The Best Fiction and Poetry from
California State University, Northridge: 1962-1988

Edited by Warren Wedin

CONTENTS

Historical Introduction  The Best (1988)
Warren Wedin

Sierra Tower Photo and the Kennedy Assassination  The Best (1995)
Warren Wedin

FICTION

Thursday's Child  Eclipse (1962)
Price Hicks

The Dollar Bill  Eclipse (1964)
Michael Burrs

Planes, Ships, and People  Eclipse (1966)
Hugo Luis Stanchi

Mady Lou  A Bao A Qu (1973)
Carol Stager

The Victim  Angel's Flight (1978)
Donna Beckman

The Day We Glued the Birdbath  Angel's Flight (1980)
Carol Stager

Digging to China  Angel's Flight (1982)
David Lipton

The End of the Pier  Angel's Flight (1982)
Amy Reynolds

Scott Memmer

Trust  Northridge Review (1983)
Mona Houghton

On Leave  Northridge Review (1985)
Wes Hempel

The Burning Monk  Northridge Review (1986)
Mark Mann
Flying  Northridge Review(1987)
    Judy Duke

You Are Here  Northridge Review(1987)
    Amy Gonzales

    Grant Cogswell

Trapped in the Heart  Northridge Review(1988)
    Mona Houghton

POETRY

White Man's Magic  Eclipse(1962)
    Larry Travis

Supplication  Eclipse(1963)
    June Demetry

Vaudeville  Eclipse(1963)
    S. T. Clendenning

The Length of Insight  Eclipse(1965)
    Paul Thomas

    Lewis Kruglick

With Tea and Lemons  Eclipse(1966)
    Helen Sorrells

Invitation Engraved on Sunlight  Eclipse(1966)
    Helen Sorrells

It Is Reason Enough  Eclipse(1966)
    Lewis Kruglick

Winter Solstice at St. Paul de Vence  Eclipse(1966)
    Lewis Kruglick

"At 5:30 P.M. Will Be a Re-Enactment"  Eclipse(1966)
    Robin Johnson

Lea's Poet  Eclipse(1967)
    Gayle Gray

Candy Man  Eclipse(1967)
    Annette Kanter

Home  Eclipse(1968)
    David W. Jackson

Colors  Eclipse(1968)
    G. Guss

Unfinished Plays  Artifax(1971)
    Rose Shade

For the Year  Artifax(1971)
    Keith Brown

A Rite of Spring  Artifax(1971)
    Rose Shade

Puritan Woman  Artifax(1971)
    Rose Shade

Depressions of a Two-World Lady  Artifax(1971)
    Carole Beck

Sunspot  Artifax(1971)
Martin Levy
The Injured Slopes  Artifax(1971)
Sheldon White

Canyon Fever   Artifax(1972)
Carole Beck

Early Winter  Artifax(1972)
Chris Cannady

Fisherman's Wharf   Artifax(1972)
Chris Cannady

Images  All Of It(1972)
Robb Dow

Game with Variations   All Of It(1972)
Nancy Shiffrin

Too Many Dancers  Artifax(1973)
Sheldon White

The Animal  Artifax(1973)
Margaret Bratcher

My Father A Bao A Qu(1973)
Diane Hannum

After the Sparrow Fell  Angel's Flight(1976)
Rachel Sherwood

Hardening  Angel's Flight(1976)
Martin Levy

I Loved Him One Night  Angel's Flight(1976)
Royce Kaplan

Hacker's Complaint to Blind Hugh of Onan  Angel's Flight(1977)
Terry Phillips

His Vision  Angel's Flight(1978)
Richard Rosing

Birds, Frogs, Hogs, You, Me  Angel's Flight(1978)
Carol Stager

Wedding Night  Angel's Flight(1978)
David Trinidad

Premonition  Angel's Flight(1978)
Rachel Sherwood

Without Title (II) from Li Shang-Yin  Angel's Flight(1979)
Gary Routh

Waiting  Angel's Flight(1979)
Sharon Smith

Mysteries of Afternoon and Evening  Angel's Flight(1979)
Rachel Sherwood

Baci Baci Baci  Angel's Flight(1979)
Rachel Sherwood

Scholar  Angel’s Flight(1979)
David Trinidad

Soliloquy  Angel's Flight(1979)
Linda Haffey

The Woman About to Be Sawed in Half  Angel's Flight(1980)
Greg Boyd

Leaning into Curves  Angel's Flight(1980)
Keith Brown

Laughter of a Drunk  Angel's Flight(1980)
Martin Levy

**Protégée**  
*Angel's Flight* (1980)  
Frances Wolf

**Walton's Thumb**  
*Angel's Flight* (1980)  
Terence Martin

**The World in the Evening**  
*Angel's Flight* (1980)  
Rachel Sherwood

**3 A.M.**  
*Angel's Flight* (1980)  
Donna Beckman

**6 A.M.**  
*Angel's Flight* (1981)  
Donna Beckman

**The Drowning**  
*Angel's Flight* (1981)  
Jodi Johnson

**The History of Cocoa**  
*Angel's Flight* (1982)  
Charles Hood

**The Missing Person**  
*Angel's Flight* (1982)  
Amy Reynolds

**The Visit**  
*Angel's Flight* (1982)  
Margaret Lavin

**Pier**  
*Angel's Flight* (1982)  
Bridget O'Mara

**A Mother's Death**  
Jodi Johnson

**Grandma Turns 93**  
Mike Lawson

**A Plantation Legend**  
Ricardo Means-Ybarra

**Rafael**  
Ricardo Means-Ybarra

**A Boy Whose Hands Were a Language**  
Nicholas Campbell

**White Cat Hit by a Car**  
Jodi Johnson

**Still December Maryland**  
Ron Pronk

**Hiking in the Grand Canyon**  
Jodi Johnson

**#1**  
Ricardo Means-Ybarra

**Class Notes: Intro to Physical Anthropology**  
Cathy Comenas

**Follansbee**  
Nicholas Campbell

**The Masked Ball**  
Greg Boyd

**Grandma's Purse**  
*Northridge Review* (1985)  
Doug Lawrence

**Janene Sixteen**  
*Northridge Review* (1985)  
Cathy Comenas

**Divorce**  
*Northridge Review* (1985)  
Marlene Pearson

**Beautiful Men I've Known**  
*Northridge Review* (1985)
Laura Webster
I Am Asking You to Trust My Memory-Wheel    Northridge Review(1985)
   Jordan Jones

El Monte, California    Northridge Review(1985)
   Wes Hempel

Strike III    Northridge Review(1986)
   Brian Skinner

With My Family on Memorial Day    Northridge Review(1986)
   Wes Hempel

In Bed    Northridge Review(1986)
   Jodi Johnson

After the Divorce    Northridge Review(1986)
   Ricardo Means-Ybarra

Eulogy for a Space Shuttle    Northridge Review(1986)
   Virginia Webster

Orange Bags on the Freeway    Northridge Review(1986)
   Marlene Pearson

Woods from the Trees    Northridge Review(1987)
   Nicholas Campbell

A Winter Scarecrow    Northridge Review(1987)
   Nicholas Campbell

At the Nursery    Northridge Review(1987)
   Margaret Ritchie

Pears    Northridge Review(1987)
   Suzanne Ghiglia

Clan    Northridge Review(1987)
   Mary Harris

   Patti Scheibel

Mari's Backyard    Northridge Review(1988)
   Cathy Comenas

Summer School    Northridge Review(1988)
   Nicholas Campbell

   Jennifer Wolfe

Submersion    Northridge Review(1988)
   Patti Scheibel

   Jennifer Wolfe

Passing Away    Northridge Review(1988)
   Herman Fong

   Herman Fong

---

Back to the beginning of Contents for*The Best Fiction and Poetry from CSUN.*

Back to the English Department homepage.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:
Historical Introduction

This book is dedicated to all writers who seek to transmute the daily bread of their experience into the radiant body of art.

All the following stories and poems were written by students at San Fernando Valley State College and California State University, Northridge, and all were published in various literary magazines edited and produced by students on this campus. The works appearing in this special collection, drawn from thirty-six separate publications, were selected for their excellence by an editorial board of creative writing teachers in the CSUN English Department. This anthology, covering the period from 1962 to 1988, presents a literary portrait of people who live, study, and work in Southern California, an unfolding emotional panorama of their attitudes and concerns. Though the works appear in chronological order, they have been arranged to suggest certain dramatic sequences or clusters of ideas and images about our experiences during the past twenty-six years with family, friends, and lovers in the San Fernando Valley and its environs. Arranged in this fashion—with each individual work expressing a dramatic or ironic reaction to the preceding work—these poems and stories tell a larger story about how it feels to live and hurt and love in our complex urban and suburban world, about how it was then, about how it is now. If some of these works look nostalgically to other times or places, they nonetheless speak with a voice that we come to recognize as our own, a literary voice that echoes our own past and present.

The first literary magazine appeared on this campus during the spring of 1962, four years after the official opening of the campus in the fall of 1958. Dr. Wallace Graves, the faculty advisor to the magazine, told me that at the time it was college policy for the names of all official publications to reflect the school's "sun" motif: the newspaper was called The Daily Sundial, and the yearbook was called Sunburst. In order to conform to this "sun campus" policy, the new literary magazine was called Eclipse. It ran for seven issues, one each spring through 1968. From the fall of 1968 through the fall of 1970, sunny Valley State--along with much of the country--experienced racial, political, and social turmoil. There were no literary magazines during this period of intense emotional disruption when creative energies were more likely to find expression in political action. In 1971, as the situation on campus drifted back toward the status quo, two students in the English Department started Artifax, a new literary magazine constructed from the pieces of the defunct Eclipse. These editors produced four issues of Artifax (May 1971, October 1971, March 1972, and March 1973). In July of 1972 San Fernando Valley State College, also reconstructed, officially became California State University, Northridge. During this transitional period, students of the English Council, with partial support from Associated Students, produced two short-lived literary magazines, the aesthetically eclectic All Of It (Summer-Fall 1972) and A Bao A Qu (Fall 1973), named after a mythical Malayan being "sensitive to the many shades of the human soul."

These separate efforts led to the founding in 1975 of Angel's Flight, a literary magazine fully supported by Associated Students and produced and edited by students in the English Department. The new magazine, as the first issue pointed out, was named after Angel's Flight, the old downtown "streetcar that could be ridden from Hill Street up Bunker hill. The trip up was like climbing the hump of that first hill on a roller coaster: the car, sometimes smelling of axle grease, clicked and jerked to the top. Angel's Flight gave you a ride that beat the hell out of the nickel you paid for it." The literary Angel's Flight ran without interruption for eleven issues from January 1976 through the spring of 1982. The name of the magazine was then changed to Northridge Review, in part belatedly to reflect the name change from San Fernando Valley State College to California State University, Northridge and in part to reflect a greater identification with the San Fernando Valley. Northridge Review has published twelve issues without interruption from the Fall 1982 issue through the present Fall 1988 issue. I would like to thank the students of Valley State and Cal State, Northridge for having written and produced these thirty-six separate publications; without their talented contributions, this anthology would not have been possible.

My own work on this retrospective glance at those twenty-six years of student fiction and poetry has been made possible in part by a sabbatical leave grant which gave me the time to collect all the various issues and begin the selection process and in part by a modest grant from the President's Special Needs Fund which helped pay for the word-processing and computer typesetting. I am indebted to Virginia Elwood, CSUN's excellent archivist, for helping me locate a complete collection of these thirty-six magazines, thus guaranteeing the thoroughness of the current
selection. I would like to give special thanks to my editorial board, all full-time teachers who graciously took time from their extremely heavy teaching schedules to help with the selection process: for help with the fiction selection, Professors Lary Gibson, Wallace Graves, and Katharine Haake; for help with the poetry selection, Professors Eloise Klein Healy, Arthur Lane, and Benjamin Saltman. I would also like to thank Professor Dorothy Barresi, Glenn Dwiggins (who also did the typesetting), Patricia Rockoff, and Jim Williamson for their help with proofreading the manuscript. My final thanks go to Michael Jacobs of RE: Graphics, without whose help this project would never have come to completion. Because funds on our campus for literary projects such as this one are minimal and seldom available, Michael Jacobs has graciously donated the entire cost of printing and binding this special anthology; may his reward be in this as well as in any other world.

Warren Wedin
California State University, Northridge
December 1988

Back to Contents of The Best.
Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Sierra Tower Photo and the Kennedy Assassination

Only a fadograph of a yestern scene -- Finnegans Wake

San Fernando Valley State College was founded on July 1, 1958 on the present site of the University. The 1960's brought about a period of rapid expansion of the campus facilities, including the construction of the Sierra complex--Sierra Hall North, Sierra Hall South, and Sierra Hall Tower, the focus of this little-known historical note. The entire Sierra Hall complex was scheduled to open when classes began on September 16, 1963. However, only Sierra Hall South opened on time; Sierra Tower was scheduled to open in January.

During October and November of 1963, the unoccupied Sierra Tower was used to beam a welcome to visitors across the San Fernando Valley State College campus. On November 26, 1963, the Tuesday immediately after the Kennedy assassination, the front page of the Daily Sundial showed a picture of Sierra Tower with the initials 'VSC' displayed from lighted faculty offices. Atop the picture was the caption "A TOWER WELCOMES VISITORS" and below the picture the caption "Beams Welcome--The tower of Sierra Hall beams 'VSC' to night visitors to the campus. The practice was ended when a four-letter word appeared instead." No mention was made of exactly what four-letter word was involved in this incident; and, in fact, officially the Tower episode was never mentioned again. Significantly, though, this same Tuesday issue of the college paper also contained a one-page insert entitled "We Honor Our Late President" stating that

The insert in today's Sundial was originally prepared as an Extra for distribution on Monday when campus Memorial Services for John F. Kennedy have been planned. A presidential order by Lyndon B. Johnson, however, declared Monday a national day of mourning, and classes were canceled. The edition is presented today as a tribute to the President.--The Editors

Despite the apparent relationship between the sudden appearance of a significant four-letter word on Sierra Tower over the weekend of November 22, 1963, and the shooting of JFK that Friday, no one on campus seems to have connected the two events.

Sierra Tower, San Fernando Valley State College, November 22-24, 1963

Because I do not believe that this re-ordering of the office lights was a random act of mischief, I am willing to speculate on the events occurring between Friday, November 22, and Sunday, November 24, 1963. Shortly after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, a small group of students with access to a master key entered Sierra Tower, re-configured the lighted offices, and beamed across the Valley State College campus their graphic reaction to the
Sierra Tower Photo and the Kennedy Assassination

assassination of JFK. They subsequently took the above photo and distributed a few copies privately. Even though this act was probably an early sign of growing political consciousness, the incident and its photographic record have both been long forgotten until I came upon a copy of the photo quite by accident--at least twenty-five years after the event--and reproduced it as an historical oddity in my edition of The Best Fiction and Poetry from CSUN: 1962-1988. For the 1995 electronic edition of this anthology, however, I have decided to add this speculative note along with the photo in order to make explicit what I only hinted at in the original 1988 edition. Incidentally, the photographer and the Sierra Tower lighting crew were unknown to me in 1988, and to this day remain a mystery.

Warren Wedin
California State University, Northridge
March 1995

20 September 1995

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
We were sitting around on my front porch reading Nancy Drew mysteries and drinking lemonade with Ritz crackers and peanut butter when I got to feeling all hot and sticky and wished someone would take us to the river to swim. No one would though. It was already after three o'clock and there wasn't time to get there and back before suppertime, even if somebody's mother wanted to.

I dropped Nancy Drew and the Mystery of the Squeaking Door on the floor without marking my place. I like to do this because someone always says, now you've lost your place, and I say, I never use a book mark; I just remember the page I'm on. To tell the truth, I forget lots of times, but my older brother Harley told me once that if you couldn't remember a simple thing like a page number you were pretty stupid. I don't really think it's stupid, and I hate Harley about half the time, but he seems to be right about a lot of things, especially since Daddy died, so I practice hard on remembering page numbers.

I looked down at my legs and thought they looked pretty cruddy and wondered if Mother would get after me if I shaved them. Actually, I didn't think she would say anything because she didn't seem to notice much of anything about me lately, but I was pretty sure that Jane would have a couple of snotty things to say about how I'm always trying to act older than I really am. Jane happens to be my older sister, older than Harley even. She's real plain and won't even wear lipstick and always has her saddle shoes polished and keeps her things in little boxes all lined up in her bureau drawer. She hates having to share a room with me.

After figuring out how I would snatch Jane's razor when I took my bath tonight, I looked over at Mary Payne. She was all curved down in the green striped canvas chair with her legs stuck out in front of her half way across the porch. Mary Payne has this awful habit of scratching her head when she reads. I don't mean just now and then like everybody else, but all the time. If she sits around for three straight hours reading, she's scratching her head the whole time. She's probably scratched away at least half her scalp by now and today it really irritated me.

Her legs are long and brown and smooth and look terrific in shorts. She's been having a lot of trouble with her skin though and has to keep this green stuff all over her chin and forehead. I guess Mary Payne is just about my best friend, except for Sybil Underwood. I really like Sybil best because we don't argue very much and she's a lot of fun; but my mother and Mary Payne's mother played together when they were little girls, so now it's kind of like we're relatives instead of just friends. Maybe that's why we're so hateful to each other a good bit of the time. It seems like lately I never can tell what kind of a mood she's going to be in and we can't seem to get through a single week without a big fuss over something.

Finally Mary Payne quit scratching her head and looked up from her book. Sometimes I stare at people for ages and they always look up after a while, like they thought someone had called them.

"Whaddya want?" She sounded teed off, like I'd snatched the book out of her hand or something.

I looked surprised. "I don't want anything . . . I didn't say a word, did I?" I stared out into the yard like she was out of her mind or something.

"Oh, never mind." She looked at her nails and cleaned out what she'd scratched from her head. I looked away. Mary
Payne has these awful habits.

"Let's do something." She picked up a little coin purse from under her chair and started sucking on the end of the zipper. She's always chewing or scratching or sucking on something. She really irritates me sometimes.

"Whaddya wanta do?" I asked. Since we were already reading and it was too late to go swimming, I couldn't think of anything else. That's all we ever do when school is out in the summer.

"I don't know . . . let's go down to Kessler's."

"What for?" I asked. It embarrasses me to go into a store just to look around. Clerks always know that kids our age aren't going to buy anything and they sort of hang around giving you fishy looks. It isn't so bad in the five-and-ten, but in a place like Kessler's you only go with your mother to really buy something.

"Oh, nothing in particular . . . just looking." She was still chewing on the coin purse and I noticed it looked pretty bumpy. Maybe she would set us up at Cooper's drug store later and it would be worth the hot walk downtown. I had a quarter, but I was saving it for some new Big Little books.

I got up and picked up our empty glasses and the box of crackers and the jar of peanut butter. "Well, O.K . . . I'll tell Mother we're going."

I went back to the kitchen and put the glasses in the sink and everything back in the cabinet. Going down the hall to Mother's bedroom where she was resting, I passed the big mirror and got a look at myself. In the dark hall I didn't look so skinny and my hair just looked sort of shiny instead of all streaky from being bleached out in the sun. I decided I wouldn't take the time to change into a skirt.

I knocked easy on Mother's door. "Mary Payne and I are going downtown. Is it O.K.?"

"Well, all right . . . just be sure you're back here in time to go up to Uncle RB's for the milk. It's your turn tonight." Through the door her voice sounded funny, like she'd been crying. It made me feel awful and I wanted to go in and see if she really was.

"Mother?"

"What is it, honey?"

"Can I have a nickel?" I didn't want to take a chance on Mary Payne deciding to be generous. She can be an awful stingy-gut sometimes.

"I guess so. Come in and get it out of my purse."

The bedroom was dark because the shutters on the big windows were closed to keep out the heat. I opened the top drawer of the bureau and found her purse and felt around for a nickel in the little change compartment.

"What time is it?" She was lying on top of the spread, all dressed except for her shoes, with one hand across her chest and a wet cloth on her forehead. My mother's never sloppy, even when she doesn't feel good.

I looked at the little clock on her bedside table and told her it was three-twenty. "I didn't know you had a headache . . . I'll stay home if you want me to; I mean, the phone might ring, or somebody might come to the door or something." I was just glad she hadn't been crying again. I never can figure out what to do when a grown-up cries.

"Oh, no. You run ahead. I'm feeling a lot better and I'll be getting up in a little bit anyway." I knew she meant it; when she says something like that she never has this whiny tone in her voice that makes you feel like you really ought to stay around. I mean, she really makes you feel like a bad headache isn't anything at all and that it's lots more important for you to go on skating or to the picture show or something.
I stood there a minute looking at her. "Well, all right; if you're real sure?"

"I'm sure. You go on now. Just don't forget about the milk."

"No ma'am, I won't." I managed to close the door quietly and went back down the hall. Through the screen door I could see Mary Payne still stretched out in the chair in this silly pose like she thought she was Hedy Lamarr or somebody. All of a sudden I wanted to kick the chair rung out of its notch and make her fall flat on her fanny.

I whacked the door open and let it bang shut. "I got a nickel for a coke . . . I think I'll have a cherry one. Hey, Mary Payne, let's go by Sybil's house and see if she can play out tonight. If she can and you can, then I know Mother'll let Harley and Jane and me."

She finally managed to get up out of the chair and gave me this hateful, stuck-up look. "Who wants to play baby games every night, for heaven's sake?" I started blushing. All summer she's been making me feel like I'm about five years old every time I mention doing something fun we've always done. Besides, I'd rather play than anything in summer, except for swimming and reading like this afternoon. Nobody has to go to bed till nine o'clock so we all gulp down our supper and go up to Mary Payne's and play Kick the Can or Sardines or Piggly Wiggly. Sometimes, when it gets dark enough, Clarence Mitchell tells us ghost stories. We all sit around on the wet grass getting chigger bites and grass stains on our clothes while he scares the daylights out of us, until somebody's mother starts calling to come on home. I can't imagine anybody not wanting to play out, except grown-ups.

"What's 'baby' about playing out, I'd like to know? Since when are you too old to play Kick the Can . . . I'd just like to know? You're just six months older than me, remember?" I never can think of anything really smart to say when I get mad. My voice just gets trembly and I think I'm going to start crying.

I straight-armed the screen door and went down the front steps three at a time, letting the door slam right in her face. All she did when she caught up with me out on the sidewalk was give me another dirty look. Mary Payne really has a rotten disposition.

Outside, the heat from the sidewalk and the streets made things look all blurry. I like being out in the middle of the afternoon. Hardly anybody is around and everything sounds kind of far away. All the mothers and really little kids are inside resting with the shades and blinds closed and the colored girls are sitting in straight chairs out on the back porches, waiting for everyone to wake up. When you go into anybody's house at this time of day everything is dark and cool and about all you can hear is the refrigerator humming out in the kitchen.

We stayed on the shady side of the streets so it wasn't too bad going downtown, but I was glad I had a nickel for a coke. Once, I stuck the nickel hard into the palm of my hand to see if it would stay there when I turned my hand over. It didn't. I bent over to pick it up off the sidewalk and when I straightened up I felt dizzy, like the top of my head weighed about a million pounds.

"Are we going to Kessler's or the drug store first?" I asked.

"I don't care. Let's go to Kessler's."

Hardly anybody was in town. We passed Cooper's and a lot of business men were standing around the cigar counter drinking cokes and laughing. They'd get all bunched up together and one of them would talk real low for a minute, then all of a sudden they'd start laughing like anything and Judge Harris would whoop out real loud and slap his knee. Once I asked Harley what they were doing and he said I was stupid.

I was kind of nervous about going into Kessler's, but I figured out that I'd pretend I was looking around for a new blouse because that's all they have out on tables that you can look at without having a clerk pull things off shelves for you. I can't stand to have someone fuss over me when I know I'm not going to buy anything.

Kessler's is the only really nice store in town. It has great big display windows out front, and inside it's all carpeted and quiet and you can see three sides of yourself when you're trying something on. The only trouble with this is, no
matter how good a dress you have on when you go into Kessler's, it always looks old and tacky next to everything they have. Mary Payne went in first and I followed her, wishing I'd put on a skirt instead of wearing these ugly old shorts.

Mrs. Kessler was behind the jewelry counter and gave us a look over her glasses. "Can I help you, girls?" Mrs. Kessler is real gushy when she thinks you're going to buy something, and I could tell right away she knew we were just going to poke around. I sort of stayed behind Mary Payne and looked over toward the blouses, wishing we hadn't come in.

Mary Payne stuck her chin up in the air and walked straight up to Mrs. Kessler. "Yes, I'd like to see some lingerie, please."

I thought she'd lost her mind or something. We never even looked at Mrs. Kessler unless our mothers were with us. I didn't know whether to stay with Mary Payne or sneak off toward the blouses.

"Right over here, dear." She moved toward a counter where they had slips and panties and things in little frames sitting around on the glass top. "Now, what is it you need, dear? Panties, or a new slip?" She was talking to Mary Payne like she was a grown-up, for heaven's sake.

Mary Payne didn't bat an eye. "No, not today. I need a new brassiere."

A brassiere! A new brassiere! Like she had about a million old ones at home! I knew for a fact that Mary Payne had never owned a brassiere in her entire life. I almost giggled but saw that Mrs. Kessler hadn't even cracked a smile. She just looked real sharp at Mary Payne's front and squinched up her lips and said, "Well now, what size would that be?"

"A thirty-two, in white I think." She sounded like she'd been buying one every week for a year. Mrs. Kessler laid two or three out on the counter and Mary Payne picked them up and turned them over, and they talked about cups and support and comfort and things, and finally she picked out one with a little pink rosebud on the middle part of the front.

While Mary Payne was fishing her money out, Mrs. Kessler looked at me and said, "What about you, dear? Anything today?"

I started to blush and folded my arms across my chest. I didn't want her to see that I wasn't anywhere near needing something like that.

"NO! No, ma'am . . . not today, thank you." Mary Payne got her package and picked up her change and we left.

Outside, we didn't say anything and started walking back toward Cooper's. I felt kind of miserable and dumb and wondered why I'd left a perfectly good book just to come downtown in all this heat.

We sat down at a back table and ordered cokes, but it wasn't much fun. We didn't talk any until finally I brought up the subject of playing out again. "Let's stop by Sybil's on the way home and see if she can play out tonight, O.K.?"

Mary Payne finished pinching her straw, he-loves-me-he-loves-me-not, and leaned back in her chair, pretending she was Lana Turner or somebody, I guess.

"Well . . . if you must know, don't bother. It so happens that Sybil and I are going to the picture show tonight."

I felt all funny inside for a minute. Sybil and I had been going to the show every Saturday afternoon for ages, and right now it was the middle of a Flash Gordon serial. "You and Sybil? She can't! We always go on Saturday . . . besides she doesn't have enough money to go twice a week!"

"Well, for your information, some of us don't like to waste our time and money on that kid stuff. Sybil and I are going to see Rebecca at the early show tonight, so there."

For a minute I thought I was going to start this dumb crying so I looked over toward the magazine rack, squinting my eyes hard like I was trying to read the printing on one of the magazines. All I could think about was who I would sit
with on Saturday. Harley would die before he would let me sit with him, and I'd die before I'd sit with Jane. I hated Mary Payne so much I couldn't look at her.

"Well, drop dead then! And for *your* information, maybe some of us don't like to waste *our* time and money on a bunch of grown-up junk either!"

She didn't pay any attention to me, so we finished our cokes without talking any more and went home without stopping at Sybil's house. When we got to my house I just said, "I'll see you," and didn't even ask her to come in.

Mary Payne had left her book under the chair, so I picked it up with mine and went through the house to the kitchen. Mother was standing at the cabinet patting out biscuit dough, looking fresh and cool, like she was feeling all right.

"What did you go downtown for?"

"Oh, nothing. Just a coke." I went out on the back porch and picked up the empty milk bottles. It was cooler now that the sun had started to go down, and everything looked all gold and clean. Inside, I could hear Mother cutting out the biscuits on the metal cabinet top. In the bright sun I took a good look at my legs. They really looked terrible.

"Mother, how much does a razor cost . . . ?"
The Dollar Bill

Eclipse (1964)

Michael Burrs

After pedaling half a mile from his new home in the San Fernando Valley and leaning his green bike against the outer brick wall, beneath the slowly revolving red and white striped pole, the boy felt the dollar bill his mother had given him folded neatly in the right front pocket of his bluejeans and entered the open doorway.

Cutler's barber shop was filled with Saturday morning customers, men and boys. Shortly after taking the only waiting chair left, one of the middle chairs, Red Oates looked up at the three barbers who stood before him cutting hair. He hoped the middle one would be his barber because he didn't like the way the other two barbers snipped their long shears above the heads of their aproned customers and the way they laughed and leaned over their customers' faces, murmuring secrets to them.

When it came his turn and many new customers had filled up the seats on both sides of him, Red gladly went to the empty chair of the middle barber. He avoided the eyes of the other customers, all strangers to him, by fixing his gaze on a faded color drawing of Old Glory. The flag was violet, yellow, and green and hung behind a sheet of glass smudged with fingerprints on the wall before him.

His barber was the tallest and youngest in the shop and was further distinguished by a thin black moustache and hair that was syrupped back on his head, past his ears. He looked exactly like Red's favorite comic strip hero, Mandrake the Magician, except he wore a white barber's coat instead of a black top hat and tails. After telling him how he would have his hair cut, "Short but not in a crew," Red did not talk to his barber while he clipped and cut his hair. However, Red spoke up when his barber laid his electric clipper on the cabinet behind him and shook the clots of red hair off the haircloth. "Have you a dollar bill on you?" the barber asked.

"You mean to pay you?"

"Yeah. But first let me see it. Got to be sure it's genuine."

Red couldn't understand why his barber had to be sure of that; it seemed strange. As he pulled the neatly folded dollar bill from his bluejeans, Red heard the other two barbers chuckle and saw one of them bend over his customer and murmur something to him.

After taking the dollar bill from Red, the middle barber carefully unfolded and flattened the paper between his palms. With mouth open, Red watched him, as one would watch a performer on stage about to transform a piece of paper into a bouquet of flowers. Red liked this barber and he liked magic tricks. He hoped this was one.

His barber glanced at his colleagues, gleamed his white teeth, then bent down over Red. "You can make this out?" The barber's forefinger pointed at the words inscribed to the left of George Washington:

THIS CERTIFICATE IS LEGAL TENDER
FOR ALL DEBTS PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Red nodded his head.

"Now watch." Then Mandrake the Magician (without top hat and tails) folded the left side of the dollar bill under the right side so that more than half of the inscription disappeared from view. He gleamed, "Now what does it say?" and handed Red the re-folded dollar bill as the other barbers smiled and the curious customers stared. "Read it out loud," said Mandrake the Magician.
Softly Red uttered that part of the inscription which showed:

GAL TENDER
AND PRIVATE

To Red, what followed was like the opening of a vein--and the pouring out, the spilling of his blood. All three barbers laughed coarsely, the two outer ones snipping their shears in the air. All the customers laughed, even the other boys in the shop. Red wanted to sink into the chair, to hide his face under a haircloth.

When the laughter finally subsided, Red mumbled to his barber that he didn't see what was so funny; he confessed, in a whisper, that he didn't get the joke.

But the barber to the left, the one who was furthest from the open doorway, overheard him. "Hey!" he shouted, so that not only the barber on the right but also the customers heard him, "The kid don't get it!"

The barber on the right didn't comment, didn't laugh as loud as before, but he snickered and his shears snipped in the air.

"Say, how old are you, kid?" asked the barber.

Red stared down his bluejeans at his black and white tennis shoes and brought them closer together on the silver foot rest. Then he answered as if apologizing for breaking a window. "Fourteen," he said.

The barber to the left was passing a comb over his customer's head. "You can tell he ain't got no hair on his chest yet."

"But," said the barber to the right, "isn't fourteen about time? Christ! When I was his age--"

During this interchange the barber in the middle said nothing. Now he leaned forward, over Red's face. Before Red's eyes the barber's thin black moustache glistened--the dollar bill, pressed between two of the barber's fingers, dangled--and, with his other hand, the barber softly pressed Red's shoulder. "Say, you want me to explain it to you, kid?"

The customers who were nearest laughed.

His blood rushing to his face, Red looked up again at the faded drawing on the wall. He asked his barber--amid the undying laughter of the shop--if he were done. When the barber on the left remarked, "Haircuts still only cost a dollar," Red Oates walked hurriedly out, not looking up at anyone, his last image of the shop the red, black, and yellow hairs strewn on the floor.
Planes, Ships, and People

Eclipse (1966)

Hugo Luis Stanchi

The thunder outside kept making its muffled rumbling noise as I tossed in bed. I kept thinking it would eventually die out and I could keep on sleeping. But it did not die out . . . it became stronger, finally developing a sensuous rhythm which repeated itself time after time. I got tired of listening to the noise and looked out from my window.

Throughout the night the wind had pushed the clouds toward the sea. The sun, for the first time in weeks, was now allowed to shine against the deep blue background. It did not make any sense, for I was sure I had heard thunder. The white-washed walls and windows of the rooms encircling the vine-roofed patio reflected the sunlight which had bypassed the bare arms of the vines. I blinked my eyes, looked at the sky, and looked down again. I noticed then that my brother, my aunt, and my younger brother Juanito were standing on the middle of the patio looking up at the sky.

"What's going on?" I said

My brother yelled, "It's a revolution!"

I jumped out of bed, put my pants on, looked around the room for my shoes and finally found them under the bed. I forced my feet into them and tried to find my jacket. It was under the bed too. At last I was dressed enough to go outside and find out what was happening. My stomach was already churning with excitement. "Mother, is it true?" But before she had a chance to answer, a plane flew past our house flying at almost treetop level, a smaller plane followed in pursuit. The thunder's muffled rhythm droned over the southeastern part of the city. "Something is going on at the harbor!" I said. My stomach and lower parts of my body felt very warm and my head felt dizzy.

"Pablo . . . donde piensas a ir?" my mother said.

"Out," I answered.

"Come here!" But it was too late. I had already mounted my bicycle and was almost through the side door when she yelled, "You have not had your breakfast!"

"Luego!"

"Tu padre te va a dar una paliza!" she yelled after me.

I knew my father would spank me, but my stomach kept making funny noises, and my mouth felt so wet that the saliva made lumps in my throat as it went down.

A slight breeze ran through the streets making dead leaves drunk with joy as they staggered and crawled toward the curb in their newly-found freedom. It was Tuesday, but the stores were closed and their windows were protected by heavy metal curtains. The heavy wood doors of Our Church of St. Francis were also closed. It seemed that everybody was on the street clustered in small groups, talking with excited loud voices and puncturing the brisk air with their gestures. I walked toward one of the groups. "It started about six o'clock this morning," someone said.

"And I thought it was a storm at first."

"I thought it was a bomb, like the one somebody threw at the bakery about three years ago."

"At least we'll have a couple of days off."

"Do you think we'll get to hear the soccer next Sunday?"
"Sure. This will only last a couple of days."

"Are you sure of that, Fernando?" Carlitos' mother asked her husband. Carlitos detached himself from his mother and came over to where I was.

"Where are they fighting?" I said.

"Down by the harbor."

"Want to look at it?"

"My mother won't let me," he said.

"She's not looking at you now . . . I've never seen a big ship," I said. "C'mon, let's go."


"I told you," he said.

"She turned around. It's going to be fun," I said.

An open army truck, its green paint faded by a thick coat of dust, rambled down the street in the direction of the harbor. The crowd became somewhat silent as the truck went by. I counted twenty soldiers inside the truck. They sat very erect and unsmiling. They did not talk with one another. I felt kind of funny then.

I thought I would not have a chance to get close to the harbor, and I rode toward a portion of the coastline which drove deeply into the sea. Hundreds of people were already there. I rode to the edge of the cape, and after pushing my way through the spectators, I saw the cause of the thunder.

The sea was calm that day and the ships' bows sliced the water like razor blades cutting paper. They slashed toward the harbor and turned to present their bodies while the thunder-makers went into action. The man next to me yelled "Bueno! Give them another round!"

Another man from further down the line said, "Listen to those burps!" Everybody laughed. He took a bottle of cheap wine from his pocket, uncorked it, wiped the edge of the bottle with the palm of his hand, and bent his back to take a long drink of wine. Then he passed it to the man next to him.

The ships came closer and closer to the port as the resistance to their advance decreased. Finally I was able to see small figures in blue uniforms running around the deck and the recoil of the guns immediately after they had been fired.

One of the destroyers changed course and came toward the beach where part of the crowd was; it slowed and fired one round which hit the beach about five-hundred meters from where I stood. I jumped on my bicycle and tried to get away, but the man who had made the comment about the burps pushed me off against the ground in his hurry to get away. There was a flurry of legs dashing for safety. A couple of people trampled me and my bicycle. They cursed and one of them said, "Damn you, kid! Why don't you stay home!" When I got up, I saw that the rear wheel of my bicycle had about ten bent spokes and was unfit to be ridden. I pushed it, mentally calculating how much it would cost to have the wheel fixed. About halfway down the cape, I stopped and looked back at the harbor.

Fires were everywhere. It was as if that part of the city was enveloped by a solid, sooty-black wall with a myriad of red and yellow blotches. Nearby, a petroleum tower stood watch over the holocaust. The ships fired once more. A lazy thunderbolt crept up toward the sky and finally fell in a dense fiery mist. Two jet planes flew over the harbor and disappeared into the distance. The crowd was silent.

The shelling lasted for about three hours. It was now nine o'clock in the morning. I straightened the bent spokes on the
rear wheel of my bicycle as best I could and started for home. The crowd broke up into small groups and walked toward the city.

When I arrived home, my mother rushed out of the kitchen and yelled, "You come here and eat something! Just because your father is out of town, don't get any ideas you can do what you'd like, young man!"

"Yes, Mother," I said. I ate a couple of biscuits and drank a cup of hot chocolate.

"Eat some more!"

"I am not hungry, Mother!" I said.

"Don't you answer me in that tone of voice!" she snapped.

"Yes, Mother," I said and got up from the table.

"Where do you think you are going?"

"I'm only going to the door, Mother," I answered.

My brother, who was playing in the living room, yelled, "Wait for me!"

We went outside. The day had changed . . . the sky had become gray and the sun hid behind dark, ugly clouds which allowed only an occasional finger of light to show through. A sharp and bitter wind bit the streets stopping only to angrily slap the blackened and dead leaves against houses and the skeletons of trees. Most of the people from the neighborhood were inside their homes and the street was the property of strange people who walked away from the harbor looking straight ahead seriously, stopping only to rest momentarily before going on.

Don Carlos, our next door neighbor, was talking to the pharmacist and to another man in front of the drugstore. "Looks like it's going to rain again," Don Carlos said.

"The weather is crazy. It's so unpredictable," the pharmacist said.

"I hope it doesn't rain too hard. During the last storm my basement flooded," the other man said. A large group of people went by and the three men stopped talking.

"Imagine, they have been walking like that since the bombardment began," Don Carlos said to no one in particular.

"I had no idea that the harbor contained so many people!" the pharmacist said.

"And the things they are carrying! One woman was carrying a picture of Christ, and the man next to her had a radio and a pair of pants in a wheelbarrow," the other man said smiling. I didn't say anything. I looked at my brother and he was grinning. I kicked him and he ran home crying.

The pharmacist said, "One of them had the gall to ask me for some gauze!"

"Did you give it to him?" Don Carlos asked.

"I had to. I didn't like the way he looked at me; but I'll never again open the pharmacy early in the morning! I have to pay for the gauze . . . it is not free nowadays!" Don Carlos and the other man nodded in agreement. Another group of people walked by and Don Carlos and the two others were silent.

Mrs. Garcia, an old widow who dressed in black and had a permanent scowl on her face when she talked to us kids, came outside carrying a folded card table with one hand and a few cups in the other. She placed the cups in the hallway of her house and assembled the table on the sidewalk. After placing the cups on the table, she went back inside the house and returned with a huge copper pot which she placed on the table. A small group of people gathered
round her. "Here is some hot chocolate, if you want something to drink," she said.

Don Carlos said to his friends, "Let's go and get something to drink. It's starting to get chilly. Mrs. Garcia," he called. "Do you have something for us?"

Mrs. Garcia looked at him and answered in mock amazement, "Yo no sabia que gusanos toman chocolate. Worms drinking chocolate?" She smiled and continued, "My chocolate is for people."

I laughed out loud. Don Carlos got very red in the face and neck; the pharmacist walked away; and the other man glared, first at her and then at me. Some people helped themselves to the hot dark drink saying, "Gracias."

After that day, I got to like Mrs. Garcia.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Mady Lou

A Bao A Qu (1973)

Carol Stager

You wouldn't believe how garlic stayed with him. Come the fifth day, you could still catch a whiff. Different people's systems work different that way. Course, the same holds with honeysuckle. Or take that night I wore the good perfume. He brought it from Wheeling. I swear to God you could smell it a whole week. Even his work clothes had a faintness. But then, that's neither here nor there.

Like Mama said at the wedding. Him and me had danced till I near dropped, then if he didn't turn around and spin every woman in that hall. Women was always something special to him, something for courting with sweet talk and it didn't never matter how young nor old they was. Mama's legs was bothering bad and I was sitting with her and Frank David, my little brother, when she turns and says, "Ella Ruth, you're going to need some hustle, keeping even with Pike Turner."

Like I didn't know. Even the first night I seen him. Best I remember, one of the kids, Robert or Silvy, had the fever and I came near not going at all. Mama was always encouraging about socials. Hadn't been for her fussing, I probably would have not gone. Just goes to show. I wore the pink dress, the one low of the neck. Back then I was shy as could be about them things. Wasn't nothing different than any lodge dance, till in he walks with Mary Kay Smothers. She's from Centerville, and being the prettiest girl in Dreggs County, besides real fiery, you know how people spread tales. As they was dancing, I was staring. His was the blackest hair and eyes you'd ever hope to see and there was something about the way he carried himself, real easy. That's how he moved, real easy and sure. Midway through the raffle, I'm standing with Jessie Graffers and up comes Mary Kay and says, "If he asks, you go with him, hear?" I just looked her right in the face. I mean, we had never spoke words before and I didn't off hand know what she meant. Then she grabs my arm and says, "Hear? Go with him." Next I know, he's asking me for the reel. Rest of the night was like in a dream. The juke music swelled twice that room and me and him, with them strong arms, laughing and looking like real dancers.

Mary Kay didn't have nothing to do about me going with him, because I couldn't of helped myself even if she'd said not to go, which probably seems the likely thing she would of done. But then, you didn't know Pike Turner. Was a long time before I could say no to that man, and by that point, between you and me, I didn't care to.

He stayed around Luckton, working for different people. There wasn't nothing he couldn't do and being so likable and all, was busy about as much as he pleased, which is saying something around here. Mama waited table at Jake's, out on Route 20. With me being obliged to care for the kids, Pike took to coming over nights. Days I was helping out Emma Shuster and he'd wash and play with Frank David and Silvy and Robert, giving me time to breathe some and catch up with the house. There wasn't no chore that man couldn't find pleasant. He'd think up games that'd make a tiresome task downright enjoyable. Sounds peculiar, but you can ask the kids. Not today though.

There is things a woman can't tell, but so's you get an idea of him, I'll remember what I don't think he'd care about you hearing. Like sometimes, when he was coming down that road, just strutting and whistling, I'd go out on the porch, my heart pumping away, real dainty. He always did like women being soft and he'd stop right where he was when I waved and holler, "Ella Ruth, you sure do have a pretty fanny." Imagine, yelling that from a quarter mile. Pike liked pretty things, especially pretty women. That's how it was.

The night he asked me to marry we was coming home from fellowship. He'd meet me there. Never was for church. Wouldn't even be married in one, felt real strong against it. We kissed and he says, "Marry me," and I says, "You don't need doing that," and he says, "Folks is talking," and I says, "Let them," and he says, "I want to marry you, Ella Ruth." Then he laughed like he was embarrassed at coming out with it and says, "Cause you have such pretty legs." I don't really. Like Mama, I got the starting of varicose veins and even not counting them, my legs ain't nothing special. But there you are.
Guess we had a shivaree like Luckton never seen. The whole town showed up at our place, and such singing. Like to woke up all West Virginia. You never seen Pike so happy, all them people and presents and women. I don't believe no one ever paid him such attention. Nothing would do but we take the kids Silvy and Frank David to live with us, and course Robert, him being mine to start with. Just when the party broke, Robert got awake with a bad ear and we took turns rocking him, half into the night. Pike nearly talked a leg off, all about places he'd seen and when he was young, things he never said before nor after that night. Us three lay on the bed, first Pike hugging me and then Robert. He went on and on about how we was going to fix up the house. One thing I recall, he says, "Ella Ruth, I know I never said I love you, like that. You understand? People that make promises about till rivers run dry, ain't never seen a river wet." He talked real nice that night. Sometimes, even now, I can remember how it felt, us being so close. But that kind of thinking don't do no good.

The first year passed like lightning. We was working hard and real tickled about the baby. Pike took work at the mill. I knew it wasn't good, but didn't never question his choices. Seems like he was all the time singing and I'd hear him reciting pieces for the kids. He didn't never say none to me. When he'd need staying out, I'd make like I was sleeping, but that wasn't often. As often as you might think.

Our baby died the same night it was born. He helped Mama deliver. It was a girl. Silvy took it hard so Pike spent time with her, getting her asleep. Knowing how he felt about crying, I sure tried my best. I had got pretty good at pretending. But when he came in that room, he jumps high and hits the ceiling with his hand and says, "Ella Ruth, you sure do have a pretty belly," and I just couldn't help myself, being weary and all. He got down on his knees and started kissing my tears, even the ones that dropped on the pillow.

The first year passed like lightning. We was working hard and real tickled about the baby. Pike took work at the mill. I knew it wasn't good, but didn't never question his choices. Seems like he was all the time singing and I'd hear him reciting pieces for the kids. He didn't never say none to me. When he'd need staying out, I'd make like I was sleeping, but that wasn't often. As often as you might think.

Come morning, there he was, if you can imagine, the same place and his eyes with that look. Being so dark, they never changed to speak of. I mean, they seemed like pieces of coal that you couldn't see around nor through. But sometimes, when we was making love, they got all watery and warm and there didn't seem to be no color to them. It's the same look I seen that last night. But all this was a good two months before what happened with Mady Lou.

Pike worked two jobs after the baby died. He said how he was going to move us to Parkersburg where there was hospitals. Real cheery, he was, but needing to be alone even more than before. One thing about that man, he never was no good at pretending. Some people are and some ain't.

You couldn't never say he was harsh, but once he looks at me and says, "Fregada." Colonel Briggs, at the post office, he says that means dishrag or something you wipe up with. In Spanish. I've a mind Pike thought I should be quarreled about him being gone so much. But that wouldn't of done neither of us no good. We talked a lot about another baby.

Then two weeks yesterday, it happened. Mady Lou was Silvy's age, eight. Her and her brother was playing by the woods and Ralph, the boy, comes back saying she got lost. They went out looking; the men hunted all day. Everyone was frantic by supper. Pike went at noon, when he heard. By dusk most of the men give up for the day, but he wasn't back, so me and the kids went ahead eating, when I hear footsteps at our porch. I run out and there's Pike holding this poor little thing, all bloody and her head holding on by a string. An animal had got her and you couldn't hardly make out a body shape. He just stood there white and stiff, with that look. Slowly, so gentle he lay Mady Lou down. Then up he straightens, turns and goes running down the road. Running as fast as he could, not looking down seeing where he was stepping. Just running like he was crazy.

The wake commenced that night with a service at the church. Come the second verse of *Abide With Me*, you hear this loud voice singing, "Roll her over in the clover, roll her over, lay her down . . ." Well, you know the song. Sarah Blatts played louder and the voice got bigger. It went on like that through another hymn and a prayer, the same words, over and over. I slipped outside to find the Miller boys and a couple other men looking up at this tree. Behind the graveyard. There he was, hanging on one-handed, at the very top, swaying and singing, drunk, with them eyes. He seen me and he shouts, "Ella Ruth, you sure do have a pretty butt." Between the singing, he keeps saying, "Go home, go on home." Clint Bodkins tried making sense, but he wasn't about to come down for no one. When the gagging started, the men and me moved away. I went home. There wasn't nothing else to do.

Like I said, that was two weeks yesterday. Today the kids and me is moving back with Mama. She got herself some of
them support stockings and you'd be surprised how much they help bad veins. They're costly though. $4.98 plus tax is a lot for one pair, but they sure do a fine job of keeping down pain, being elastic and all. Then too, I can help with money.

Funny how a person's thoughts go. When I come in the house and found all that money? First I says to myself, "Pike must of won at poker." They I says, "They paid dearly at the mill," and all the time knowing what it meant.

Sometimes I almost hate people like him. I really do. Sometimes I hardly have a day's use for a person that can't let their poison leak out a little at a time. They just cause this world so much of its trouble.

I guess folks don't hurt on purpose, but they're talking like I could of done better at keeping him in Luckton. When the end don't turn out like they hope, people go around making the middle ugly. Some says they seen him in Centerville with Mary Kay Smothers, but that's none of my concern now.

Would you believe? I ain't cried yet. Knowing his sentiment I just figure it's no sense making things harder on him. Emma Shuster needs me back there, so life's going to be fine from this point.

But the kids, the kids took it so bad. So bad they're still mooning, mind you, after two weeks and a day. Silvy and Frank David is old enough to remember real well, but you wonder about Robert, him being only four. I mean, just knowing one Pike Turner, even for only eighteen months and four days, can make a whole world a difference in a child.

Back to Contents of The Best.
Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Max had been in a concentration camp. As many times as I saw the tattoo on his arm, I don't remember what the numbers were. The ink was blue and the hair on his arm curled over it. I could rest my cheek there when we were in bed and look up into his face. He was dark, gypsy brown. His hair was black and curly, and his nose was sharp. His eyes were the same color as his pipe tobacco.

I think there were a letter and four numbers, but I'm not sure. If I close my eyes and try to imagine his arm, I can't but sometimes I think I hear his voice.

"That's my girlfriend's phone number. I don't want to forget it," he told someone once about his arm.

I wanted him to fuck me the first time I saw him . . . he was a married lady's fantasy I amused myself with on boring afternoons. Late at night Max and I drank coffee and talked while his wife worked and my husband slept. We talked about sex, but we didn't touch.

Their marriage was a mystery. Max was a European intellectual; he smoked a pipe, drank dark coffee, and played chess. She was a waitress. Her name was Sherry and she wore a pink uniform, a pointed hat, and white orthopedic shoes. She took a lot of valium. He was nicer to her than she deserved. Sherry and I were good friends, of course. On Saturdays they came to our house and on Tuesday nights we went to theirs. In between she called me on the phone.

Max killed a man once with his bare hands. He bludgeoned a Nazi motorcycle soldier with a wrench until the man died. It was after Max escaped from the camp. He stole the soldier's gloves.

The phone rang. "Hi, it's Max," he said. I could hear the traffic in the background.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"On the corner of Vermont and Santa Monica," he shouted. He was close to my house.

"I thought you moved to Phoenix," I said.

"What?" he yelled.

"I thought you moved to Phoenix."

"No," he shouted. "It didn't work out. I'm back."

We played chess at night and talked a lot about Goethe or the concentration camp. As punishment he was once put in a hole for ten days. It was underground and big enough for him to sit in, but not to lie down. The first day they opened the cover to throw in a piece of bread. In the sudden light he could see the circle of rodent eyes. He missed the bread they threw at him. It fell onto the damp floor. The rats surged at it and before he could bend to pick it up, it was gone. He slept crouched, ready to awaken instantly to catch the bread they threw randomly into his hole.

"I've just gotten into town," he said. "I'm broke and I've got no place to stay." A siren drowned his next words.

Sex with Max was always good for me. He took a long time to come so I could drift into fantasy. His mouth tasted of pipe tobacco. His pubic hair was even thicker and blacker than the hair on his head. He had a nine inch scar below his stomach. "I got it in a sword fight," he explained. It was slow with Max, but after he came he would grab his head and writhe and yell "No, no," as tears squeezed from the corners of his eyes. "When I come, my head hurts," he said.
After my divorce I invited him to my house. He and Sherry were not yet separated and he refused to come.

The last time we fucked was on a summer night. I picked him up at his house. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"I'm not going to tell you," I answered. There was no moon. I drove into the hills and stopped in front of a darkened house. He was breathing hard and the smell of his sweat filled the car.

"Come on," I said and he followed me. The house was low and long and hung white in the darkness. I led him through a gate to the left of the house into the back yard. A swimming pool loomed, a black hole. Far away there were lights but on the hilltop it was dark. The trees were black against the sky.

"Take off your clothes," I commanded. I expected him to hesitate or to question, but instead he stood before me and waited.

He was nine when they took him to the concentration camp, and he wasn't even Jewish. His mother was a concert singer and his father was an Egyptian diplomat who visited twice after Max was born. He lived with his grandfather and his mother in Vienna. His grandfather was a politician and when the Nazis came to Austria, Max's grandfather condemned them in public speeches. His grandfather died in the camp a month after he was put there. His mother died after a year of singing for the German officers.

I led him by the hand to the swimming pool and pushed. I watched the black water close over him. It was a long time before we came up. He sat on my lap on the steps of the pool and sucked my tits. The wind came up and blew through the trees and I could see that he was crying.

His grandfather and mother were asked to sign a paper. It would become a public document of support for the Nazis and then they could resume their lives. They refused and long after they were both dead and the war was over, Max wondered why they didn't sign. When he ran through the forest, after he escaped and before the end of the war, he was in the most danger. He could be shot by soldiers from either side or by German people. There was nothing to eat but an occasional dog. He took the gloves off of the dead army officer's hands and put them on his own. The first time we fucked, we met in the middle of the room and lay on the floor. Neither of us came.

"I can't believe you are going to leave me waiting here, on this corner," he said. "Come pick me up."

"No." I said, "No." One German officer hid Max during medical checks. He probably would have joined those waiting in line to die; he was tubercular and thin. His hands were beautiful, soft on the palms, fingers straight.

"I can't, Max. I can't come now."

"I don't believe you," he said. "I'm going to wait here."
The Day We Glued the Birdbath

Angel's Flight, Vol. 5.2 (1980)

Carol Stager

Some men find their strength early. My grandfather flowered so far into winter that his bud barely opened till it was nipped. But there were reasons. For one, he never gave a hoot for his immortal soul. If he had, he'd never have married that fourth wife, Jessica Loft. Right there's a woman who could drag a saint straight to Hell. It was a power he gave her. I wouldn't know how. The fact is, she had it and he fueled her right up to the day he dropped over dead, at the front of the Larksburg, Inc. Golden Centennial Jubilee Parade.

Knowing now about the birdbath, I'd say his trouble was due to an artistic constitution. Not that it, by itself, was fatal, because my grandfather happened to be well into his nineties and you'd have to allow he was pretty well spent, even if he did manage to strut, double time, nearly a quarter of a mile before he gave up and expired.

We didn't generally count him except at reunions. I don't recall he was ever left out of a group photograph though, and in all fairness, my grandpa's lot in this world wasn't an easy one. Women gave him a bad time. Even now, his daughter, my mother, isn't what you'd call a straightforward person.

Not many could snap back from grief as fast as Grandpa Rex. He buried two wives by his fortieth birthday, then turned peculiar, marrying a traveling missionary, who first nailed his shoes to the kitchen floor and later got the call to convert the heathen in Venezuela, leaving him with a dirty refrigerator and a lifetime subscription to Ministry at a Glance.

About that time, Grandpa got himself a Deluxe Paint-by-Number at the local hardware that turned out to be a big auburn stallion galloping up a multi-colored mountainside. When he finished the fifth shade of blue in the sky section, we were convinced he had a knack. Near the middle of his third Paint-by-Number, a big-as-life red and black fighting cock, he got Jessica. I'm not sure where. Probably the next county. Grandpa had his own property that could have passed for a fort. The two of them might have holed up in there forever. No, not them. They marched up and down Eighth Street, Grandpa two steps ahead of Jessica, making faces so people would stare. He thought she was solid gold. She glided along behind in open-heeled plastic shoes with her chest practically out in plain sight. If the men on the corner so much as snickered, she'd level her gilded eyes, toss her carrot hair and spit in their direction. She had good aim. It's the only skill I ever saw her display.

Last April when the Mayor's Committee asked Grandpa, as the oldest citizen of Larksburg, to be Grand Marshall at the opening ceremonies of the Golden Centennial, anyone with an ounce of sense would have known they meant him to ride in a sidecar, and even before the day of the parade, his being selected caused a big to-do at the Chamber of Commerce luncheons. But the loudest voice in town against the decision to honor him was from my mother, his only child, who publicly stated she could not abide mashers, even in her own family, and wouldn't give a thought to a reception at the house after the ceremonies until she learned that Bret Lafferty, the television star, had been hired as guest celebrity.

"Go tell your no-good great-grandfather to trot himself over and get this place in order," Mama told my girls the morning she decided to do what had to be done for the sake of the community. That was a good week before the reception and two days after she accused Mayor Trilling of choosing Grandpa because his own father was next in line. The Mayor got embarrassed and offered city funds to Mama for food and his wife for serving.

"Go tell that pervert great-grandfather of yours to wash the paint from beneath his fingernails and high-tail it over here for instructions," she hollered again to my daughters. They turned to me. "Just tell him we could use a man, if he could spare a few hours," I whispered, so Mama wouldn't hear.

Well, the girls returned, finally, with two paper plates of marzipan, a bushel basket of sweet peas and no Grandpa.
That was a week before the reception and set a pattern for the next six days.

On this end, Mama rounded up the Ladies Aid to decorate the house and got the Founding Daughters' Garden Club to agree to work on our yard, in spite of the long standing quarrel between us and the president, Eleanor Sparks.

Then again, Mama tried to get Grandpa over, sending off the message that she, herself, didn't judge it any feat of character to happen to live into the nineties, and that if he was up to dealing with Jessica Loft, he was as sure as sin equal to a day's housework, previous to his own party. I altered her thoughts for my daughters by saying we were all proud, no matter what, and wouldn't he please come by the house and show us how he wanted things arranged. That particular afternoon the children came back with a batch of panocha wrapped in colored tissue and Grandpa's collection of miniature piano benches he had formed himself from matchsticks and painted pastry dough. Mama stuck the hobby in the cellar and talked the Boy Scouts into cleaning the garage. In case of rain.

Then finally, the afternoon before the parade, when it became evident that Grandpa wasn't coming to help or arrange or do anything, Mama got worried that he might be strange enough to pass up his own party. So she sent the girls over with two different sterling cake cutters to ask which he liked. Not that she had any intention of letting his preference influence her choice. My daughters came back lugging three hanging art pieces made of different-shaped cat food and sardine tins. That load took two trips. Included was a palette knife for the cake, with a mother-of-pearl handle and a ring of tiny rubies set at the base of the blade. We still can't figure where he picked it up. Mama shoved the metal work in the attic and took the painting knife as a signal he intended to be present.

None of us slept much the night before the parade. Beginning at five in the morning, food and flowers and people started a heavy stream through the house that flowed right up till noon. The parade was called for one o'clock. By twelve-thirty Mama and me and the girls were dressed, in spite of the ice in the sinks and the bathtub, and crepe paper ribbons the Ladies Aid had tied to our closet doors. We had orchid corsages, with sparkle stuck to the petals and feathers and corkscrewed pipe cleaners. There were satin streamers hanging down. Mama's said "Father" on one and "Rexford Hufford" on the other. Both mine and the girls' said "Congratulations" in silver script.

About twelve forty-five when we were set to leave, but had to go back to the garage to show the men from the bowling alley where to set the juke box, in the side gate comes the three of them.

First is Jessica, dressed like a fairy princess with pink gauze wrapped around and around her body and arms and legs, and tucked in, Lord knows where. With a crown of camellias and a foil-covered cardboard wand. And red tapestry bedroom slippers. With a stuffed pillowcase. Orange. Thrown over one shoulder like a knapsack.

Next is George Van Lupe, who it turns out was sent as Assistant Deputy to escort Grandpa to the parade. George has nine children, the last we heard, plus a weakness for impetigo and is generally either rough-complected or covered with gentian violet. This day he is both and wearing an old police uniform that's rolled up a turn at the trousers and sleeves. And a brass sword strapped around his middle, hanging so long that he has to give it a quick lift with a knee before he can take a step forward. Wrapped around his chest, from the waist up over one shoulder, on the bias, is a scarlet sash. And he looks for all the world like last year's potentate.

Finally is Grandpa, decked out in a hair shirt and ragged brown undershorts, with worn sandals and long leather laces wound up to the knees like snakes. Centered on top of his head is a mushroom-shaped fur hat that looks like it might have been Jessica's. He holds a stick for a walking cane in one hand and a big hide pouch in the other. At the time I can't figure who he's supposed to be. His face is one continuous smile and he strides by the other two, puts down the cane and pouch, surveys the preparations and then says to Mama, "Where's the birdbath?" Meaning the one he gave us when I was born.

My girls run to hug him and Jessica. He is tickled and turns again to Mama. "I said, where's the birdbath?" Then he just stands there, grinning, waiting.

"Broken," answers Mama who is speechless except for the one word.

"Get the pieces," commands Grandpa, not raising his voice nor looking her way, but sort of surveying the yard,
double-checking on the Garden Club.

George Van Lupe and Jessica are drinking in the place like it is their first reception and I am laughing. I don't know why. Maybe I am nervous from the morning. Maybe I've never seen my daughters hug a man, and I'm happy for them. There's been a shortage of men around our house for as long as I can remember. And especially ever since my husband deserted the strip mines of Ohio for the gold mines of Alaska, leaving me with two baby girls and no forwarding address. Or maybe I'm laughing because I know where the pieces are because I saved them myself, as a child, when Mama said to throw them out and I knew better. I believe it was the first time I ever had the sense to listen to myself.

Then Grandpa notices me and is pleased. I can tell by the way his eyes jump fifty watts in brightness. And he says, "You get the pieces."

So I go to the garage, take a ladder and step up to the rafters where I had put the jagged hunks of pottery, back in a sort of false corner that neither Mama nor my girls' father nor the Boy Scouts could find. And I bring them down to Grandpa, who when I take a closer look, resembles a hermit or maybe even St. Francis.

When I hand over the pieces, Grandpa is excited and says to Mama, "Get the mucilage." Mama's way of shifting her hands lopsided, from one hip to the other, spells out her feelings that you could never hold earthenware with dime store adhesive.

Grandpa sees her message and turns away. "Would you please get the glue?" he asks the children, who are gone into the house and back with it almost before he can remove the styrofoam horseshoe someone has set on top of the birdbath base. My thoughts go back to when I was a young girl and had a father and Grandpa had a wife and the two of us fed the birds daily and changed the water and charted migration by seasons.

Thank you, he bows. My girls make curtsies. Then he calls over George and Jessica. And he squeezes glue all around the edges of two pieces and gets George and Jessica to hold the ragged sides up tight against one another where the crack pattern fits. Next he motions to the fellows from the bowling alley, who are pretending to still be busy and peering out from behind the garage door during Grandpa's arrival. And he circles two more sections with glue and fits the pieces, with the men holding on, in next to Jessica and George. Mama and me are called next. Mama walks stiff, like she is hypnotized and doesn't say a word until Grandpa begins to work her in next to Jessica. "Oh no you don't, no, no . . . never," screams Mama, dropping her section of birdbath and running over by the children. Grandpa just bends down calmly, picks up the piece, applies fresh glue and then fits me in, sort of across from George and one of the bowling alley men. Mama and me are called next. Mama walks stiff, like she is hypnotized and doesn't say a word until Grandpa begins to work her in next to Jessica. "Oh no you don't, no, no . . . never," screams Mama, dropping her section of birdbath and running over by the children. Grandpa just bends down calmly, picks up the piece, applies fresh glue and then fits me in, sort of across from George and one of the bowling alley men. Next he positions one of my girls cater-cornered from Jessica, barely touching me.

Right about this time, Eleanor Sparks, president of Founding Daughters and an enemy of our family, comes yooohooing through the house and on out to the yard with two collapsible chairs under each arm. Grandpa instructs her to set up the chairs and come hold. You can tell Eleanor is wondering what in the world's going on. But she walks over and Grandpa glues up this half-moon-shaped slice and fits her and it around me and one of the bowling alley men.

He calls to my other girl and Mama next, there being three sections left and only three people to hold, counting him. My daughter comes skipping. Mama is lagging behind, her eyes digging toe-holes in the ground. He glues my girl in position, and then himself, and tells Mama, with hardly a chip as her piece, to just edge in sideways next to him.

By this time those that had been glued since the start were losing strength, having to reach all over and under with different crossed hands, like too many spokes in a wheel. We were crowded, ten of us, up close circling this three-foot birdbowl, which probably had to do with body heat and irritation on George Van Lupe's part, because Grandpa has no sooner got Mama slipped into the jigsaw than George forgot for a second, and needing to scratch, let go of his piece. At that the whole project fell apart. Different people tried to pressure against the next piece for support and ended up pulling away entirely or falling to the ground. Eleanor and Jessica started to cry. My girls, angry with themselves, blamed each other. George said he felt awful. The bowling alley men sympathized.

But Grandpa was steady, like nothing unusual happened and he says, softly, "We start over." Then he makes everyone take a piece to the kitchen sink and soak it in hot water, because the glue started to set and is holding grass and dirt in
From the way my heart is thumping, I can sense that this birdbath and this day and Grandpa's new role all make a world of difference to me, and even to my daughters. He has come into our lives with authority; he has finally come into our yard with such assurance that even the bowling alley men who are not getting paid anymore don't tell him to go you-know-what himself when he takes their time for his own personal project.

Mama is quiet, but with a frantic look on her face. She keeps staring at her watch because by the time Eleanor and George use the bathroom, it is ten minutes after one. Mama is sure the parade went on schedule without Grandpa in the lead. She is right.

When we finally convene, Grandpa says, "The children will be last," like he has figured out a master plan. And he begins the glueing all over again, with Jessica and Mama first this time. Next the two bowling alley men. And Eleanor and George. And then him and me and my two girls. You can see he is pleased with the job this second time around, so he says, "We will sing Love Lifted Me." And he starts a pitch so high that only Jessica can carry the tune. The rest of us fill in where we can. My girls complain that their arms hurt. Grandpa says he can hold their parts and relieve them, if George will move a thumb over two inches, which George does, and the children get a rest, because Grandpa states they need periods of freedom. But later, when he makes them come back, the girls are angry and I suspect that Grandpa is tempted to let them go on playing. But he catches himself and says, almost in a whisper, "We learn to finish what we start." And there is a big silence.

George and Jessica are shifting hands from top to bottom. Mama is standing up tight next to a bowling alley man. She switches direction and gets fact to face with Grandpa. My daughters are grumbling. Other than that, there is this huge silence.

Mama glances at her watch. Her arms begin to shake. She is looking down into her orchid as though she can see the reason for all this in the center of the flower. Grandpa kneels to help give Mama's piece more support from underneath. Then while he's holding both their sections from below, he creeps his top hand over Mama's. "I'm sorry," he says, looking up at his daughter.

Mama bursts into tears. She jerks her hand away from where Grandpa can safely touch her and hold onto his piece at the same time. And she swings around to face the bowling alley man again, who is still a total stranger.

Grandpa adjusts himself, straightens up and says to the back of Mama's head, "I'm sorry I ever corrected you."

"Corrected!" spits Mama, so fierce that the bowling alley man switches hands instantly and turns to face Jessica.

Grandpa continues. "You were so much like your mother that I . . ."

"Her mother was his first wife who died," interrupted Eleanor Sparks, explaining to the others as if she is announcing a play.

"I'm sorry," Grandpa says again, over Mama's shoulder. "I loved you. But the way you walked and held your head high, no matter what tragedy hit, I didn't think . . ."

"You can't count on looks," bawls Mama.

"His first wife," puts in Eleanor again, nodding toward Grandpa. "She died young."

"I wish you'd try to see," said Grandpa to the back of Mama's collar. "It was easier not to be around." His voice cracked.

"Will you listen to him?" hissed Eleanor, leaning over one of my girls and around George, so she can talk right at Mama. "Will you just listen? He loved your mother and he loved you, only he was young. Your Papa has seen a lot of
grief. Now why don't you . . ."

"Shut up," shouts Mama. Which ended the first exchange of words those two had spoken in fourteen years. And there was this enormous silence again.

Then one of the bowling alley men said it was one-thirty and shouldn't Grandpa be at the parade. That reminded George why he was there and got him so nervous that he had to be relieved.

Finally, Grandpa announced we could let go. By then no one seemed to care, one way or the other. We did though, slowly. All broke away. Carefully. Wondering. And lo and behold, the birdbath stayed in one round circle.

So Grandpa made pie fluting designs on the little strings of glue that had come up from between the sections, and he squeezed fresh glue from the bottle into letters that said BIRDS.

In spite of George having conniptions, Grandpa took a minute more and got a handful of canaries from his hide pouch, ones he had made from clay. And he put them all around the rim of the birdbath. Then Jessica and George and he scooted out the side gate as fast as George could go, kicking a sword.

By the time I got my bearings, everyone had gone on to the parade, except me and Mama. So I went into the house, searching for Mama. I found her in the dining room, barefoot up on the table, straddling the punch bowl and hanging Grandpa's metal work of cat food and sardine tins from the chandelier.

"Some are cursed, stunted like dwarfs," Mama shouted at me. She climbed down and sighed. "Their April comes in May." I held my tongue.

We never got to see Grandpa head the procession. My girls told us though. So did everyone. They had held up waiting for him as long as they could. So when he and Jessica and George got to the formation site and didn't find anyone there, the three of them ran along the parade route till they caught up. They say it was a sight, watching them pick a path through the band columns and war veterans, and through the Salvation Army, and the drum and bugle outfits. The streets were lined so tight with people, there wasn't any other way to get up to the head of the parade.

They say George didn't bother with his sword. It bounced along the concrete, giving off light, like a match. And the sparks and the noise gave a start to every horse they passed, so that a good many riders got thrown. And they say Jessica's pink gauze came unraveled from about four ends, and that she got herself caught up by every tuba player and drum major she passed, so that finally George took hold of her loose ends and ran along behind, at her heels, like a chariot driver.

We believe what we want, so I'll only tell you facts. Every source I've spoken to has vowed that Grandpa Rex maneuvered through the parade like a professional half-back, that he side-stepped the pom-pom dancers in perfect form, never once breaking rhythm from one band to the next.

And they swear that through the entire episode, his face glowed, his shorts stayed shut, and his pouch lay flat against his back. Well, who knows?

The story goes that when the three of them eventually made it to the head of the parade, there was only space for Grandpa in the sidecar of Mayor Trilling's motorcycle, and because he wouldn't leave Jessica and George in the crowd, the trio double-stepped, on foot, nearly a quarter of a mile, until he dropped over and passed on. I wish I'd seen him. Mainly now because now I realize who he was supposed to be.

My girls said he scattered seeds all over the pavement. That's what the pouch was full of, seeds and clay birds. Jessica's pillowcase was stuffed with marbles and whistles and blue tops that she gave out to all the children along the sidewalk. My girls said, and Emma Watson backed them up, that after the marchers passed, people couldn't get out to the street fast enough to pick up the seeds Grandpa left for them. It was such a short time he got to lead and a shame not many received the benefit. Even of those who did, not many understood that he was Johnny Appleseed.
They brought the body to the house a few minutes after we got home. Jessica helped George and a fireman carry him in and because Mama fell apart and I wasn't in a condition to make decisions, they put him in the bedroom, where Jessica said he belonged. She ought to know.

Going right on with the reception seemed the logical thing to do, as a sort of salute, and also because guests were already arriving. Very few had seen him drop, and even those that had, didn't know the extent of his collapse. So Jessica stayed with the corpse in the bedroom and from time to time, during the afternoon and evening, we picked out the few friends we thought would care to pay respect.

My girls used bad judgment when they assumed that the celebrity, Bret Lafferty, would be interested in viewing Grandpa. By the time they mustered nerve to escort a movie star in to see their great-grandfather, coats had been piled on the bed to such an extent that Jessica was forced to switch the body to a straight chair by the window. All of a sudden this big actor came sailing out of the bedroom like a spaceship. And he spent the next half-hour alone, in the pantry. We've seen him face death a dozen times on Gunman. My older girl says the corpse was facing out the window and when they walked around the body to take a good look, Grandpa's hands moved. She says his arms lay folded in his lap and his hands twitched, as if there was still life in them. I asked Jessica. Her answer was typical. Grandpa hadn't finished the bust of her, the one he was sculpting, she said, smiling a smile that if it broke into sound, would have been a giggle.

Mama locked herself in her room and mourned all night. She'll heal. We all do . . . most of us. I didn't sleep either, but for a different reason. Bret and I got to dancing and enjoying ourselves, so when they took up the portable floor, we just moved to Pete's out on Route 17 and then on to the Para-Dice Cafe, and when they closed, we drove up to Lookout Ridge, and watched the sun come up and spread itself over Larksburg. I had never realized its power, how it sends liquid gold up over the hills, how it spurts at the horizon in little piercing spears and then floods everything with warmth and light, whether it deserves it or not. Bret likes the way his fingers fit in the crook of my neck and how I laugh. He's staying for the Alfalfa Festival.

I have more to celebrate than harvest. I have a feeling that because of yesterday, some of the sins of the fathers stopped here with me. I hope. That would make Grandpa very happy.

By and large the reception went well. There's always a letdown. Mine began with a call from Mr. Gordon at the depot, reporting that Jessica took off for Chicago on the 6:43 with an armful of Grandpa's Paint-by-Numbers and Mama's sterling cake cutters.

But then, there's the good, too. I didn't expect service from the birdbath, so you can imagine my amazement when I found someone had dumped a bottle of Dr. Pepper in it and that the soda pop sat all night and didn't leak or even cause the glue to soften. You can't count on the mended being like new. The real test will come with the first good rain.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Digging to China


David Lipton

"... a strong woman who bore six children. She will be remembered by her two surviving sons and their wives and by her five grandchildren. Her three great-grandchildren will be told of this unselfish woman who took pleasure in sacrificing for her family and caring for them for more than sixty years ..."

The rabbi's voice strained to sound sincere. Father sat stiffly on my right. Tiny drops of sweat slid down his reddish neck, leaving a network of moist lines. I rubbed my palms on my thighs. The coarse black material of my skirt refused to absorb. Mama sat on my left. She pushed a white ball into my hand. I blotted my palms.

The rabbi sang an ancient, unintelligible Hebrew. We sat on hard benches, separated from the pulpit, the Hebrew, and the casket by a sheer white screen. The rabbi's form was visible, a vague shadow against the white.

We stood and walked past the casket. Such a large box to hold that tiny, shriveled body. The polished wood shone and reflected my image. Mama stepped quickly by. Father lingered and laid a thick pink hand on the closed lid. I turned back. My brother Larry waited with the other young men. He pulled and twisted the tips of his moustache. Father tugged at my arm. "Come on, Karen," he whispered.

"Come on, Karen," Daddy says. I run to the car. It's a big green car. "We're going to see Grandma!" I say. I want to go see Grandma. She's funny. She can make her teeth say "clop-clop!" and they come out.

"Larry! Larry!" Daddy says. Mama pulls Larry by the hand.

"I don't want to go," Larry says.

"You always say you don't want to go, and when you get there you don't want to leave," Mama says.

"I don't want to go! I don't!" Larry says. I laugh. Larry's older than me. He's funny, except when he hurts me. Grandma's funnier. "Clop-clop," her teeth say.

It's a long time to get to Grandma's house. I sit behind Daddy. Daddy's neck is red with little black hairs. My dress is pink. It's hot. Daddy's neck is shiny and wet. I pull my dress up, it's so hot.

"Mama! Look at Karen!" Larry says. Mama looks out the window. I pick the brown hard thing on my knee where it hurt.

"Look! Look at Karen!" Larry says.

Daddy says, "Karen! Stop that. Pull your dress down." His eyes are in the little mirror. I pull my dress down and smile at the little mirror.

"Are we there yet?" Larry says. I like Daddy's neck. I touch it.

"Not yet," Mama says. Larry bounces. I bounce too. We bounce, up and down, up and down. Mama says, "Stop that! Stop that! I'm getting a migraine from those two."

"What's that, Mama? What's 'mi-graine'?" I say.

"You're dumb," Larry says.
"I am not," I say. I kick him.

"Mama! Mama! She's kicking me!" Larry says. He kicks me.

"Karen. Stop," Daddy says. His eyes are in the little mirror. I stop kicking Larry. I smile at the little mirror. The eyes smile back.

We get to Grandma's house. It's hot. Grandma's standing on the porch. I run to her. "Grandma! Grandma! Grandma!" I say.

Larry says, "I gotta go to the bathroom." He runs into the house. I run to Grandma. She hugs me. Her face is gray and fuzzy.


"What's 'shane-a-punim'?" I say.

"It means, 'beautiful face'," Daddy says. He's behind me. He kisses Grandma's fuzzy face.

"Why is Betty in the car?" Grandma says.

"She has a headache," Daddy says. He wipes his face with a white cloth. "I'm going to take her home," he says.

"Daddy! Daddy! Don't go!" I say.

"Always a headache," Grandma says.

"I'll pick them up later," Daddy says. "Good-bye, sweetheart, I'll be back soon," he says. He goes to the big green car.

"Don't cry, darling. I made cookies for you," Grandma says. I cry and wave good-bye.

There were twenty or thirty people assembled in front of the open grave. Father stood next to me, wiping his face and neck. Larry and the others rolled the casket on a cart. The air was warm and heavy with moisture, the sky a dull gray. The men lifted the casket and set it down next to the square hole. Two heavy, brown-skinned men lowered the casket into the hole with ropes. They lowered three concrete slabs after.

"Those who wish to pay their respects to the deceased may do so by casting earth into the grave," the rabbi said. He spoke now without any forced inflection, pausing only to wipe his face. People lined up on either side of the grave. One gray old man grabbed a shovel and thrust it into the huge mound of black earth that stood behind the grave. His face glowed bright red and his plump neck bulged over the edges of his collar.

"Bury her?" I said. "We help bury her?"

"It's all right," Father said. "It's orthodox custom. Your grandmother wanted this. Really, it's all right."

"It's all right, darling," Grandma says. She touches my head. She says, "Do you want Grandma to do something to make you laugh? Do you?" I stop crying. She smiles. I smile too. I know what she is going to do.

"Clop-clop! Clop-clop, Grandma!" I say. Her mouth opens and her bottom teeth come out and go back in. Her teeth say, "Clop-clop!" I laugh and Grandma laughs.

We go inside. "I made cookies for you," she says. The cookies are good. Larry won't drink his milk.

"I hate milk! Can't we go outside? I want to go outside!" Larry says.

"Of course, darling," Grandma says. Larry runs outside. I look at the pictures on the wall. There is a picture of a man
holding a little girl. The man has a black moustache.

"Grandma, is that me?" I say.

"Who, darling?" she says.

"In the picture. The little girl. Is that me?" I say.

Grandma laughs and says, "Oh, no, no, no! Ha, ha, ha! The little girl is me, darling. It's me."

"Really? Who is that man?" I say.

"That's my father, darling. You see how handsome he was? Don't you think he was a very handsome man?" she says.

"Oh, yes, Grandma!" I say.

"Yes, he was. So handsome. And he loved me very much," she says.

"I love you very much, Grandma," I say.

"Yes, darling, I know," she says. She kisses me. Her mouth is wet.

"Sit! Sit, darling," she says. I sit on the big sofa. It's got big red flowers on it. It's shiny and sticky like sitting in the car.

"My father was a felcher. A felcher's like a doctor," Grandma says.

"I hate the doctor!" I say.

Grandma says, "Oh, but my father was a very kind man. You would not have hated him. We lived in Nickoliev, in Russia. And when I was sixteen, just a young girl, he took me on a trip to Germany. Such a wonderful trip. We went to concerts and museums. It was the most exciting thing in my whole life!" Grandma smiles. Her eyes are wet.

"Every night, we rode in a buggy," she says.

"What's a buggy?" I say.

Grandma says, "Oh, we had no automobiles then, darling. So we rode in a big, black cart with a horse pulling it."

"A horse! Oh, I love horses!" I say.

Grandma says, "Do you, darling? Well, so do I! Do you want to see something?"

I shake my head, up and down, up and down. "Yes!" I say. Grandma goes away and comes back with a bag. She says, "My father bought me a beautiful gift in Germany." She opens the bag. It is something black. She says, "You see? A beautiful shawl! A wonderful gift!" She holds it up. It is black but I can't see Grandma's face behind it. She says, "Such fine material. Feel it. So soft." I touch it and it is soft. It smells funny, like the big wood box in Mama's closet.

"My father was a wonderful man. So handsome. He loved me very much," Grandma says. She is crying.

I say, "Don't cry, Grandma! Don't cry. I love you too!"

"Does everyone have to?" I asked.

Father wiped his face. "Only if they want to. It's a way of showing respect. You don't have to." I stepped up to the grave. I grabbed the shovel with both hands and sank the blade into the soft pile of earth. I tried to jerk the shovel up,
but stumbled. I went down on one knee, still clutching the shovel. My face came close to the mound of loose, black earth, and I saw the casket at the bottom of the square hole, the three gray concrete slabs resting on it. I sucked in a deep breath. The odor washed over me, the heavy, moist smell of freshly broken ground.

The ground smells funny. Larry and me dig with our hands in Grandma's backyard. The ground sticks to my fingers and my knees. The ground is wet.

"I can dig deeper than you," Larry says.

"No, you can't," I say.

Larry says, "Yes, I can! I'm a boy and I can do everything better than you!" He digs faster. I start to cry.

"Come on, you crybaby! Dig! Come on!" Larry says. I cry. He says, "Do you want to know where we can dig to?"

"Where?" I say.

Larry says, "Well, if we dig real hard, all day maybe, and we dig and dig and dig . . ."

I say, "Where? Where will we dig to?"

"China!" he says.

"China! Really?" I say.

"Yes, China! Come on, dig, dig!" he says.

We dig faster. I want to dig to China. I've been to Grandma's house and to our house and to the store and to the park and to Kindergarten and to church. But I've never been all the way to China!

"Larry, is Germany near China?" I say.

"I don't know. Maybe . . . yes, I think maybe it is," he says.

I say, "Oh, I hope so! Come on Larry, let's dig!" We dig and then I say, "Larry, should we pray to Jesus? Mama says if we want something real bad, we should pray to Jesus."

"Yes, I think you're right. Let's pray to Jesus," he says. We put our hands together and pray. "Please, Jesus, we want to dig to China real bad," Larry says.

"And Germany," I say.

We dig for a long time. Grandma comes outside and says, "What are you children doing?"

"We're digging to China!" Larry says.

"No! No! Stop digging in the dirt!" Grandma says. She kicks dirt into the hole.

I say, "Stop! Grandma, stop! I want to dig to China 'cause it's near Germany! You'll come with me! Germany's the most wonderful place in the whole world! Please, Grandma, please! We can dig to China and Germany and we'll be happy there!" Grandma kicks dirt into the hole. I cry and cry.

The shovel load of earth thudded against the concrete slab and shattered. I felt weak from the heat and the humidity and the smell of the grave. I pushed the shovel back into the mound and walked back to Father and Mama. She gazed at the gray sky. "Mama," I said, "aren't you going to?"
"No," she said. Father smiled quietly and stepped up to the mound of black earth. "No," she said. "I can't. I just can't."

"I can't," Mama says.

Father says, "All right. How about you, Karen?"

"Sure," I say. "I'd like to go."

Usually, father drives fast, jerking away from stoplights. Today he drives slowly, nearly crawling. I roll my windows down but the car moves so slowly, there is no breeze. The air is hot and still and lifeless.

The elevator also moves slowly, cautiously upward. Father sweats and the air in the elevator cab is heavy with moisture.

"This way. Down the hall," he says. We pad quietly to her room.

"Hello, Ma," Father says. She sits in a wheelchair, gazing out the window at the gray sky. He bends stiffly and kisses her cheek. She is shrunken, tiny and dull in the glistening wheelchair. She turns and her cloudy eyes settle on me.

"Darling!" she whispers.

"Hi, Grandma," I say. I bend to kiss her. Thin arms encircle me and squeeze with astonishing strength. "Feeling better?" I ask.

"I'm so glad you came to see me! So happy!" she says. She weeps and covers her gray face with spotted hands. Blue patches dot the skinny arms where needles have entered the flesh, searching for elusive veins. Father and I talk quietly, bringing her small news items of family and friends.

Abruptly she says, "The maid! She left last week! We must find another maid!"

"Ma," Father soothes, "the maid left thirty years ago."

"Last week . . . we can't pay her . . ." she sobs. She looks out the window then back to me. "Darling," she says calmly, "did I ever tell you about my father, my wonderful father? He loved me very much. When I was a young girl, he took me on a trip, a trip to Germany. There was art and music . . . the most exciting place I have ever been! He was so handsome! He bought me a gift, a beautiful black shawl. He loved me very much."

"Yes, Grandma, I know," I say. She looks out the window again. Father stares at the floor.

"Fa spielt dem Leben!" Grandma blurts. She cries for a moment. I stroke her dark gray hair, thick like a younger woman's hair.

"All right," I say, "it's all right."

She stops crying and is calm again. "Thank you, darling. Thank you for coming to see me."

The elevator descends slowly, carefully. We reach the ground.

"Father," I ask, "what she said . . . 'spiel' something?"

"Fa spielt dem Leben!" he sighs. "Literally, 'I played the life' . . . 'I pissed my life away'."

The two dark-skinned men finished filling in the grave. The rabbi sang while shovels diminished the mound of moist, black earth. Mama walked ahead of Father and me.

"Have you ever been to Germany?" I asked.
"Yes," he said, "during the war."

"Did you like it?"

"I suppose. Things were pretty bad then."

"I think I would like to go there."

"Would you?"

"Yes . . . and China too!"

"China!"

I smiled and took his arm. We walked slowly to the car.
The End of the Pier

*Angel's Flight, Vol. 7.2 (1982)*

Amy Reynolds

My lover and I had a fight. So I took him to the end of the Santa Monica pier and tossed him over the side. He fluttered like a seagull's feather down to the water and floated on the oily surface a moment with the cigarette butts and bits of ice cream wrapper. His edges began to curl, and as he sank a minnow nibbled at the strong line of his jaw. His eyes were dark smudges and disappeared last. I'll say one thing for him: he never stopped smiling.

A fisherman watched the whole thing without a word. There were always lots of them on the pier at that time of morning, older men mostly, a few derelicts trying to catch a meal, a few teenaged Chicanos. This one was unexceptional, unshaven, melancholic. He had several flat silver fish in his bucket that eyed me, hoping I'd toss them over the side too. The fisherman eyed me as well, while I kept my own eyes on the gray line of the horizon and imagined Japan. It was foggy that morning; Catalina was a strain to see, a hump of darker gray a long way off like the back of a whale. Who did I think I was, imagining Japan? I remember thinking what a pleasantly distant place it was.

The fisherman hadn't had a bite in some time. He looked friendly; there wasn't any point in not speaking. Our silence seemed awkward after what he'd just seen me do.

"How's the fishing?" I asked.

He looked at the bucket, then at me. The silver fish jostled each other in the water and gasped at the surface.

"Not bad," he said. He directed his attention back to his line, but I had already seen his dark, serious eyes. "Getting a little late for 'em to bite now," he added.

"You come here much?"

"Yeah."

I waited, but he didn't elaborate. In that respect he was very different from the lover I'd just thrown off the pier. Eddie would never give me a short answer to any question, hardly ever gave me a straight answer, for that matter, and so he was never satisfied with a short, straight answer from me. He always thought I was hiding something. But then, Eddie was the nervous type, and he thought talking things out relaxed him. I never saw it work. It always seemed to me that his talking just wound him tighter. He was afraid, he'd say, of his terrible temper, and that I should watch out. "One of these days," he'd tell me, looking mean, "I'm going to lose it and kill somebody."

This seemed to be a point of pride with him--his terrible temper--and it didn't take me long to find out that even mildly furious, he was not to be tampered with. The more he'd talk the louder he'd get and the veins would stand out on his neck and my own neck muscles would begin to knot and kink in a kind of cave woman terror. But he constantly promised he'd never hurt me. He loved me too much.

So calming him down became a game, and my reasonableness was my own point of pride. I thought I could talk Eddie into or out of anything by way of superior cool. But the day I got rid of him in the Santa Monica surf was the day after I lost control of the situation and he finally took a swing at me.

The fisherman's line jumped and he tightened his grip on the rod and began to reel it in, while a few of the other fishermen along the rail looked over at the whizzing sound. I watched as the fish slid out of the water, bucking and fighting, but the hook was in.

The fisherman plopped it into the bucket with the others. "Rock bass," he said, pleased. "Good eating."
He held the fish firmly and slipped the hook out of its jaw. His hands were rough-looking, weathered, but he handled the fish with a gentle respectfulness, like he would rather have thrown it back.

"You doing anything right now? I mean, besides fishing?"

He looked at me full on at that, like he understood what I was getting at better than I did.

"Well, I've fished my limit with this one," he said. "Can I offer you lunch?"

That was how it happened that when I took Eddie to the pier I ended up going home with Dave, who impressed me with his brevity and who I think was impressed by my black eye. He took me to a roachy little single out toward Venice in a faded yellow Malibu, and turned out to be a Vietnam vet who lived on fishing and food stamps and hadn't kept a job since he'd come back in 1971.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Authority problem."

He never mentioned the war again after that.

Dave's clothes and hands smelled faintly of fish and his beard and hair were long and raggedy and not exactly clean. But the most unlikely people can be good in bed and I guess that was what I needed at the time, a good fuck, as they say. Which I hadn't gotten from Eddie in a while, with my nerves so shot all the time so that I'd given up coming ever again, even by myself.

But as I said, he was very different from Eddie. He made love as if I were the focus of everything at that moment, like he hadn't a thing better to do or think about. To Eddie I always seemed to be something other than myself, Barbara as a metaphor. For what? That I could never figure out. I guess in the advertising business everybody gets that way to you after a while, a symbol for some concept, some product. I don't think Dave could afford that; and so the shitty way he lived, the roaches and the mattress on the floor and the loneliness, the cold mornings I could imagine down at the end of the pier, all seemed to take on a clarity, a kind of hard edge that he somehow created. He made the whole two years I'd just spent with Eddie like a dream, or worse.

But all he really did was touch me right. It was no big deal. And afterward he fell asleep and began to snore. I decided the beard disguised a set of kind features; he had a nice mouth, to match the eyes.

I smoked a cigarette and leafed through a porno magazine from a pile by the bed. It wasn't anything unusual--just a lot of people fucking and girls together and the usual beaver shots--nothing really sadistic, I mean, which confirmed the generally comfortable feelings I'd gotten about him from that first dark look on the pier. He wasn't any weirder than some guy who used a good deodorant and kept the Esquire on the coffee table and the Screw under the mattress, for instance.

The pictures and the Letter-to-the-Editor got me a little excited again, and I was half tempted to take care of it myself. But when I peeked over the edge of the magazine to check on him he was watching me, and I realized he'd been staring for some time. I made it look like I'd been scratching my thigh. Fleas too, no doubt, to go with the roaches.

"You like that stuff?" he asked.

I shrugged. "The letters are interesting."

His question made me nervous, and I felt all the self-consciousness, and even fear coming back. I started thinking, my God, Barbara, you are weird, you've walked right into the Twilight Zone and he's going to flip out now and slit your throat--

"Your boyfriend give you that?" He indicated my eye.
"I don't have a boyfriend. I fell--"

"You should be more careful."

I started gathering up my clothes, throwing things on. "I have to go."

"I promised you lunch--I wish you'd stay."

Sitting cross-legged on the bed he looked like some bearded Buddha. And then he pulled me down to him, smiling because he knew what a liar I was, and undressed me again and next thing I know this guy's got his beard in my bush.

Traffic was bad on the San Diego freeway heading into the Valley, so it was nearly six by the time I got home. It was actually Eddie's place; he insisted on paying all the bills. I'd been there an hour or so, walking around with a headache-I guess from the eye--making mental notes as to what was his and what was mine (the stereo, the TV, the video recorder--his; the water bed, the books, half the record collection--mine), when the phone rang.

"Barbara? Where the hell have you been? I've been trying to reach you all day. Are you all right? Oh baby, I'm so sorry--"

Apparently, he'd washed ashore.

"I was out," I said. My pulse thumped in my hand as I held the phone. I was sure he could hear it.

"You've got Larry worried sick. He's been trying to call, too. He thought you were in an accident, but I told him you were just a little upset about something and went to your mother's for a couple of days."

Larry was smart and I'd told him enough that a story like that would worry him more than my not calling in.

"He believed you?"

"Of course he did. Listen Barb, honey, I need you. Maybe you don't know that, but you had me worried too--you run off like this and nobody can find you--"

"You hit me."

"I know. And I'm so sorry. I was crazy, you know? I just wish to God you wouldn't say things like that. But listen--I can't get anything done here, I just keep thinking what a creep I was last night. Why don't you just stay put, and I'll bring home a nice bottle of champagne."

His voice was like honey, sticking to me all over. I could hear the bees coming, buzzing through my head, attracted by the sweet smell of love and pain and the blood swelling in the soft tissues around my eye--

Click. I hung up. The buzzing stopped and in the abrupt silence of his big empty house, I just felt the headache beating away at my temples.

It was a simple solution, but a stupid idea. He would, of course, come straight over from the office. I started to get the shakes then so I got myself a shot of bourbon and called the police. I told them I was at a friend's house and a neighbor had called to tell me a strange man was prowling around my house and would they please check it out as I'd already been burglarized a couple of times, thank you very much. No problem, they said. Then I hightailed it over to Jean's. Oh, I was pure cave woman cunning now.

In the car, though, I started to feel bad. After all, it had been my own lack of cunning that had gotten me punched in the first place. He had sounded so sorry. In the rear-view mirror I saw how sorry he'd be if he saw me.

It had started months before, when I finished a couple of office skills classes and quit waitressing for a posh secretarial job in Century City. I had to work late a lot, and even though I'd come in bitchy and beat from the long hours, it
seemed that Eddie got his rocks off getting furious about it, getting himself crazy and jealous on these office party fantasies of what I did all day at work with my boss Larry, who had a lot of class and was probably gay anyhow. Usually I'd end up petting Eddie and playing with him and apologizing for myself, and I'd fix his favorite dinner and lots of times end up making love to him just to get him out of his sulk.

But that night I was especially tired and suddenly sick of the game. That time I got mad. And I picked the moment to tell him I'd be home a helluva lot sooner if I had a goddam human being to come home to instead of a--well, I never finished the thought. I left a lot of thoughts unfinished when I was with him, though most of the time I had the sense not to start them. I guess I meant to say that he didn't seem human anymore when he treated me like that. His eyes--they'd get wild looking, scary, with the white showing all around his china-blue irises like he was a rabid blue-eyed animal.

So that time he hit me, he really did. I probably could have kept it from happening by keeping my mouth shut. I'd done that often enough before. Maybe I trusted him too much, thinking his temper was just a story to keep me in line, his rages just harmless, even therapeutic tantrums that would never touch me. Not physically. Even if I was a little nervous sometimes, I was at least safe. That's what I thought anyway.

I'd never been hit by a man before, not even by my father. I had always thought my girlfriends whose lovers beat them up were stupid, or liked it that way. But this was me, not one of my friends, and I just couldn't get past the fact that Eddie had hit me. I just kept seeing his fist coming at me (though it had happened so fast I couldn't have seen it), and the thud when it hit I just kept hearing like a sickening echo in my head. He really knew how to shut me up.

I was parking the car when I remembered, hazily, like an old dream, how Eddie had kissed me after we'd made love just a few nights before. He'd touched my cheek with his fingertips like a blind man reading, and then he'd kissed my eyelids so gently! He could be that way sometimes. I remembered being sure then that he loved me, that I could make him feel gentle and loving, that the violence was the necessary flip side to his sweetness.

By then I must've looked pretty thrashed, because when Jean opened the door she said, "Barbara! My God--what happened?"

I had meant to make one of my typical jokes. But the shock on her face, the sudden rushing facts of the situation--that I was on my best friend's doorstep afraid to sleep in my own home, afraid of my lover of the last two years--killed the joke right there. Click. My sense of humor done in.

"Jean, he hit me." Then I fell apart.

She was great. She just stood there in the front hall holding me and patting my back like I was a little kid. But then, we'd been best friends since grade school and had been together through all kinds of shit, mainly in connection with men. We were always hung up on them and dealing with each other's sob stories. One time Jean fell for a history teacher in high school and he turned out to be the kind who can't resist an adoring student. But then, of course, he wised up and dropped her when things got messy. Jean wouldn't eat for days, and so finally I brought over a Tomic's burger--her favorite--and tried to make her eat it. We ended up with chili and the works all over our faces and laughing like madwomen. And then I got involved with a customer from the restaurant where I worked who was always having me meet him at crappy little motels in Inglewood or Hawthorne. I liked him so much it took me forever to realize he was married. Jean tried the Tomic's burger trick, but it didn't work. I threw it at her. The stain is still on the wall. But she understood--hollered at me to quit being such a fucking baby and clean it up.

That seemed to be the pattern. We could never figure out any better way to do it but to keep struggling through each affair, trying to learn, but never seeming to. Never really changing anything, though I guess we did start to get a little harder around our hearts.

Shit, Jean and I probably had marriage in the back of our minds all along and never even realized it. And the idea of it, of that veil and the gown, kids and the nice house, the station wagon, the whole peaceful suburban scene we'd picked up from our mothers, always crept up and blinded us when we most needed to see. Usually with the sharp stick of loneliness.

http://www.csun.edu/~hceng029/thebest/reynoldspier.html[7/12/2012 1:24:10 PM]
What kept us going was the fact that sometimes we were happy. There would be those wonderful times with some wonderful man, like Eddie had been for a while. And some of the callus would wear off and there I'd be, Marlene Dietrich crooning "Falling in love again--" moony-eyed and scared and oh so hopeful--"What am I to do?"

Jean put an ice pack on my eye and listened to the whole sordid story. She looked like she was afraid I'd die right there at her kitchen table. Her overweight black cat had stretched herself out on the table between our coffee cups and lay there brushing at crumbs with her tail and grinning at me through green slit eyes as if she'd heard it all a million times. The ice felt good, but it was probably too late to help the swelling.

"So you are leaving him?" she asked when I had finished.

"This is the first time he's ever gone this far."

"Let me see." She took the ice pack away and frowned at me. "He must've hit you pretty hard. You're lucky he didn't break your nose."

"I'm lucky he didn't kill me." My voice cracked. "Oh, it's not luck at all. He's not a monster. He's just angry and lucky me, I'm the one he loves. The one he hurts."

"Maybe you remind him of his mother. Didn't I meet her once?"

"At his birthday party. Very nice, well dressed, sweet--"

"She made the cake, I remember. Everybody went nuts over it."

"Eddie bitched about it later. He didn't understand why she couldn't just buy a cake. He sees plots everywhere."

"His folks divorced, right? He told me once it was pretty unpleasant."

She tickled the cat's chin and she rolled over on her back, pushing my coffee closer to the edge of the table. Jean was like that--cats on the table, up in her lap all the time. A new stray every month.

I pushed my cup back. "It was a long time ago. They had gotten a pool table for Christmas and Eddie was trying to teach his mom how to play. But she wasn't ever any good at that sort of thing, and she slipped and tore the felt. Eddie's father got mad and cracked his cue across her knuckles."

"That would seem to explain Eddie."

"He broke her hand. It was the last straw for her."

"So you never answered me."

Sometimes things were too clear to her. She was rarely confused. "I don't know, Jean," I told her. I was running my finger-tip around the edge of my cup and the cat reached up and pawed my hand lightly. "He still loves me." Abruptly she slammed down her coffee cup. The cat jumped and scrambled for the floor, dumping mine all over the table. Coffee started to pour off the sides onto my lap, and I jumped back to avoid it. But Jean didn't pay any attention.

"Then why aren't you at home, goddammit, waiting to talk this out with him?" She was shouting. Unreasonably, I thought.

I grabbed a dish towel and started mopping up the mess. I was too afraid to face him, that was why. It all made sense, remembering his mother's story, but I wasn't some Jane Doe case history in a magazine; I wasn't one of my girlfriends or Eddie's mother. It was carelessness--we'd both been careless.
"He said he was sorry," I said from the floor.

Jean squeezed out a sponge at the sink and attacked the brown puddle on the table. "That's typical," she said. "They're always sorry; but if he did it once, Barbara," she said more gently, "he could do it again. How could you ever trust him after this?"

She looked at me hard for a minute, the sponge dripping coffee back on to the table from her hand, suddenly so like my mother, angry and worried and sad, and loving me in spite of my mess--I had no resistance against her. But then, I felt like such a kid, sitting there on the floor. I was so tired. My brain had all gone to mush.

Later I took a shower and scrubbed off Dave's fish stink, though I think I imagined it more than it was really there. Jean put on some cool jazz and that started to work on the knots in my neck along with the hot shower. Then we made omelettes and while we were in the kitchen I told Jean about Dave's rock bass recipe. Then I started describing him and his place, and how I met him, and she thought it was all pretty funny. But that was my fault because I told it that way, made him out to be Gary Cooper in beads, a real loser. Jean and I laughed it up quite a bit. Then it all started to seem awful to me, that I could forget so easily how kind he'd been. So I cried again, choking on the whole thing, on my stupid cleverness, on how things could never be as simple for me as they were for Dave, on Eddie and me and how jaded we'd gotten, what we could have been, what we had let ourselves be instead.

So Jean changed the subject and pretty soon we'd gone on to all kinds of other things and left Dave and my lover and her lover, who had simply drifted away to Mexico on her, for another time.

I woke myself up crying in the middle of the night. It was funny how once I had started, I just couldn't seem to stop, not even to sleep. I just kept thinking about Eddie, how he hit me after he promised. It had gotten into my dreams, like everything else.

My eye hurt so I got up for some aspirin. When I came back to bed Jean woke up and snuggled against my back.

"You okay?" she whispered.

"I just needed an aspirin."

"You were crying."

"I'll get over it."

She threw her arm over me and as I fell asleep, it seemed as if we were twelve or thirteen again, ignorant, our dreamy little girl hearts as soft and naked as our still little girl bodies . . .

[Back to Contents of The Best.]

[Back to the CSUN home page.]
One Evening in Winter


Scott Memmer

One thing for sure, it would be plenty cold out. It was always that way after a storm. Laura gathered herself into her moth-eaten woolens and wondered why she didn't just climb into her car and drive the two miles to the post office. But then she remembered how deep the snow was and the freezing rain the day before and how many cars she and Ma had seen stranded on the side of the road on the TV--and she thought better of the walking. So she climbed into her jeans and gray thermals, her faded sweater, woolen socks and thick padded boots, her tattered gloves, red scarf and green drab ski cap, her checkered red hunting jacket--the one Pa had given her with the right sleeve torn--and looked out the window to the barren cornfield below.

"Better hurry, Laur!" her mother shouted. "Gettin' late!"

Laura slipped her hand into the jacket pocket and checked for the key. Yes, it was still there--she could feel it through her gloved hand. She released it and let it settle into her pocket. Then she looked out the window again.

Already she could see the stark shadows lengthening into night, the chill creeping into snowbanks, lampposts and stalled cars--into the land Laura knew so well. The fences and the rivers, the pastures and orchards--everything she saw spoke of her father's life, gone now, and of what had gradually become her own. It had been two years since Pa died. For two years she and Ma had lived alone in this house. Tractors and cornfields defined his life; now they made up her own.

Laura saw the evening coming on, sifting out under the ceiling of the sky like an old cigar-faced man dealing poker. She heard Ma in the kitchen, singing faintly off-key one of those old love songs Pa used to sing before he died. She smelled the stew Ma was making. It had been Pa's favorite.

"Better go!" her mother shouted. "You know what day today is, don't you? Gettin' late, Laur!"

Laura finished lacing her boots and pulled the laces down good and tight. She stood, snatched the cap off her head, and gave her hair a few good swipes with the hair brush. She wanted to look in the mirror, but didn't. Instead she took several more swipes with the brush and stepped out into the hall. It was cold there. Certainly you're beautiful, she told herself. She set the brush down on the bureau and placed the cap on her head. Of course you're beautiful. Oh, hell, it don't matter. So what if you haven't been with a man since--

"Come now, Laura!" her mother shouted. "You ain't forgettin', are you?"

"No, Ma."

"Then get down here and get goin' before I boil all this stew away."

She was a large woman. She was heavy-boned and over-sized, with dark olive skin and long black hair. Her father used to joke to the fellas that she resembled a horse; and yet she had about her that distinctly magnetic attractiveness, that aura of wonder and fascination, that exalted mystery, common to the Clydesdale and all other forms of prodigious life. She was strong as an ox, as the saying goes, and could lift nearly as much as her older brother Wayne. She had wide hips specially suited to childbearing; had had one child, but it died in childbirth. Laura was thirty-four and single; she had never been married.

She trampled down the stairs in her hard boots, crossed the carpeted floor and presented herself to her mother in the kitchen. The old woman stooped over the stove. "Will you turn that stew down and let it simmer, Ma. You're liable to burn yourself, for heaven's sake."
"I'll thank you to mind your own business," the old woman said. "Seems I raised some pretty healthy children without so much simmerin'." Her voice trailed off. She spoke and moved in that slow-controlled motion singular to old people and very young children. The old woman blinked at her daughter and tasted the stew again. She jerked her head away and winced.

"I told you you'd get burnt, Ma."

"Okay, okay," the old woman said. She slid the lid on the pot, leaned over and turned the flame down to simmer. Her hand trembled. Then she straightened herself as much as she could, reached up--straining--and righted the cap on Laura's head. "You have this thing about wearin' your cap crooked, don't you? Used to drive your father damn near crazy. Now will you get! It's comin' on dark."

Laura pushed her mother's hands away and angled the cap back the way it had been. "Tell me, Ma--you sure today's the day? It's awful cold out there."

"Sure, I'm sure. And if you think it's too cold take the car. That's what the lady from the lawyer's office said anyway."

"Did she tell you how much the check was for?"

"I didn't ask."

"You shoulda asked, Ma."

"Well, I didn't!"

"We need the money," Laura protested.

"They'll be plenty," the old woman said. With this she went back to her stew, removed the lid again, bent over and adjusted the flame higher. Laura tugged the glove on her one bare hand and shook her head. "They'll be plenty," the old woman repeated.

Laura turned the storm door handle and stepped outside. Her feet crunched on the weathered ice. She eased the door gently into its frame (the spring was broken) and tucked the collar up around her ears. The air nipped at her cheeks.

Laura looked south over the farm to where the land sloped away and the gray woods rose up to meet the sky. The sky winked with its first few impressions of starlight. All about her the peculiar silence of farmland after a storm exhaled into the valley like an old man snoring. Above, Venus, always the first star out, shone like a proud Madonna saying grace. The land hushed itself into secrecy and held its secret close.

And then she remembered the dream, how she'd left the house that day and walked the entire length of the valley. It was almost dusk. Across the southern field she'd trod, stumbling time and again on the shadowed furrows of the Jenkins' orchard, until, at noon, she arrived at the rusted old bridge that crossed the River Stimson. The river ran along the base of the hills at the far end of the valley. When Laura found herself there she stood on the bridge for the longest time and didn't know what to do. But then a voice called out inside her, a voice resembling her father's shouting hurry, hurry, Laura, go home--and without hesitation--without any rest at all--Laura ran all the way home. It was twelve miles, but in dreams such things were possible. When Laura made it home she opened the kitchen door and found her mother lying unconscious on the kitchen floor. She was frightened--her mother looked so pale and lifeless. Laura felt her mother's wrist; she splashed water on her face until, dazed and shivering, the old woman came around. It had only been another one of her mother's fainting spells, but it scared the hell out of Laura. She awoke that night with a dry mouth and clammy skin and could not get back to sleep. She watched the snow fall outside her window and stayed awake until first light.

Laura gazed across the cornfields and saw the leaning towers of the cornstalks in the snow. She took one or two halting footsteps, stopped and listened to the beating of her heart. She heard the blood pulsing through her veins. Then she shoved her hands into her jacket pockets and set off across the field.
When she made the road she turned left cautiously (for the road was slippery now and covered with patches of ice) and proceeded west down the lane past the Jenkins' place. Walking this stretch, she always closed her eyes. There were things ahead she didn't want to see, and she wanted to make sure she didn't see them. She didn't want to see the Jenkins' love seat, ancient and rusting, beneath the old elm. She didn't want to see the duck pond, frozen and blanketeted with layer upon layer of snow. She didn't want to see windows or stars or her own breath against the firmament of heaven. So she walked in the night, eyes closed, listening. Joey Jenkins was dead now, wasn't he? It didn't matter that she'd had his baby. It didn't matter that they'd made love beneath the old elm. It didn't matter that the baby had died. Nothing mattered. Laura walked until she was well past the love seat. Then she opened her eyes. The road stretched on through the rows of stark, bare, unfruited trees.

The post office would be empty this time of night; it always was. It was an old building that creaked when you entered it and creaked when you left. Laura stamped up the steps and opened the door. She walked in and slammed the door quickly. It was cold out there. She creaked across the floorboards until she stood in front of the box marked "Woodley," removing one of her gloves, finding the key in her pocket and sneaking it into the lock. It would have been his child. She turned the key in the lock. He would have come home from the war and they would have had a family. She reached in and found the envelope marked "Mrs. Eliza Woodley." It would've been his family.

Laura stuffed the envelope into her pocket, shoved the key in her other and slipped her bare hand into its glove. She closed the door of the box, straightened the cap on her head and creaked off across the floorboards. She opened the door, stepped out, and slammed it shut. She clumped down the steps and into the crusty snow.

Several times on the way home Laura tugged one of the gloves from her hands and felt the crispness of the envelope in her pocket. She could hear it rustle between her fingers. Above, Venus shone in all her glory--the brightest star in the sky--while eastward the silver sliver of a moon strained against the horizon. The sky was black. The stars flickered like blue-green candles over the frosted terrain.

Hurry, a voice said.

Laura heard it and stumbled over the frozen hulks of the apples in the road.

Hurry, it said.

Laura made the edge of the field and started to run. Her legs moved sluggishly over the rutted path and the shadows of the trees played on the ground to define themselves in twisted, eerie, ghostly delineations. Her father's voice shouted hurry, Laura, hurry.

The house was a hundred and fifty yards beyond. Laura saw it but she could not see her mother in the kitchen window. She smelled stew in the air, stew that smelled burnt, charred, carbonized. Her heart raced; her feet faltered over the path. I can't lose her! I can't--not now! The window glared vacantly into the snow. Ma! She clutched the envelope in her hand and dug her boots as deeply as she could into the frozen crust. The stew smelled closer now--pungent, acrid, definitely burnt. Her legs lifted; her lungs burned; her throat felt hot, scorched and dry. She tore the aluminum door open and lunged into the inner door with the full force of her shoulder.

For the longest time her mother just sat there and looked at her. It hadn't occurred to Laura that she might be perfectly well; might, in fact, be exactly as she had left her. But she was. She was sitting quietly on the living room sofa, humming to herself and reading a magazine. She'd merely suffered another one of her lapses of memory--and forgotten completely about the stew. She was senile; she hadn't even noticed all the black smoke in the room. Laura stood in the doorway, stunned, ashamed, a little embarrassed. She could think of nothing to say. She leaned against the door with her face flushed, her red scarf wrapped loosely about her neck, her green cap angled off to one side, and closed the door gently behind her. She removed her gloves.

"Mother," Laura said, pointing to the stove, "your stew . . ."

The old woman scurried to her feet and rushed to the stove. "Oh, I done it again!" She clawed at the knob and shut off
the gas. Laura stared at the back of her neck and said nothing.

It was then that Laura came up behind her and embraced her softly about the shoulders. She pressed her face into the back of her mother's skull and held her body firmly but tenderly between her strong, bare hands. She felt the fragility of her mother's frame, the wizened angularity of her skull, arms and elbows. "Sometimes I worry about you, Ma," she said.

The old woman stiffened. She tried to pull away but Laura held her fast.

And then Laura began to weep. She wept like a child with huge yearning sobs that shook her entire body. The tears ran down her face and down the back of her mother's neck. She wept for the pain of the lost child and the pain of her lost man, for the pain of a world she didn't understand, and for all the people in it who were gone, gone now, her father among them, whom she had never really known or understood--and for her mother whom she couldn't touch.

The old woman turned to face her. She reached up and held Laura's face between her rough hands. Then she pried herself away and went to the window. Laura tried to hold onto her hand, but couldn't.

"I never told you how sorry I was when your baby died," her mother said. She looked out over the snow and cornfields and watched some headlights pass on the road. "In my day we didn't talk about such things."

"It don't matter, Ma."

The car and headlights passed away and out of sight.

"You're all I have left now, Laura," her mother said. Laura watched her mother's breath frost the inside of the window. "Your brother never even came to the funeral."

"He and Pa could never talk. Maybe because he was more like Pa than anyone else."

"Sometimes I'd like to kick that Wayne."

"Me too, Ma."

Laura put both her hands on her mother's shoulders from behind.

"I resented your pregnancy," her mother said. "From the very first day, I resented it." She placed her hands on the window sill and ran her fingers through the dust. "I never told you this, but I was pregnant the day I married your father. That's why I acted the way I did, Laura--I didn't want you to start out the same way. I know you thought it was Joey. It wasn't. It had nothin' to do with him. He was a good kid. I woulda been proud to have him as a son-in-law."

"You don't have to say nice things about Joey because he's dead."

"I know."

Laura lifted her hands from her mother's shoulders. "Pa never liked Joey. I don't know why."

"Your pa never liked anyone."

Laura reached into her pocket and her hand came upon the envelope. She had forgotten completely about it.

"I sometimes wonder if your father ever loved any of us," her mother said.

"Ma, look," Laura said.

Her mother turned from the window and saw the envelope in Laura's hand. "Oh that ol' thing came today, did it? Well, give it here, then. I been makin' enough of a fuss over it, ain't I?"
The old woman held her hand out for the envelope. But then, almost without thinking, almost as if by reflex, she reached up and righted the cap on Laura's head. She smoothed the hair all around the sides of Laura's face and then let her hand linger upon her cheek for what Laura considered an unusually long time. Some of the dust rubbed off her fingers and onto Laura's black hair.

Laura saw suddenly that it didn't matter about the check. Pa hadn't left them much, after all. It didn't matter if the check was two cents.

Spring--that was what she thought about--that it would be here soon. She could almost see the season, smell it, hear it: the birds winging their way home at last, the brown molting sparrows and the brown earth and the cherry blossoms and the too-full streams and a sense that there was something vastly eternal about it, something forever being born.

Laura tried to think of a name for it, but couldn't.

Instead she watched the envelope settle into her mother's hand and thought she saw an icicle drop from the eaves outside her window.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Trust


Mona Houghton

It was a hot night. John and Jackie had left about an hour earlier. They were the last guests to go. The drainboard was stacked high. The dishes were all but finished. I had learned from experience that washing up was easier with a nice high than a nasty hangover. Harder on the dishes for sure, but chips and cracks were easy to live with, and there was always Elmer's glue.

"Here's the last of 'em," Warren mumbled as he bumped his way through the swinging door. Each wine glass on the tray was in a different stage of emptiness. Warren set his booty down beside the sink.

Swoosh, swoosh . . . swoosh, swoosh swoosh. The pink bubbles rode on top of the water, swirling down its path away from me. Warren put his chin on my shoulder and watched too.

"Gone," he said.

"For good," I added.

The sink made a sucking sound, wanting more.

A hand slid under my tee shirt; fingers caressed, lightly. Bushy lips brushed the nape of my neck. I turned my head slowly and found the lids closed over Warren's oval eyes. I kissed each one quietly.

The right eye opened. It moved about, erratically. The left eye opened. It darted here and there. Suddenly Warren jumped back and looked directly at me, wildly.

He screamed, "Praise the lord. Praise the lord. I can see. He has given me sight! He has given me light!"

"Stop it, Warren," I laughed.

But Warren fell to his knees. He grabbed my foot and kissed it. "Thank you, thank you."

"You silly goose," I jumped astraddle Warren's back. He wheeled around the kitchen on all fours neighting like a mad horse. I yelled, "Whoa!" and held on for dear life.

He sang out, "Hi ho Silver," and reared up, flailing at the air with his hoof-like fists.

Warren's whinny faded as I slid over his butt and onto the floor.

He turned on his knees and looked down. "That'll teach you to ride bare back," Warren puffed, catching his breath.

He leaned down and gave me an Eskimo kiss. I could smell him, nut-like and warm. I reached up and put my hands on the back of his neck and invited. He crumpled beside me and nestled his head carefully between my breasts, a hand on either side, making things closer.

We stayed like that for minutes. Warren's heart slowed down to a regular pat . . . pat . . . pat. I stared at the bright bare bulb glaring down from the ceiling and remembered how many times I had promised myself to buy some sort of fixture for it, knowing I never would. I liked it the way it was.

Warren raised his head, ready for more. "Let's get naked and go for a swim."
I thought for a moment. "Only if I can have some of your white lightnin'."

Warren smiled evilly, uncrumpled himself and said, "Just you wait." He disappeared down the hall and into his workroom.

The year before, Cole, our neighbor, and Warren had set up a still in the abandoned barn which sort of stood on the boundary between the two properties. They had concocted a clear, fiery liquid which, in the next few months, gained quite a reputation locally. I didn't know how much was left, but Warren always seemed to have some for special occasions.

He returned, potion in hand. "Come, my little mermaid."

I peeled myself up off the floor, egged on by the delights to come. White lightnin' was guaranteed, if nothing else, to give a second wind.

Warren and I picked our way across the fields of alfalfa, trying hard not to scare the fireflies. I asked him for a sip from the jar.

"For your tee shirt," he bartered.

All the wine from earlier had left me with a thirst for something substantial, so, rather than argue, I slipped the shirt over my head and handed it to him. He dropped it as he held the jar to my lips and poured. Warren was accurate. I got a sip, and only a sip. I reached around my back and undid the clasp. An undergarment apparently held more value than a tee shirt. For it I received two portions. I found my willingness to give up clothing increased proportionately to the amount I took off.

By the time we arrived at the creek I had the white lightnin' and neither of us had a stitch on. Just like spin the bottle, I thought. The boys were always willing to take something off even when they didn't have to.

Warren took the jar, sealed it, tossed it into the swimming hole, splash, and shouted, "Last one in's gotta make the bed for a week." He jumped in. Bigger splash. I followed him. The water was hot from the spring that bubbled up above the place where we swam.

"Warren . . . oh, Warren," I said into the night.

"Over here. To the left," he teased, taking a big gulp of air as he spoke.

I listened. I could almost hear the water close over the top of his head. It made me feel uneasy, imagining Warren suspended in the black water, hiding from me. He might have disappeared. He might have dissolved. I might never have been able to find him again. I had always felt if you couldn't see people there was no telling what they might do, and up to that time in my life the instinct seemed to be a reasonable one.

He surfaced near me and put my fears to rest. I held my breath. I could tell he didn't know where I was. I sunk beneath the water and enjoyed being the missing one in our game.

The water surrounded me tenderly and I yielded. Above, Warren called my name, at first tauntingly, and when there was no answer, anxiously. I knew I should go up, but I stayed, resenting the need to breathe. I slipped back to the beginning. The first nine months must have been the best.

Finally the fright in Warren's voice reached through the water and grabbed me. I kicked up off the slippery stones, shooting to the surface.

"I'm right here," I sputtered.

"Dammit, don't do that," Warren said, taking me in his arms.
I found his lips in the dark and kissed them. "Sorry." Another kiss. "I couldn't resist not being." The moon came out from behind a cloud, lighting up the night.

"Be careful." Warren hugged me closer. "I'd miss you."

The rustling bushes warned us of Lucy's arrival.

"Darn it," Warren said.

We untangled our bodies.

Lucy bounded up to the creek's edge, smiling and wagging.

Warren splashed some water at her. "Hi, pooch."

"Be nice to him," I said quietly. "He's had a rough time of it lately."

Warren said, "What's new?"

Cole's depression preceded him, like his dog. As he walked into the clearing I could practically feel it descend on Warren and me and wrap itself around us, wanting to bind the three of us into its gloom.

Cole was a painter when he wasn't working at the hardware store in town. He had grown up on the streets of New York and was named after Nat King Cole. He had fought in Vietnam. He was trying to get away from violence, but it was always right there, just beneath the surface, just one coat away. We were all friends, but Cole and I were good friends.

Warren had had to work in Boston for several weeks once. During the evenings Cole and I had sipped and talked a lot. That was when he had told me about the horror, about the death, and about how it all haunted him like phantom feelings in an amputated limb. That's when I had told him, too, about Warren at seventeen. For some reason it had slipped out.

"Hi-ya, Cole." I tried to resist his mood.

"Hi." He was completely submerged.

Warren was losing patience with Cole's fragile state of mind. He grabbed the white lightnin' as it bobbed by. "Here, have some of this. Maybe it'll cheer you up."

Warren held the jar up toward him, but Cole made no effort to take it. He was looking at me. For a brief moment I could see the moon reflected in his moist, broken eyes, but a cloud put us back into darkness. We were merely shapes again.

"When you didn't answer the phone I guessed you'd be down here," he said to me. He could have guessed Warren was here with me if he had thought for a moment.

"Come on into the water. It feels good," I said.

"It sure does." Warren scooted up behind me, spoon style. He whispered into my ear, "I don't want to be blue." He put the edge of the jar to my lips and poured some of the hot liquid into my mouth. I felt it in my toes before I swallowed.

Cole looked ghost-like, weaving in front of us, his arms raised over his head, struggling with his shirt. His voice was muffled. "God dammit." Rip. The fabric gave out.

"Patience." Warren warned.
"Fuck patience," Cole muttered, flinging the ruined garment into the bushes.

Lucy thought it was time to play. She pounced on the shirt and returned it to her master's feet. Cole didn't notice. By then he was fighting his way out of his pants, a drunk in a Japanese shadow play.

Finally without clothes, Cole sat on the big boulder at the edge of the creek and dangled his toes into the water.

"What's up?" I asked.


"Well, I'm alive," Warren said. He took a big slug out of the jar to prove it.

"I feel dead inside," Cole challenged.

I said, "Maybe you should call Lisa. Maybe she's ready to come back." Lisa had moved out about six months before. Cole loved Lisa.

"Lisa doesn't care. Nobody really cares."

Warren was bored. "We care. We really care."

Cole didn't seem to notice. "I mean, does it really matter, one way or the other?"

Warren was getting angry. "Not when you get right down to it. But don't forget, Lucy needs you. She depends on you. As a matter of fact in her dog-like way, Lucy probably loves you." Lucy snapped at the air. She knew she was being talked about.

"Quit it, Warren," I said, defending Cole.

Warren said, "Okay, Doctor." He swam away from us.

"He's drunk. Don't pay any attention to him."

Wasted breath.

Cole only heard what he wanted to hear.

"Nothing's going anywhere." After a moment Cole continued, "I sit in that house and feel my life decaying from the inside out. I can't stand it."

Cole's despair drew me back. "Everyone is always lonely. Companionship just takes the edge away, that's all. It's still there lurking, waiting to pounce." He paused, searching for further definition, waiting to describe more clearly. "Friendship is a sham. We all use each other because we're afraid of the dark."

"Well, as long as it's between consenting adults . . ." Warren joined us, momentarily. He nuzzled my ear. "Want to camp out? I'll get the sleeping bags."

I said, "Sure."

Warren headed for the house.

Cole drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs. "I wish I could believe in God." His voice quavered.

"Believe in love."
A stinging, mean "Ha" hit the air.

"You believed in love when Lisa was here."

"Love is worse than friendship. With love you grow to expect even more. With love you're even more insulated from the truth."

"No, Cole. You're all wrong. There's always . . ."

Cole didn't let me finish. He didn't let me utter some saccharin statement about love and friendship.

"No, I'm right," Cole said. "We would have been much better off if our brains had stayed small. We complicate our lives to amuse our memories. To occupy them." He tilted his head back and looked up into the cloud-covered sky. "And then the nasty little buggers turn around and torture us." Cole's head fell forward. "Oh, God," he sobbed.

I didn't know what to say. Cole had such a different perspective. He could make any optimism seem foolish and back his position with personal accounts from the dark side. He knew more about LIFE than I possibly could because I had never put someone's guts back into their body and then tried to make them whole again with my tears. Who could argue against that?

"Cole?"

He didn't respond.

I got out of the water and sat on the rock next to him. Cole and I had never been alone and naked before. I wondered if Warren imagined he was challenging me in some perverse way.

I reached over and put my hand on Cole's leg. I ran the tips of my fingers along the soft, brown hair I knew was there.

"You're going to catch cold," he said.

Cole picked up my hand and wrapped his warm fingers around mine. It was the second time he had ever held my hand. The first time had been on the day we met. I had had an abortion. No one knew about it, not even Warren. I had gone to the hardware store on my way home. The faucet in the kitchen had been dripping for months. I fainted in the washer department, then threw up all over Cole, who was holding my hand when I woke up. It was his first day at work. After he helped clean me up, I had started crying and couldn't stop. Cole patiently listened to me blubber on about my missing fetus. We drank some whiskey in the back room. He called Warren for me. Six months later he rented the farm next to ours. Warren had always been bothered by the way Cole and I had gotten to know one another.

Cole put my hand on the cool stone between our hips. He stood up and stepped down into the water. He swam slowly over to the cool side of the creek.

A few minutes later Cole was back on the rock next to me. He laid back and covered his eyes with his hands. If I listened I could hear Lucy and Warren in the clearing not a hundred feet away. Warren was zipping our sleeping bags together. Lucy was running circles around him. Cole sighed, wearily.

"Don't be afraid to need other people, Cole. It's normal. A person isn't meant to be alone, really alone."

"But they always leave. They always die or go away."

"Not everyone."

Smoosh, smoosh. Warren primed the Coleman lantern.
Cole took a deep breath. "I want to kill myself."

"No you don't." I grabbed at straws. "Your painting's going good. You used to say that was all that was important." I tried to sound casual. "Anyway, you want to know how it turns out, don't you, just like the rest of us?"

"I already know. We all know. We're just pretending we don't," Cole said.

He sounded so serious I was afraid I was getting out of my depth as "friend." "Cole, if you really mean what you say . . . and aren't just experimenting with me, you should see a doctor or . . ."

"Don't worry. If I had the nerve to do it, I wouldn't be talking about it, right? I mean, isn't that what they say?"

"Go over to the V.A. and ask them."

Cole sat up. The words came out of his mouth matter-of-factly, like he was asking for a recipe. "Tell me, how did Warren ever find the courage to actually pull the trigger?"

The mantle in the Coleman lantern burst to life, too late for the question not to be asked. Warren's amazed eyes glistened across the gulf between us, Cole's words branding me "The Defector." Ten years crashed like so much shattered glass. Warren looked away and unfolded the drop cloth, rectangle, square, rectangle, square.

I could only watch Warren and wonder why it had seemed so natural to tell Cole at the time, and so outrageous that he should know now.

Cole stood up. "Well, I better go." He knew what he had done. What I never figured out was whether it was done on purpose.

I stood up. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "Don't worry about me. All talk and no action."

Cole picked up his pants and shirt. He said "Sorry" to me and "Goodnight" to Warren.

Warren didn't acknowledge.

I didn't know what to do. I simply stood there between them.

Cole whistled. "Come on, Lucy," he said, and started along the path toward his house. Lucy raced in front of him as soon as she was sure he was serious about going somewhere.

Warren, on all fours, smoothed the joined sleeping bags out over the drop cloth. I started toward him, feeling more naked than I had ever felt before.

He brushed out imaginary wrinkles. "Just leave me alone for a while, okay?"

I stopped.

He looked up at me. How could his confessor have forsaken him? "Okay?" he demanded, again.

I went back to the rock. I toyed with the white lightnin' and cursed it for loosening my tongue.

I had betrayed him. I had broken a vow.

Warren had tried to blow his head off when he was seventeen and would have succeeded if he hadn't used a hunting gun. Under his beard, around his right ear, there were scars where they had sewed his face back together. He hadn't told me about it until the night before our wedding. He only told me then to explain his attitude about children. He
wanted me to understand, completely. He had waited until the lights were out and I was half asleep before starting the story. We talked about it all night in the dark. It was never mentioned again.

I slipped into the sleeping bag beside Warren. His back was to me. I thought he had dozed off, but he reached over and turned off the Coleman lantern before I had a chance to.

The clouds had blown away; the moon had set. The Milky Way was stretched out across the sky--forever.

"I'm sorry, Warren."

He rolled onto his back and looked up into the night sky with me. "So am I."

Warren turned to me, but his touch was tentative, like the first time. He wanted to show me it wasn't going to come between us, but couldn't.

I counted falling stars and gave him my wishes.

Cole dropped by the house a few days later. He seemed to be on top of the world. He borrowed the vacuum cleaner. He said his was broken. I told Warren that Cole must have called Lisa and that she must have said she would come back to him, since he was cleaning house. Warren hoped I was right.

The next day I went to Cole's house to use his typewriter. I owed my father a letter. I found Cole in his truck. He was dead. He had taped our vacuum hose to his vacuum hose. He had attached the end of his vacuum hose to the truck's exhaust pipe, and stuck the end of our vacuum hose in through the wind wing of the truck's cab. The gas gage read empty. Cole's lifeless fingers were wrapped around a pistol. Lucy was in the house, under the kitchen table, dead, with a bullet in her head. Cole hadn't left a note.

After a while Warren and I were back to our normal routine, more or less. I missed Cole. I missed his obsessive need to corral life and define it in absolute terms. Warren was relieved that Cole wasn't around us. Perhaps Cole's constant questioning reminded him too much of his own delicate grasp.

Warren changed, slowly, afterwards. He wasn't as sure of himself, and every once in a while I would catch him looking at me apprehensively.
On Leave

Northridge Review, Vol. 3.2 (1985)

Wes Hempel

David didn't say anything. That was typical of him. At least that hadn't changed. He stood in front of the fireplace in the den and smiled as everyone took turns posing with him. I watched Aunt Louise wrap her fat arms around his uniformed chest, sidle up as close as her large frame would allow.

"Kiss me, you big handsome military man!" She laughed and everyone laughed. The camera flashed as David bent to kiss her cheek.

I saw all of it from where I was sitting in the living room. I didn't see what there was to be happy about, why everyone was laughing and eating and drinking like it was a celebration.

"Okay, Janet," my mother said. "It's your turn."

When Janet stood up, the room quieted. David waited by the mantle, looking at her and smiling, his hands in his pockets. She smoothed her dress, tucked a strand of short brown hair behind one ear, and leaned against him. He didn't kiss her, but put his arm around her waist as the camera flashed.

I didn't like Janet. David, I guessed, was in love. He spent practically every minute of his leave with her. Every school day of those two weeks I rushed home, got out the bat and gloves, hoping he would come home before dark. As the sun was setting the day before the party, I lay on my bed with his mitt over my face. I closed my eyes and breathed in the dark richness of the sweat-stained leather. I remembered how it used to be before he met Janet. He had never broken a promise to me before.

I hardly recognized him. Everyone kept saying how handsome he looked in his uniform; I thought he looked odd. It was so meticulously pressed that it looked flat, two-dimensional--as if he were walking around holding it in front of him instead of actually wearing it. And, with his hair gone, he didn't look like my brother. His head, practically shaved, looked like a peach, a cap of fuzz, not unlike a dead clump, the unfledged sparrow we found under the eaves two years before.

I was seven. It was the same year our father asked him to move to Colorado. David decided to stay with us, I think mostly because I begged him to. We shared the same upstairs room. The sparrows hatched almost directly above my head. I had positioned my bed, in spite of Mother's protests, under the window where I could watch the progress of the nest. Each day I kept tabs on them, waiting for the eggs to hatch, excited with the prospect of watching the babies learn to fly.

I woke one morning, just after they had hatched, to silence. I looked up, but could see no sign of them. David was already out, so I rushed to get dressed. Before I finished he came in. He didn't say anything, but waited for me to put my jacket on, then led me outside. Strewn among the tall grass and irises were the remains of one of the babies.

After school we buried it in a Band-Aid tin beside the white pales that once enclosed our rose garden. The backyard had become wild and overgrown, but we cleared away a plot. David made a cross out of popsicle sticks and a rubber band; I adorned the mound with honeysuckle and clover.

The next morning I remembered waking in the night and seeing his bed empty. I looked out the window and saw him by the grave, his white terrycloth robe the same shadowy blue in the moonlight as the overgrown calla lilies next to the fence. I planned to ask him about it but forgot. Later I wondered if I hadn't just dreamt it.

I watched him now as he sat on the couch between Aunt Ruth and Janet. He didn't seem to mind that everyone was
fussing over him. Mrs. Piper, our next door neighbor, sliced him a piece of the cake she had brought over, then sat on
the piano bench to watch him eat it. She was the only parent in our neighborhood that had children my age. It was an
old neighborhood that had houses, and mostly retired people lived in them. I didn't like Wanda and Alice Piper too
much. I never played with Alice at all, but sometimes I'd go roller skating with Wanda if things got desperate enough.
They had come to the party with their mother. Through the sliding glass doors I could see them on the patio, feeding
cake to Alice's doll.

David, who was being extremely careful not to drop any cake on his uniform, had managed to smudge chocolate
frosting on his chin. I noticed it even from where I was sitting. He had very fair skin, almost the same color as the
calla lilies in our backyard. He was also overly modest. Though he had wide shoulders and a strong build, he rarely
took his shirt off. Practically the only time I saw him without it was when he shaved. Before he joined the service he
let me sit on the edge of the tub in the morning and watch. Outdoors he had to be careful. If he was in the sun longer
that a few minutes he would burn, like he did the day he taught me to swim at Black Rock Lake.

We had planned to go fishing at Purdy's Trout Farm in the foothills north of town. It was a good hour's drive. When
we got there that morning the farm was closed. I tried not to let my disappointment show. He suggested we drive up to
Black Rock Lake where he camped when he was in Indian Rangers.

It was called Black Rock Lake because of the slate and black silt that surrounded the area. The lake, bottomed with this
silt, was also black. The surface was like a mirror. David rolled his Levis up and waded along the shore. I went in in
my underwear. We were the only ones around.

"Don't go out too far," he said.

I was fascinated by the sky and the green pines on the surface and the rippling effect caused by the movement of my
body. I felt the black mud between my toes, though I couldn't see my feet. As the disturbed silt rose from the bottom,
brilliant gold particles flickered underneath the surface in the shafts of sun against my stomach. When I stopped
moving and the water became still, I looked at my reflection.

That was the last thing I remember before it happened. I was staring at my face and thinking I looked strange, like
someone I had never seen before. There were birds circling on air currents above the lake. I watched them swoop
down. I must have moved forward. My feet slipped out from under me, and I found myself thrashing in over my head.
My mouth filled with water as I tried to call out. The sky swirled blue and green and black. Then I felt his arms
roughly under mine, chafing against my ribs and chest as he hoisted and pulled me through the water.

I lay on the shore; he sat next to me, his knees drawn up supporting his elbows, the butts of his palms on his forehead.
I could hear the hard release of his breath, see the water drip from his hair and nose.

After a few minutes, he took his wet clothes off and spread them over a rock. Then he dove in, swam the width of the
lake and back. I watched his white shoulders move cleanly and powerfully through the water.

As he neared the shore I heard him calling me. "Come on back in," he shouted.

"No," I said, "I don't feel like it."

He moved closer, stopped in water up to his waist and looked at me. "It's important, Jeff. I won't let anything happen to
you."

Later, driving home, we sang songs he had learned in Indian Rangers. He didn't like to talk but had a strong singing
voice. I listened and watched the skin on his face and neck deepen redder and redder.

"Jeffrey . . .," someone was calling me. "Jeffrey, your father wants to talk to you." It was Janet. I looked up. David was
in the den holding the phone toward me.

"I don't want to," I said. David stood, looking surprised, still offering me the phone. My mother put her cake down and
came over to my chair.

"Jeff, your father is calling from Colorado and he's asked for you."

I noticed how quiet it had become, how everyone was looking at me, waiting for me to get up from the chair and walk over and take the phone from my brother. I don't know why that simple act seemed impossible. My father rarely called, usually on birthdays and holidays; I always enjoyed talking to him. So it was as surprising to me as it was to everyone else when I simply repeated: "I don't want to."

I stared at my arm on the arm of the chair. David, who I'd never heard lie before, said something into the phone about me not feeling well. I'm not sure he lied then.

When the phone was hung up, my mother tapped me on the knee.

"Go and stand by Davy," she whispered. "I want to take your picture."

"I don't want to," I said.

"You don't want a picture of yourself with your brother? He's going away tomorrow; you may not see him for a long time."

I stared at my arm. For some reason it was impossible for me to move. Then David grabbed me by the elbows and dragged me across the room. I felt the same rough chafing against my ribs and chest. But I struggled to get free this time. I kicked as hard as I could and yelled: "I don't want any picture. I don't care."

He held on tight. "Sure you do," he said. "Anyway, I want one with you. You can send me a copy when you write me."

"I'm not going to write to you," I screamed. "Let go of me." I wriggled one arm free and hit him on the chest and shoulders. I didn't understand why I was hitting or why I was yelling. I struggled as hard as I could to get free and when I couldn't, my eyes blurred and I screamed: "I hate you!" He let go, and I ran down the hall still yelling, "I'm glad you're going away. I hope you never come back."

In the dark attic, I stood before the crosshatched wires of the vent. The sun was low in the sky. Yellow leaves from sweet gums and walnut trees blew along the sidewalk. I looked out across the rooftops to the yellow fields, the row of eucalyptus trees that ran along the alley behind the dairy. There were already a few chimneys started. I thought soon the streetlamps would blink on.

When he found me he had the gloves and the bat. I saw my glove come flying at me in the dim light and reached out to catch it just as it hit me in the stomach.

Walking to the field, I wanted to say something, to tell him how sorry I was. I wanted him to know how I really felt about his leaving, how I felt about him. But I was afraid if I tried to talk, nothing would come out.

I think he must have known how I felt. Perhaps he knew then even better than I did. As we walked, he ruffled my hair and began talking idly about baseball, about the wind. I remember wishing we would never reach the field, that we would just go on walking like that forever.

It was late when we got started. He pitched underhand to me. The red sun threw shadows like spears from eucalyptus leaves across his broad teeth and cocked arm. I hit one, a long fly, and watched from the center of the field as he moved away toward the mountains outlining the twilight sky.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.
The Burning Monk

Northridge Review, Vol. 4.2 (1986)

Mark Mann

Just before lunch the burning monk kneels within his smock, pulls off his thongs, and nudges them to the side of his mat with his big toe. Patty and Ira are on the couch watching TV. Ira holds the bowl out to Patty so she can reach the popcorn. Her face looks hazy and blue in the TV light. The rubber soles are badly worn from the endless walking the burning monk has undertaken over the years. Pilgrimages. I warned him it would come to this.

"The tenth anniversary," Ira says. He means the war.

Patty tugs the blanket up around her neck and asks Ira if she can wear his socks, her feet are so cold. She isn't serious. The door buzzer buzzes. "I'd rather watch Spartacus," she says. It's Guy and Linda at the door, both wearing hairy gold alpaca sweaters. Ira lets them in.

Guy eyes Ira.

Ira eyes Guy.

Guy puts a powerful headlock on Ira for old time's sake. For the life of him Ira can't get free.

Linda says it's nice out and draws the curtains to let in the sun. There, swimming like a plant on the bottom of the pool three floors down, is Ilene, Ira's Japanese neighbor with the long perfect hair. The burning monk nods and grins and returns to his mat. I can tell he's only kidding around.

Patty puts Spartacus on. She is worried for Ira, who can't stand it anymore. Guy is humming the "Marseillaise." As a counter, Linda sings "Waltzing Matilda." This soothes Guy. Then she breaks into "Bingo Was His Name-O." Clap. I-N-G-O. Ira drops blue-faced on the couch next to Patty.


"The slaves are uneasy," Patty says. "They're about to rise up."


"Can't happen without Spartacus," Ira says, panting rapidly. "No way."

The burning monk hasn't much English (a quick learner, though), so I fill him in on the gaps he hears in the conversation.

"This is his best movie," Patty says. Guy and Linda agree.

"Definitely in the top five," Linda says. "Either this or The Detective or The Harder They Fall."

"Was he in that?" Guy wants to know.

Ira changes the channel back to the show about the war. Hunting the tiger. Hauling the wounded forgetting the goners. Unnerved hoards at the Embassy gates. The burning monk rises from his mat and goes to the window. I pat his shoulder, delicately, to cheer him. A harnessed woman pulling a cart loaded with children passes in the street. One of the children has a radio that sings. "Two become one, under the bamboo treeeee."

"Sure he was in that," Linda says.
Patty goes into the kitchen but forgets what she wants there. For a long time she stares at the miniature nineteen-twentyish-wall-telephone magnet stuck on the refrigerator door. Nobody calls. She returns to the living room with a bowl of grapes, red, seedful. Ira sends her back for the sandwiches. "And some nice rice for you," she says, opening her hand to the burning monk. A steaming bowl on the burning monk's mat.

Linda, who has studied the laws of History at Brown, Penn, Pitt, and Indiana State, says: "Did you know that near the end of the fifteenth century, the endless complaint of the frailty of all earthly glory was sung to various melodies."

I know that.

During the next seventeen seconds (the span Linda intuitively allows for thinking on the matter), I have nineteen thoughts, on average, a brand new one every .89 seconds: A red movie of a leaping whippet clapping a frisbee in its jaws. A black-and-white picture of Oscar Ravez with upturned eyelids. A family of sparrows panicking from tree to tree. One pi minus three pi is negative two pi. A flying raccoon queen wielding an alpinist's two-headed ice axe. Four identical snowflakes. A blue picture of Long John Silver. How delightful really Patty's tits are. Fatty Arbuckle as a featherweight fighting for the title. Ooky ooky ooky. I was framed I tell ya framed. A palmful of shaving cream peppered with stubble. The Invisible Hand of God. Boiled cabbage odor. Linda's aren't as nice not nearly. Dotless dice thrown. Our bodies why do we forbear? The artifice of consciousness. How many footballs can fit in a--

"I don't know that," Ira says.

The burning monk hasn't touched his rice, not so much as a grain. Even though it's too pasty for my liking, I pretend it's just about the best rice I've ever had--scoop after scoop, sucking my fingers clean of it--hoping my friend will take up his spoon.

Patty changes back to Spartacus. Linda has finished all the sandwiches and is working on the last grape. With the nails of her thumb and forefinger she catches the seeds in her mouth and drops them into the ashtray from the Tropicana Hotel, Las Vegas. It's the very end where Mrs. Spartacus lifts up Spartacus Junior so Spartacus Senior can have a look. Then she spirits the infant away. Mile after mile, as far as the eye can see, thousands of extras somewhere in the Italian countryside quietly bear their crucifixions. Guy hurries into the bathroom, where he weeps. "I can't help it," he says from behind the door.

It is warm, and the burning monk has been exercising and not touching his rice, so Patty mists him with the plant mister. He is grateful and smiles, and after Patty mists the African violet plant, the spider plant, and the little baby plant without a name card, she mists the burning monk again. He says it's a wonderful invention, one wonderful thing.

Guy emerges from the bathroom with a pair of enamelled red bongos. He says he found them in the clothes hamper. He squeezes them between his knees. He can't resist, for old time's sake: ponk-poppa-totta-ponk. Ponk.

Ira changes the channel and turns up the volume. The burning monk takes his can by the handle and pats the pocket of his smock to make sure that he has everything he'll need. He says it's time for him to go, word has come down, so long, thanks for it all, thanks all around. Patty can have his mat, Ira his thongs. Guy and Linda don't get anything. I was afraid of this moment, but I know that what's on his lung is on his tongue. The can is heavy for him--I offer to carry it but he resists, he can manage. From the landing I watch him descend, heaving the can along as if he had a bad hip. Then I follow him.

Ilene is towelling herself by the pool. When she's dry she twists the towel into a turban on top of her head. The burning monk heads for the street, where the people are. Patty and Ira and Guy and Linda follow Ilene's example. Soon they are all wearing towel turbans, too. They wave at Ilene from the window, and Ilene waves back. Linda was right, it is a nice day. On nice days all things open, and the burning monk finds a nice little spot in the middle of the street and sits there, a lovely little lotus, opening.

A half-circle of warm wet faces. They spill from the sidewalk in front of the barber shop: SIX CHAIRS NO WAITING. I point out to Ilene that the intricacies of the burning monk's face are of a life-like delicacy. She tells me
that all warm things fall to the cold and remembers how when she was a girl she used to help her grandmother into sweaters. "The world has its own imagination, don't you think?" she says. Then the gasoline-splash and the flick of the match. I think I love you, Ilene.

The fires flap and pop like little flats. The burning monk tips and then topples fully on his side.

A pickup truck crowded with three men in green gardener's clothes comes to take the body away. The leader recommends a period of waiting.

A boy with a blue rattail combs some of the ashes into a cloth that he has ironed exclusively for this purpose.

The men of the truck are tired of this sort of thing.

*Back* to Contents of *The Best.*

*Back* to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

*Warren Wedin*  warren.wedin@csun.edu
**Flying**

*Northridge Review, Vol. 5.2 (1987)*

**Judy Duke**

People were deceived, for the most part, by his placidity. But behind the torpid manner cowered an excitable being with a fluttering heart. He was such a timid boy. Especially in the face of loud urgency or demands. Beverly heard on the news he couldn't tell them his name.

Donny, scrubbed and serene, waited in his wheelchair, which took up the only open patch of kitchen floor and barricaded the exit. But the morning sun--the only sun to find its way through the maze of neighboring buildings--crept through the solitary window with a reminder of open skies. From a cage in the corner the zebra finch racketed a welcome to the light. Donny rolled his head toward the sound.

At his feet, Beverly said, "Such a handsome birthday-boy!" He seemed almost beautiful with sunshine spilling a glow across his pallid face and turning his fair hair gold.

She couldn't imagine shutting Donny away from the light. It was inconceivable. Others demanded it, however--first the boy's father and now Eric: it was his motif. When he was absent, the refrain vibrated in her mind in connection with Eric. When he was present, the same note sounded, tantalizing, whether he spoke it or not and despite her efforts not to hear. Eric's easy smile would disappear, replaced on his smooth face by earnestness. "Think of ME," he'd say. He could see nothing in the boy.

Beverly looked up from the colorless linoleum. "Today is SPECIAL," she informed her son. She was kneeling, tying Donny's laces. The white bows drooped against red canvas. Six months and still the sneakers were unsullied.

"The SHOES--my God," the other mothers in the park would say to each other, watching the children scuff and tumble and climb, "the SHOES they go through! It's impossible to keep a kid in shoes." And Beverly would see the women clustered on the bench nodding wisely together, making a wall of their backs. While beside her, Donny slumped in his chair and watched the leaf-shadows sweeping back and forth on the bright grass and the pigeons flashing up in graceful panic when he rocked with happiness.

She and Donny went to the park less and less.

Beverly sighed and rose wearily to her feet. She drew the belt tight around her limp wrapper. The night had been too late again, almost always too late because too rare: old Mrs. Karpuzov--Beverly couldn't blame her, it wasn't her fault really--Mrs. K. was reluctant to sit with Donny, to be near him, even when he slept. It was the way people were about the child, they felt caged by something shameful. And then to argue again with Eric, there was only one argument, to come home to Donny's formless nightmares visited on her like a judgment. Although she would have been tired in any case. She smiled for Donny.

"Eight years old. Such a big boy!" His head was turned toward the finch. Gently, she traced a fuzzy gilt eyebrow, claiming his attention. "Whose birthday is it, Don-Don?" The gaze that fastened on her face was clear and green and bottomless as a mountain lake. The golden brows puckered.

"Donny's birthday," she prompted. "I know you can say it."

Green eyes wavered between the bird cage and Beverly's face.

"Donny," she insisted. "Birthday."

"Dah," he finally said, the sound released slowly and with care, fragile as a robin's egg. "Bah-bah." She smiled and
patted his cheek. He began to bump from side to side. "Bah, bah, bah, bah . . .," he chanted.

Already this morning, the tension was settling in her shoulders. Her smile faded. "My goodness, I almost forgot. Wait till you see . . ." She squeezed through the narrow space between table and wheelchair and headed for the pantry; it was a touch of homey, old-fashioned charm. As for the rest of the flat--it was there, that was all. Four walls enclosing mother and son, a roof over their heads.

Behind the oatmeal box on the second shelf were three square envelopes all marked "Donny" in the same hand. She drew them out and cried, "Wait till you see!" Donny still lurched rhythmically in his chair.

The sun fled, leaving the kitchen dim. Beverly flipped the light switch.

"Birthday cards," she grinned. There was just space enough to pull a chair out and wedge herself against the dinette. She pecked the formica with the edge of one stiff envelope. Donny stopped rocking; his head swivelled. Beverly laid the cards out carefully.

Balloons in primary red and blue, sulphurous ducks with a placard proclaiming "8 YEARS OLD": "Mrs. Karpuzov," she read. "Isn't that nice?" She waved the bright colors before his face, and he focused briefly. There was a volley of bird chatter from the finch, a whirring ruffle, then the rapid light tapping of its circuit around the bottom of the cage.

The next card was all flowers and serious script. "This one is from Daddy." Alarm rippled across Donny's slack moon face: for an instant, the air hummed with a vague unease. But the card was a lie, a lie and a lullaby: " . . . come true, Having a wonderful son like you. With all my love, Daddy." Donny's gaze drifted away, peaceful.

She wondered where Donny's father was. She hadn't heard since the divorce. For four years, his memory had retreated, farther and farther away. Some could not bear to witness certain and pointless deterioration.

"And OF COURSE, there's one from ME . . ." She looked at the child's profile. He was no longer there. Like father, like son. Her hand fell slowly to the table, down and down. She left the last card in its envelope.

Eric, her--what? Boyfriend? Temptation? Eric was a salesman. He'd be driving his inland loop today, spreading charm and order blanks through the outlying sections of his territory. He wasn't due to call at Valley Roofing for another week.

So there would be no sudden breath of air, no lifting heart, nothing for her at the office, a knocked-together hut at the back of the supply yard, an over-sized wooden box cluttered with scarred desk, crumpled invoices, bills of lading, and filing cabinets that banged her knees if she shifted too far in her chair. A person could suffocate.

Perhaps he would stop by tonight, after Donny was tucked into bed and out of sight. Eric would press for a decision. She saw Donny sitting in a vast and shadowed room while white uniforms flitted through the gloom like ghosts. She and Eric walked through the park, and the pigeons swirled in the air like a cloud of confetti. "Think of me," his voice breathed inside her. He would press . . . Her tight shoulders ached. Her breasts ached. Her heart ached.

Beverly looked at her son. Last year at this time, he had balanced, for a while, in a regular chair. He said "birthday"--drawn out slow, of course, but clear as day--and even seemed to examine the cards. She caught herself before she sighed; it was becoming a habit.

It took no time at all to slip into jeans and shirt and sneakers. Then she ran cold water into the pan she'd used for Cream of Rice and into the two sticky bowls and left the dishes crowded together in the sink.

Napkins, sodas. Cup and spoon. Next an apple and a bologna sandwich followed the jars of bananas and strained beef into a brown bag, and, on top, she put two cupcakes from the bakery. The bag went in Donny's lap. He sat with his arms draped around it the way she'd arranged them, like the limbs of a bendable doll, a doughy mannequin in too-tight OshKosh overalls and too-new sneakers.
She had put the car keys somewhere—it was cheaper, usually, to take the bus and besides, it conserved gas—there they were, now they were ready. She put the keys in her pocket, nestled her purse in his lap alongside the grocery bag, then carefully maneuvered the wheelchair backwards out of the room, turning the light off and leaving the finch quiet in the dark corner.

The rickety elevator clanked down, down, to the faded lobby, and they went through the lobby and down the crumbling elegance of the steps at the entrance of the building.

On the sidewalk, Donny blinked at the light. There was no yellow bus at the curb, no special bus with converted doorways and hydraulic lifts and modified aisles. When she turned the chair away from the bus-stop, he began to fidget.

"No school," she explained. "You and I are playing hooky. That's your present: we're having a picnic!" She explained again, several times, changing words and tone, until something of her meaning filtered through and he was satisfied. Or simply forgot.

He was a growing boy—heavier, it seemed to her, every day. She worried about getting him in the car. It had been so long since he'd been in the car. They seldom went out. Desolation was easier in private.

She wondered whether the makeshift harness would hold him straight in the seat now that he was getting so big. She worried about the freeway, about car trouble and needing more napkins and finding the road to the creek and getting the wheelchair down the path.

How could she concentrate on important decisions when she was hemmed in by trivialities? Donny's father had never understood either, and back then is was just beginning, really. Men had so little patience. She forgot to hold the sigh back.

The car was a station wagon, a tank, splotches of chalky white overtaking the original gray paint like a skin disease. "U. S. Navy Motor Pool" and a string of numbers still showed faintly on the door, and rows of rusty holes ran the length of the car, marking the former locations of decorative chrome.

"Built to last," she told Donny, leaning over his shoulder to point. Exactly what his father had said when he'd brought the car home, although it was ten years old at the time and the broken odometer had already turned over once. "Built to last," he said and disappeared the next week. Which was touching, in a way, since he must have wanted to leave her well provided for, at least as far as transportation was concerned.

On the freeway, the wagon labored in the slow lane and lugged at every rise in the road. But it felt like they were soaring above the highway at the speed of light. Hot wind rushed through the open window, and the city sped by like a muted kaleidoscope. Donny was entranced. The freeway snaked out from beneath a dun-colored veil of smog and into the brown hills and wound through the canyons.

Then, familiar as yesterday, there was the turn-off. And suddenly, a small and noisy Donny stood bouncing in his seat, three years old, with a toddler's unquenchable energy. Donny's father sat behind the wheel, except his mustache had vanished and his blonde hair was Eric's, a glossy brown-black. He smiled at her with Eric's caressing smile.

And how could she forget the road? The three of them took the same route every week: behind a "No Trespassing" sign there was token asphalt for a mile and a half, and then the air turned to dust and the road turned to dirt and fist-sized rocks bounced under the car. The tires crunched over dry wild oats, and she parked in their usual spot near the edge of the gully.

Going down was harder than she'd thought. The path, a narrow fire road, cut steeply across the face of a shallow cliff. She dug her heels in, hauling on the hand grips and trying to throw the load back on the rear wheels of the wheelchair. Donny sagged, inert, his face gentle in the open air. The big wheels jerked over stones and caught in holes. She was constantly wrenching the chair straight, fighting it as it skewed from side to side. Her arms and legs were heavy, trembling with the strain.
She might have managed to carry him. Beverly stopped and steadied the weight in the chair. She should have carried the boy and come down again with the folded chair. But she'd been thinking of them as a unit.

There was no way to stop now. She struggled on. They bucked and slithered down the cliff, and it seemed like years before they reached the bottom. She felt dizzy from the effort. She patted the wheelchair and giggled, "Built to last."

They were in a wash threaded with a ribbon of running water and a procession of cool cottonwoods. She forced the wheelchair through the sand. Near the trees there was shade and space and firmer ground. She smoothed her hair back with both hands to let the breeze fan her face, then stretched triumphantly.

She was curious. "Do you remember?" she asked.

But Donny was gone, leaving only the mild landscape of his face. His head lolled back against one shoulder, and the green eyes roved the open sky.

"Well," she said aloud, from long habit. "I guess it's time for lunch."

The lunch shut up in the brown bag was a jumble. The story of her life. She sighed and rummaged through the cupcake fragments.

No broken jars. But her sandwich looked as though it had been hammered. She dangled it between her finger and thumb and grimaced. "I guess not," she said. Instead, she fed the boy, whose mouth gaped automatically between spoonfuls, even food failing to distract from an inspection of clouds and sunlight flickering in the leaves.

She was afraid to open the soda cans: battered about like that, under pressure, they would probably explode. So she brought him a cup of water from the creek, then wet a napkin in the cup. The paper dissolved beneath her fingers as she wiped his face. She threw the soggy wad into the bag along with the remainders of the picnic.

The boy in the wheelchair paid no heed. He had seen the birds, a trio of sparrows popping lightly over the ground, coming to investigate. Beverly edged away; he didn't need her. At the edge of the creek she freed her feet from sneakers and rolled up her jeans. The cold water bit at her skin, and stones slid underfoot. She flapped her arms for balance. The shining water forced her to squint.

It was very quiet. When she rolled her head from shoulder to shoulder, there was a grinding sound in her neck and faint cracks when the clenched muscles relaxed and tiny bones snapped into place.

A raucous cry sliced through the stillness. The sparrows had vanished. Farther up the wash, two ravens squabbled and danced over something in the sand, their huge wings arched wide. Closer, on the near shore, the boy seemed to be drowsing.

Beverly waded downstream to the bank, to listen under the trees. She spread weightless arms wide and still there was room. Eyes closed, she shuffled in lazy circles.

Voices breathed in the cottonwoods. Whispers and phantoms wove behind her eyelids as she turned. "No hope," Donny's father said. "I can't, I just can't . . . I can't," she echoed. Doctors shook their heads, murmuring in serious pairs. The mothers buzzed behind their wall; faces closed against her in the street.

"Hopeless," said Eric, her new hope, tugging at her hand. In connection with Eric. He said, "Think of us." Always, she answered.

Eric's face wavered, melted into young Donny's, fresh and gleeful. She cocked her head. He was piping, thin and high, a string of words flung back over his shoulder to her. She couldn't catch the words. But he was happy. He darted away, out from under the trees, and she lost him in the glare.

Beverly opened her eyes. It was time to leave. Relief made her light-headed.
Climbing up was easier; her muscles were refreshed and strong. She fixed her eyes on the lip of the cliff. Back under the cottonwoods, Donny sat enthroned, turned to gold. A squirrel nestled on his shoulder, jabbering softly in his ear. Guardian ravens crouched on the back of the chair, and sparrows perched trustingly in his outstretched hands. His smile was like a benediction.

When she got home, she would fly to Eric. He would accept her, draw her into the circle of his arms and fold his body around her like a cocoon.
You want a bite to eat before you meet Karen and Donald in Westwood. The nice thing about your neighborhood is that there are so many fast food places within walking distance. Your mother always laughs at you for calling this a neighborhood. No place in LA is a neighborhood like the one you grew up in, where you knew all the neighbors. Here, you know all the kids who work at McDonald's, Taco Bell, Burger King, and Hot Diggity Dog.

So you walk to Taco Bell, only superficially noting the group of people clustered together under one of the orange metal umbrellas, clustered around a round, rusted white table, at the edge of the outdoor dining area. Ten or twelve people sitting and staring at the service windows of the Taco Bell.

You ignore them and walk to the order window, thinking only of a Macho Burrito and a Diet Pepsi. At each of the four windows, a young employee stands, staring out at you. In their plaid uniforms and name tags with the chipper message--"Try Taco Light!"--they look like the goofy painted ducks at a shooting gallery, set up straight and even and identical. They all stare at you and a voice from behind you, from the crushed group of people, is going "psst, psst." You approach the window and the girl behind the counter, you know her as Suzie, is very slightly, almost imperceptibly shaking her head no. As you get nearer, you see her eyes are damp. Big brown eyes and full of tears . . . a tear slides down her cheek as you open your mouth to order.

A motion catches your eye in the back of the Taco Bell. A red knit hat . . . no, a ski mask. You forget about ordering and realize that there is a man in a red ski mask holding a gun against the head of a teenage, skinny, plaid-clad boy who is frantically trying to stuff dollar bills into a white Taco Bell paper bag. Ever so slowly you back up. The ski-mask man is not looking toward the window and you inch backward until you become part of the group at the table.

A heavy-set woman in a purple floral polyester blouse whispers at you, "It's a stick-up."

This you know. This you finally figured out. You watch the stand, gaping at the bright interior, as fascinated with the scene as the ten or twelve people around you, fascinated to see TV-like action right here in real life. The Taco Bell kids up in the front stare back at you, mute fear in their faces, yet they look so perky in their uniforms, it is hard to connect them with the strange drama behind them.

The boy opens another door, shakes his head and closes it. The ski-mask man shakes the boy's shoulder, waves his gun as if he is unhappy. The boy's mouth forms an "O" and even from this distance, you can all see his distress. It is obvious he is pleading. Perhaps there is no more money. Perhaps there is a safe he cannot open. Whatever it is, the ski-mask man is angry and the boy is visibly shaking.

Purple-Polyester says to you, "There's something wrong."

"He looks mad," says a very blonde girl, peering over your shoulder.

Her boyfriend, fashionably crew-cutted and dressed in bright surf shorts, puts his arm around her shoulders and says, "How much money did he think there'd be at Taco Bell?"

A man in a gray business suit says, "If he wanted a lot of cash he picked the wrong place."

"I think . . ." you start to speak but there is a loud explosive noise and you see the young boy's face disappear into a mass of red, just before he slips out of your sight to the floor. Purple-Polyester grabs your right hand. Blondie gasps in your ear and puts her hand on your shoulder. You reach to the side and grasp the elbow of the business man and feel the deep trembling that started in you is also shaking through him. There is a general compression of the ten or twelve
bodies around the white table as everyone pulls in trying to make contact, get reassurance, share fear.

The ski-mask man turns to look at the service windows. He holds up his gun and fires. One of the boys facing outward drops. He fires again and Suzie, the girl with tears in her eyes, the girl who warned you away, she drops and you cry out, "No!" The gun turns so that you can look right down its barrel, though you are maybe fifty feet away. As a group, as a mass of skin, bones, breath and fear, everybody falls to their knees at exactly the same second that the gun fires inside the Taco Bell and milliseconds later, you hear a metallic noise and you realize the orange umbrella is quivering, reverberating, shaking the pole and shaking the white table that all of you are clinging to, and the reverberations go right through your already trembling bodies.

The metallic ringing noise is drowned out by distant sirens that hurry nearer. You huddle together, until the business man strains his neck and looks, then stands up.

"He's gone," the business man says, and slowly, helping each other, the rest of the group stands up. Purple-Polyester is still clutching your hand, and you pat it.

The two remaining Taco Bell employees are hysterical. One is screaming in short bursts, echoing the sirens that you can hear in the distance. The other is draped across the counter, her body shaking as she cries.

You and the others move forward to the windows. You see over the counter and realize that the brown and red thing on the floor is the girl you had almost spoken to. You back up a few steps.

In no time, the police are jumping out of black and white cars and running past you. They swarm around the taco stand, some running down the alley, others gathering inside and hovering over the kids on the floor.

One officer comes to your group and asks if you will all stay for a few minutes so they can take reports. You say yes.

You go back and sit at the white table. Purple-Polyester and Blondie and her boyfriend sit around it with you.

"I can't believe it," says Blondie, shaking her head and crying silently.

"He just blew 'em away, bang, bang, bang, just like that," says her boyfriend. His face is white and shocked and he looks as he must have looked when he was ten years old. A child, really, not a grown-up at all.

"Why kill those kids, why?" says Purple. "It's not their fault, it's not their business. They can't help it if there isn't any money."

You all agree. Purple holds your hand on top of the table, and Blondie takes your other hand. Her boyfriend is wrapped tightly around her, his head against her shoulder.

The police are busy and you talk quietly with these three people for about half an hour. You re-live it over and over. Blondie says, "I can still see the kid, shaking his head." You say, "I could tell he was apologizing, that he was pleading." The boyfriend says, "The way he raised his gun." Purple says, "The way the umbrella shook when the bullet hit it." You all agree that when he turned the gun toward your group, you each thought you would die. You swear that you looked down the barrel, that you knew it was pointed at you, that you could see the bullet in the chamber, the finger tightening, the slow cruel heartbeat in the chest behind the hand behind the gun. You knew you were dead. "If you guys hadn't pulled me down with you . . . " you shake your head, and the hands holding yours squeeze and console.

The police finally talk to you. They talk to you all together, then talk briefly to you alone. Finally, they say you can leave. You go over and hug Purple-Polyester. You hug Blondie and her boyfriend together as if they were one person. You walk up the street, heading back to your apartment. The last thing you need is a movie, so you call Karen and beg off. Instead of the movie, you spend the night watching stupid sit-coms on TV. You long for the company of Purple, or Blondie and the boyfriend. You want to discuss this one more time. You've shared something with them that you never shared with Karen and Donald, and even though they are your best friends, they can't possibly know you or help you like Purple and Blondie and the boyfriend. You think, "This must be what it's like in war, this must be what it's like
after a plane crash." Sleep overcomes need, and you toss fitfully the whole night on the couch.

Two weeks later you walk past the Taco Bell. A heavy-set woman in red pants and a blue sweatshirt is at the white table, looking at you from under the orange umbrella. She eats a taco, holding it carefully in two hands. You wonder, "Is that Purple?" But her face is not clear in your memory and you walk on past.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Paris in '73


Grant Cogswell

I

She left him in Paris in 1973, in a Metro station that sat directly three hundred feet under the Seine, just where it curves south of the Hotel de Ville. I was six years old at the time, and I can remember that if you looked from our apartment window maybe a quarter of a mile down the street you could see the rim of the trench the river flowed in. The river always stank and always was brown, and it moved sluggishly as if just waking between its stone and concrete banks. I imagined the bottom to be hard cement too, and it was not until much later that I realized this was impossible.

The Metro station was under reconstruction, perhaps because of the river. There were holes gouged in the smooth tile, through the walls and even into the wet black dirt of the ancient riverbed itself. There were pools of water on the platform, streams dripping down from pipes, thick tile dust moistening into sludge, and still more holes and cracks everywhere.

My mother and father were yelling at each other, at first during and over the bursts of jackhammer noise but after a while pausing angrily, waiting and looking around at the cracks in the walls before it was quiet again, and then the shouting would resume.

The French were rooting for her. She was young, tall, American, and a brunette. My father was (and still is) a stout Kansan, bald and blond-bearded, looking Bavarian and possibly violent. I was learning as we traveled that the Germans hate the French and the French hate the Germans (or anyone who looks German). So now the French stood back, commenting and jeering and watching my mother and father yell. I stood between my parents, closer to my father because it had always been that way. When I think of my teenage obesity, the places my father and I went to together and where we are now, the rainy August night in Oxford when I rolled in the warm grass with a barmaid whose name I did not know, but whose mouth I explored with my own and whose birthmark I found in under five minutes, I think now of the way my mother stood at the edge of the yellow line, her arms out at her sides, with my father several feet back from the tracks, and how as the train arrived I instinctively stepped back away from the gust of wind and bumped my head on my father's belt buckle.

He turned and looked down at me and grabbed my wrist tightly. His big, red fist reminded me of the one I had seen on posters around the university that spring, posters I didn't understand the meaning of, only the rage. "Some people are angry and desperate," my father had said, "and they need to feel strong."

She hesitated a moment and they were both quiet in the rush of bodies that moved around us. Then she stepped onto the train and sat down next to a long-haired blond boy in a green fatigue jacket. The doors slid closed and we watched her run her hand over his hair, pulling one strand out and high toward the top of the window. The train moved and she dropped the hair. We watched her shift in her seat closer to him and place her hand on his smooth neck. I next saw her thirteen years later, in the Greyhound Bus terminal in Murfreesboro, North Carolina.

II

With my mother suddenly gone my father hired a German art student named Helga as a maid and sort of live-in babysitter. On the wall of her room, which had been my room before my mother left, there was a poster of Castle Neuschwanstein with big white letters along the bottom that read DEUTSCHLAND. Helga was blonde and slimly elegant like a ballet dancer. She stood with me once, looking at the poster with a glass of white wine in her hand, and said, "It does not need to say 'Deutschland.' It is Deutschland."

"It's a picture," I told her.
"You are an American," she said to me later, sautéing her Swiss-buttered carrots, a recipe she knew by heart, "and you should be like one. It is not right that you should grow up here." She often drank at the cafés with the American students and had picked up their expressions. "You don't speak like an American. Say 'grovey'."

"Gravy," I said.

"Americans say 'grovey.' You should know that."

Under our apartment was a shop which sold gas heaters. To the left as you entered was a café with a big red and white striped awning and lots of outside tables. To the right was a gourmet restaurant, this one with a green awning. The restaurant gave away little lead figures of two hand-painted frogs, one mounting the other, to amuse the customers. I did not understand why two frogs would want to do this, and I asked the manager of the restaurant. The manager had one missing eye, and he left the empty socket uncovered. But he laughed at my question so hard that the blind socket began to ooze, and I ran out of the restaurant and only returned on the nights when we all ate dinner there.

After that I spent my time at the newsstand, the café with the red and white awning, and the bench beside the big oak tree, where almost every day a man brought a guitar and an accordion and played for the coins people tossed into his velvet-lined accordion case. Sometimes, my father says, I danced and got money too. The man played songs all mad with flowery torrents of words, announcing them in a thick Scottish brogue: 'Subterranean Homesick Blues,' 'Fishfly Stomp,' 'Buttertown Stage,' 'Blinded by the Light.' I'm starting to remember, I think, that it was the crazy lyrics of the songs as much as the notes of the guitar or accordion that made me whirl and leap like I'm told I did.

In the summer my father would get home long before it was dark, ambling slowly up the sidewalk and swinging his heavy leather briefcase. As I ate raisin cake at one of the outside tables or picked through the grate at the bottom of the oak tree for lost coins, he would cough loudly and come over to me and gather me up out of my activity and onto the stairs. Then the three of us would eat together, looking out the windows at the traffic, the afternoon light, the nuns from the seminary eating hot dogs across the street. Helga and my father would drink wine and stay at the table until long after it was finally dark and I was in my bed next to the cobwebby airshaft.

Sometimes on those nights I could hear them talking, if the wind was right, quiet and low like old, old friends, about the mountains of Germany and the plains of Kansas, and, I imagine, about my mother and about the strange events of their lives of the kind that people talk over on warm nights with a bottle of wine between them.

I picture her telling him her idea. "I have made a film, a movie, and in it I have pictures of people in Frankfurt and of the Black Forest and gypsies--near Heidelberg I found them--and it closes with a picture of Neuschwanstein. I want to sell it as a travel commercial." He would smile and she would continue. "It does not say 'Deutschland' in it anywhere. It shows it. That is what is important. No narrator, no one says anything."

"Subtle," he says.

"Ja, subtle."

Later he would tell her, "My aunt came back from the dead."

Helga is thinking she heard him wrong. "Back . . ."

"Back from the dead." He pulls out another cigarette but does not light it, setting it on its end and turning it over and doing the same again and again. On a night fishing in Puget Sound, my great-uncle Ray had told my father about the time he saw his dead wife. My father was seventeen. It was dusk, and that boy could not see his uncle's face clearly, but the man gestured wildly with his big, hairless hands ("Uranium prospectors' hands," he said of them) and told his story in the twilight.

My father says, "Aunt Rachel died in 1945. She was an assembly worker in a shipyard up in Seattle during the war. A riveter's gun slipped off the metal and put a rivet right through Aunt Rachel's windpipe." Uncle Ray was downtown at the bank, three days after the funeral, about to withdraw his wife's account, when he saw her face in the window of a
city bus. "The bus went right by, and there she was, dead a week and staring right at him." Then he walked two
blocks, found a bar and drank whisky shooters until he passed out. That night he was treated for shock at the Yesler
Way Mercy Clinic.

She says, "It must have been someone who looked very much like your aunt."

"No, it was her. I don't know how, but she was. My uncle believes it, but he doesn't believe it, if you know what I
mean, and so do I." My father had placed his young hands on his Uncle Ray's hairless ones and had sworn never to tell
anyone. But Uncle Ray had died in 1971, the winter we moved to Paris, and now he could talk about it. "It's true, it
really happened, I know it did."

My father did not tell her he too watches bus windows for dead relatives as well as live ones, like sometimes his wife.

Sometime she must have told him about her uncle, this one a Gunther, who crawled into her bed one morning just
before dawn when she was seven years old, "His age," she would say, looking sideways toward my bedroom. "I loved
my Uncle Gunther and I trusted him, so when he said, 'I want to be with you,' I opened the covers and he crawled
under." Then he began to feel her chest, looking for the ghosts of breasts that were not there yet. "It scared me very
badly," she told my father. "Scared of men and of life and of everything." I see her fumbling with her wineglass and
looking down, saying, "He was a molester, but it felt like . . ."

"It was rape," my father says.

After more stories they would pick up the dishes and wash them in the tiny kitchen, their laughter echoing off the tile
and the sound of the wine bottle slamming down after a swig onto the counter, the cutting board, and finally into the
trash, coming loud through the walls. After that they would both go to their rooms. My father would come into our
room quietly, closing the door behind him. He would lay down awake for a long time, and then get up and go to the
bathroom, and come back, and still be softly washing the room with his awake-breath when I fell back into sleep.

It went on this way until fall, when the days got shorter and often it was raining when my father came home at night,
in the dark. Helga studied a lot then, and after dinner she would go to her room, studying math and French while I
leafed through her big books and looked at the full-color prints of the Renaissance paintings. Things slowed down,
were less alive, and my father and Helga were waiting. She rushed through her assignments toward spring, when she
would bring her degree with her back to Frankfurt. He was waiting for word on a job he wanted with Rockwell in
London. The television stayed on in the evenings until we went to bed.

When word from London finally came, just before Christmas, no one seemed to notice. At the dinner table one night
my father said, "It looks like I got the job."

Helga, looking down at her butter-sautéed carrots, her masterpiece, said, "That is good. You will like London."

And so, we went to London, where we lived until the summer after I first got drunk with my father and he told me that
he and Helga had been in a strange kind of love.

At the airport Helga kissed me briskly on the cheek and forehead and hugged me tight, and smiling with wide wet
paths on her face turned to my father.

"I have met a man," she said, grinning.

"Oh, good," said my father, and they kissed each other on the mouth, twisting themselves as if in a struggle, for what I
could not tell.

"Watch out for his dentures," I said.

My father kept the job with Rockwell until twelve years later, when cancer was found in his lungs and he had to quit.
He was remarried, two years after we left Helga in Paris, to a woman he had known as a child in Wichita, also
separated, and burdened with a child and looking for someone to carry her into middle age.

"It was supposed to be like 'The Brady Bunch'," I told a friend much later, when I began to see what actually had happened. "We pretended for ten years or so that we had been together all along, with no acknowledgment of our differences, no attention paid to the missing parents." It didn't quite work, but it got us a long way in relative safety.

Helga graduated with her art degree, returned to Frankfurt, and kept in touch for a couple of years. Her last card, which we received just before Christmas of 1976, told us she was working for an advertising agency, struggling, but would sleep on the streets before moving back in with her family. "Good for her," my father said, and pinned the card up on the bulletin board next to our Girl Scouts of America Bicentennial Calendar.

I was sixteen years old the first time I got drunk with my father. "I could have made love to Helga, but I didn't want to spoil things for you," he said. "She was beautiful, she lived in our house and she was alone. But I never slept with her. We loved each other, though. Through you, mostly."

I was never aware of this at the time, but I suppose I had it half figured out by the time he actually said it, having heard some of the things they said and having to imagine others; and knowing that at some time this had to be told, it seems like the right way for things to have happened.

III

I grew up fat, lost weight, ran track in my senior year of high school, and once went into the bathroom with a pack of razorblades and a bottle of my stepmother's favorite bourbon with intentions of killing myself on the toilet, getting drunk, cutting my wrists and letting my blood flow out. All of us, my father, my stepmother, Helga, myself, seemed to be reaching for something lost, something just out of our grasp, that if found would make our lives whole again. It seems that as the years go by, sometimes we come upon times that make our pasts more our own, that, like the Talking Heads song says, give us back our names. Fiddling with our big old French radio we kept in the guest room when I was sixteen, dialing through the stations from all over Europe, I suddenly heard something familiar. It was in French, a language I had forgotten almost entirely by the time I entered junior high school. It was one of the accordion man's songs and I half-whisper-sang it, not understanding what the words meant, but remembering their sounds, and the story they told of the fisherman's drowned sons.

Also there is the more recent thing that makes me remember Paris, for the first time making me feel as if it were me who had been there; a month ago I took a bus to Murfreesboro, North Carolina, and I met my mother and three-year-old half-brother I did not know I had until I got off the bus. He looks like me in the dappled light that falls through the trees that grow in great stands around Murfreesboro, and there is a way he turns his head, as if cautious, that makes me want to protect him from all the crazy shit the world has in store. His father is gone, on whatever device it is which pulls people from their natural obligations. It was a strange and wonderful week I spent in Murfreesboro, and I feel very different now than I ever have before. But that is a different story, and also one about a strangely physical kind of love.
Trapped in the Heart


Mona Houghton

Lily and Hank

Lily opened her eyes. The shadows on the pull down shade that covered the glass front door loomed over her, like they did every night. Roses that were red in the day, camellias that were pink, now the bright flood light along the path of the courtyard apartments magnified the parts, reduced them to dark, distinct shapes, each leaf, each petal.

Lily glanced at the clock on the floor. 2:18 a.m. She looked back at the door. Three minutes later Hank's shadow joined the others. She watched as he raised his arm and softly tapped his knuckles against the glass.

Lily got up and opened the door as wide as it would go, without undoing the chain. "Hi, Hank."

"Open up," he said.

"Why?" Lily asked.

"So I can come in there and drown myself in those big bosoms of yours, that's why," Hank said.

Lily could smell him, the beer on his breath, the stale sweat coming through cheap after-shave. It turned her on.

Hank leaned up against the door frame. Lily reached out and ran her fingers up and down the front of his pants. He grabbed her hand and held it tight up against himself.

"Open up," Hank said, "and you can have it all."

After giving him a squeeze, Lily pulled her hand back and undid the chain.

Lily and Hank had known each other a long time, but the kind of knowing had changed almost a year before, after a Christmas party where they both had happened to turn up. It was a big party. Lily had come alone. She had planned to leave alone, but her car wouldn't start. Someone had told her Hank always carried a set of jumper cables. She had found him in the kitchen working on a bottle of vodka, and he would have been glad to help except his cousin had borrowed his cables earlier that day. Hank offered her a lift home. Lily accepted the ride, but she didn't want to go home. She wanted to go to church to hear the singing. Hank had shrugged. He had thought midnight mass would be a gas. They had left the party together. That had been the beginning.

Hank kicked the door closed after he came into the room. Lily slinked around behind him and slipped the chain back into place.

"You locking me in or locking them out?" Hank pulled his sweat shirt up over his head. Lily didn't answer. She never did. She never said a word once Hank actually came into her room, not until much later. Oh, occasionally a whisper would escape, something that would let him know how much she wanted him, but that didn't count, not to Lily and not to Hank, because it was as much a part of the loving as any kiss or caress. Afterwards, though, Lily couldn't shut up.

But before Lily started talking, she'd leave Hank in bed wrapped up in the sheets and the blankets and run a bath that had almost no cold water in it at all. If any sample bubble bath had come through the mail she'd throw that in too. And while the tub filled up, Lily would set out a big soft towel and lather up a wash cloth with Ivory soap and pour them each a shot of something strong. Then, when everything was just right, Lily would go get Hank out of bed. He'd usually be asleep, but she would wake him up anyway, gently. With her teeth, she would nibble on his side, or she would tickle his eye lids with the tip of her tongue.
Hank never minded being awakened. He loved Lily's baths. He liked the way she guided him through the darkened room and the way the bottom of his feet wanted to run away when they hit the cold linoleum on the bathroom floor and the way he kind of ached up inside and tingled at the same time when he lowered himself into the almost too hot water.

Once Hank settled in, that was when Lily would start. She would kneel down beside the tub and in the dark she would wash Hank and tell him a story, give him a piece of herself, a beginning and a middle and an end. As far as Hank could remember, Lily had never repeated herself, not in the nine months since they had been seeing each other. And except for the first two times they spent together, that being Christmas Eve and New Years Day, the routine had never varied.

This night Lily said, "Lean forward."

Hank did as she asked and Lily started to wash his back.

Christmas Eve -- New Year's Day

Lily had done some research earlier in the morning. She had found out the Catholics over in Taft had the biggest choir around, so once she convinced Hank she should be the one behind the wheel, that she hadn't had much to drink, Lily pointed his pick-up truck north into the desert and drove out of Maricopa on Highway 33.

A silver moon sat over on the horizon to the west. The stars were bright and the Joshua trees stood out, silent and still. To Lily, the party, the music and the voices and the blinking lights strung up around each room, didn't seem like part of the same evening, not now. She glanced over at Hank.

He smiled and said, "Not often I let somebody drive my truck."

"I'm honored," said Lily.

"I'm drunk," Hank said. "I'm drunk and I'm going to church." He laughed and gave Lily a sidelong glance. "I'm cold, too." He explained about the heater being broken as he snuggled up against her.

The night air did hold enough chill to make the move logical. It surprised them both, though, when that wanting feeling came through, wild like a March hare. There had been an attraction, but the being close opened it up into something bigger. Lily took deep, calming breaths and kept her eyes on the white line and pretended she didn't feel Hank pressing his thigh tight to hers. She didn't want it to go too fast.

When they walked into the church Hank giggled a little, but Lily's icy response made him keep his opinion to himself. She enjoyed being in church. The formality absorbed her. She had always wished she could discover the comfort in religion that she guessed real church-goers experienced. With all the Christmas fanfare Lily could actually feel like the man in the white robes in front of the altar represented a conduit between herself and some pure and hypnotic state. But these sensations didn't last long. She'd glance over at Hank and before she knew it some other idea of ecstasy pumped through her mind, and the images were not powder puff voids, they were concrete and luscious. Still, that night, with the booming organ music and the big voices in the choir, Lily did tie in to the clean feeling of sinlessness.

After the final blessing, Lily and Hank headed for home. It was late and the moon had set and they were both silent as they traveled through the dark desert. By the time they got to Maricopa the town had closed down. Someone had even turned off the green neon sign above the Shamrock Bar and Grill.

When Lily saw this she said, "That's a first."

Hank said, "You should stay out late more often."

Lily said, "You'd be surprised."
"Would I?" Hank asked.

Lily nodded.

She drove straight to the Courtyard Arms, the bungalow style apartments where she rented the smallest unit available. She pulled the truck into the spot where she usually parked. She said, "I have some tequila in the freezer."

Hank said, "Good."

Contrary to his expectations, though, Hank only heard a story on Christmas Eve. What Hank did not know, and never really would, was that what he heard that night was Lily's first story. In it, Lily told about her dog and how he got the name Sidewinder.

Hank liked the story. He laughed a lot, especially at the end.

Lily poured them each another shot of tequila. She said, "About four years later old Sidewinder got hit by a train." Lily stared off and kind of shook her head. "Funny how a person can feel about a dog."

"Yeah." Hank moved from the chair to the couch and sat down next to Lily. He put his arm around her, but Lily kind of scooted away. "Come on, honey," he said.

But Lily wouldn't have any of it, not then.

She let Hank spend the night, but they both slept in their clothes.

For the next seven days Hank couldn't keep his mind on much else but Lily. He wanted her in the worst way. He felt mesmerized. He kept replaying that night in her apartment over and over again, in his head, the way she sat in the dim light talking about that dog, the way she wrapped her hand around the neck of the tequila bottle and gripped it until her fingers turned white before she poured, the way their bodies fit together even with the jeans and the slacks and the turtle necked sweaters. Lily confused him.

Hank tried to reach Lily. She never seemed to be around when he dropped by her apartment or telephoned. He left a note thumb tacked to her door. She never got back to him. By New Year's Eve, Hank gave up on Lily. He got drunk by himself and went to bed early.

The next day while Hank was sipping beer and watching the Rose Bowl game he suddenly felt like he was not alone. He looked up. Lily was standing outside the screen door staring in at him.

Hank said, "Where have you been?"

Lily didn't say anything.

Hank said, "Come on in."

Lily opened the screen door and let it flap closed behind her.

Hank stood up and stepped over the coffee table. "Are you okay?" he asked, as he moved close to her.

Lily nodded.

Hank reached out and touched her hair.

Lily put her index finger on the metal button on Hank's jeans.

Hank and Lily made love right then, right there on the throw rug in front of the television while Sam the Bam Cunningham made football history with his fourth touchdown of the game.
Afterwards, Lily held Hank close and watched the sun play on the leaves of the pepper tree outside the front door.

**Hank and Lily**

Initially Hank tried to be conventional. He called Lily and asked her out to dinner.

She said, "I'd rather not. But why don't you drop by after you've eaten."

So Hank ate dinner by himself then drove over to Lily's place. He knocked on the door. Lily only opened it as wide as the chain lock would permit.

"Hello, Hank," she said.

Hank thought maybe it would be nice to go out for a drink so he asked her if she'd like to walk down to the Shamrock. They had a new group coming in that night.

"You go on alone," Lily said, "And then come back, later." She smiled.

Hank wasn't one to insist on doing things his way, so he followed Lily's leads. It seemed she had a definite plan in mind.

By the beginning of February their internal clocks were in synch. Hank would be out there in the dark, after midnight, three, sometimes four nights a week, knocking on the door. Lily would always let him in. They would make love and Lily would give him a bath and tell him a story. In ways, Hank had never felt so complete. The loving mystified him. It took Hank outside himself into a light he had never before seen. He spoke about it, a blue-green forever. Lily enveloped him. Her body always stayed with Hank, the touch, the smells, and her voice, somehow she made the words wrap around him.

Lily said, "Lean forward."

Hank did as she asked and Lily started to wash his back. She rubbed the sudsy cloth up and down his sides and around his neck and behind his ears. A gentle nudge encouraged him to rest his back against the cool porcelain tub. Lily reached under the water. She ran the washcloth between his toes and up his legs and she started to tell her story. What Hank did not know, and would never really understand, was that he was hearing Lily's last story. In it, Lily told about the woman who had no bottom lip.

Hank didn't laugh at the end. Instead he asked Lily for another shot of tequila.

A couple of nights later when Hank knocked on the door, Lily never opened it up. His senses told him she was in there. He knocked louder. He felt cheated. He felt betrayed.

He came back the next night. He had started drinking early and had been drinking hard. He knocked. Nothing happened. With his fist Hank pounded on the door.

From inside, from the bed, Lily watched the shadow on the pull down shade. She couldn't move. She couldn't get up. She couldn't let him in.

Hank hurt. He yelled out Lily's name.

**Lily's first and last stories**

Originally the dog had been called Bert, short for Fierce Albert. Bert was seven years old when Lily was born. When Bert was fourteen, he had a stroke. The vet had wanted to put him down. Lily screamed. If they killed Bert she would kill herself. Bert stayed alive. And Lily kept all the promises she had made at the pet hospital. She devoted herself to the dog. For weeks she would run straight home from school and drag that poor animal out into the sunshine so he
Lily's last story was about something she had seen.

When Lily was fifteen, her parents got so crazy she had to go live with her uncle and his wife. At first they seemed like straightforward people. He went to work everyday, a state employee. And the wife, she kept books for several small businesses in the suburb where they lived. The aunt had an office in the house. Her clients would come by and they would work there in the room that used to be the den. By that age, Lily had seen a lot and heard more. It didn't take her long to figure out that the aunt did more than take care of the businessmen's books. Lily didn't care. She had hoped, though, that she had landed somewhere that would stay still enough for her to grow up. It didn't turn out that way. The uncle finally caught on and he did care. Lily found this out one afternoon when she came home from school and found him in the living room, sitting on the couch, holding his knees with the palms of his hands. His face was bright red. The door between the living room and the den was closed, but that did not stop Lily, like her uncle, from hearing the grunts and groans of the aunt and one of her lovers. Lily only had a moment to speculate as to who was with the aunt. The uncle stood up. Right in front of Lily this big man started to take off his clothes. By the time he undressed, the sounds on the other side of the door had subsided. But that did not discourage the uncle. His wife's unfaithfulness not only made him angry, it apparently excited him. Lily had never seen a grown man's erection. The uncle went into the den. He raped his wife and in his frenzy he bit off her bottom lip, the whole thing. Lily found it on the floor, under the arm chair. She wrapped it in a piece of plastic and gave it to the man who drove the ambulance. A doctor tried to sew the lip back on. It didn't work. The last time Lily saw her aunt she had no bottom lip, none at all.
White Man's Magic

_Eclipse_ (1962)

Larry Travis

a really wild and way out
witch doctor
sat tearing
a paperback edition
of white man's magic
into small
one word
bits
then put them into
an empty skull
to wait for the wind
to blow the little squares
of white
with bold black letters
out of an empty eye hole
and land on the smoky
ceremonial grass
sifted symbols

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Supplication

_Eclipse_ (1963)

**June Demetry**

Please,
since (among
wild roses
sweeter than believing)
you and I
would play at love
why not un
-pretend
(oh ask me
please)
to be that way
:give me violets
with (bluer than believing)
your eyes.

Send questions or comments to:

*Warren Wedin*  warren.wedin@csun.edu
Vaudeville

_Eclipse_ (1963)

S. T. Clendenning

That histrionic sun again!  
Insisting always on a  
three-act waning and  
a death off stage.  
All I wanted really  
was a sudden brief smile  
filtered through  
these last leaves.

---

[Back] to Contents of _The Best_.

[Back] to the CSUN home page.

---

Send questions or comments to:

_Warren Wedin_ warren.wedin@csun.edu
The Length of Insight

Eclipse (1965)

Paul Thomas

But I knew when I was young
That green hills don't grow.
My friends and I, with our bright rubber balls,
Burst to the litany of cocks on the wind,
Till, brilliant as the sun, we hillocked home at dusk.

The fingers of sand were fine words
To the robins in our feet, and we danced,
Beating, blazing, in the flames that we caught
And rolled into mud statues with hysterical bellies.
From the trees, we threw stones.

I was home in the mouth of my mother's back door
When the dinner-bell dried out
The sweat in my shirt.
Later I would sit by the chair with a book
And learn
That green hills don't grow.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Autumn Farewell (Athens, Oct. 1963)

_Eclipse_ (1965)

Lewis Kruglick

(I have taken copper candlesticks
and checkered tablecloths
for my eyes.)

I waited two hours
in the kafenion
with Athens and purple clouds,
the lace veil of autumn,
and sounds of the lottery sellers
shouting, "I have."

The brandy was warm in my mouth
hearing his footsteps
of small comboloi beads
striking concrete.

(I have taken mint vases
and rusted coins
for my shelf.)

"I am leaving tomorrow,"
my voice was hurried
and the girls' thighs damp
on Lycavetos.

Later we walked home
the first roasted chestnuts of October
filling our hands.

(I have taken violet islands
and white cities
for my book.)

We listened to jazz and bouzouki
comparing the length of the tone
of our lands.

"Autumn is best for remembering," he said,
and slowly a rider came
topping the trees
with the wind in his feet.

The sky opens its legs
and I enter,
the rain is gray.

---

Back to Contents of _The Best_.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
With Tea and Lemons

_Eclipse_ (1966)

**Helen Sorrells**

She has come home to the white room
That locked her dreams in paper roses,
The curtains more fragile
Than her wedding dress.

Torn in half in her morning,
Unhealed on a velvet chair,
She marvels at her wholeness
In the mirror.

Where is her mother who does not come
With tea and lemons
To say love is a fig
And a feather?

She knows where he is, his sorcery spilled
In willing hands,
The bright lust of another's hair
Stitching his eyes closed.

Blind, he is yet beautiful. There are weeks
Ahead, months, and years, years.
Outside a pigeon wears a prism on his breast;
A horse rears.

[Back to Contents of The Best.]

[Back to the CSUN home page.]

Send questions or comments to:

*Warren Wedin* [warren.wedin@csun.edu](mailto:warren.wedin@csun.edu)
Invitation Engraved on Sunlight

_Eclipse_ (1966)

Helen Sorrells

While this fresh fall of light,
This summery burn,
Heats our travelling blood,
And the wheel turns

Upward in the hills
Of your forgiveness,
Come to my country.
I make two promises:

Here prophets are given
The keys to their cities;
All the statues are
Living.

Send questions or comments to:

_Warren Wedin_ warren.wedin@csun.edu
It Is Reason Enough

_Eclipse_ (1966)

Lewis Kruglick

An image of her develops, coming across the hot center of Greek plains into my mind like a whisper. I touch her breasts; her eyes lower. Her face fills with motion. In the village young girls make music, and we walk in streets where the dust stirs. What do my fingers touch?

The coffee we drink in a taverna makes circles in my cup. Her eyes seem to be blank spots: colorless. We do not talk. The sea breathes deeply from its belly; squares on the tablecloths turn white. Were her hands slender? There are several vacant spaces in what I remember.

This evening a blue painting on the wall becomes the Mediterranean Sea in her hair. In the dim light of conversation I see a woman laughing. There is a sameness about the mouth which introduces one into the other. We speak. I touch her breasts; her eyes lower. One smiles through the other. In the morning her hair will be wet with the jasmine-scent of sweat, and I will enter the woman through the image. It is reason enough.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Winter Solstice at St. Paul de Vence

Eclipse (1966)

Lewis Kruglick

Among that winter,
sunmade shadows haunted
the steps in St. Paul de Vence.

Silence crumbled like
children's kites in the wind,
and I was caught by the sound.

The brown ramparts were goatherds
to walks I took, belled by women
washing morning in the fountain, and
each day guided me down to the weedy
cemetery where white marble teeth
stood in the ground.

I held parties
among so much company.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
"At 5:30 P.M. Will Be a Re-Enactment of a Militia Muster of '75"

Eclipse (1966)

Robin Johnson

The box grows slowly, down in Williamsburg, and we walk slowly through the maze of years until the drummers catch us with their beat and fifers trill melodious martial news, bringing the children running to the green, and we are children too. We run along behind the men who leave the Raleigh Tavern, leave the cobbler's bench, and leave the bells of Bruton Parish Church to evening prayer. Shrieking down the Duke of Gloucester Street the fifers reach the square. They slow their steps to half-time near the flag, where stars explode defiance from the staff. An antique cannon booms, a silversmith in homespun stubs the fuse, and drill begins. We see a brown-wigged officer command and know his heritage is not an act, his special issue: drill, defend, or die. Today that man would not be there, the man without a leg. Nor would the boy beside the man who shoulders a blunderbuss, a gun. The roll of drums, abrupt and silent now, leaves a vacuum like a snare, echoing drums, and fifers cradle the music in our minds. We stand so still the birds take over air and we are lifted beyond the sunset sky to see and hear the muster of sleeping men snared by drums that rumbled long and far before this casual cluster of free men.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Lea's Poet

_Eclipse_ (1967)

Gayle Gray

Love feeds slowlyrom the hand of a thousand
western towns,

and when we
pull off our clothes, it is in
remembered beds.

Words happen to me
then, when the restriction
of my body

is lifted away
from your brown hills
and the day
does not rise
until I tell it to. It will
never rise,

quick-breathing
and clear, until I demand it.
If you rise

with me, laughing
and singing in the joy of my words,
then you understand

I do not care
that you have loved others,
I only care

that these sounds
come to your ears' oceans
like new silver

or like the wind
painting umbered fields
with its guitar.

---

[Back to Contents of The Best.]

[Back to the CSUN home page.]

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Candy Man

_Eclipse_ (1967)

Annette Kanter

There's a kind of a man
Who would kiss a little girl
Who would kiss her so kind
On her little behind
That before very long
She would very much long
For a kiss on her little
Before.
Candy Man, Candy Man,
Let's play the game:
I'll be the lady and you be
The man who comes for the kisses
And tell me what kind.
A dozen of orange and six of vanilla?
We're out of vanilla,
Will strawberry do?
Old Daddy, first lover,
Old Daddy, old fart,
You took all my kisses and then
Ate my heart.
How deep is my mother, you
Dear
Candy Man?

___

Back to Contents of _The Best_.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Coming back
I came upon the border full of scars
With a borrowed map spread on my knee.
I was thinking
Already my hands were grown old
With five tied tongues apiece.

I had always been shall we say
Safer
When the fields were greener
Over there,
But nowhere near demanding
Nowhere new.

(To get there I might add unnoticed
I had hauled pride like a chain
And worn my hunger like
A fat belt.)

And here I am again
Home again
With a new map of the old days
Like a traveller with
Ten new marvels.

And here is that same old house
As if moving
Glad to accommodate departure
Full of new doubts
The same room with half a roof
Wearing the same effigies.

I will move in.
Colors

Eclipse (1968)

G. Guss

With quiet eyes I now look back to England. There, a lumpy schoolgirl at the age of ten, I remember seeing colors . . .

Purple in our postman's nose in January
And purple in the onions strung up high;
And green across the Hampstead Heath or parrots' backs
(Ill-tempered birds in the London Zoo).

I remember picnicking in yellow fields
Where buttercups grew taller than the grass,
And all the black there was
Was in the black of patent leather shoes and India ink.

But blue was always light and mine:
My room, my bike, my father's eyes;
As brown seal fur my mother wore was soft
And I could push against it with my face.

Then into my eyes a madness came,
A madness trailed by people from abroad.
They came with purple coffin eyes,
Their flesh turned green from shuddering;
Confused and haunted by a yellow star, they came.

A black smoke-drift followed them
From sadder compounds over there
Where blue fire
Passed through brown bodies
Into browner graves.

Now, with quiet eyes,
The colors bleached by time,
I can look back remembering.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Unfinished Plays

Artifax, Vol. 1.1 (1971)

Rose Shade

There seemed no resurrected hope
On "Black Easter" 1865. One bullet
In a darkened theater had
Stilled the play, rung down the curtain for a nation,
And no stand-in
Waiting in the wings could read the lines
The same. Where was the Producer then?

And still he lets bullets close his
Brightest plays. One crazed critic can, before the act
Is over, send the lead into light
In Dallas; one lone hater in a balcony
Can stop the scene
Before a motel door in Tennessee;
A despiser of one line of speech

Can so confuse the stage-sets that
A kitchen corridor contains a dying scene
Before the curtain's barely up.
Now the darkened theater, the stillness on the boards,
Makes us wonder
Why these voices were silenced entr'acte,
Why good "angels" let these plays close down.

Then is 'the play the thing,' or just
A sleight-of-hand, a veiling curtain for a
Subtle alchemy, each bullet the
Bombardment of an atom, converting bleeding mass
To energy
In endless fission as on that
Friday on a hillside long ago?

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
For the Year

Artifax, Vol. 1.1 (1971)

Keith Brown

I
Caesar could have been my father.
I am Roman: each holiday
I stand my flag in the corner,
Shelter a candle between gusts of wind.
Our general grows fat from killing;
I run to the bathroom
Hand to my mouth.
Lights out, sweetheart: lights and candles.

II
I'm watching the game.
Where is your hand?
You march forward in straight lines
And keep the horses fed.
Pawns cross, bishops kneel,
My legs shake under the table.
God, I love it:
The abstract war,
The blood on my fingertips.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
A Rite of Spring

(The Burial of Igor Stravinski, April 1971)

Artifax, Vol. 1.2 (1971)

Rose Shade

They bore my body in a gondola
Of gilt and black in Renaissance procession
Across the liquid grace of Venice,
A gold-caped archimandrite and boy crucifer

Standing in the gondola before,
A flotilla following, water rippling to
Vibrations of my late-sung Requiem
From the dark basilica where the doges lie.

Sky spun with stars, strange birds of fire,
As oars swirled muddy water counterpoint,
And in a circle on a bridge, cat-eyes glittered
In the darkness watching. And I remembered

The red wines of Venice. But violins
Abuzz seemed to beckon from the cypressed island,
A magic garden, where in that grave
Beside the ivy-covered wall might be the key

To break the spell. And Diaghilev
Not fifty yards away, with what new
Rite of springtime to encourage.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Puritan Woman

*Artifax, Vol. 1.2 (1971)*

Rose Shade

*I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits.*

Anne Bradstreet

There in Massachusetts
We built our "city upon a hill"
For all the world to see
And find example in--
But that first winter
There was just the land,
Lying before us
Like a vast unfinished garment--
And my cold hands holding needle
Were only female
And busy with the work of babes.
The men would slash and shape the earth,
And style to God's design
The stuff of law and state;
I had small garments of my own
To fashion. So in the chill
Of winter nights by candle--
When the children were in bed--
Why did my hand, shaped only
For the shaft of spinning wheel
Or bar of cradle,
Dare to grasp a pen?
Perhaps it was the bare house,
The wolf's howl, the Indians,
The memory of those months of shifting sea--
And Simon gone away for days;
Perhaps the words, dancing into shape
In neat and airy couplets,
Imposed design on savage vastness
And hemmed up the ragged edge of newness
With thread from across the seas.
So between the cradle
And the oven, with fresh brown
Bread baking and infants babbling,
I wrote, and Simon understood.

Back to Contents of *The Best.*

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

*Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu*
Depressions of a Two-World Lady

_Artifax_, Vol. 1.2 (1971)

Carole Beck

1
It is winter
and the roses are blooming.

Dark cauldrons of life
their hungry edges moisten
in the morning.

I watch
while ants play
upon a rose petal
like caraway seeds
in red wine.

Once, a petal
loosed from its hinge
funnelled sweet scents
into my lap.

2
I bit into
a rose petal
and dreamed of blood
bubbling from my lips
deliberate
as a Dali still-life
unconscious of reality
but certain of pain.

3
From a bloody sky
the rain dripped
rose petals
carpeting the streets
with wet velvet.

When the storm ended
I lifted my face
with the scent of roses
and evaporated
into the sun.

Send questions or comments to:

_Warren Wedin_ warren.wedin@csun.edu
Sunspot

Artifax, Vol. 1.2 (1971)

Martin Levy

1
I've lived my life
on streets that stumble
into streets.

Each house crowds the next
like relatives.

Mariposa        Buena Vista
Riverside        Catalina;
names should mean more
than roads of campers
ready for the weekend.

I've seen my father
grow white
in this land
of never-ending sun.

2
They speak with strange inflections,
circling around pointing to
    yes just that spot
where yesterday
old Isaac passed away.

Like displaced Bible pictures
they crowd the Venice benches
backs turned to the quarter-mile beach
and talk of Israel
as if it were an hour's walk.

3
In Detroit when I was seven,
my uncle returned.

    California
    land of sun
    and good health

His veins burst
before he sold the store
but we came,
living out his dreams
like good Christians,
working hard all year
for a two-week vacation.

4
As I walk the promenade
old women prod me with their canes.

They call me Cossack,
fingers bent
around the corner of the bench.

The stores mime the people,
chalked gray    cracked,
ridden by the heat.

It's 90
but the women scarf themselves.

Sweat comes hard.

My bare head
viewed with suspicion.
Rows of cracked stucco, 
palm trees    dead skin 
chafing in the Santa Ana winds.

The sun 
burning my brother well, 
stretching me like a Moses rod.

Even then 
smog levelled the valley, 
the cruel highlight 
of Spanish tract houses, 
my father's first words
Here you'll grow 
healthy and tall.

They come at night       children from
New York   Chicago
Pittsburgh  Detroit.

They prowl the Venice beaches 
hunting hipsters, 
crowding into filthy bars.

The others hide in old hotels, 
waiting for daylight 
and gentle water over bones.

---

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin  warren.wedin@csun.edu
The Injured Slopes

*Artifax, Vol. 1.2 (1971)*

**Sheldon White**

Dark eucalyptus stand in shaggy rows,
Small oak trees interrupt the yellow grass,
And horses huddle where the fenceline goes;
Here bright October sleeps below the pass.

Old winds chopped down the mountain towers
Above these fields where lately iron teeth
Reduced the soil and in a few short hours
Cold concrete tombed the injured slopes beneath.

With bridges arching high above the drains
And shining serpent curves of man-made stone
Coiling back upon themselves, concentric lanes,
The freeway writes hard beauty of its own.

---

Back to Contents of *The Best.*

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

*Warren Wedin* [warren.wedin@csun.edu](mailto:warren.wedin@csun.edu)
Canyon Fever

_Artifax, Vol. 2.1 (1972)_

Carole Beck

A fence of eucalyptus
spiked into the parched ground
dull and browner
than the road that points
to other canyons
lying still
as empty troughs.

Dry winds
make the only sound.
Wrapped up with the heat
even lifeless burrs
cannot be pushed.
Nothing but the dust moves
silently
in little stirs.

Even with the summer rain,
the sudden break in clouds, late
before a dropping sun,
that caused the trees to glow
below a charcoal sky,

I saw the shadows
stretch across the road
like prison bars,
and then the clouds fused
tight again
across the sun.

__Back__ to Contents of _The Best._

__Back__ to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

_Warren Wedin_ warren.wedin@csun.edu
Everywhere the trace of early winter,
the hard clarity of something missed.
Helpless as shadows
we are haunted by the light
breaking into pieces across your desk
where books, papers, your glasses
exude a sharpness
delicate as the sun burning depth to the room.

And in the letters we forgot you kept,
the old papers falling from books,
we are reminded
as we hold your picture like a breath,
finger the cross you once wore:
words we can never say
hang around our necks.

Chris Cannady

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Fisherman's Wharf

Artifax, Vol. 2.1 (1972)

Chris Cannady

They drift in and out of their shadows, turning slowly. Their faces separated by lanterns, in the silence that settles, low curses, the slow ring of buoys, and beer cans crumpled, marking the hours.

They show a weariness soothed by the rhythm of the tides, patient, hanging over fins partly raised, silent, sharpened by hooks and knives.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Had it not been for the furious storm that swept the sea up over the docks, and broke the masts of fishing boats, and moved the rocks across the beach, and closed the solitude of night, I might have slept those hours and never known the wind, never watched the corolla around the moon. But there it was. I thought of you in Yugoslavia.

And now it is another year, and I have known your arms a while before you went. Though I remember, it is turning June and I will go away, Alaska bound, perhaps, perhaps across the Yukon 'til the snow stops me. I don't know where you'll be. I thought of you in Yugoslavia.

Time may ease the thoughts I have of you, and you may hear, remembering the name and nothing else, that I have gone to take the nod on a cold stage in a cold place. Praised for words unheeded, I may stand gray and deaf: will I remember my blood-pounding hours of you, and will I think of you in Yugoslavia?
Game with Variations

*All Of It* (1972)

Nancy Shiffrin

The Puzzled enter the game
Not quite knowing why but caring;
Unable to tease or to perform with
Pleasure, the Puzzled submit,
With each debasement somewhat pleased.

To be clever is to tease lewdly
All meaning from the game;
Reluctant to commit or to pretend with
Conviction, the Clever mock
Each position contrived and measured
For easing satisfaction from the act.

The Master plays first of all with
Abandon, with submission and commission
Where they're good; testing every variation
Designed to gratify, and finding
Fresh tensions in forgotten places.

---

[Back](#) to Contents of *The Best.*

[Back](#) to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

*Warren Wedin* [warren.wedin@csun.edu](mailto:warren.wedin@csun.edu)
Too Many Dancers

_Artifax, Vol. 2.2 (1973)_

_Sheldon White_

Twisted faces and the other
ugly sights of love
An old man's arms are weak
A kiss is not worth much
a crooked joining of our mouths
and bliss is short
so little to remember

The piano and the clarinet
conspired a sort of rhythm
but there were too many dancers
and rum and Coca Colas
and rosebuds on your shoulder
and suddenly we quarreled
nothing more than that

Send questions or comments to:

_Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu_
Three a.m.
in separate rooms across the city:
our cigarettes glow
like signal beacons, not quite reaching.

We have hurt each other,
this time beyond forgiving.
Somewhere a siren wails
too late for help.

Our hurt crouches
howling in a dark corner,
waits for nightfall
to keep us awake.

We fill our emptiness with smoke,
and think how once
a late-night cigarette was shared
in the silence of a single room.
My Father

A Bao A Qu (1973)

Diane Hannum

Saturday
When I picked the flowers for Mother
She was so happy
You hit me
You said I wrecked your garden

That night you made me sit
Sick at the table
Until I ate every pea

You wanted me to cry
But I didn't

I wish I could make you
Eat a bucket of them
One at a time
Cold like that

To you I'm not a person
Just someone you can push around
A thing you own

Grandma smells like cabbage when she talks
You don't kiss her
But you make me

She says I look like you
If I really did
I would cut off my face

After you take me to the barber
You tell him what to do
My shaved neck shows at school
But my friends don't laugh anymore
And Marty lets me wear his hat

You say Marty's dirty
He's just my friend

When I'm as big as you are
I'm going to hold you down
And shave off
All your hair
You'll go around ugly for a long time

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
After the Sparrow Fell


Rachel Sherwood

Orsic:
Oh, this is nothing new, these several
Bodies strewn about the room;
I have seen it elsewhere, and here, before.
I am not shocked--training prevents it
And allows only pained expression when it
Suits those higher up.

These huge trees, oak or firs, whatever
Breath their sight takes from you,
Are easily cracked, felled, carted off for
Fine-carved castle doors, monuments to majesty.
The dogwood bends more easily and, though not remarked,
Manages to (speaking practically) survive uncut.

The scholar, in this confusion, must welcome
The King of Norway to an unsightly mess. He must
Explain, sign papers, consign succession.
I'll agree with Norway on the weather and his choice of
Colored cloth--God knows it won't suit him.
A change of scene is needed. (Exeunt)
Hardening


Martin Levy

We walked along the west rim of the valley sloping to the last part undeveloped--horse trails soon to be a giant shopping complex.

You showed me your old house, your husband's school, the rooms they taught old math to both of you twelve years ago.

You wanted to make it in the field next to the gym, to wipe out a decade of buying clothes, of having kids, of living for a man who always brought you gifts, who never lied and never thought that there was more than this.

I see his handsome face beside me as I kiss you here, his astonished breath--his jacket shields the kids. He waves his hands; he begs you to come back. You close your eyes and laugh.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Hacker's Complaint to Blind Hugh of Onan

Angel's Flight, Vol. 2.1 (1977)

Terry Phillips

I am the crippled boy.
I have the lagging foot and the jerking knee.
You have fixed your teeth in my lame heart
and your lips never touch the meat.
Your smile cut from Cosmo with a razor
betrays no one,
offsends no one,
pleases no one;
it is inert
as the polished enamel of your incisors.

I play with deep subjects
cached in my pockets.
In the cloister of my bedroom
I have hidden my marbles behind the socket facing.
They are inert
as the lead scales that skin your heart.
You, daughter of the bunny hutch and society's page,
come to me,
come in the waking day
and I will know you.
No vow need rob us of love, nor tender caress
wake us from our viscous dreaming, nor genuine embrace
hold us from our fond-handed good-night, sweet lady.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
His Vision

Angel's Flight, Vol. 3.1 (1978)

Richard Rosing

He had a vision of how it would be
There would be a fireplace, an ocean
nearby through a large dark window
They would be older and look per-
factly affluent  She would lie on
a long sofa, her head in his lap
turned away toward the window
He would stroke her long hair, as
dark as the night outside
They wouldn't have to speak by then
Perhaps they had children, away some-
where  He didn't care about their
individual natures  It suited him
that they were hers and that she
lay there having had them by him
She was still incredibly slim
wearing long black slacks, a turtle-
neck sweater  He envisioned no pain
They would be perfectly happy
perfectly silent, alone
He would fix his eyes on a point
in the rug and watch the firelight
shake the room

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Birds, Frogs, Hogs, You, Me

_Neil's Flight, Vol. 3.1 (1978)_

Carol Stager

I had embroidered the fable
that we were built of brick,
no straw in our story,
no crumbs to be pilfered by starlings.
If you were the youngest son.
If I were skilled at transforming frogs.
If fairies had not turned queer.

As it is, princes are slaughtered,
virgins die virgins.
The paths through our plundered forest
are endless. Stay away!
I am here in the land of pigs
where even your breath
can blow my house in.


[Back to the CSUN home page.](http://www.csun.edu/~hceng029/thebest/stagerbirds.html)

Send questions or comments to:

_Warren Wedin_ [warren.wedin@csun.edu](mailto:warren.wedin@csun.edu)
Wedding Night

_Angel's Flight, Vol. 3.1 (1978)_

David Trinidad

Night is an overweight woman
who strips to old songs.
I've seen her shove the sun behind
  galaxies in crowded rooms, and at
  parties snap her lacy bra.
  She slung out the North Star
like a nipple on a glittered tit.
  Voyagers saw it.

In her parlor
we dared to touch.
Night is a pushy girl,
she was jealous of this match.
Comets shot like eight balls
  across her table of green felt.
She tilted her head and laughed
  and laughed and laughed.

She peeled gold rings
off of planets
instead of fingers. Or cigars. Day had worn
  the sky like a ski jacket. Night fell
loosely on her large legs
  like a pair of faded jeans.
We should have stayed a little longer
  and listened to her Polish jokes.

But it was safe
in the motel room.
The moon was a comma at the end of a good line,
you turned and pulled me like a slip
  of paper and blasted your pen like a rocket ship
through my nebulous words.
It was the Fourth of July
  and all the stars were dotdotdots.

We should
have listened
to the gypsy on the pier
  when she pushed my palm away
and said, "You'll be more than a lover,
  much much more."
Plastic bracelets crashed toward her elbows
  like sharp waves warning us to stop.

Night turned cold.
She pouted and was too proud
to play another game. Now I'm hung up
  in the bathroom and you're on the road
being blinded by the headlights
  of a speeding car.
Our lips chap and sprout milky sores.
  Our faces show their age.

Street lamps burst
and spin halos
like horseshoes and clovers in a slot machine.
  While night drops her G string
like a pink eyelid
  or a pun
and coughs from the corner of a cabaret:
  "I've won, I've won."

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.
Premonition

Rachel Sherwood

A pitcher broke sharp in the sink
tonight of all nights, like a tooth
shattering the pleasure of a walnut
with an unwholesome crack

we watch from the curb dull
as lamp posts
when the car shrieks sidewise
in a willful lunge against the street

bark shivers off a pepper tree
and the wheels cover the close night air
languid,
tilted on a wrecked axis.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page. < HR> Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Meeting is hard;
Separation is even harder--
And now the east wind
Has no more strength;
Flowers wither by the hundreds.
Till spring the silkworm spins,
Then dies. Candles must first turn ash,
Before their tears can dry. This morning,
Looking in the mirror, I find my hair has taken on
The color of clouds--
Now singing poems in the night
I shall feel the moonlight's chill;
For I have not much farther to go
To reach the sacred mountains.
Bluebird, be a sentry,
Go, seek out a way.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Waiting

*Angel's Flight, Vol. 4.1 (1979)*

Sharon Smith

there are souls who scream all night in their rooms
holding covers up, blinking
at a dark space before them
empty, unblessed.
there are times that defy
the word stop.

the end moves from the
center to the skin
a creeping constant
no event, no goal.
our skins dry
flaking dirt like the
dark surface of a lemon tree.
dust becomes the clothing
and center of each
as the worms carve tunnels
in the wood, patterns to follow with
the tips of our fingers
smoothing, silencing
like a touch to the lip.

you hang by that fine thread
a slim black spider
wanting release
the slam toward dirt
is not always final.
there are recriminating
blasts, silences
where voices are needed.
the thread will last if you let it,
the dirt will stay soft.

[Back](#) to Contents of *The Best.*

[Back](#) to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

*Warren Wedin*  warren.wedin@csun.edu
Mysteries of Afternoon and Evening

Angel's Flight, Vol. 4.1 (1979)

Rachel Sherwood

The wind is fitful now:
soot piles in the corners
of new buildings,
gulls stumble out of place
in the ragged branches
to skim against a rise
of pond water.

The children watch, breathless
with the birds.
They feel an emanation
from this shuddering place.

This winter evening
the sky cracks with cardinal color
and we sit in cooling wonder
like dwarfs at the Venetian court
must have done--
amazed at Tiepolo's sunshot ceilings;
like us, they were fickle,
aware of smaller inconstancy.
But the dazzle above, enclosing,
seems fit or made for this
fragment of belief.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Baci Baci Baci

Angel's Flight, Vol. 4.1 (1979)

Rachel Sherwood

A garden
late spring, honeysuckle and lazy birds
heavy with the round scent
of tuberoses and jungle gardenia

There is a man
in boots that make his calves
look lethal
with a whip, no spurs
medieval sorrow in his eyes
or around the mouth, maybe.
"He is dangerous:
in this place he has
the fertility of steel."

There is a woman
in a vine-green habit
her veins purple, her blue
eyes. She is blonde
though sometimes brunette:
"My horse is lamed
I was riding, I . . . ."

And--still in the heavy air
they push each other down
like dogs with fleas
under the bushes, in them

The camera pans to the nearest tree
the cat approaches like a panther.
She is also in boots
like an empress
who loves horses.
The man puts on spurs:
there is combat
his knightly despair
her deathly power.

The witch burns, finally--
the lamed horse returns.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Up in his office, as he sits at a neat desk puffing an allotted pipe-full, the familiar expression of the dead and the faces of those disowned flare before him like smoke heightened to silver in the late sunlight-- his wife (six years since cancer caused her white flesh to slip fish-quick from his devoted touch), the eldest son (long hair and a beard refuse their resemblance), the other (cracked like a knick-knack in a car accident at seventeen), and the daughter who tiptoed out of his life one night while he slept, tiny as a pea beneath king-sized sheets, and dreamt of a faulty elevator hammering him into its sudden depth. He pauses to check the clock. That boy-- the blond one he wanted in a Village bar over thirty years ago-- could he have changed anything? Or if he'd stayed overseas? He might have died drinking, but would have written (America meant opportunity, prestige, and sparse seminars in Chaucer). His regrets stop, an interior lecture interrupted by time. He must prepare notes, consult his syllabus. As he bends over to scan...
a shelf, his tan slacks sag
like loose skin.

Then, with breath
built-up
for the top of the book
selected, he blows
at the dust.
I want this time
to write a poem
just about me
not to a man or about a man
or even with one in mind
about how my hair is long and brown
and silky, like they say in the commercials
but I don't know if I'll ever
be held enough
and how I don't have any tits
just big brown nipples
that beg to be touched and stand at attention
about the way I hate laundromats
and no one ever bought me a washer and dryer
though I washed their clothes
folded them neatly
about how I am afraid of the dark
and the blank white paper
like Iowa winters
and memories of childhood
the little girl in the convalescent home
too hurt to heal
The Woman About to Be Sawed in Half

*Angel's Flight, Vol. 5.2 (1980)*

Greg Boyd

after months of mounting tension,  
weeks of hysterical waiting,  
after savoring the infidelity  
that silently rubbed you raw,  
you decide it must be finished:  
too late to explain, you insist  
he dress in black, curl his moustache,  
and sharpen the saw, while you  
lie helpless watching  
the amazed, sympathetic faces  
of family, neighbors, and friends  
shake solemn as a tragic chorus,  
satisfied to know you were right.  
poised in the final silence  
as he tests the blade  
gently against your skin  
and you urge him to rip,  
do you think of sad children  
pushing your wheelchair  
on visits to your mother,  
or do you plan to sew  
yourself quickly back together  
in a singles' bar?

---

Back to Contents of *The Best.*

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

*Warren Wedin* warren.wedin@csun.edu
Leaning into Curves

*Angel's Flight, Vol. 5.2 (1980)*

**Keith Brown**

I'd forgotten to tell her
of course this is the center
I'm holding together:
the blown engines, the misplaced books.
I'm 30 with a small 24-hour
library and wrecking yard to my credit--
women as old with nothing more
could lower their standards,
try something that's been passed up
a thousand times,
but they don't.

---

Back to Contents of *The Best.*

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

*Warren Wedin* warren.wedin@csun.edu
Laughter of a Drunk

_Angel's Flight, Vol. 5.2 (1980)_

Martin Levy

She pushes him away:
No Robert please.
Flies buzz around the light.
She straightens out her dress;
She feels alive.

But they can see the drapes sway
and the silhouette of shapes
moving away
and they can hear
a girl sing to the phonograph.

For fifty years
he has remembered this
and drunk tonight
he feels her leg.

She stops him
and begs him to come back.

Her hair was so soft
he says
and laughs.

__Back__ to Contents of _The Best._

__Back__ to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

_Warren Wedin_ warren.wedin@csun.edu
Protégée

Angel's Flight, Vol. 5.2 (1980)

Frances Wolf

Sir Professor, Sir Doktor,
Something big has stopped, it's intolerable.
I wish it were a hollow hourglass.

I could grasp it, reverse it,
Turn it upside down,
Set its measure running again.

Because when this something
Stops, I am a page torn out,
A disappearance.

And when it begins again
I'm rewritten.
I'm a sheaf of furious notes.

Dear Mentor,
Take heart,
I am learning.

Dear Mentor, it's here,
You are teaching.
I am the proof, the flattery,

And you a genre, like stars.
When I leave, when I leave,
It will be for somewhere good

And far from the voice
Of tutelage, the touch. Scars
On my papery skin, I know. You know

Too, the irony hounds me.
My mind is rounding over and over
Our flat windy world,

Seeing myself at slightly past
Forty, talking
At rows of shifting knees

And one open, naive
Face, the bloom
Of gullibility, I'll pluck it.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Be quiet and go a-angling.
   Izaak Walton

Be patient
until the evening distances
the drone of the last boat.
Wait
while flies scramble like commuters
for the final shafts of sun.
When your hand rises in its shadow
Present the lure.
It flutters into life
dances on the lake
disappears
like a word
cast upon silence.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
The World in the Evening


Rachel Sherwood

As this suburban summer wanders toward dark
cats watch from their driveways--they are bored
and await miracles. The houses show, through windows,
flashes of knife and fork, the blue light
of televisions, inconsequential fights
between wife and husband in the guest bedroom
voices sound like echoes in these streets
the chattering of awful boys as they plot
behind the juniper and ivy, miniature guerillas
that mimic the ancient news of the world
and shout threats, piped high across mock fences,
to girls riding by in the last pieces of light
the color of the sky makes brilliant reflection
in the water and oil along the curb
deepened aqua and the sharp pure rose of the clouds
there is no sun or moon, few stars wheel
above the domestic scene--this half-lit world
still, quiet calming the dogs worried by distant alarms
there--a woman in a window washes a glass
a man across the street laughs through an open door
utterly alien, alone. There is a time, seconds between
the last light and the dark stretch ahead, when color
is lost--the girl on her swing becomes a swift
apparition, black and white flowing suddenly into night.


3 A.M.

Angel's Flight, Vol. 5.2 (1980)

Donna Beckman

Once I could pass my finger through a flame
dream of a place where the trees have leaves
and the nights are cool.

I sing my dirges eight to the bar
think of mordant leaves, all moisture gone
the arch of the cat dealing death to the bird
raccoon skin hung on a tree
and suicide.

When the professor killed himself
it didn't make the newspapers.
The crickets chirped as he sipped his brandy
although he couldn't hear them
with the window rolled up and the motor running.
Perhaps pompous little men kill themselves every day
and are buried as the moon shines in the daytime sky.

And the suicide girl, drained
skin colder than clams, animal eyes
dropsy girl, despair too deep for pain
dead two weeks later
lifeblood let from open veins
down the drain of her gleaming bathtub
leaving me poised on the tip of a metaphor.

The sound of a piano is on the wind,
and the smell of violets.
If only I could do a time step.

I conjure midgets and deaf people
who sing with their hands:
Transcendentalists, transsexuals, Transylvanians
and women with beards,
dwarfs who live in trailers
and do handstands for good money.

It's not the monsters I fear;
I receive lightning on my own scaffold
strain against my own bonds
to make whole again my monster self.

I am afraid I will forget my own secrets.

I watch for shining rats' eyes in the dark
as I wait for morning.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
6 A.M.


**Donna Beckman**

In spite of the omens to the contrary
in spite of the noises conspiring to drive me insane
in spite of the terror eating at me like vicious acid
the night is over
the day has come.

In this time, in another time
horses clomp tiled streets
delivering milk to the households
rising fresh from sleep
newspapers slap against the porch
birds warmed to song announce the day
and put to rest the lingering shadows of night.

I do not rise to skim the thick cream
from the top of the bottle,
read news among cornflakes, dogs, and children
scrubbed and eager.

I am grateful merely that the light has come,
that others are awake at last,
that I can retire as guardian of the night
to walk with ordinary people
and drown my thoughts
in the noise of my small actions.

Back to Contents of *The Best.*

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

*Warren Wedin* warren.wedin@csun.edu
The Drowning


Jodi Johnson

They said I was dead
When they pulled me from the pool,
But one fireman covered my face with his mouth
And blew
While another said to my mother
It happens all the time with young kids.

(The cord passed through the open mouth
Into red gills.
He hung suspended by the stroke of fins,
Webbed like the pale skin of a fan.
Leaning over the edge of the boat,
I saw the green twitch of his eye
And the faultless shingle of scales.
The bone of the boat-rim pressed my ribs
And I saw the blunt white bud of each tooth.)

The doctors would pronounce no verdict
Prematurely,
Prodding me with flash of needles
Into the sterile glare of lights.
I went home after four days smelling of
Clean steel and antiseptic.

(I remember
The rippled underside of the sky,
The sunlight in brown petals on my face.)

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
The History of Cocoa

*Angel's Flight, Vol. 7.2 (1982)*

Charles Hood

*It is suicide to be abroad. But what is it to be at home, Mr. Tyler, what is it to be at home? A lingering dissolution. Now we are white with dust from head to foot.* --Beckett

A strange dandruff. The Ice Age swept up the street like a bulldozer; hordes of penguins toppled ashore on Guernsey, the Isle of Man, Corfu, chequering the beaches and obstructing skiing. Tanks and jeeps froze together like stiff turds. Udders sagged with ice cream. TV trays, the seats of folding chairs, wash tubs, and small windows all made excellent sleds. Record amounts of hot chocolate mix were sold.

---

Send questions or comments to:

*Warren Wedin [warren.wedin@csun.edu](mailto:warren.wedin@csun.edu)*
Amy Reynolds

Knowing of secret exits, trapdoors, fake book shelves opening on unlit stairs, you make your disappearance, leaving only the evidence of retreat, of your Moriarty act: a few breakfast crumbs and a smeared thumbprint. Mugshots were unhelpful. You were disguised or have no record. Neighbors say you live quietly. No newspaper drift on the porch, lights turning on and off regularly. Smiling from a distance you make them believe the blurred outlines. They could swear they know you well. But at my knock you slip mercury sly into empty closets or up the fireplace or watch me as a melting coffee table stain or a formless shadow, a disturbance of air ruffling book pages aimlessly by the window. Others produce ransom notes cut from the Times, scrawl renunciations in red ink, make tearful collect calls. But you have perfected the art of the painless get-away, leaving me clueless in the dark, too flesh and aching bone to follow.
The Visit


Margaret Lavin

A lilt of touch
Hushed in afternoons of cream Belleek
And lavender leaves, polished
Windows, orphaned voices in the alley.
Conversation falls from your lips
Like orange peelings.
This cracked glass, I said,
Is not enchanting.
You're beguiled by rumors of grace
In every corner, the flush of wings
On a shabby sill, promises kept
In snug teapots, patches of shadow
Mending the chairs
And I don't know what to do
With you but wait
Between the light's last breath
And the unbearable empty cup.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Pier


Bridget O'Mara

The old carrousel
Looks forlorn
In the early morning gray-lavender light.
Fisherman cast lines out
And wait.
Ancient men in torn sweaters
Look out with sun and age-faded eyes over the ocean
That perhaps once belonged to them.
The morning peace is over
Men with gull-like voices
Shout at each other
As they carry tubs
To the seafood restaurants.
Two young boys in leather jackets
Carry a gigantic radio
The spell is broken.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
A Mother's Death


Jodi Johnson

When Mother was sick she sent
Morgan and Jason and me
Outside to roll down hills,
Catching hay-colored grass and purple flowers in our hair,
So that at five years cancer seemed
Something made of sky and hot yellow splinters of sun.

I picked sweet peas for Mother,
Purple-pink flowers in a glass by her bed.
But she didn't see--eyes closed, she sang,
Her voice dropping like petals in the room.

It was a year before I knew she was dead,
(Knowing was a dark sour taste on the roof of my heart)
I only thought she was gone
And perhaps walking suddenly into her room one morning
I would catch her there, smelling of sweet peas, singing.

I think that if I could
I would reach both arms around the waist of the world
And squeeze it flat as a sky
To make the dead sprout up.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Grandma Turns 93


Mike Lawson

On these April mornings
that only hint of spring,
with a child's anticipation, she says
"Will you roll me to the garden?"
Removing her shawl,
"You can go now. I'll be fine."

She will sit for hours,
fumble out of her slippers,
dig her toes into the ground,
her arthritic body
opening to the sun.
Just when I think she's fallen asleep,
she cackles
as the neighborhood tom attacks a crow.

At dinner,
we cut her meat, butter her bread.
She shakes, food drops on her robe.
We don't have peas anymore.

One night,
hearing giggling girls,
I entered her room
to find her and mom
sprawled on the floor,
her unwilling body
taking them both down.

She will be 93 tomorrow,
celebrating in the garden,
blowing seeds off dandelions,
digging weeds
with her toes.

Send questions or comments to:
Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
A Plantation Legend


Ricardo Means-Ybarra

You're like a coffee bean
brown
warm-looking, and
you used to be very round.
Like java you're good to hold
you warm up the insides
whir and spark with energy.
You're comforting like jo
in the wee hours, and
the cold before work.
Like cappucino you can be intellectual, but
never snobby
like a double espresso.
You are a true bean, dear Sophie
and if I could brew in your cup
just a bit of my love
it would fly through your insides
and light up your lungs.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Rafael


Ricardo Means-Ybarra

In the tub we play games
with the tugboat and the wind-up hippo.
The water bounces in our close sea
sliding onto the floor
soaking the clothes thrown about.

"Mi hito, wash my back--please," I say
and he clamber over my legs
exchanging places
forgetting the soap
as he scrubs so generously,
tickling me with the loofa, laughing
"Wash daddy's back."
Then finally, the water finally still,
with no hands, he pees on me.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
There Was a Boy Whose Hands Were a Language


Nicholas Campbell

There was a boy whose hands were a language
When he woke mornings he showed them to his mother
And they became two brown wings of a sparrow
Or leaves or even snow falling past his bedroom window

When it was spring his hands were new flowers
Pushing up through the earth
Like bright buttons through the eyes of a dark coat

In summer his hands were wind blowing in the grass
And golden apples burning holes in a green leafy sky

Sometimes the boy's hands brushed across the air
And his mother knew they had become a stone
Or a water spider jumping across the surface of a lake
As easy as a finger flicking a sawdust ring

Sometimes the boy's hands struggled like a wrestler
And his mother knew there was a storm approaching
Or the boy's sister had fallen off her bicycle
And once they became fists
And fell to his sides like tears
And she knew a dog had been struck by a train

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
White Cat Hit by a Car


Jodi Johnson

"Is that your cat?" they said, pointing
To a rag of white on the roadside.
I went over for a closer look,
Thinking--no, it can't be, it looks almost gray--
The dark hair moving as if by wind
Or breath: ants.

The dead are so changed; earth-heavy, still.
I should bury the cat. But the ground is hard;
I scratch out a shallow hole--a mouth.
I wonder whose face is under my shoe.

Instead, I tip the cat into a plastic bag.
Early the next morning, on my way to work,
I throw the white bag into a trash bin.
It crashes like a rock.

All that day I am afraid of my blood,
Crawling blue under my skin. If someone
Slit the veins, it would pour out, tiny and dark,
Waving antennae.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Still December Maryland


Ron Pronk

Nothing redeems like a walk through still December Maryland. I used to wax the runners of my Flexible Flyer, then glide between glass trees on slow rolling hills with snow resting like lazy clouds, through air filled with wood smoke and sparrows.

My mother had sad dreams of dying alone in a big cold house built for children. She would feel the house grow as she shrank. I was too young to know why she hugged me and said she did not want to see past fifty.

When I moved west I could not stop seeing in the dry hot wind and dust her dreams and my past wrestling alone, together in our big house.

So I've come back to walk through December Maryland. Tomorrow I will tear apart the Flexible Flyer still hanging on the garage wall. From the splintered pieces I will build a small house and nail it to the dormant maple near her grave. I want her to see it filled with sparrows.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Hiking in the Grand Canyon


Jodi Johnson

At Santa Maria springs we take off our shoes, dangle feet in the water. Their whiteness shocks--salt-pale below brown ankles--the white of our age: concrete, sunlight-on-glass, impeccable museum walls. But here I wear color again: trail dust on bare legs, shoulders sun-reddened, I see how muted shades of rock climb perfectly, from the river's black line to the white sky-rim.

* * *

I stand naked among rocks, the river rising, white-maned. Only a pale slice of sky--the river owns all blue: cornflower, December ice, glass-eye on bald-faced colt.

The water is cold. I wash off eleven miles of Hermit Trail. I think that if I wanted I could wash clean through, run clear as the river. It takes knees hips ribs shoulders--my hair floats, a yellow tan, thickens, sinks. Only my face, sunlifted, survives. The river claims blue of eyes.

* * *

The clear notes of coyotes rise like moons. We lie in the river-sand and catch stars. All day I watched night growing on canyon walls, spreading blue roots. It covers me now as it always has. In the dark, I forget where my skin ends; I feel a thousand others around me rustling like grass.

A star falls and goes out. Perhaps some night another will watch our own earth, shot from its orbit, wearing hair of flames.

* * *

In the sharp light of the dawn we lie in sleep-worn hollows, each separate as stones.

The stillness makes everything new--leaves wave gold of first leaves; the sky is a curve of eggshell. In this light even my skin is transparent, thin as a baby's.
I wake from ribs of earth
afraid to shatter the morning
with rising, each movement making rings
in tender air.

* * *

When we begin the climb home,
our bones feel immeasurably old.
We have been walking the floors of oceans,
sleeping with fossils.

Halfway up the canyon wall, I pause,
watching a red-shouldered hawk
circle below. The sheer cliff
tempts me to try my own wings.
I know now why once
we wore feathers,
danced to the sun;
why young girls smiled as priests
lifted their red hearts.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Ricardo Means-Ybarra

When I squeeze you, I worry about
your thin chest
so delicate, as if made out of
hollow bones, meant only to keep
your heart from beating through.

And I like to kiss
the valley between your breasts
that, like a small bowl,
could hold a little sip of water
or maybe stop a cherry from running
down onto your neck.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Cathy Comenas

I
Her wrinkles are not elephant skin
They are the ocean
She's a river in my rocky dreams

Her German face sun-soaked
wind-blown hair
drunken hips sway

Speaking calm, sometimes
a child when a student
answers a question right

Drawing blanks as she thinks of
an English term, it comes, it rolls
off her tongue flows through
the air
If she backs up any further she'll
run straight into the chalkboard

II
She's dancing with the natives again
A face lighted gold

Her own canvas tent
among straw huts
cross-legged by the fire
eating wild pig

III
Sitting barefoot
in white sand
arms folded against her breasts
brown back a spear as hard
as rock

Behind this Samoan chief
blue desert of water

I stand at her side
a thirsty dog

IV
I was climbing with you
up Mount Everest
held together by a long
strong rope

Your body bold and polished
I floated over dirt and rocks
watching
Nicholas Campbell

From the bank my uncle Emil and I watch the men working, the long boats pulling what steel they can downriver, the water rusty, slow as the steel.

Ohio watches as we watch--
Follansbee, West Virginia, a gray street across a bridge: Market Street, a link between two states.

Emil says the flaming steel drum around which the men stand warming their hands, cold and hard as brass, is called a salamander--that the work is easier just knowing it is there.

Sometimes we walk to the store and I listen as he tells me how it was, how the air was cleaner, how there were fewer mills, more work, how a friend named 88 is now a barber, how he plays piano when he isn't cutting hair, why my uncles Frank and Joe and Red Sperringer moved to Texas, why my cousin Billy drives a school bus and lives in a trailer in Wellsburg.

Sometimes we sit on the bank watching the boats while Emil drinks whiskey, his fingers standing around the bottle warming their hands as he remembers how it was--how the work was easier just knowing it was there.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
The Masked Ball


Greg Boyd

Someone in red heels and nails dances past, giggling through the snout of a pig. A wolf bows and whispers in her ear, offers a white-gloved hand. Glasses, nose, and moustache forgets to laugh when he spills a drink on his tight pants. Sequins and cat whiskers wishes she had taken dance lessons and lost weight. The band affects a pirate crew with eye patches. Children peek down from the stairs, mice in white pyjamas, up past their bed-time. Their parents, the Lone Ranger and Tonto, aren't speaking.

Out back a plump Wonder Woman skinny dips in the swimming pool. Franken-stein strips and joins her, uncovering a monstrous secret. A bald Superman passes out by the bushes. Batman and Robin lock themselves in the bathroom. Dracula waits his turn.

Somewhere in the black tub of lights below the hills of Hollywood, the Keystone Cops are cruising.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Grandma's Purse


Doug Lawrence

Grandma's purse opens like an aged oyster.
Barnacles crack, the silica huffs
a heavy cloud from the crusty shell,
settling on the night stand
catching stray fingerprints in the sand.

The room lies awake with eyes closed.
A hand glances quickly inside the purse,
furtive little digits gather coins
from the bottom. The furnace pops,
Billy reels, the moon buzzes loud
through the window. Curtains hiss,
the cold hairs on his arms fall in
line and bristle at attention.

Billy's grip loosens and the hand is lost
among sharp pencils, safety pins,
laughing photo faces. The mirrors loom
and crowd the room like dark bubbles:
fifty wide-eyed lenses showing
a hundred gnawing jaws gulping two hundred
fifty fingers that drop one shiny coin apiece.
The throw rug slithers along the hardwood floor.

Billy slips to his knees with a thud.
Grandma stirs, smacks her lips, turns over, snores.
Billy's arm feels like a dry tongue.
He yanks it free and skates away on his socks.
The knob gives him a shock as he leaves.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Janene Sixteen

*Cathy Comenas*

The two of us off
the side of the road
Marina del Rey's rocky coastline

The first minutes of silence
then crashing of champagne
against our brains

We talked about our lives
Janene sixteen wanting to be
twenty-five
eyes meet, lips linger tasting
of ocean and champagne

I like men too
she tells me
my hand barely holds me up
men are fleas that bite me
when I lie on the sand

We giggle as we leave love in mid air
The bottle of champagne comfortable
in her hand
I watch the rippling waves beneath
Janene sixteen

Falling in my lap
she says let's go someplace warm

---

[Back](#) to Contents of *The Best.*

[Back](#) to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

W*arren Wedin* [warren.wedin@csun.edu](mailto:warren.wedin@csun.edu)
Divorce


Marlene Pearson

He knocked on my door with iron knuckles and a plaster smile explaining:

I'm leaving/ marriage ruining my job/ you never do what I/
can't keep my bushes trimmed in the yard/ and you know
how I need sex/ got to divorce.

I shook my head. It turned bruise green realizing something.
It fell off and landed on the desk near my typewriter.
My right arm flew out the window in rage.

sell houses/ you half/ we'll split dishsheatstvcouch--
grubby anyway/ stuff you never would replace.

My stomach became stone, dropped to the floor,
rolled down the hall and out into the street, resting
in the cool trickle of the gutter.
An ear left my severed head and began typing poetry.

I'm keeping/ investments important to me/ don't touch
my profits/ but Anna is--

The other ear joined and they typed louder.

my main concern/ lovely child/ support
one year/ that's all.

Spiders poured from my vagina down to the floor
weaving secrets in red, then crawled away
and hid among the books in the case.

I can't stay/ so you go--final decision/
I speak calmly/ expect you to do the same.

My feet stood there, just toes stiffening
like I'd been standing on ice for a long time.
The newly typed page began chanting sounds
he had never heard before. He listened.
Smoke rose from his ears, mouth, privates.
He fell in a heap of ashes.
His head rested like a dull marble on top,
glazed eyes looking up.

My left arm slammed the door. My head yelled:
feed the cats when you get up,
they're scratching at the window.
They've knocked over your geranium.
I went to gather up the parts of me.
Beautiful Men I've Known


Laura Webster

I play
with the shrunken
apple heads that
slither from the drain
across the bottom
bleeding
on the ceramic
of my sink

They've sat in the sun
too long
they've stared at their leaves
all their tiny lives
watching sun beams crawl
across their skin

I hold my mother's kitchen
knife
across dried out skins
folded over from severance
of the womb

They slither slowly sensing
I may turn on the water
blow their heads down a hole
turn the disposal on
mash around their shrunken
brains.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
I Am Asking You to Trust My Memory-Wheel

Northridge Review, Vol. 3.2 (1985)

Jordan Jones

The interior of my ear
hurts in pulses, memories
of your explanations for lateness,
each time more inventive.
You began with flat tires and cracked pots, I could believe it.
Then that stray cat along the shoulder you had to catch.
It scratched you. Where was the scratch? Where was the cat?
Next, I thought, aliens will be stopping traffic
for smog inspections and Rorschach tests.

Each time you lie you displace me.
I am a refugee wandering a strange country
sifting a dark new language. You have your wheel and clay;
I have the heat of your kiln. I will keep your letters
and pottery, the sleek lines of your flat hands,
their enthusiasm. Don't worry about my memory
and don't send me letters when you're gone.
I must be alone in a room with my own wheel
turning a bust of you out of wet fresh memories.
If you arrive as you are now, not were then,
even on paper, my fingers may poke through the eyes
and form a ghoul of you instead of who I remember.
El Monte, California

Northridge Review, Vol. 3.2 (1985)

Wes Hempel

At the Pentecostal church on Arden Drive
my father moves through the sanctuary
quietly arranging chairs while I lean
on the green sill in the Sunday school room
gaze across irises and tall grass
to the parking lot of the Ball Canning Factory
that mass of corrugated building
I always thought was abandoned

That morning in our kitchen a milk bottle
slipped from my mother’s grasp
and shattered on her foot
a bright flood opened from her instep
My father carried her to the bathroom
cleaned and wrapped the cut

I am talking about my father
the woman in his arms
and twenty years in El Monte

Sometimes I think I could get in my car
and go back to that town
to the church my grandfather built
our house on Allgeyer
the alley behind the dairy
where my brother and I played ball
before he went away

I could drive across the railroad tracks
by the Coffee Shop on Tyler
next to Five Points Bowl
the back-to-back phone booths
in front of Arrow Auto Sales

where a girl in a white dress walks
after class with her hand in mine
When it begins to rain we dash
into the booths, call each other up
pretend we’re secret lovers

I could follow the concrete curve of the wash
north of the Palm View Trailer Court
those sloping vacant fields
where I walked alone the morning after graduation
and found an abandoned desk on its back
all the empty drawers stuck out
among weeds and grass into the sky

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Strike III

_Northridge Review, Vol. 4.1 (1986)_

Brian Skinner

You're not supposed to think about Dachau in right field. Full of ice cream and beer and potato chips and all, you ought to keep your eye on the ball, your cleats planted firm in the soft summer grass.

Uncle Ray sits tight behind his sunglasses and cap, he saw it all, over there, that other summer. He doesn't like to talk about it, just smokes his cigarette, keeps score, laughs.

You're not supposed to ask someone like him what it felt like to kill a man. And when the letter comes with your name on it, I guess you ought to think of it as just another winter at Little League training camp.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
We sit next to the barbecue, already two grown men
you with a family of your own
and listen to Uncle Frank tell how shrapnel
spread up the back of his legs
He waves a spatula at the smoke and fills his glass
as he talks, white foam spills over the sides
In Dresden the bodies like coals

I think of the only death I ever saw
We lived in a comfortable house then
four rooms behind the railroad tracks
a back porch, a walnut tree
bodies of cars in the yard

First we caught the frog in a potato chip bag
then dropped him into a pot of water
We were boys and your friend Mike said
if the temperature is raised slowly enough
the frog doesn't even notice

When the afternoon is over, you carry Jenny
on your shoulders to the car. Donna pushes
Chris in the stroller. Everyone kisses me goodbye

This is not something we do often. Years creep
in between the days we see each other

Driving home, I think of the voices we listen to
the imperceptible progression
how it starts in the garage with a broken Volkswagen
Dad directing your hand on the wrench
There will always be cars to repair
So you follow him onto the floor of the shop
bend over engines where years of oil
slowly seep into the lines of your skin

At night you drive home to the same neighborhood
where the row of walnut trees, your daughter
in the driveway with a hose, your son lifting
his face from the edge of a bra, and the white head
climbing the sides of your glass
have nothing to do with choices

It is the same life we knew
with nothing but years between
nothing but slowness and gradation

It is not a question of happiness
or repair, the reassembly of a life

We have not returned with killings every night
a child's face ripped from his head
each time we close our eyes
the smoking remains of a man on his knees

We are two boys who yell Jump to a boiling frog
two men who do not know destruction
only this slow comfort, and the summer
gradually rising around us

**This site was awarded a Times Pick by the Los Angeles Times on 5/23/97.**
In Bed

Northridge Review, Vol. 4.2 (1986)

Jodi Johnson

They lie side by side, not touching
except where his right arm cradles her neck,
his hand resting across her chest.
Already he grows solid and heavy with sleep;
where his fingers cup her breast their cells
press together so she can't tell his flesh from hers.
She imagines what might happen if he moved:
he carries off her nipple in his palm, and she is left looking
at the cage of her ribs, red and blue veins,
her lungs filling up like balloons.

She hears the first soft drops of rain outside
and remembers what it meant as a child--frogs.
The shallow pond below the house filled with run-off
and she and her sisters hunted the black-eyed
clusters of eggs. When the tadpoles hatched,
she skimmed them up in glass jars and carried them home.
Once, she dropped a jar on the road and watched them
shrink on the pavement, wrinkled and dry as raisins.
Now she thinks of the sperm inside her
beaching themselves on her womb.

She knows that if she dies tonight, her hair
and nails would grow without her for months.
Her heart could beat in another chest, a plastic and metal one
pump in hers. When morning comes she will pull on her body
like an old shoe. But here, in the dark,
she is drawn out thin as a sheet, feels her skin stretch
so something bright can glow through.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
After the Divorce

Northridge Review, Vol. 4.2 (1986)

Ricardo Means-Ybarra

Small candles make Sunday difficult
parking at the church where
my grandmother forces me to look
into this place
dark as a drive up the coast
when night has carried off
the beach swings and Jungle Gyms
left ice cream and towels
in the middle of the road
packs of dogs waiting
under the guard towers.

I know my grandmother's with St. Teresa
in the alcove
of the 25¢ candles.
Beautiful St. Teresa, the nuns said she used
crucifixion equipment to stop the ache
a martyr
waiting for me
to light another
of the thin matches in the center
of my palm.
But I won't do it.
I lit them all when I was a kid
until the light climbed into
the hard wood of the pews
and I'd lie there
stare at the smoke
and think of her.

Send questions or comments to:
Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu

Eulogy for a Space Shuttle

Northridge Review, Vol. 4.2 (1986)

Virginia Webster

If in this sleep I speak
it's with a voice no longer personal.

Adrienne Rich

When I was ten my mother
lit the burner on the kitchen stove
I remember seeing the crisp blue flames
from where I sat and how
I startled when a lumbering moth
crackled in a swift puff.
She used to tell me how moths
would fly into a candle's flame, but
I had never seen anything die that way.
So I asked her why it flew into the fire.
She told me it liked the light.

I wondered years later
after I felt the bump of a desert hare
beneath my car one night
wondered what it thought of the two bright lamps
moments before the weight of them passed over its body.
It was the eyes I remembered, darting toward me
the bright panic, blind yellow.

And one day there was talk of men on the moon.
I was watering my marigold seeds when I saw a rocket
on the television, counting down to liftoff.
A book I read said the fear of flying
was really the fear of sex, the fear
of the fuselage erecting, of it holding,
the fear of falling.
I think of that now. How could they
not have been thinking of that giant straight thing
And the power of the blast: loud white noise?
After, when I looked down, I saw
the white-green tip of a marigold pushing up
into sun passing through the curtain.

I think if a scientist could explain
the inert seed cracking into space
stirring from sleep into a jagged mouth of light
then I could say that the light we follow
pulls me for that reason too, how
one day I came to sit at the helm of a ship
pointing toward the sun.

It must have been like this before
seeds moving from womb to womb
one dark space opening into another.
The light is brighter here than I had expected
the clouds are not as soft.
But the edge of heaven is blue.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Orange Bags on the Freeway


Marlene Pearson

Silly to question/
Someone must be steering this car

swollen orange bags lay in weeds
at the side/ I wonder what is inside

if I open one will my own eyes
look up at me? I keep driving

I will turn off at the mall
buy the tangerine sundress
paint my nails
and wonder about finding my self

later/ there are perspiration beads
on my arm/ enough evidence for today

I understood those bags

I told my psychiatrist I saw
the orange bags on the freeway again
through my window which I couldn't open.

sure it was stuffy inside, but out there
all those smog-covered people
in their moving cans

like a factory conveyor belt:
were we on our way
to being sealed shut
packaged and shipped out?

would I wake tomorrow morning lined up
on Gemco's grocery shelves?

he lit a cigar and nodded.
he was listening.

I understood the bags I said, two were clinging
to a stick in the ground. one was up tight
against bending bushes. they wanted

to get off that freeway.
to get out of there.

did they tell you that he asked.
no of course not, I laughed
I'm not that stupid. I don't
hear voices.

I read their minds.

There was one

Orange bag crept
toward steel pole
then leaned there
out of breath

no hand to close
the ripped plastic
triangle like a rust
colored heart
bleeding leaves

**Melodrama of oranges at 7 a.m.**

someone spilled a bag of oranges on the Ventura freeway west every morning for the past week I've seen them cling to the edge

yesterday I slowed down and heard them speak

I want to grow up to be like that orange bag said the hopeful one pointing his small navel

the realist gave him truth you won't be one you'll be in one

then a truck swerved to miss a car and caught two oranges on its tire

we all watched the orange stain disappear by the time the truck skid through sand to halt

the door opened out stepped 2 men with orange bags and pointed sticks

**January 28, 1986, the accident**

The newscaster interrupted the song on the radio he said the shuttle crashed no one knew if anyone survived. he kept talking. that's when I saw orange bags 7 of them full and tied leaning in weeds. I knew if I could just get over 3 lanes stop and untie the bags, from each one an astronaut would step out I'd put them all in my Rabbit take the Sepulveda turnoff to the store with a phone I'd call NASA. tell them they're ok I'd hand the phone to Christa let her talk

I flicked on my blinker looked over my shoulder for a chance I shouted slow down you fools but no one would let me over even if there'd been only leaves in those bags I could have rescued them

**Sticks reach out like arms/**

**There's fury in those bags**

Orange bags stick out their arms, legs at 55 mph and race beside my car beat spine fists on my window I push on the gas. 60. 65.
lose all but one
her twig fingers cling
to my door. a branch arm moves
across my windowshield
she is mouthing something

what do these bags want from me
this is January 4th
I turn up the radio and go faster

no time for rantings of old leaves
dead twigs, ripped pages
yellowed and torn
empty Pepsi cans
stuffed in orange bags
tied shut and looking
like my sister

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Woods from the Trees


Nicholas Campbell

A bluejay
spots me but
is not alarmed.

As I watch,
it fills a knothole
with acorns, then flies off.

I get a notion
to take one back to town
and I am angry with myself
for the thought.

Looking at the sky
heavy with clouds I think
if I stand here long enough
everything will be white.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
A Winter Scarecrow

Nicholas Campbell

This evening
I have given my shadow
to the fainter birds.

Now that the wind
has my heart
a branch beats there.

These children
have brought mittens
for which I have no hands.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
At the Nursery

Margaret Ritchie

At the rhododendrons, their clay
pots swollen, ripe soil wet and pungent, you
put me in charge of the seeds, letting me go
where the small packets line up like a colorful
band of plump cellophaned players: tomatoes
carrots summer squash sealed loosely
in slick packages rattle
like a golden gourd.
I am starting my own garden
to feed the hole in my head I believe
is the only opening to my toes.

It started with the avocado
seed on my window sill
and comes to this, my love
is caught in plastic
glass, transparent, suspended
by wooden toothpicks, driven
past the skin to the meat, the sweet
beginnings of roots dangling
in rotten water.

I can see you at the ferns
marvelling at their bright perfection
you sift between them like an ant finally
crawling toward me at the potted pines:
like small men their arms yellow
and stiff. I think LA smog does something
to the trees; I think
if we meet
it will be at the planted flowers:
so strong a perfume that
that section makes the eyes water.

While I touch the animated pictures
of squash and carrots you
will motion for me, enveloped
between iris and bird of paradise
as if to say "In LA we have enough to eat. Let's
care for flowers despite the air."
But you are planted somewhere
between the ferns and me
carefully planning my garden and

I am dreaming of fruit.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
They sat in their sack between us like miniature children on the bench seat. We didn't eat them or talk about them but instead pointed out rocks and rivers or drove and drove with no sound from Four Corners up to Grand Junction.

We had seen them when we gassed up the Buick. Gold, pink, cheerful, matronly, crowded in the cart we could practically taste them in the air it was cold October I'd never seen any like that. We had to have them.

I was scared on the curves and on the long flat roads not of the confident, unchanging map, but of the horizon of your face. We were just empty space, whirling atoms sucked to the earth by gravity only but for those pears.
Mary Harris

Parade of relatives files through
the door like coins through a slot.
Tupperware and Pyrex descend on tables--
Chex party mix,
onion dip and chips.

Grandma, balding matriarch,
skin fragile as tissue paper,
issues orders from her armchair.
She stashes insulin and needles
next to homemade pickles in the refrigerator.

Spinster Aunt Mildred rolls in;
wheelchair gags on shag carpet.
She gave up cigarettes after her leg
was amputated twice last year.
No one buys her slippers for Christmas.

Grandpa shuffles in carrying Mil's fake leg
upended like an unwrapped gift,
props it in the corner,
sits in a chair and naps upright,
his hearing aid turned off.

Cousins once banished to the station wagon
for punishment
now tower like statues
Mike will graduate Notre Dame;
Bob, a coke rehab center in Arizona.

Five sisters on a sofa hip to hip
slip chip to dip to lip.
I choke on smoke and See's candy
frozen gray and pick cashews
out of the party mix.
Meat


Patti Scheibel

"Eat your meat," they say.
It lies dead on my plate,
Gray on the outside,
Pink on the inside,
Marbled with strings of white fat.
"Eat your meat so you'll grow up to be big and strong."
It's moist,
That's the worst.
When you chew and chew it remains in a lump
Until finally you swallow it whole
Because you can't stand the feel of it in your mouth.
You can never eat enough.
There is always more
on the red strawberry platter in the center of the table.
"In this house no one goes hungry," they say.
You linger over your carrots and milk.
They at least seem friendly and bright
While on either side of you the adults
Gnaw at the bones,
Watching you,
Sharp eyed.
You are within their hands' reach
And they are huge from years of eating meat.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Mari's Backyard


Cathy Comenas

That Sunday your parents went away
we lay on a raft in the pool
dark sunglasses and bikinis
my cheek resting on your bare shoulder
you told me how your backyard held memories of fairies
how you used to fly a plane
as you swung on that wooden swing
tied to a big oak tree by two chains
you spread stuffed animals
on the green grass
served them tea
then put them in the trees
threw rocks at them
until they tumbled to the ground
that's when you brought out
your grocery store medic bag
and fixed them up
sometimes you slept out here
in summer with your sister
sleeping bags and cookies

If your parents could see you now
with me, so close
they'd shoot me and bury me
way back where your yard
turns into a cement wash

I jump every time I hear a car outside
until I fall into the water with you
and dance arms around each other
breasts touching

A person could get lost
in your acre of childhood
with all its green

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Summer School


Nicholas Campbell

In June we carved branches
into whistles, testing the sound
so that, when winter came, we could
bring down the cigar box and breathe
a little easier.

Summer taught us a song,
what we touched we remembered,
careful to carve a place for each finger.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Love Poem


Jennifer Wolfe

I want to move to New York with you for the summer, I want to explore you, to explore this fascination with your lardy flesh; sit on a fire escape in lower Manhattan sweating humidly my cotton shift sticking to my thighs, crawling up the crack of my ass. I want to watch you walk through the door of our crowded apartment still angry from a day of blaring horns, other people's sweat and vinyl seats and see the relief cascade over your face that it is me here, not a stranger who wants nothing from you but transportation, me and I want everything, even the things you've forgotten.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Submersion


Patti Scheibel

There is green peaceful water
With fish drifting in and out
Under the cover of anonymity.

Dive in with me
So deep and dirty no one can see.

There are places where creatures with eyes
Bugged out and paler than white
Hide,
Where no voices can be heard.

Dive in with me
Let me wrap you in a watery body
And breathe away your boundaries
Until everything is fluid and giving.

There is a death like rain,
Redemption without pain,
Thornless and soft,
Reasonless,
A passion too dark to be seen,
Too gentle for the air.

Back to Contents of The Best.

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
The White Temple

Jennifer Wolfe

Our meeting was planned
five thousand years ago
laid brick upon brick by
slaves sitting on the banks
of the Euphrates
weaving the elaborate
labyrinth around a core

not even the architect
could find the infant
sacrificed for the cornerstone
the cattle horns buried
in the foundations
icons of birth and sex
and death hidden in the mosaics
patterned on the passage walls.

We run through history,
animal husbandry, Egyptian queens,
dense stifling cities, steamy
August nights spent in smoky rooms,
loneliness eating through the urban rhythms
and we collide in the innermost room

both of us knowing, even as you
pull my head back by the hair,
exposing my throat to your obsidian,
that the slaves
are filling in the labyrinth.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu
Passing Away


Herman Fong

We come each spring to this deserted field where headstones reach up like pale tongues tasting the living air. The names chipped out on cracking marble are unknown to me, and you only half remember, but still we trek through congested streets, half the afternoon gone, and walk into the windy valley to lay a square of antique cloth on thinning grass and to set for ancestors a simple meal of boiled duck, bits of fatty pork, and round lotus seed cakes sprinkled with sesame seeds roasted brown. After prayers and bowing, whiskey and wine, warmed in porcelain teacups by the sun, are thrown down and soaked into the earth. Bamboo chopsticks are laid on end in pairs, and slender red candles shaped like cattails are lit for good fortune along with orange stacks of crisp hell money, thousands of sheets burned to ashes which lift to the sky with an April breeze. We leave the flames burning, the meat and cakes glistening in their oils as we go and look for other gravestones rows away, and when we return, we must chase off a cemetery dog that has stolen the largest piece of gray fat. We are the last in a line to carry on this ceremony. I do not believe, as you do, that it does the dead some good, but I wish that I could. Then, I would go on kneeling and rising, holding bundles of incense by bowls of tangerines and sprays of kumquats, but I could probably count the years left on just my hands.

Send questions or comments to:

Warren Wedin warren.wedin@csun.edu

http://www.csun.edu/~hceng029/thebest/fongpassing.html[7/12/2012 1:24:42 PM]
Miles Away, to My Friend


Herman Fong

The blue summer you journeyed down
and I traveled north,
two days each,
to Pengyou River
to pitch tents to the sound
of rippling waves on rock
stays with me.

In firelight, after roast fish,
we heard strings plucked in the distance,
and we drank plum wine
and sang slowly of Xiwang village
and its sinewy trees
heavy with birds and spring blossoms,
where we ate and slept and opened books.

In the morning, as bright water geese
flew with August clouds,
we parted like two leaves
yellow and weighted with dew
falling from the same bough
and returned across valleys and ranges
to our desolate cities.

Our time those months ago
makes the winter frost cling longer
to the leafless branches
outside my window.

---

Back to Contents of *The Best.*

Back to the CSUN home page.

Send questions or comments to:

*Warren Wedin* warren.wedin@csun.edu