?

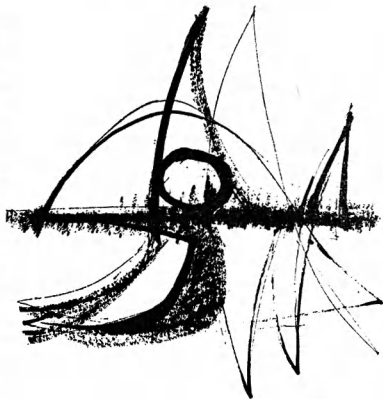
The Sound of Water Only

BRENDA ROBERT

The car swung onto the hard-graveled area of the Point and stopped, its headlights making twin beacons of light far out on the black ocean. Phil Crane cut the motor and settled back in the car seat to wait. It would be at least

fifteen minutes now before the grunion would come in; lights always scared them away from the shore.

He sat in the soft warm night, listening to the slap of the waves breaking on the beach. He wasn't sure just why he had come. On impulse, he had driven the seventy miles south from Los Angeles to this remote stretch of beach just to watch the grunion come in. He could remember when he was a boy, the slightly mysterious trips to the beach at night to pick up the silvery fish when they came onto the beach to spawn. The rest of the fellows would spread along the shore and he would stay in his appointed spot, small and shivering a little in the damp air, wondering if the fish would come and hoping in a way that they wouldn't. He loved to see them, but it seemed a shame to kill them. The thick spawn would drip from their bodies when he picked them



up, and he had wondered if the eggs would hatch anyway. Perhaps, if they did, it wouldn't be so bad. Waiting in the dark, he was always surprised by the first wave surging onto the beach. Then, he would rush to the water's edge and

start filling his bucket. Sometimes a wave would break over him and he would retreat to the beach, icy with the cold and with a nameless fear of the dark water.

And now he was back, because of some strange pull from the silver fish and the dark water. The impulse had been almost mystic, like a tide, tugging and pulling him to the sea, to the constant pulsing rhythm of the waters.

Phil slowly got out of the car and then stood for a moment, looking down at the ocean. The air was moist and warm; it seemed to be quivering with life. A full moon dappled the water with soft patches of light and the sand had a creamy look in its glow. He half slid, half jumped down the slope to the rocks below. The tide was coming in, each wave curving up and in, breaking on the beach, and then rolling back, leaving a strip of dark wet sand in its wake.

He stripped off his shoes and

socks, rolled up his trousers, and walked to the water. The sand was clean and dry, then firm and wet. He put one foot hesitantly in the water and felt the slick, cold leaves of a clump of kelp. Feeling somehow slighted, he backed away. The water didn't feel the same. It was too cold and the weeds were slimy.

He walked back to the rocks and sat down, waiting for some sign of the fish. Far out to sea, the lights of a steamer twinkled in the night. The day seemed very far away. A flicker of white on the beach to the right caught his eye, and he whirled around. A girl, dressed in filmy white, was walking toward him. What's a girl doing on the beach at this hour, he thought. Probably wandered away from her family. He turned away, pretending not to see her. He didn't want to scare her.

The sound of a sigh, a whisper, hovered in the stillness.

"Hello."

He thought it was the sea or an echo from up the beach, and then he realized she was near, standing a little to the side and shadowed by the cliff, speaking to him. She smiled at him.

"Hello," he said, awkwardly. "Waiting for the run, too?"

"The run?"

"The grunion run," he said. "Are you waiting for them?" He spoke gruffly, feeling uncomfortable at her approach. She seemed so totally unaware that it might not be the right thing to do. He was almost angry. How does she

know I'm a nice guy? She might run into some tough character on the beach at night. He looked at her intently.

She nodded knowingly. "Oh, the fish. Yes, I came out to watch them." She came toward him and sat on a rock. She seemed very young. Her long pale hair hung straight about her face and clung damp to the curve of her neck and shoulders. Her eyes were intensely green and wide, with long fair lashes curving upward.

"Who are you," she asked, "and why are you here alone?"

He laughed at the directness of her question and then replied, "I'm Philip Crane and I heard the grunion would run tonight, so I decided to come back and watch. I haven't been down here since I was a kid. Now, then, just who are you?"

"Diane," she said promptly. She rested her chin on her hands and stared at the water. "I should think you would come here more often; the ocean is so beautiful."

He followed her gaze and silently nodded agreement. It was relaxing just to sit and watch the waves break. But who has time to waste like that?

"I work in the city," he said, "and I don't have the time to get away very often. I should be at home right now, doing some work."

She looked at him sympathetically. "That is a pity."

He lit a cigarette and then looked at his watch. "The fish should come in before long now."

Her laughter hung in the still

air like tiny liquid notes. "You can't time these things, Philip Crane. You have come; now you must wait for them to come to you. Time is meaningless to the people of the sea."

He looked at her curiously, "You're a wise little miss."

She laughed again and stood up on the sand. "Oh, I must dance. Can *you* hear the music from the sea? Will you dance with me, Philip Crane?" She stretched her arms to him pleadingly. "All music needs dancers."

He listened to the night, but the muffled roar of the waves was the only sound. "There isn't any music," he said.

"Oh, my poor man, you are so wrong. You must listen and learn to hear it. Watch."

She swirled lightly and the soft folds of her white dress shimmered in the pale light of the moon. She folded her arms across her chest and swayed gently, barely moving at first. Then, spreading her arms out, she ran lightly across the beach toward the water, swirling, dancing to her music. Her hair streamed back in the air and she seemed an enchanted being as she moved across the sand. The man wondered at the magic of her dance. What a strange child.

Abruptly, she stopped and ran across the sand to him. "They will be here soon."

He looked to the sea and saw, beyond the breakers, the glitter of silver in the dark water.

He turned to the girl and pointed, "They are coming . . ."

"Shh!" she said. "Just watch."

A high wave broke onto the beach, bringing a scattering of the grunion with it. The small fish wriggled excitedly, burrowing into the sand with their tails until they seemed to be standing erect on the shore. Wave after wave rolled in, increasing the numbers, until the whole stretch of beach was covered with hundreds of the squirming silver fish. The moonlight glittered on them like so many shiny silver coins, making the beach sparkle.

The girl ran to them and picked up a fish. She carried it gently in her hand back to the man.

"Here," she said. "It's for you."

The man shook his head. "No, take it back. I have no use for it."

She stood before him, the fish lying quietly on her palm. It was so still that he thought it surely must be dead.

"But it's beautiful," she said. "It's my gift to you, Philip Crane. It can tell you of the music."

"Don't be silly, child. I can't keep a fish. It's dying, anyway."

She looked at him sadly. "No, Philip, it won't die. But I shall take it back if you won't have it." She walked to the water and placed the fish reverently in it.

He watched her, feeling somehow that he had lost something. He was uneasy—the girl, the sea, the fish, all seemed unreal and far away.

The grunion were beginning to leave, the waves taking them back to the deep sea. The eggs, buried in the sand, remained as part of the cycle. The girl walked a few steps forward and then stopped.

She called to him, "Will you leave now that the fish are gone, Philip?"

He stood up and moved toward her. "Yes, I suppose I'd better go on back to town."

"Will you dance now when you hear the music?" She smiled impishly at him. "You will hear it now, won't you?"

He laughed. "Yes, Diane. I will hear it now."

"Thank you, Philip Crane." She turned her back and began to walk slowly away. Stopping, she looked around at him for a moment and then said, "Goodbye, Philip."

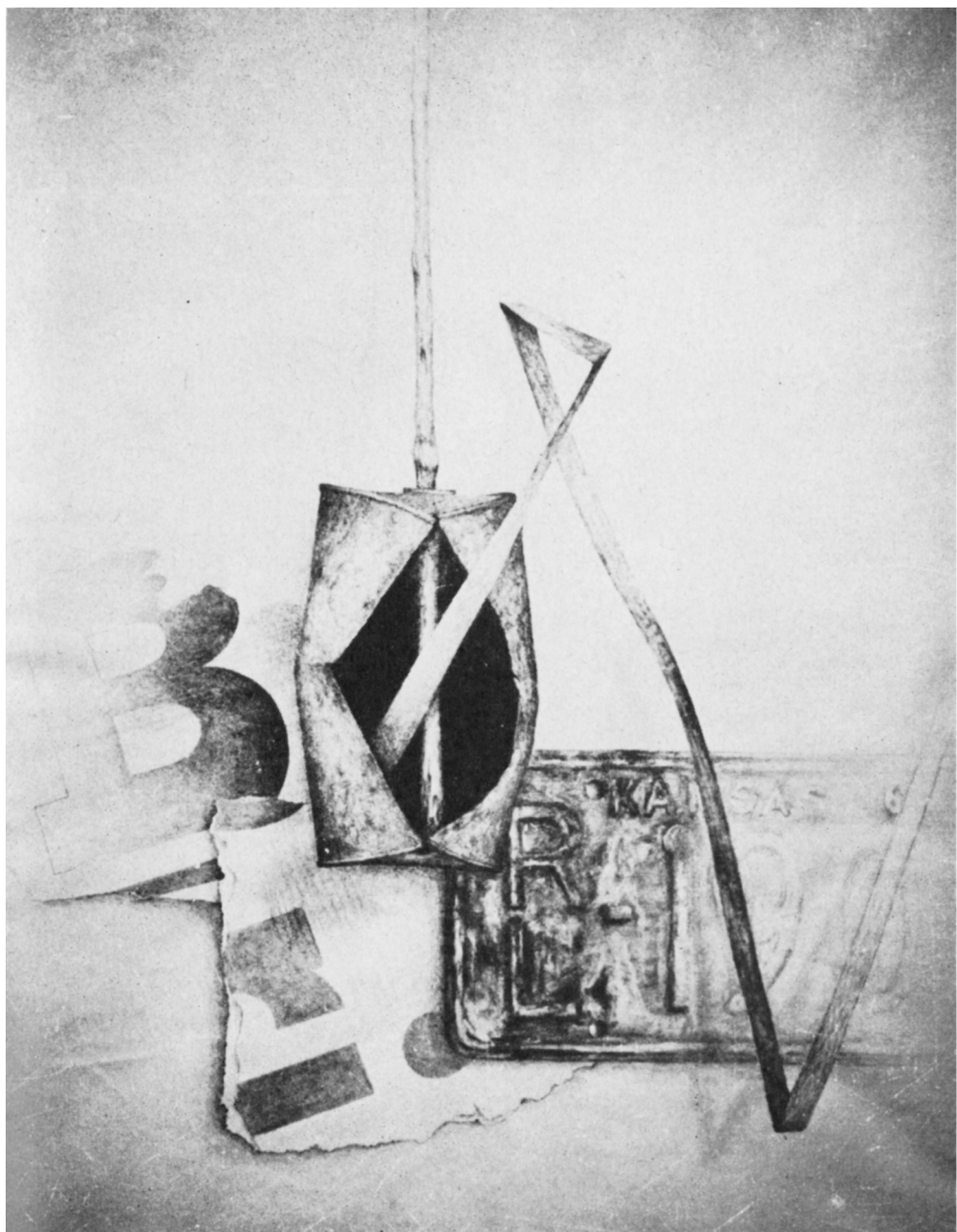
He felt a momentary confusion. He didn't want her to go yet, but he had no reason to stay. "Wait," he called, starting to go to her.

"No, I must go home now." The breeze moved the soft white dress gently as she walked to the water's edge. She seemed to hover

for a moment in a mist and then was gone.

He ran to the water and looked up and down the shore. There was nothing but the constant movement of the ocean breaking lazily on the beach. The black water was calm, and far out to sea the lights of a steamer twinkled. The man stood for a moment, unsure and unsteady, wondering if he should leave. Where had she gone so quickly? Then, from the dark water he seemed to hear the soft sound of music. It sounded like a flute, each note clear, distinct, and then trembling into silence. For one brief moment, he was drawn by a yearning hunger to know the music. He shook his head in disbelief and stood very still, listening. But now the only sound was the pulsing throb of the ocean. He turned, decisively, and walked back across the beach to the car.

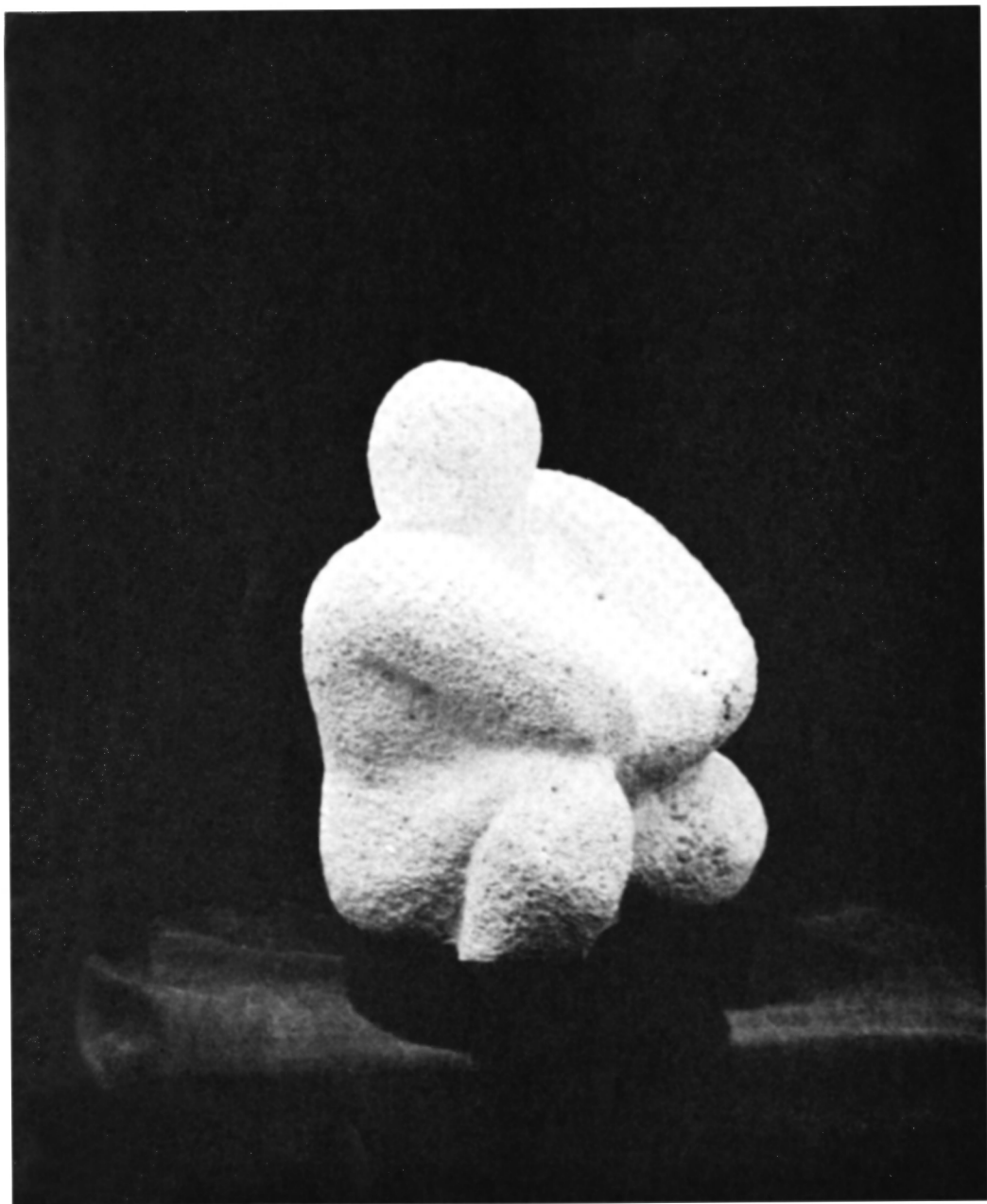




RICHARD EUGENE JOHNSON



HAL LUND



JAMES MCKINLEY



MARY ANN KICE

The Birth and the Death

from *The Principles of Cendarius*

LEON FRICK

Two score and two years Cendarius had talked with his people, theorizing and thinking. Their fathers had done so before them, their offspring would do so after them, and they would progress as before, step by step through the efforts of all. Cendarius had been content to stay with the people of his land, until a group of four travellers from various parts of the world arrived, telling of conceptions and customs which indicated that their respective clans were far below the intellectual level of his people.

When he had finished conversing with the strangers, Cendarius knew that he must leave his home and go among other people to teach and to learn. He meditated on this decision for two days and on the third day he announced to his clansmen that he had decided to leave. They walked with him to the boundary stone of their land, each person hoping that Cendarius would soon forget his whim and return so that they again might enjoy his presence. Amidst many farewells he left, never to return to his people.

Cendarius traveled for many days, living off the land and seeing no one. Then one night he came upon a clan—filthy and weak—eating berries and leaves, which they devoured as quickly as they could strip them from the bushes, leaving the shrubs trampled and broken. Each was eating all he could, saving none. Cendarius inquired why they did not gather and store food in the daytime, but no one seemed to notice him. They were intent upon one thing—food. It appeared that they had not eaten for days, but this seemed illogical to Cendarius, since he had noticed that this particular berry was plentiful over the land. The possibility that this behavior was either customary or of a religious significance occurred fleetingly to Cendarius as he sat beneath a tree and waited for the feast to end.

He dismissed his thoughts of the surroundings, knowing that to become frustrated over a problem which presents no evidence for its solution is the sign of the dog who incessantly lunges at the top of its

cage to no avail, exhausting himself and decreasing his efficiency with each leap.

At length he noticed that most of the people had finished assaulting the bushes and had lain down in the grass, obviously in great pain; but Cendarius knew that the berries were not harmful, for he had eaten them himself during his travels. Puzzled, he withdrew a short distance, wrapped and tied an oiled skin about himself as protection against the cold night, and went to sleep. The next day would be time enough to talk with these new people.

As the night went its journey, the clouds gathered, growing heavier and grayer, totally obliterating the moon. A fine mist started to fall, which moistened Cendarius' beard and lips. The taste of the fresh moisture half awakened him, and he smiled faintly. Soon afterwards, the storm heightened, the tall grass kneeling to the vicious flogging of the wind as it drove torrents across the plain, the trees bending and swaying until they were on the verge of being ripped from their beds.

Cendarius awoke fully with the force of heavy rain and saw the people frantically running in all directions. Arising and tightening the oiled hide around him, he walked toward a thicket of bushes nearby, which would provide some protection from the wind and rain. Three successive bolts of lightning tore open the heavens, illuminating the sky and the earth while thunder sounded high above; a bolt flashed to earth behind Cendarius, illuminating his body with an intense, white radiance. The people, standing huddled at the edge of the thicket, saw him for the first time. They fell upon their knees where they stood, shrieking, crying, babbling, "From the lightning!—With the lightning!—God of Light!—Mercy! Mercy! Mercy!"

The wind raged more fiercely, but Cendarius had lost all concern for the elements. He stood as of stone, with ignorance and weakness ringing in his ears, power ringing in his brain. Throwing off his oiled cape he beckoned to the heavens, tossed his head and shrieked, "Let the rain fall! Let the wind whip these mortals because they are mortals! Cut loose from their moorings all the elements!

"Rain! Wind! Lightning! . . . Arise! . . . Arise and bathe me in your glory! Arise and bathe . . . Cendarius!"

Oblivious to all around him stood the new-born Cendarius, quivering with the tension instilled by the thoughts which rushed into his mind. A sudden flash of lightning—a tree splintered and fell to the ground ablaze. Immediately Cendarius sprang to the spot, twisted an already shattered branch from its trunk, plunged one end into the flame and returned, swinging a great luminous arc with the blazing limb.

Terrified, the natives buried their heads in their hands, pressing themselves to the ground, and mumbled, "Conqueror of fire! Master of the great destroyer! Ruler of all! Mercy! Mercy! Mercy!"

Cendarius stood in front of them, the fire brand held high, the rain-

drops hissing as they struck the flame. The heavens rumbled and groaned above him—a lightning bolt struck into the thicket, felling a tree; a voice shrieked in pain. Cendarius turned and strode toward the sound, followed by the people. Beneath the fallen tree they saw the body of a clansman who had been crushed. The people stared in silence, some moaning softly, everyone numbed by the terror which had come to them that night.

Cendarius spoke: "Look not surprised you who knew him. Is this an indication of it? Look not surprised you who loved him. Is this an indication of it? Look not surprised you who learned from him. Is this an indication of it?"

"Knew you ever a time when he wished sadness upon you? Would he have you stand in silence, weeping? Do you not realize that mental silence is initially low? Need you drag it lower by supplementing it with tears? Would you have your friends weep over you?"

"If tears of the living were blood to the dead, then I would say, 'Weep, friends of the dead, weep.' The tears, however, are stains which discolor the body. Put away this foolishness. Mourn, yes! But mourn not with tears and sadness. Instead, mourn with tales of his accomplishments to supplement his glory.

"You view the body, the shell of the man, not the man himself who has gone from your presence. Is this not a ghoulish custom? Self-imposed misery? This is religion only to those who fear God."

Cendarius saw that the people were shivering in the slackening rain, so he led them into the thicket where he made a large fire with his torch. They sat around it in a semi-circle, facing Cendarius, who remained standing.

"I will now tell you of a youth who lived in my village many years ago:

"The boy's mother had died a short time before his father, and after both deaths he was forced to attend the ceremonies against his will in order to meet the demands of his relatives. While the grief-stricken boy watched his father committed to his eternal cell with chants and wails ringing in his ears, everything which he had seen and learned during his life dropped from him. There before a hundred eyes was born a raving, shrieking madman.

"As the boy stood, half laughing, half sobbing, a relative struck him, thinking it merely an hysterical outburst. The boy turned and raced off through the village, away from his clansmen and into the mountains beyond which he was not seen for almost a month.

"Eventually he did make an appearance. During the night he stole down into the village and exhumed three bodies. After arranging them in a semi-circle, he squatted before them and waited for the dawn. My people awakened with the sun and found him sitting before the decaying bodies. They gathered around him, but for some time did nothing but

stare at him, listening to his mumblings to the dead. Then he turned to them and said, 'Behold! Yea! Behold the bones of your ancestors. Does not their smell offend you? Are they not rotten and disfigured? Yet, behold! These are your ancestors! Can you not tell simply by looking at them what scholars they must have been? How handsome this one! How valiant that one! Here are the bodies, now tell me where are the men? Where are the souls? The thoughts? The energies of life?

"'Admire now the dead as you did shortly after their death. Stand and weep, foolish relatives. Stand and gape, you who call yourselves friends. Turn to him who stands beside you and tell him how well you knew these men here before me. The living are now dead, yet the dead may live. Those friends of the healthy weep that so strong a person has passed away. What a comfort he was, so reassuring.

"'Yet as you lament the passing of so worthy a person, mention not your loss to your neighbor on the left or right, for if you do, society points an accusing finger. No, people, let not your thoughts be known to anyone. You must even shun yourselves, for sympathy is a great and powerful thing—to the weak!'

"At this point the dumfounded people surged alive, roaring and pressing forward upon the madman, beating and kicking him until he joined his friends in death.

"Nearly one hundred years prior to my birth our civilization witnessed the termination of the burial customs for which that boy died in protest. So I say to you, break away from your custom and beliefs as we have done. To be sure, the beginning of the reformation will instill in you the feeling of coldness and heartlessness, but all emotion which achieves no positive purpose I would have you cast off, that you no longer be impeded in your growth. This misery consumes all-important time, yet returns nothing. If it revived the dead or prevented death, I too would wail and weep and be remorseful. But it does not.

"Sorrow concerning a mistake, I laud! For only by heartfelt regret have we any incentive to rectify mistakes. So I say to you: That which *is* rectifiable, mourn; that which is unavoidable, mourn not, but exile!"

So saying, Cendarius stood watching the entranced listeners who stared up at him. The firelight flickered on their moist, upturned faces. It had been, Cendarius knew, a beginning; but he knew, as well, that it was only a beginning and that there would be other clans to be visited—clans existing in equal darkness. It was now to these that he must turn, and with this thought he bade farewell to the quieted group about the fire to continue his wanderings.

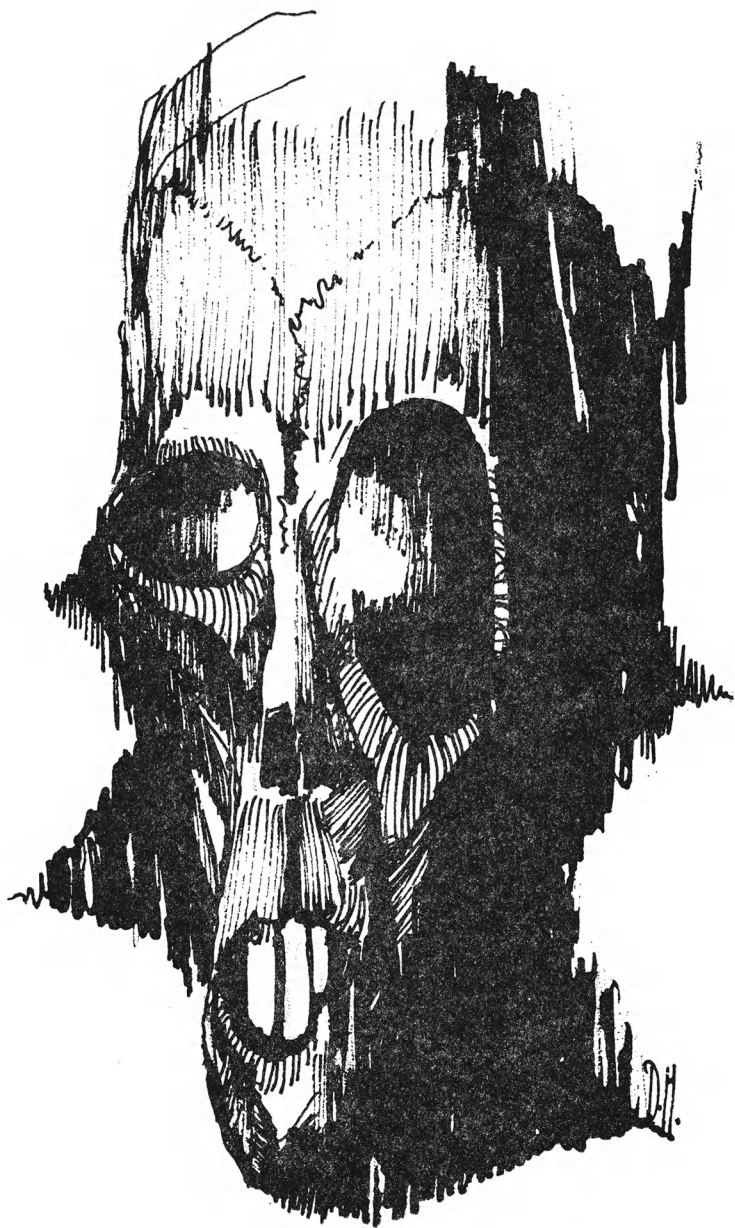
For You

I would not rob a bank for you,
Nor steal a diamond, I suppose,
But filch I may poetic lines,
Or snip a neighbor's rose.

Sharing

Sharing is the essence of friendship, my love,
Distilled from the tendermost feeling;
"Sharing with you" is treasured, my love—
"Sharing you," far less appealing!

CHARLES S. LOVELL



Rak'ah

KEITH LAQUEY

Au nom du père

No more songs of innocence
And eternal profundity!
No more grave and apocalyptic truths
Flung from the hip
In fistfuls of incense breath
And talk of tomorrow
And tomorrow.
No more promises of multi-eyed perception
Or requiem within the placenta of some
Dark chair.

Et du fils

Rather listen for once,
Butter your hair and listen just once
To the unique sermons of hunchbacks and idiots.
Read one time the revelations
Of clubfooted pygmies scratched with
Splintered fingers on windowsills and back-yard
Swing sets.
Roar down across asphalt skies
Screaming bloodhot against the spume-blown night
In ashfilled fists of foam and fire.
Open your stomach to winter poppy fields
And watch the mad mice spreading carnage between
Your eyes,
Pressing warm lumps against your throat in antic-
ipation of some new Idea.

Et du saint esprit

And see how nicely you burn . . .

Ainsi soit-t-il.

“This, That You Call Love”

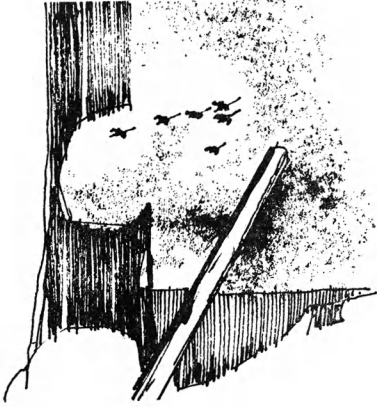
JAMES G. VAN BUREN

Iago. Virtue! A fig! 'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners. So that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry—why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts, whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion.

Othello, Act I, Scene iii

Subtract, subtract and evermore subtract,
Before the definition prefix “mere,”
Reduce its glory glandularly down,
And halt the hyperbolic with a frown.
Proclaim it animal in move and act,
And deviation from the bestial view with fear.

Yet there's a rebel rhythm in our hearts,
A sense of some dimension beyond lust,
That vocalizes words long viewed with scorn,
“Forever,” “truly,” “for each other born”—
A joy, a dawn, delight as day departs—
Some everlasting flame that kindles in our dust.



Waiting for the Ducks

MICHAEL DRY

The car lurched to a stop and Hadley Brenner drowsily opened his eyes and looked out into morning darkness: grain fields were covered with an undulating coat of snow which glowed with a soft white luminescence; the bright moon sat low above the eastern horizon, whitening the dark blue sky around it, while the silver dot of Venus watched close by to the north, the last trace of the star-filled night. Had slowly raised his arm which felt heavy and stiff under the weight of his flannel shirt, sweater, and green parka, and tried to rub the sleep from his eyes. His clothing gave great bulk to his thin frame, but his face revealed that he was still a boy.

He turned to his father who sat beside him, wearing the tawny clothes of the hunter. "What time is it, Dad?"

"It's a little after five." The man's face was tanned despite the lateness of the year. Small deeply creased lines fanned out at the corners of his eyes; beneath his old felt hat, his blue-black eyes shone

brilliantly. He stared at the boy a moment, watching him slowly blink his eyes. "You can stay in the car and sleep if you want to."

"No, I'm ready to go," said Had, unconsciously responding to his father's tone of voice in the same way that he would answer the challenge of a friend's dare.

His father smiled and reached down to the glove compartment and flipped it open. He withdrew a tall, red-topped thermos bottle and unscrewed the top.

"Well, then, you'd better wake up before you load your gun. I don't want to be out there with anyone who doesn't know what he's doing every minute," said his father.

He pulled out the large cork and poured the steaming coffee into the red top. He handed it to Had who held it in both hands and stared down at the unfamiliar liquid, smelling the toasted coffee and feeling the vapor condense on his face. His father filled another cup and lit a cigarette, waiting for the coffee to cool. Had waited too,

feeling strangely excited, strangely older now, as he held the warming cup in his hands and felt the freezing morning air seep in around him.

"It's probably cool enough to drink now," said Had's father, lifting the cup to his lips. He swallowed deeply, as Had watched, the coffee gurgling deliciously, deep in his throat. He pulled on his cigarette and slowly blew out a large cloud of bluish smoke. Had raised his cup and tilted the liquid into his mouth, tasting the scalding hot bitterness and feeling it burn down to his stomach. He worked hard at the coffee, sipping at it more cautiously in short intervals, until he finished it, then handed his cup to his father who screwed it back onto the thermos.

"Well, we'd better get the guns and load up," said his father as he opened the car door and climbed out.

"Right, Dad," said Had, now very much awake. The words, "gun" and "load up," had drawn fresh life into his body. Three short weeks ago he had held his first shotgun, a light sixteen-gauge pump gun, and had fired at clay pigeons which his father had thrown with a handtrap. They had practiced once every three days for an hour, until his father had felt that he had learned the lessons of the gun. But Had had learned more than fundamental lessons: the silky feel of the gun in his hands, pressed tight against his cheek; his finger resting lightly on the tiny curved trigger; the powerful recoil of the gun butt

against his shoulder—the simultaneous roar; the elation when the sailing discs powdered in the air; the moment when boy and gun had functioned perfectly as one; the ringing in his ears and the sweet, acrid smell of gunpowder in his nose. These were the things of the gun which Had learned to love and to hunger for. Now, they would go to the pond and wait for the ducks.

Had jumped out of the car and opened the back door. He reached in and pulled out the soft buckskin gun case by the handle on its side. He sat down on the edge of the seat and laid the gun across his lap. Then he unbuckled the flap at the butt end of the case and slid his hand into the thick lambs-wool lining and gripped the smooth stock. He slowly slipped off the case, letting it fall onto the snow, and stood up. He held the gun with both hands at waist level, then snapped it to his shoulder in an instant. His clothes felt tight and pulled around his shoulder, so he repeated the action several times, lowering the gun to his waist, then cheeking it quickly, until he felt loose and comfortable. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out three red-cased shells. He slid them into the belly of the gun and pumped it once. He put his case into the car and walked up to his father, who waited in front of the car.

"All set, Had?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"How many shells you got?" asked his father.

Had felt inside his pocket and

said, "About four more besides what's in the gun."

His father looked at him questioningly, then reached down into his large coat pocket and started to withdraw a bulky object. He hesitated and looked at Had again. He pulled out a box of shells and handed them to Had and said, "You'll probably be needing a few more, so you can carry these."

The box felt heavy in Had's hand. He quickly crammed it into his pocket and started after his father, who walked ahead, following the road. The sag of the shells in his pocket and the feel of the gun cradled in his arms and the crunching sounds of the ankle-deep snow gave him the joy that comes with things first done. He smiled, fighting the urge to yell in the morning stillness, to tell everyone of his joy. He had listened to the stories of his father and his grandfather, late at night after dinner, listening to them talk about their hunts, the things they had done with their guns, and now he too was going to do these things.

He broke into a quick trot and came alongside his father as they moved toward the pond. They could barely see little shiny marks on its surface, the gray reed marshes, and the small humps on either end of the pond. They would shoot from the west blind today, since the slight wind was coming from that direction. They walked on, both straining to see the ducks which they knew would be feeding on the water. Then they saw them lift off, counting twelve, wing and water sounds to-

gether, rising quickly, high into the air, black wingless bodies silhouetted against the lighter sky, seeming to stop in mid-air as they turned and drifted into the east and out of sight.

"They were pretty good-sized ducks, weren't they, Dad?"

His father still stared in the direction of the now-vanished ducks. Without turning he said, "Yes, they looked pretty good." His voice sounded very distant, faintly echoing Had's excitement.

They walked on to the blinds, saving distance by wading through the marshes. Had strained to keep up with his father, almost stepping out of his heavy, oversized waders as they suctioned in the soft mud with every step. When he came up to the blind his father was lifting away the rectangular wire cover heavily interwoven with tall grass which camouflaged the opening of the blind.

"Better put some more grass up here, Had," said his father. He tapped the top of the blind with his hand and climbed down into the opening.

Had handed his gun to his father and walked into the straw-colored grass behind the blind, tearing up handfuls with each stride. He placed the grass across the top of the blind and climbed inside. The bottom was standing inches deep in water which gave off a stagnant odor. As he sat down on the wooden bench and laid his gun across his lap, his father reached out and fitted the wire-grass covering across the opening, cutting out most of the interior light.



He sat down on the opposite end of the bench and lit another cigarette. They both stared out through the grass and watched the sky grow lighter, filling with long golden clouds which hung in the reddening sky. Imperceptibly the clouds changed color, turning to lighter shades of red and orange; the moon's brightness grew dim, seeming to shrink in size; Venus dissolved, fading into the other world to join the stars and planets. Then the bright orange rim of the sun touched over the end of the white fields, streaking the snow with long fingers of rippling orange light.

Had could now clearly see the dark brown decoys which bobbed in the rising wind and waves, moving to the end of their submerged tethers, then spinning crazily around, from side to side, seeming almost real except for their dull colors and stiff, erect heads. He looked out across the sky, hoping to see the racing black dots, hoping to see them circle and come into the pond.

"Don't worry, boy," said his father, who sat quietly on the bench, leaning against the concrete wall, "they'll come in when they feel like it. Just sit back and sit still. They'll see your face moving behind the grass and spook off. Anyway, you'll hear them before you see them."

Had quickly leaned back and stared at the pool of water which covered his feet. He watched the old red and green and blue shell cases floating on the surface or shimmering through from the

floor. He began to slowly raise and lower his feet, making small waves which danced the shells. One flipped over on its side, filled with water and sank; another filled and sank, then another.

"Stop slopping the water and making so much noise," said his father in a soft, irritated voice. "A duck wouldn't come within fifty miles of this place with you doing that."

Had stopped without looking up at his father and continued to stare at the empty shells. "The ducks will never come," he thought. "They see too well and they hear too well. We'll sit here forever, waiting for them with our guns, but they'll never come. At least the clay pigeons are always there, whenever you want them. They are better than sitting here in this cold wet blind, waiting for the ducks which will never come."

"Here's some coffee," said his father, handing him the red cup which he had just filled. "It'll keep you awake."

Had looked at the cup and said, "I don't want it."

His father withdrew the cup and held it for a moment, then took a large gulp and said nothing.

The sun rose higher and became more yellow and the sky grew lighter and bluer; the wind blew stronger from the west, but the ducks did not come. Had could hardly stand the motionless, soundless waiting. He was becoming very tired, the initial excitement leaving him, and he could not go to sleep. The wooden bench was painfully hard and the wall made

his neck and back stiff. The gun rested heavily on his lap and his clothes and the shells in his pocket bothered him with their weight. The bright sun hurt his eyes, which were red from lack of sleep and began to burn. Suddenly he said, "Why don't we go back home and come back tomorrow, Dad? There aren't any ducks around today."

His father turned and looked at him. "We've only been here a little over an hour, Son. You've got to give them time—sometimes a lot of time. And sometimes they don't come in. But you forget about that when they do come in."

Had stared at the floor of the blind.

"But you can go back to the car if you want to and try to sleep. I'm going to stay awhile myself."

Had still stared into the water, but did not speak. He had sensed the challenge, sensed it more sharply than before. But it was strange to him and not like the others he had received from his friends or even his father. No, somehow it was different. But this did not matter. He would sit there beside his father, all day, if he must; yes, as long as he must in order to prove something which he did not understand. Had did not move. He did not look at his father. Yes, he would sit and wait in silence.

Another half hour passed slowly, Had counting every interminable minute, sitting and waiting and hating—hating not his father but something intangible inside him

which would not let him leave. It would be so easy to walk back to the car and sleep until his father returned. Yet that something made him sit and wait.

From nowhere came a soft high-pitched whirring, like the sound of tire wheels hissing along a hot highway.

"That's the birds," whispered his father as he squeezed into the corner of the blind and squinted up at the sky.

Had froze and swallowed hard, his heart suddenly racing. He instinctively placed his hand around the gun stock and rested his finger on the trigger guard, looking through the grass-covered screen, searching the sky for the birds. Their wing noise faded. He looked at his father, his face asking incredulously, "Have they gone?"

"Dad, they passed over!" he whispered angrily, as if to say, "They cannot do this, I have waited so long. I gave them agonizing time and now they have left me with nothing. It's not fair!"

"Sit still, boy," said his father, still staring up at the sky, "they aren't finished looking us over yet."

Had turned back slowly and looked to the sky and saw the birds for an instant, counting six, as they passed out of sight behind the corner of the blind. Again the wing noise faded out, but Had did not move. He strained his eyes, then felt his father's hand touch his arm lightly and heard him say, "Better ease off your safety; they're coming in."

Had could not move for a moment, but only a moment. He curved his forefinger around the guard until he felt the round, rough top of the safety and slowly pushed it down until it would go no farther, all the time following the birds in their flight toward them, watching them grow larger, seeming to increase their speed. Now they appeared to be almost on top of the blind. They slowed suddenly and set their wings, freezing themselves in flight, and glided down quickly toward the water.

"Now!" whispered his father as he stood up and pushed forward the grass covering with his left hand and raised his gun to his shoulder, all in one practiced motion. Had jumped up, heard his father fire, aimed at one of the panicked birds and pulled the trigger; the gun exploded and his bird crumbled in the air, falling limp into the water. Had yelled, "I got him, I got him, Dad!" For that one split second, when the gun had roared and the bird had stopped in flight, he had felt some ecstatic tremor of joy course through his body with such an intensity that he now stood trembling and weak. He had never known such a pure, instantaneous, intoxicating feeling. It had come only for that fraction of a second, but it was still fresh inside him and it had left his soul clean and pure and alive.

"I got my bird!" he screamed, staring out at the duck as it lay still in the water among the decoys.

"Nice shot, Had," said his father, smiling.

Had stared at the bird unbelievably. There it was, not fifty feet away. New power surged through his body, some force which made Had feel as if he had just discovered a secret strength within his body, somewhere within himself, and he knew that this power was his and that it could never be taken away.

"Put your safety on and go get your bird," said his father.

Had quickly clicked on the safety and climbed out of the blind. He had forgotten to reset it, but now it did not matter. He placed his gun on top of the blind and waded out into the water. He circled around the decoys until he reached the deep brown colored duck which floated peacefully on the water. He reached down into the icy water and picked up the bird by its neck. The outside of his hand was numbed by the water and wind, but he felt only the warmth of the duck's body inside his hand. He looked at the light blue touches on its wing and the black wing tips, the whole body covered with drops of water, warm and shiny in his hand, glistening like some rare stone.

Had turned and walked back through the water to the blind. His father waited for him, holding two green-headed mallards. Had had not heard his father's second shot which had killed a second duck.

"Good-looking hen you got there," said his father.

"Yeah, she's a big one," said

Had, holding up the duck triumphantly.

"Well, let's get back inside," said his father, "and get a couple more to take home with us."

Had grabbed his gun and eagerly leaped down into the blind and sat down on the bench, letting his duck fall at his feet. He could wait forever now, wait for that one sacred moment which would place him in a new world of joy and power, a world which he had just begun to know.

They sat quietly, Had tense and anxious, but patient. When his mind wandered, he would look down at his fresh kill, recalling that glorious moment. Then he would return his watching to the skies, forcing himself to sit motionless and listen for the wing sound.

Twice again the ducks came, first four, then eight, and twice Had killed his bird, only one each time, too excited and enraptured with the moment to fire a second shot. A third time the birds came, a flight of fifteen large mallards which seemed almost too large to fly. Had and his father waited while the birds circled twice, came in low as if to sit down, then rose swiftly and passed a third time, climbing high into the air and turning behind them for another pass. They swung far to the east end of the pond and pivoted sharply toward them, regrouping tightly as they began their descent to the water. They set their wings against the wind and began their tilting glide down to the water.

The cover fell forward and the

hunters sprang up. Had fired and a large drake hung for a moment, then fell, hitting the water with a loud slap. Had pumped his gun quickly and fired again at another drake which had now reversed his flight. The bird did not fall, but began to fly in circles, each revolution taking him farther across the water. Had watched as the bird spiraled the width of the pond and glided into the tall grass which covered the far bank. He climbed out of the blind with his father and looked over to the spot where the bird had fallen. He started into the water to retrieve his first bird which floated in front of them among the decoys.

"I'll get that bird," said his father, "you go over there and pick up the cripple."

Had looked quizzically at his father. "I can't find him," he said. "Besides, it'll take too long to get there and look for him."

"I'm sorry, Had, but you'll have to try and find him." His father turned his back and waded into the water.

Had hesitated, looking at his father as if he were a madman, then started around the pond. He walked quickly over the snow-covered grass for a hundred yards and stopped to reload his gun. Perhaps the birds would come and he could hide in the tall grass and get his shot. He walked on until he reached the tall grass-stand on the other side. He stopped and waited to see some movement and to judge how far in the bird had fallen. He heard nothing. He waded into the grass, taking large

kicking steps as he went, and stopped. Just in front of him the grass moved and he heard wings thrashing about. He walked toward the motion and noise and saw the duck, wildly flapping in the thick strands of grass, almost enmeshed and unable to move. He reached down quickly and grabbed the bird under its stomach, tightening his arm around its wings. He looked at the bird which now froze and stared at Had with terror, quivering in his arms. Had walked back around the pond, the bird occasionally struggling in his grip, and walked up to his father.

"Dad, look at him. He's hurt!"

"Yes, I know," said his father, softly. "You'd better give him to me."

Had handed the duck to him, "Do you think we can help him?"

Had's father held the bird as he laid down his gun, then slid his hand up under the bird's head and lowered it an arm's length. He began to swing its body in sharp, snapping circles, the bird flapping madly for three revolutions, then whirling limp. Had watched, horrified at the sight, drawing his face into a knot, wanting to scream at his father to stop. But it was over before he could speak. He looked at the duck, hanging quietly in his father's hand. He looked at his father's face which was set in some

expression that he had never seen before, that he could not understand. He wanted to say something, but could not.

"I'm sorry, Had, but that's the best way."

"But it's so terrible," said Had, his voice filled with the sickness and tears that he felt inside.

"I know it's terrible, but it had to be done."

"But why, Dad? Why did you have to kill him?"

"If I hadn't done it, he would have starved to death or maybe a hawk would have gotten him. But no matter how, he would have died and died slowly and painfully. Don't you see, Had, it was the quickest and best way?"

"But it's not the same when you shoot them. With a gun it's different."

"No, it's not the same, but it's part of hunting the birds."

Had stared at his father and the duck in his hand. "This is part of hunting," he thought, "and it is the bad part. But the moment when the bird drops cleanly, into the water . . ."

"How much longer can we stay?" he asked.

"Until sunset," said his father.

Had walked over to the blind and picked up his gun and crawled inside to wait for the ducks.



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