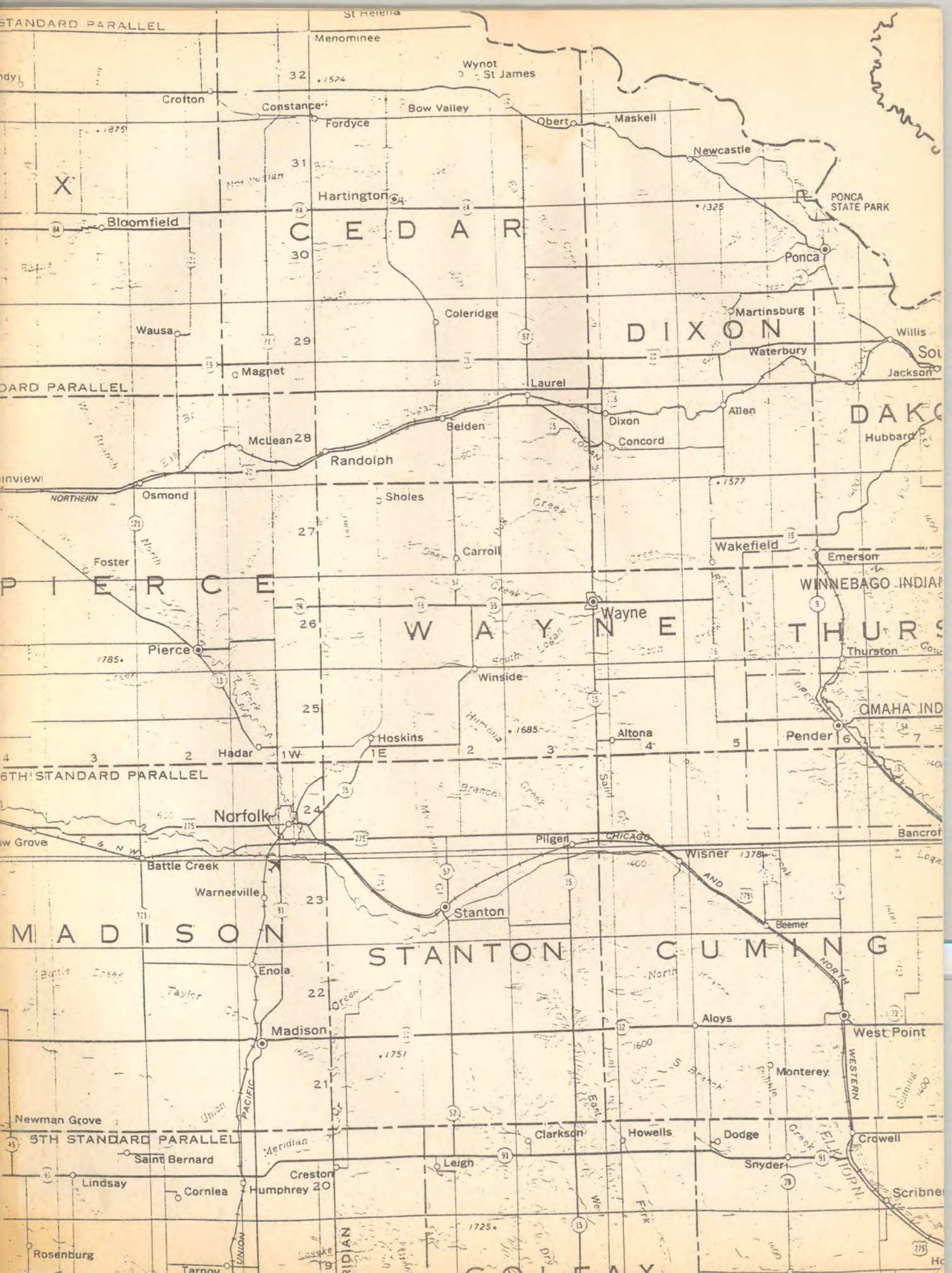




NEBRASKA TERRITORY AUTUMN 1991 CONTRIBUTORS

Ralph Beer is a Montanan by birth as well as by inclination. This is **Mavis Bentley's** first appearance in the Territory. **Robert Cooperman's** letters just keep coming. Our theory's that he lost the address he was looking for.

Twyla Hansen returns to the pages of the Territory after a brief absence. **Neil Harrison** has taken to eating native plants found in the ditches around OK Camp. Understandably, he's at war with the county weed control. **Linda Hasselstrom** will conduct the Neihardt Seminar for Wayne State College this July.

B. Jones is the same guy who wrote The Farming Game, the truest and funniest book ever written on the subject. **Jack Ridl**, from Michigan, serves as the Territory's eastern correspondent. **Don Welch** teaches at the newly created University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK).

WALKING THE DOG

for Frodo, March 1989

Walking a dog in the city makes me humble,
especially since we're used to acres of prairie privacy.
I pretend to walk for my health, striding up the walk
past clipped lawns, fenced trees, flower beds,
tugging the dog toward the curb.
"He was my husband's dog," I said as I left the meeting,
as if that explained it all, and being true
to George's memory meant nothing more
than taking his dog out into the street
to mark territory four hundred miles from home.

You've seen us, or a similar pair:
the human studies the sky, historical plaques, treetops,
apparently unaware of and not responsible for
what the dog at the other end of the leash is doing.
The dog plays his part: stares at bicycles,
challenges windowed cats,
barks at children on a merry-go-round.
He lifts his leg as a cardinal
might lift a hand over a crowd of pilgrims,
with immense dignity, a modicum of grace,
and an expression of concentrated rectitude.
He's a short dog, but his eyes
focus on higher things: the heavens, and
flying squirrels, which he--and I--
believe to be ghosts of those caught by larger dogs
whose mark he senses when he stands beside a tree.

Without George I'm like a dog myself,
dangling at the end of a leash
held by someone I hardly know,
looking and sniffing for a familiar tree,
some landmark among fumes from asphalt, exhaust,
and unknown legs. Neither of us could scent
our real home from here.
It's lost behind us
with the man who put our collars on
and whose identity we shared
as we sat beside his campfires.

When we're back in the car,
the dog will curl up on his back seat blanket,
dreaming of a place where he catches rabbits--
instead of only smelling the ozone of their passage.

Where George tosses chunks of fresh venison
over the campfire's coals at night,
and in the morning leads him beside still waters
waiting for a dry fly to land, a trout to rise.
I have to remain awake, read maps, watch the gas gauge,
try to determine where we go from here.

SETTING UP A HEADSTONE

A week after George died, the first monument salesman called me; he explained that he'd seen my husband's obituary, and knew I'd be needing a monument, and that he'd like to be of service. I was shocked, horrified, and impolite; I believe I mentioned that I'd never buy a headstone from someone who would telephone a widow a week after her husband's death. After the third salesman called, I realized that the monument business--they never call them gravestones, probably to avoid the connotation of death--is probably competitive, and that the use of the newspaper's obituary column and telephone must seem like an efficient and reasonable way to do business, but I was filled with resentment of the whole system anyway. Not long afterward, a close friend called to ask if I'd considered finding a headstone in the Black Hills; he offered to come and help me look. I felt my heart open in relief; I had been dreading the procedure because it seemed so impersonal, so standardized.

We found the perfect stone one chilly October afternoon, following the tracks of deer hunters into an isolated canyon. Whenever we spotted a likely slab of rock, but were unsure whether or not it was strong enough to withstand weathering and drilling, we'd upend it, and let it roll down a hill. The ones that leapt into the air, dropped gracefully, and shattered when they hit were automatically rejected, and after awhile, I heard myself laugh out loud--for the first time since George's death--at the picture we made toiling up hills, apparently just to roll down large hunks of rock. I would also bet we ruined the deer hunting in that neighborhood for a week.

The massive slab of granite we chose lay on wet ground in long pine shadows at the bottom of a deep canyon. Through the trees we could see the ghostly glow of a two-hundred foot cliff of white and gray quartz glittering with slabs of mica; mica miners had dynamited the cliff, then broken the mica from the rubble at the bottom for sale. The headstone lay slightly above the trail, so with the two of us prying and shoving it slid over the wet earth into the pickup, but I wasn't certain we'd ever get it up the steep, corkscrew trail. When we arrived home, we looked at the stone more closely; it was deep black and brown, flecked with tiny sparkling particles of mica. We backed the pickup into my garage, and built a framework of used railroad ties high enough so we could slide the stone straight out. Our theory was that the height would be comfortable for his work as he carved a niche for the bronze plaque George's mother had sent. And when the work was finished, we could slide the stone right back into the pickup for transport to the cemetery.

We both bent down, got a good grip, and heaved. The stone didn't move. We breathed deeply, and heaved again. Nothing. The third time, his face got very red, and the stone twitched a little. After we'd managed to shove, lever, and curse it halfway onto the platform, I decided we needed help, and went in the house to call the neighbors. I later told him this was a plot, that I knew that any normal man threatened with calling for help would move the stone alone if it killed him. When I returned, the stone was on the platform, and he was draped artistically over it. Between gasps, he offered his opinion that the stone weighed at least five hundred pounds. We sat on the sides of the pickup and admired it for awhile.

"You know," I said thoughtfully, "this was a wonderful idea, and now that we've found a stone this beautiful, I've decided I want one just like it. I know I can count on you to get it for me."

He glanced up from under his hatbrim. "Right. I'll scratch an arrow and 'Linda' on the bottom of this one."

Even lying on a makeshift bench in the garage, the stone had a primitive look. We decided not to change its natural shape in any way; we even managed to preserve a patch of green lichen growing along one edge. All winter, whenever I drove into the garage, my headlights struck the stone and I was reminded once again of its mass, literally and figuratively. Each time I walked through the garage, I touched its rough surface. This tombstone was not chosen with the help of a salesman practiced in soft speech and the whims of widows; it was a gift from the earth. It was not represented by a cancelled check and a bill; it was a living rock, and it came to symbolize George's life, his way of altering the

world as little as he could while enjoying it as much as possible. When the plaque was finally bolted in place, it seemed to perch lightly on the stone's face, a scrap of man's handiwork on a mountain.

A hundred years ago, a person died at home, surrounded by family; each member of the household was part of a death, as they had been part of each other's lives. George had to die in a hospital, with oxygen bubbling in the corner, tubes in every orifice, and nurses who broke into the middle of the important things he had to say in order to take his temperature. They asked me to leave the room while they bathed him, when I'd been bathing with him for years. Their well-meant attentions added to the pain of death the feeling that it was unreal. I think our modern mode of death prolongs our feelings of suffering and helplessness, and makes us less able to realize the secret George discovered too early: that he was going to die. He arranged his priorities from that knowledge, accepting life *requires* death, is a completely natural component of it. I believe many country people have the same sense: that death gives real meaning to life.

When a man died a few years ago, his body was washed and clothed for burial by people who loved him, who were able to say goodbye while doing a last intimate service. Now we pay professional people to take care of details we consider distasteful; people who never knew the living person are hired to apply cosmetics to conceal death, the central fact of our lives. Strangers who never saw the smiling face attempt to paint on dead flesh a portrait of what he might have resembled in life. In church, a minister who would not recognize the man recites a list of accomplishments that seems pitifully short, because the pastor cannot speak of what really made the man, but only of what he studied, what jobs he held; he can recite the names of the woman he married, the children he fathered, but not why and how they loved each other as a family. Then, because church audiences are small and restless these days, the minister lectures people who have faced death, perhaps for the first time, about the brevity of life. Cruelly, he distracts us from the reality of loss by promising a fantastic heavenly paradise, implying we will gain it only if we come to a particular church. We hide the body inside an ornate box containing enough wood to build a small house, a box that costs enough to feed a child for a year. We stack fresh flowers around it to further conceal the fact of death and its aftermath: decomposition.

Neighbors used to tell stories about the dead while they dug his grave, knowing others would do the same for them; they might pass a small bottle of whiskey from cold hand to muddy hand if the temperature was below zero. The shovel shifted from one to another in a ritual as old as time, so everyone who felt the need to help dig a grave was part of the event. Even though the diggers were always men, the ceremonies of death brought the community together in a way that acknowledged death's inevitability, and gave a healthy start to the healing process. Our present methods try to conceal death even from the dead. I had resolved at my grandmother's funeral never to encourage such travesties, and George's was as different from the norm as I could manage at the time.

Early in June, I planned a day to set up the stone. A funeral is public, but to this rite I invited people who had known George long and well. Four men, grunting, moved the stone into a pickup as gently as if they were moving George's body. These were men who barely knew each other, but who had been close to George in different ways: a rancher, an artist, a carpenter, and an engineer. As they moved the stone, the differences between them was bridged by their companionship with George, as if they were brothers who had been separated a long time. Under a black sky rolling with thunderheads, a solemn procession of cars followed the stone out of our yard and up the highway. Just as we got to Hermosa, a fire engine screamed out of town, dodged the slow-moving cars, and turned north, headed for a fire along the railroad tracks. The volunteer firemen in the procession kept their places.

At the cemetery, the men lowered the pointed end of the stone into a hole dug in the yellow clay, helped unload the cement materials from the truck, and gathered around the wheelbarrow. More helpers had arrived than were strictly necessary, but as I watched, a

fascinating dance began. No one gave orders or tried to dominate the scene. All seemed to move in and out of the tasks so that there was no hurry, and everyone participated in mixing the concrete as if doing so were part of the ritual. One dumped cement, another added gravel, an artist directed water from the nozzle of the tank George and I used to haul water to our cattle, while a hairdresser steadied the wheelbarrow handle and a musician explained the process to his son. I felt as if it was not my place to do this work, as if this was something the men must share. I stood with the other women, watching.

Somehow the atmosphere was different than the official mourning of a funeral. We were people gathering together to show our respect and love for George by doing this work ourselves, instead of hiring someone to do it. This is no pastel headstone with lettering that looks carved by a machine; this stone seems to have torn itself from the mountains and plunged into the hillside like a challenge.

When the stone was firmly set, covered with plastic, and braced, we were ready for the ceremony. I had not known how much time to allow for the work, so the bagpiper had not yet arrived. We wandered through the cemetery, visited in small groups, sat on the Civil War era cannons, studied other grave markers. We had comfortable conversations about and above the dead, made them all part of our ceremony of grief. I realized that since many members of my family are in their seventies or eighties, I will have more graves to care for in a few years. A few years after that, no one will be left to care for mine. I carefully drained the water left from mixing the cement onto the native plants I have put on George's grave, and the adjoining plots. I want nothing up here that cannot survive alone, and that's a tough job: this windy hill is covered with particularly adhesive yellow clay that becomes hard when dampened, then dries to a shell.

The conversation was comfortable; there were few tears; it seemed we were ready to accept what shock and pain had kept at bay at George's funeral ten months before. When the piper arrived, resplendent in a new kilt, we gathered around the grave for a ceremony that was simple, moving, and intensely personal. Then the piper played a lament for the clans who died with Bonnie Prince Charlie's hopes for a Scots kingdom at Culloden in 1746; the bodies of clansmen were identified by tartans and tumbled into a single grave for each clan. We had both cried when we visited there. After a pause, he played another lament traditional at the funerals of British royalty. The silver on the pipes glowed dully; high, wild notes dissolved into the cloudy sunset. Through it all, Frodo lay at the foot of the grave, staring at the stone. "George Randolph Snell," it read. "1946-1988. Mountain Man. Dear Husband and Beloved Son." The slab of black granite looks like a huge Stone Age dagger driven into the earth, primitive and human.

WINNING ISN'T EVERYTHING

Losing is. Losing's a blink,
a land far off. It gets us all
talking, fixing, firing, growling,
leaving, sleeping late. It's
a field of weeds, a housefull of termites. It's cold
coffee, bounced checks, broken cars,
marriages, toys, and backs.
Losing's a Thursday. It's all
the news not fit to print. They
print it. It's a blank space
behind the eyes, between the glances. It's
after the hour. It's the long wait.
It's the way it is. Coach
knew this. The players were learning.
The fans... The fans... The fans...

Manager

At home, in his room, after a game, manager
often dreams about coming off the bench

with a few seconds left, behind by one
and firing in a jump shot at the buzzer.

He sees himself hoisted on his teammates' shoulders,
carried off the floor, the fans roaring

long after the lights on the scoreboard
go out. At the dance, he turns down

every wink and smile, stands against
the wall of the cafeteria, shrugging while

even the toughest, in tight jeans and gloves,
nod his way before taking their girls

out of their cars, engines running
in the parking lot. Manager lies back

on his bed, looks over at his jacket
and red W glowing, and he

wishes he could answer, "Guard" or "Forward,"
anything but manager. He's glad

sometimes that he can do
what he is told:

keep track of towels, the dozen balls,
get ice, or broken laces

fill out the rebound chart, make sure
the warm-ups don't get lost, keep

Coach supplied with Beeman's, hold on
to all the valuables. Some day,

he thinks, this will do me good.
He gets up, crumples

a line-up, throws a head fake
at the desk lamp, jams.

TIMER

watches for the referee
to raise his hand, halting time;
watches for him to lower it,
starting time back up again. He keeps
his finger on the button, knows
a second more
or less can change
a coach's mind, a player's
choice to shoot or
pass, the final score.

All the other clocks go on.
His ticks back.

And every game he wonder
what it would be like to stop
the clock, to whirl his world
into a chaos of excuses, arguments.

Late in a close game,
the crowd one monstrous scream,
he always feels an urge
along his finger.

BROTHER STORY

He was probably nine, I five and spoiled when my brother started punching me silly probably for good reason. I was the baby, the peabrain, the whiner and lying tattler, instigating trouble behind mother's back.

My toothpick arms felt his full knuckles, these chickenlegs the sharp toe of his boot under the supper table. He kicked so hard once the mashed potatoes splattered out of my twitface mouth all over the oilcloth.

It wasn't until he started dating I learned bruises weren't part of my permanent anatomy. Even then he had to drag me, dumbbell, along to town so I could attend basketball games, go rollerskating or to the movies with friends.

He'd dump me off and be gone for hours--I'd wait in the cafe until it closed, then outside. But if I, asseyes, so much as complained, we'd both have to stay home and so we called a truce, sort of: if I wouldn't smoke, he wouldn't fart

and it was later on I discovered this is what is known as brotherly love.

FURNACE

Down in the dank, dim-lit
cellar of the old farmhouse
father tosses the gartersnake
into the furnace, a demon
that has frightened the living
daylights out of mother.

*

Upstairs in my tall bed
I huddle, a full moon through
the maple all silvery and
shadow, the furnace hissing
off and on, the under-my-bed
monsters for now at rest.

*

Through the grate opening
father emerges, soot-covered,
cinders shoveled out ahead
to be spread over the lane,
a devil of a chore in the
cool dampness of the cellar.

*

Maybe it was the evil one,
I tell mother, coal dust
covering my dress and shoes,
the black smell of that
sparkling new heap down in the
cellar too much to resist.

*

Father stokes the furnace
early, before chores, feeding
coal to the opening; under
quilts upstairs, I feel it
radiate, warmth from deep
inside a dark, dark heart.

*

I build a tent over the heat
register: blanket wrapped
over my body, flame enough
to ungrip the ice of winter;
while the fan runs I glow.
I decide to live here forever.

BRANDIN' TIME

A world of bombs and death and pain
far away across the sea
Brushed me like a shiver in the night
in the spring of '63.

The brandin's once were manned
by teen-age boys in huge tan chaps.
Now those boys are dressed to kill
their hats replaced with caps.

So those of us left behind
must brand the calves and make the hay.
And in that summer of my youth,
I added to my resumé.

Dust hung lazily over the catch pens
Spring was hot and dry that year.
While the cattle sensin' change
stirred the dirt in wide-eyed fear.

Old cowboys in crumpled, dented hats,
laughed and spit into the dirt.
Smilin' through the chew-stained teeth
tell-tale rings decorated each shirt.

And those of us who drew to heel,
knew that this would be
a spring that called to ante up
cause nothin' good comes free.

Soon the smell of burnin' hair
sufficatin' grew--
Mixed with dust and fear in the air
it seemed to activate the crew.

Some rodeo clown drug one-heeled calves
to a spot of fresh green sh--.
While cowboys all around took bets--
Would she throw the calf and sit?

A place to wipe the bloody knives
My Levis were the spot.
So I clenched my teeth and vowed to hold
no matter how they fought.

Every bull calf was an invitation
to brandin' fire fare.
Raw and slimy mountain oysters
were more than I could bear.

By sundown the scene was changin'
You could feel it in the crisper air.
The attitude held more respect,
and somethin' else was there.

My words had gained real power,
they could make a bull-rider blush.
My body, a hoof-marked trophy
made the old boys hush.

With remarks that were less tauntin'
the final calf was tossed
the horse tank was invitin'--
Would my new found pride be lost?

As I splashed and cussed tradition,
algae mixed with grime.
I looked up into the wrinkled eyes
of a cowboy, old as time.

His legs were bowed, a smile broke his face,
with lips stretched out real wide.
The radiance from his sparklin' eyes
filled my soul with pride.

I smiled inside, knowin' now
that I had paid my dues--
That bein' kicked and dragged and dunked,
I had nothing more to lose.

My resumé read expert
in lessons no school could teach
And at that heightened moment
nothin' was beyond my reach.

Later in the tub of bubbles
I felt I'd passed the test
But I whispered to God--Please end the war,
before next brandin' would be best.

HELMVILLE DREAMS AND THE ARRASTRA CREEK LETTERS

For James Welch

Georges Charpentier's father had a fondness for swearing in French, for lazy, watered-whiskey afternoons in the Helmville Bar, and for his majestic Jersey cow. After a few hours of loitering at the bar, he sometimes bragged this cow of his might weigh seventeen, even eighteen hundred pounds. "A great milker too," he'd say, his bug eyes batting like a frog enduring a hard rain.

No one paid much attention because every hay-dusted man in the place knew the cow; there were more owner's names on her bill of sale than ranches along lower Nevada Creek. In fact, of all the men standing at the bar -- who were more concerned with the Korean War news on the radio anyway -- only Red McGarrity would answer, and then only warming his face in the afternoon winter sunshine which flooded the west end of the long saloon, nodding with satisfaction about the beautiful calf his Grandma cow would have now any day. The calf would be a heifer, tall and straight-backed; in a short while that calf would have calves, and Mr. Charpentier would become an established cattleman like the men around him.

"Say," Red McGarrity finally answered one afternoon, his voice ringing metallic from the ornate tin ceiling overhead and making the radio voice seem frail and very far away, "are you really that thick or just dreaming? That old whore of yours looks more like an elk than a milk cow."

Big Red McGarrity lived by himself in a one room dugout on a hardrock claim up Arrastra Creek. His jaw looked something like the square end of an anvil, and when he snowshoed down to the valley once a month for mail and grub, he said pretty much what he pleased. "I know this guy," he said, pointing the ferric jaw toward Mr. Charpentier. "He comes up here from Lapwi and turns into a Frenchman." Red wrapped his fingers around his glass like it was a pick handle. "Lots of Frenchmen come from that Reservation," he added and shattered the glass for punctuation.

Down the bar, Eddy Bread's father pulled his pocket watch and said pertly, "Supper time." Eddy's father ran the store and was the Helmville Postmaster. He was a punctual man when it came to meals and avoiding hassles.

"Eighteen hundred pounds," Red McGarrity said to himself, and as he bent to pick slivers of glass from his calloused fingers, he rasped his rusty laugh.

Georges Charpentier's father usually waited until he was safely home in his wife's warm kitchen to express his indignation. His wife was full blood. He could talk to her without giving him grief like McGarrity. She sometimes hummed while he rambled, but that was all. Even the last time, when he'd ranted and waved his arms and asked again and again, "You ever see a Métis with curly hair?" she had only hummed.

But this particular February afternoon, when he got home to the piece of bottom land he leased with his wife's allotment check, he went straight to the log barn instead. He didn't really mind so much that McGarrity knew he wasn't all French, as he thrown by Red's talk about this beautiful Grandma cow, the mother of his future herd. Red's casual slander undercut his confidence in her, and as he swung open the wobble-hinged barn door, he looked for reassurance.

When the cow saw him, she lifted her tail, shook her head, and with a sweeping motion of her ropy neck, blew a filmy streamer of snot down the long row of milking stanchions.

Majesty on the hoof, she wore her horns like a tiara above her lice-ridden ears. Her very dewlap was regal. Mr. Charpentier admired her greatly. But like so many things in his life which he'd admired greatly, George Charpentier's father had avoided getting close to this cow for as long as her possibly could.

Young Georges was peeling potatoes for his mother when his father banged into the kitchen through the woodshed door. His father's face was very white.

"That damned cow," Mr. Charpentier said. Blood dripped from the shaking fingers of his left hand onto his wife's freshly oiled shiplap floor. "That damned cow," he said again and fainted.

Georges and his mother rolled the fat man out of his canvas coat and wool shirts the same way they would have skinned a buffalo. Fibers from his shirts and long underwear had matted together with torn filaments of living muscle in the neat round hole which had been punched through his marbled upper arm.

George's mother grinned, showing three missing teeth. "Get some needle and catgut quick," she whispered. "He'll holler like hell when he wakes up."

Later that evening, Mr. Charpentier sat stitched and stiff and hoarse, holding a bandanna full of ice to his right eye and cheek, which had gradually turned into a bruise-purple outline of the log wall he'd hit while trying to dodge the cow. As the ice melted and ran down his jaw, he watched his son read.

The boy was much too big to spend so much time indoors; after all, he spent most of each day at school in the next town beyond Helmville. The boy should be out more, be more help around the place. Mr. Charpentier brooded -- a trickle of ice water ran down his neck -- until he came to a reasonable solution.

"You spend too much time indoors," Georges' father told him. "You should be more help around the place." He avoided his son's eyes. "you are old enough to milk," he said.

The boy avoided his father's eyes, and his mother stopped humming.

That night was a long one for young Georges Charpentier. He lay awake under the mound of quilts, comforters, and counterpanes in his unheated room and thought about the uneven, downswept, upturned and finely tapered horns above the cow's age-dimmed eyes. Georges saw a hammer-shaped head swaying on a boney neck above a senile stack of ribs and gut-tight hide. He thought about the velocity with which he'd seen her run full tilt into the corrugated iron side of the shelter shed when she was chasing shadows, and he remembered her bowed and splayfooted hind legs, either of which could kick a water bucket the length of the barn. He closed his eyes and saw his father's arm, and he watched the tiny white sinews twist with a life of their own in the red mash of pulverized flesh.

By the time dawn arrived with its various grays, young Georges Charpentier knew one thing with more certainty than he had ever known anything in his life: If he wanted to make Seventh grade, he would have to launch Grandma into that Great Pasture in the Sky before she came fresh.

*

Although Georges knew the routine by heart, his father started him out the next morning, showing him what to feed, how many buckets of water to carry, and the best way to muck out the barn. His father outlined and detailed the chores with unusual exactness, making certain the boy would take better care of Grandma than he had. After an hour of long-winded instructions, repeated admonitions, and pointless digressions, he left the boy forking manure into a wheelbarrow and went back to bed. He needed rest to heal he knew, and during the weeks which followed, he did not return to the barn, so as to further speed his recover.

In the barn, the old cow watched young Georges the way a sniper watches a victim. For her it had all been too much. Since she had been a spindleshanked spring heifer, she had been carrying and raising one calf right after another, only to look up each autumn and find them gone, or to find herself being driven off to another damp barn on yet another place that smelled of death.

Men had handled her, burned her with hot irons, and cropped her ears; they had pulled

her calves right out of her and then stolen her milk; men of all smells and sizes had chased her, cursed her, and cornered her. She'd had enough and long ago dedicated herself to evening the score. But now she was again so heavy with calf that she could only spend her days lying on her folded forelegs watching this new one, the boy-man who was quick and sharp-eyed as a rat, who put things in her grain that made her cud taste of rust, who hid behind the horse manger and watched... But soon, when she was rid of the bulge that grew each day inside her, she would catch him too, just like the last one.

George missed several days of school because his father, who had seldom cleaned the barn, now insisted that it shine. Georges began to smell like the barn, and when he went back to school, he took the smell with him.

"I tried hardware," Georges told his friend Eddy Bread as they rode the school bus toward town. "Last week I put a handful of brass harness rivets in her oats. Before that I tried chicken wire staples and buckshot. Today I gave her some roofing nails. The way she eats, she could digest a Buick."

Eddy Bread was wolfing one of his mother's doughnuts. "Try wire," he said, and sugary crumbs fell from his lips. "Short pieces of steel wire."

"Yeah," Georges said. "That might work."

The bus swung into the middle of the road to pass a man on foot. It was Red McGarrity, carrying a huge canvas pack on his back and his snowshoes under one arm.

"Boy, he's a tough guy," Georges said. "He has a badger that lives in his dugout with him."

"Yeah, I don't know," Eddy said.

"He killed a guy over in Idaho with his bare hands, I heard."

"I guess," Eddy answered. "But my dad feels sort of sorry for him."

"Your dad feels sorry for Red McGarrity?"

"Uh-huh," Eddy mumbled around a mouthful of doughnut. "Dad says Red's family back East thinks he struck it rich out here, that he owns a gold mine and stuff. They think he's going to be a millionaire. It's pretty goofy."

"How do you know all that?" Georges asked.

"My dad read his mail," Eddy Bread answered, wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

*

Grandma was a month overdue the morning Georges opened the barn door, peered in, and saw her licking a damp-haired unsteady calf. He hooked the door behind himself and raced for the shelter of the horse manger. The cow let out a low moo and looked back toward the grain room, where another calf, spotted with abstract white blotches, stretched its neck and sucked its own tongue.

Georges couldn't believe it. He'd charged the old girl with so much scrap iron that he was afraid his father would begin to miss things, like the brand new horseshoe calks he'd given her last. Yet here she was, standing in a sunbeam that poured golden through a dusty east window like a prize Ayrshire on a creamery calendar. With twins!

His first impulse was to run for the house to tell his father, but he stayed, minute after slow minute, watching the old cow as she got her calves moving, until finally, one on each side, they bunted and nursed, and her warm milk foamed white on their upturned jaws.

As young Georges squatted on his heels and watched the cow through a protective tangle of horse collars and abandoned harness that hung on the manger, his mother cleaned ashes from her kitchen range, and humming to herself, carried them out to spread on her snow covered garden. Eddy Bread added a handful of gingersnaps to his school lunch while his mother slopped their pigs and his father studied one of the girlie magazines he kept stashed in the false ceiling of their outhouse. And in a tunnel bored ninety feet through solid

hardrock, in a box canyon near the headwaters of Arrastra Creek, Red McGarrity worked by the light of candles, scraping a vein of primary gold the width of a young girl's thumb into his high-grade bucket.

Two calves would take a lot of milk, Georges thought -- maybe all Grandma had. Calves were worth more than table milk, especially a set of twins. Maybe the cow would be okay, and he wouldn't have to milk her after all. With this in mind, and after a careful check to make certain sure there were no nails or wires sticking from either of the calves, Georges ran for the house to tell his folks.

That morning Mr. Charpentier rode the school bus as far as Helmville with his son. He walked briskly up the middle of the muddy main street to the store, ignoring a growing pack of growling town dogs that followed along several paces behind him. He sat down on the red, white, and blue bench on the store's board porch, and facing into the bright March sunshine, dreamed his latest dream. Through half-closed eyelids, he saw a glowing future filled with frisking calves, pastures rich with stately cattle, and in a future still to dim with distance to see very clearly, a ranch of his own, where on mornings like this hired hands forked sweet hay to his three hundred head of registered bulls.

When the store opened, Mr. Charpentier went right to the telephone. He made several long distance calls and put the charges on his store tab, along with a new denim prairie jacket and a big, Western-styled felt hat. He scrawled his initials on the chit, adjusted his new, high-crowned hat at an unlikely angle, and returned to his bench outside to wait for the saloon to open. Those twins weren't just the cornerstone of a future ranching empire, they were going to put his picture in the newspapers as well.

*

When young Georges came up the rutted lane that afternoon he did not see the cars parked at the barn until he was almost to the house. He was watching the tire-patched toes of his rubber boots sink in the gumbo of the road and thinking about what Eddy Bread had just told him on the bus. Eddy said that his dad said that Red McGarrity didn't write like he talked. Eddy's father said Red's letters were the work of a well educated person, like a professor sort of. But as Georges watched his boots sink in the mud, he couldn't see what difference it made if bullshit was spelled right or not, and he just couldn't understand why a tough guy like Red McGarrity would want to lie about himself in the first place.

Just before Georges had stepped off the bus, Eddy dropped the big one: "He's got a girl friend in Baltimore. He calls her 'Darling' and his 'Little Pussy Willow' and he says stuff like, 'Living in the Wilderness without you, Darling, is like eternal night.' It's hot stuff. The letters kept coming back marked Addressee Unknown, so now Dad just reads 'em and throws them in the stove."

Georges didn't know what to think. After all, Eddy sometimes heard Morse code in class and tapped out long replies on his desk with an empty .30-30 casing.

Young Georges kicked up a spray of slush with his boot and saw the DeSoto and a Kaiser Henry J. parked in front of the barn. His father was talking -- lifting and dropping his arms as if in defeat -- to some men wearing trenchcoats. His father's voice drifted to him on the wet Chinook wind. "I don't understand," his father said. "My kid was taken good care of her evr day. She was doin real fine..."

Georges stopped in his tracks.

"We can't use a dead cow," a man wearing a flat brimmed FBI hat said. He looked at his mud spattered FBI oxfords then up at Georges.

"That's the kid," Georges' father said, betraying him to the agents.

"Maybe him and the calves," the man said and unslung a leatherette camera case.

*

Saturday afternoons in Helmsville, Montana during the early nineteen-fifties, were nothing to write home about. If anything, the little town was quieter on Saturdays than usual. Until dark, anyway. But when the Friday papers came on Saturday morning, there was a rustle of interest, even a small stir of hometown pride. Right under headlines: REDS ON THE MOVE, in the Great Falls Tribune, there was a picture of a boy holding two wild-eyed, day-old bull calves and a caption which read: "Georges Charpentier of Helmsville* with his new friends. Story, page 11."

Georges made the back pages of the Helena Independent and the Missoulian too, and when he walked into town with his father that afternoon, there was a free NeHi waiting for him at the bar. Ranchers came around in ones and twos to kid him or ask about the calves or drop offhand remarks about a cow they all seemed to have known pretty well.

Georges' father seated himself at the sunny end of the room and stared at a newly hand-lettered NO PROFANITY AT THE BAR sign that had been thumbtacked above the bottle of pigs feet. "Merd," he said to the sign. Curly brought him a beer. He had no taste for beer. Beer was merd. Elmer Wallace ordered him a CC ditch and asked if the twins were, by chance, for sale.

"No, no," Mr. Charpentier said. "I give them to the kid. No time have I got to mess with bucket calves."

A little while later the saloon door banged open and Red McGarrity walked in, kicking a trail of mudballs from his heavy boots and ignoring everyone as he unshouldered the canvas pack he'd just filled with canned goods and mail order catalogues at the store.

"Oh, Merd!" Mr. Charpentier said.

"Black Jack!" Red McGarrity said, and Curly set up his usual. Red gunned the shot, belched obscenely, picked up the counter copy of the Tribune, and the place returned to something like normal.

Eddy Bread's father came in, and after a sly sip of flat draft, rubbed his fingers and thumb together and almost imperceptibly jerked his head toward Red, by which he meant, of course, to convey to Curly that McGarrity had no money.

Curly frowned and looked at Red, whose RCAF flight jacket hung on him in scuffed leather glory. Curly shrugged; he suspected that Big Red had more dough than Mr. Bread.

Georges' father remained oblivious to everything around him. The sun did not warm him through the west window as it once had. He saw the error of his ranching dream, and he sank into a dreamless mire of banality. Ranching was work. Lots of dirty work and maybe still go bust because of unforeseen events like the death of that damned cow. He cast about for something more hopeful...Now those rumors of oil strikes up north....

Red McGarrity looked up from the Tribune to Curly. "Uugh?" he inquired and tapped Georges' pictures with his ore stained finger. Curly nodded toward the boy who sat by himself behind two empty NeHi bottles. Red looked the kid over, read the brief story on page eleven, drank his second drink deliberately and decided to head back to his claim, rather than linger at the bar as he'd planned, to get stinkingly, struck-it-rich drunk. After all, he'd kept it quiet so long that another month wouldn't matter.

...Oil is the future, and here it is, right in Montana. And that stuff they leveled Japan with. Uranium. Mr. Charpentier's eyelids began to droop. Yeah. There has to be a future in something like that, and I can get in on the ground floor...

As he harnessed himself into his heavy pack, Red walked across the room to little Georges, and when he opened the sheepskin lined flight jacket to reach for his snuff, Georges saw the ugly black butt of a heavy service revolver on Red's belt. Georges looked up at the massive, broken-nosed man who towered now above him, and who always would in his imagination and memory.

Red leaned down, fixing the boy with his evil eye. There was a pregnant pause.

"Wire," young Georges blurted. "Short pieces of steel wire. In her oats." He stared,

*Misspelling intentional

transfixed, into Red's awful gaze until the big man snapped a silver dollar on the mahogany bar and said to Curly, "Keep those NeHis comin' 'til he pukes."

*

Toward midnight, under the sky gone hallowed with a dazzle of stars just beyond his reach, big Red McGarrity stopped on a ridgeline rocky point to catch his wind and watch pale streaks of aurora borealis electrocute the northern sky. He shifted the canvas packstraps on his aching shoulders, eased the weight of the .476 British Enfield on his hip, and began to compose background material for another letter. (She had been only a girl then really, a willowy girl named Margaret. Our attachment, of course, was immediate: our slow evening walks on the university ground quickly blossomed into the brief, lyrical moments of my life.)

But as he watched the Northern Lights flare over Canada, where he'd gone with the first American volunteers in the spirit of the Lafayette Escadrille to learn to fly, his mind wandered in mid-paragraph back to town and the Indian kid bloating himself on strawberry pop at the bar. The phrases "Lyrical moments in my life" and "pieces of steel wire" ran coupled like links of golden chain through his mind. Red tried to focus on the wooden nail kegs of high grade waiting under a false slide in his tunnel, but somehow the idle letter, written to divert his mind and mailed to a bogus address back East, had overtaken the place of gold in his hopes. And as Red McGarrity withdrew the heavy revolver from its well oiled holster, the bloodshot horizon reminded him afresh that just as there's more to gold than geology, when love is involved, somewhere even dreams must end.

SECOND LETTER FROM JOHN SPROCKETT (COLORADO TERRITORY)
TO SOPHIA STARLING (ENGLAND), AFTER SHE HAS
INFORMED HIM OF HER IMMINENT MARRIAGE, 1876

Miss Starling,
I've read your letter
a hundred times now, if once,
and have something to add:
I may be a murderer and a drunk,
but I'm no fool--
underneath all your pretty,
sad words of farewell
is shame for a dirty killer
who could spout poetry,
and so, surprised you
that I wasn't a screaming savage
who danced on my victims
and swallowed their hearts whole;

Shame for loving the rough things
we did in places you'd never set
a dainty foot again;
shame that people who love
to stir trouble like a pot of beans
will scotch your easy life
of kissing clean, pretty kids;
shame for still wanting me
but afraid to think of yourself
as a brute's woman
and that you'll have to mourn me
sooner than later,
dead in a dirty street
or saw-dusted saloon--

To leave you grief-wild
and knowing that love
can't help you forget me
and be magically swept off
to a soft English gentleman
who'd make you feel safe
when you yawned boredom,
who'd not ask you embarrassing questions
about your tearful dreams.

LETTER FROM AGATHA STARLING LAWSON, IN ENGLAND,
TO JOHN SPROCKETT, COLORADO TERRITORY, 1876

Sir,

I must insist that you cease
all correspondence with my sister.
Her imminent marriage must end
all social intercourse between you.
Her fiance--a physician dedicated
to the poor and abused--
is a man of principles,
something you could never grasp,
living, as Sophia has informed me,
by trapping helpless creatures
along with the greater sin of murder.

That you and my sister spent
several months traveling together
was a mere accident of chance:
she, your employer; you, her porter--
any intimacy merely a quirk of propinquity,
my sister sentimental about wild beasts,
never seeing their treachery
until they bite or scratch.

She spoke of you as a natural gentleman.
You can perhaps prove that hyperbole
by silently acknowledging
you have no place in her world,
just as she found yours unfit
for a civilized English lady:
a world of dirt and unspeakable horrors
in no way picturesque when she recounted
her travels on peaks heathen gods inhabit.
Our Lord dwells in solid churches;
our missionaries are driving pagan idols
from the swamps of Africa and the Orient.
A pity we've not hollowed out your Rockies,
that lair turned into Christian cathedrals.

I trust you to mention nothing
of this letter to my sister,
already giddy to the point of collapse
by the joyous prospect of her marriage.
Your disappearance will serve as the best gift
you can bestow upon the blessed couple.

ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHT IN THE SHADE

She's cobbled a soft velvet collar
To a gown made of musty blue towels
And stuffed a sagging side pocket
With Sunday's cold chicken wings

Eyes called back from better worlds
Roamed the wildly flowered walls
Past young children's weakening smiles
To a tilted cake's labored icing

Dreaming, she plucked her angel wool
And smiled, warm as a skull
A wavering finger searched the air
For the family tree, fast fading

Innocents, no memories to lose
Assumed the finger dealt their doom
Left the invalid her cake, her room
And moving air from their quick passing.

FISHHOUSE

Rank.

Stark.

Slick worm of light in the dim bulb in the fishhouse--
"Hell"--with the fisherman--"When I was that boy's age"--
slicing down with the long, thin knife, angling the narrow
blade back--"I'd get more damned pike than you could shake a
stick at!"--paring pale flesh from a thin line of transparent
bone--"Speared 'em thru the ice up on the Otter Tail"--fat
face livid under the red-and-white checked cap--"Hated
cleanin' them slimy bastards"--spitting black at a bucket on
the floor--"It's pickle or smoke them bony sons-a-bitches"--
spits again

a long, dark stream arcs over the rusty bucket, slides
down the warped boards, pulls itself together like something
elastic and stops, a black mass congealed on the floor
between my Sunday morning shoes. I stare at the dark mess,
at the minute reflection of a yellow bulb illuminating a
spearthrust into icy water near a pocket of driftwood, the
spear writhing in my hands as I raise a long fish, spouted,
green, impaled on the long tines until I turn to shake it
off onto a pile of others on the ice. It slides down among
them

mushy, rotting. I clean the bony bastards, grasp the
head of each slimy son-of-a-bitch, break the gills loose,
tear away the guts, the soft belly flesh too because I have
no knife, now, when I need one most--"Carp!"--the fat voice
booms again

the last rotten fish slips from my grasp, a squirming
light lost in the sticky dark under my wayward shoe--"are
alright if you know what you're about when you're cleanin'
'em"--and a long-billed cap agrees; a frail figure in a
soiled coat coughs long and loud, huddled near the stove,
nodding while in perpetual agreement, or to aid the fit
of coughing

it might be the cold, or smoke inhaled from the stove.
Taking a red package from his pocket, he shakes it once and
moves it to his mouth, then pulls it away, a faint round
length secured, protruding from his lips. He leans over the
hot belly of the stove, sucks the cigarette aglow, exhaling
a dense bubble of smoke that rises in magic swirls,
envelopes the dim bulb in the muddy spawn of a slough-run carp

with no thin blade to cut the translucent veil, fingers
gripping cold flesh, I pull off huge slabs of pink streaked
dark-red, the fat man leaning over my shoulder, glaring,
cursing, telling how to do it right--"Cut down along the
backbone"--my coat grown heavy, oily, wet--"Use a good sharp
knife"--I tear fistfuls of fish-flesh from a ragged carcass--
"make sure to get every bit of meat"--nervous, mouthing a
Pall Mall--"throw nothin' away but the head and naked
skeleton"--smoke rolling out of my mouth, sucking my breath
up to the dim bulb--"like the fish you see a cat with on a
cartoon"--I hack on and on

the screen door squeaks, hangs silent half a second
them SLAMM! SLAMM! Slams shut. My father stands inside the
fishhouse, beyond the stove, blinking his eyes, adjusting
them to the dim light in the fishhouse as I duck past the
fat man, slip out the back door, crawl around one corner,
another, and squat out of sight behind the big cans near full
of the heads and guts of a thousand fish where I can hear
their voices

through the fishhouse wall--"Any luck this mornin' Tom?"
"Ahh, it's all drum today, an' yesterday's no better; but
drum's alright if you know how to clean 'em; an' I've
cleaned a boatload a' drum in a good day when I was no
bigger'n--uh--'n--uh--'n that boy a yers."

"There's a job in that."

"Well, an' sure it was a job, but I've always said, a
man's got a good, sharp knife and knows what he's about--why
it takes no time to cut up a mess a' drum, unless he's a
cuttin' the pearls outta their heads, an' that's no time
neither, with a good knife, if he knows what he's about"

SLAP!--I lift my head, and see the cleaned carcass
sliding down the tin of the refuse chute; it slips through
the hole in the fishhouse wall--SPLAT!--in the can I lean
on, sticky drops splattering my face as I envision old Tom's
knife, long, thin, sharp blade gleaming in the fishhouse
light, splotted with blood from the fresh drum carcass
cleaned so well it resembles a fish in a cat cartoon, now,
in my hands as I eye the inviolate head

imagine the pearl size of a baseball. I bite hard
into the tough fish hide, my teeth tearing down through the
silver scales, crunching into the hard fish skull, releasing
a cold mass of bitter oil around an odd bone that is all
there is of the precious pearl and now

outside, vomiting alone between the cans of fishheads
and fishguts and vast stark bones from a thousand cat
cartoons, with no knife, no knowledge, just a dying
fabrication from the dim squirming depths

Clean your catch.

THE BREEDER OF ARCHANGELS

His name was Warloski. Anton Warloski. An old Bohemian who lived on the south side of town, across the railroad tracks from the German bankers, he was someone I visited every Saturday morning as soon as my mother thought it was courteous. One winter morning I remember bicycling south, riding over tracks which ran like long icicles into the sun.

When I arrived, Warloski, his face frosted with stubble, was feeding his scrawning chickens which gave him one or two eggs. The chickens were in a run-down pen, behind the dead-gray boards. They had bodies too small for their legs, and heads too small for their bodies. If Warloski were a breeder of chickens, something had gone radically wrong.

But I never said a word to him. He knew why I'd come. After the first year he never gave me permission to go where he knew I was going. I just walked out through his garden, which in the cold was much like his chickens, stunted and gray of limb.

At the far end of his lot, so far south it was at the edge of the river, there was a small shed, its roof finished with tin, its door locked with a long piece of one-by-four. I turned it like a huge clock hand and went in. Warloski, in time, came after me.

There, we sat on overturned buckets in that winter shed, our feet half-warmed by cobs, the sun scattering itself throughout the room through cellophane windows. Around us on rich feet pranced his archangels, pigeons crowned and bronzed with a celestial sheen. An old country breed, they had come over with his father from Slovakia. But the originals had a sheen which was like oil on water on a cloudy day.

Warloski wanted more, said he wanted them to speak a fire the way the painting did in St. Theresa's rectory, when Stepanka had the windows clean. The light came in and swam across the bronze. He said he'd seen it once before in a windstorm when the wires came down. Black crackled, and there were shades to its nerves. Greens, oranges, strange purples. If someone could only breed that way the sun could paint divinely.

He stopped, then picked an archangel from the floor, cupping its iridescence in his hands. With a finger as thick as my wrist he began to stroke the bird's breast. Then, as if confessing to God, he said, *you see, after all these years a certain sheen has escaped me.*

I looked hard. All I could see was a bronze bird which had been set on fire by the sun. Then looking down, he changed my life with his wine-stained mouth. He said yes, I could take some home.

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE INDIAN

Outside a curio shop in a mountain resort town an old indian was sitting in a sun which was as huge and as warm as his father's arms. It was morning. Every bead of his mocassins remembered the weft of his old wife's hands and the warp of her porcupine needle.

Across the street the mayor, a former Hollywood actor, had on his Ralph Lauren shirt and his power silk tie. Under the fluorescence of a sanitary light, he was reading the month's green accounts: profits reported by the Better Business Bureau figures which spoke no lies.

The old indian was dreaming. Out of the sun his father came riding; and as old and slop-fleshed as he was, the old indian suddenly awoke, got up, and pissed on the sidewalk. For good measure he stomped his urine into the pastel and man-made rock.

A woman driving by shuddered, veered, almost colliding with a Dodge Dynasty and scratching her Ferrari. Then driving on, she began to marvel at the indian's odd ritual. She was certain it had mystical significance in the history of some savage tribe.

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