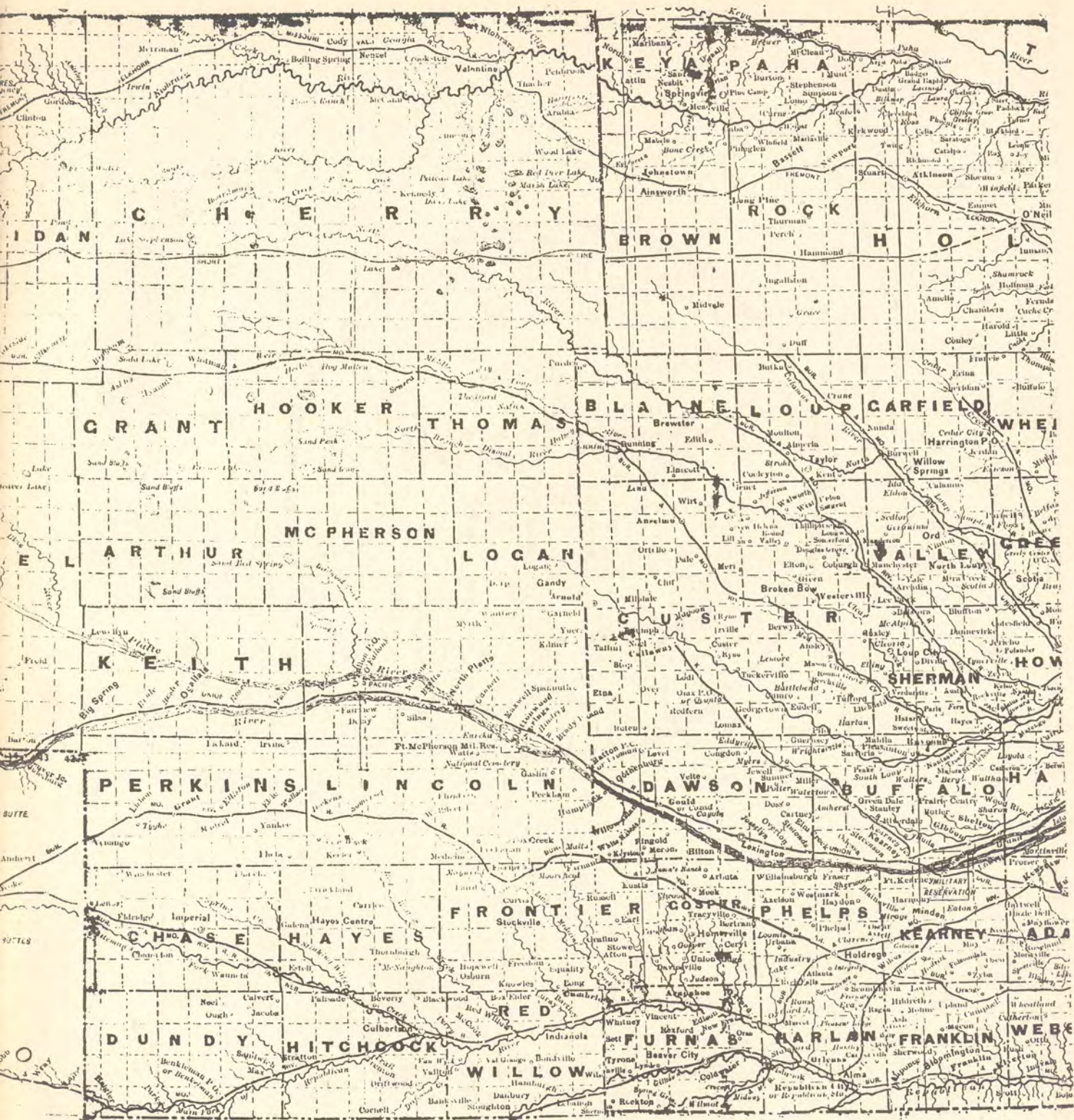




NEBRASKA TERRITORY

Winter 1993



NEBRASKA TERRITORY WINTER '93
Editor: J.V. Brummels

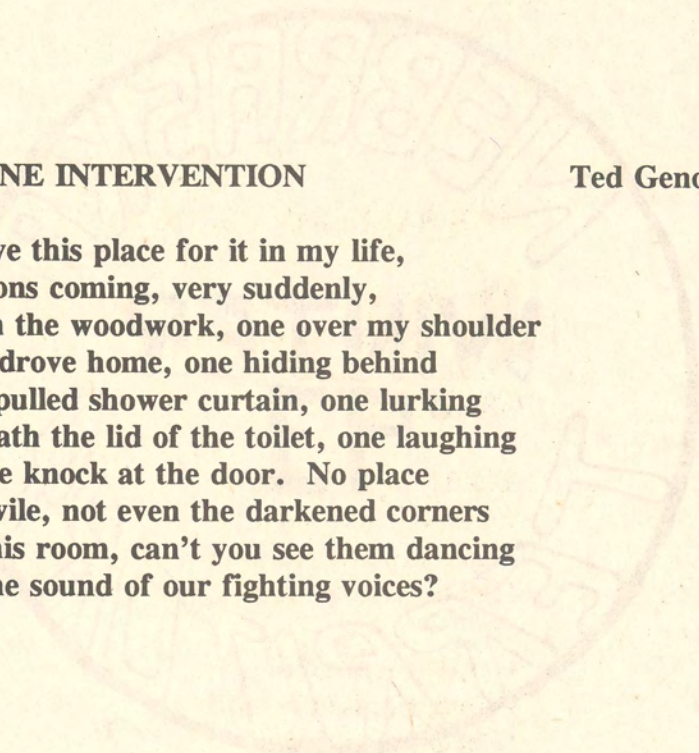
Managing Editor: C. Barnes

With a Special Thanks to Joyce Trevett

DIVINE INTERVENTION

Ted Genoways

I leave this place for it in my life,
Demons coming, very suddenly,
From the woodwork, one over my shoulder
As I drove home, one hiding behind
The pulled shower curtain, one lurking
Beneath the lid of the toilet, one laughing
In the knock at the door. No place
Too vile, not even the darkened corners
Of this room, can't you see them dancing
To the sound of our fighting voices?





THE BALLERINA'S NIGHTMARE

The ancient image
Of growing feet bound
To fit this burning
Silhouette,

Tightly wound into
Girlish frameworks,
Flesh so patly holding
Her here suspended,

Gentle toe touching
Down, phalanges softly
Snapping, splitting
Into metatarsals, tarsals

To tibia and fibula
To kneecaps, unraveling
Piece by precious piece
To a cloud

Of unsettled dust.



YEARS LATER, NOAH RECALLS THE FLOOD

**Days of
Sand and
Coarse**

**Salt,
Grinding
Into slits**

**Of sun
Brittled
Acacia.**

**Air
In the gallows
A choking**

**Sackcloth
of stale
Humility,**

**Sickness
And sorrow,
Physical.**

**The wind
Blowing
Darkness**

**Across
The open
Sky.**

**The moon
Luminous
And empty,**

**Trembling
Across the
Water**

**At the
Sound of
Their
Weeping.**



Red Shuttleworth

Stars and Beasts All Die
And Slam into Each other in the Distant
Light of so Much Dying

My breath comes in spasms. As daylight breaks
against tawdry green cut-up curtains in a summer
theatre town, she's on her belly, legs spread
as I stare at her tawny hair. I only want
her to tell the truth. No, I also want to
make a million dollars writing poems and plays.
And I want Sage to cook lasagna and sleep
with me always beneath Indian blankets.

My breath is coming hard and I hear my heartbeat
in both ears. I squint. She's on the other
side of the bed. I feel the relentless sorrow
of a man who's shot a coyote and eaten boiled
beaver meat. Too much has already been done.
Sage is so young that her years will never
catch up with mine. Sometimes, when we fight,
I wish she'd throttle me in my sleep, as if
that would bring the peace of falling water.

Once she mentioned God and I laughed.
God is a plump old fool with mottled skin,
a guy who was once sent to dancing school,
a messenger, a lonely, slouch-backed
widower wishing for a hyacinthine woman.

Sage moans in her sleep, asks,
What time is it? She is always talking
in her sleep. Awake, she once told me,
because I am married with children,
Red, we are good people. This just happened.
She says she trusts me. Sure, but I just
had a dream of wolves pulling ticks out
for each other, of being an outlaw
in his death-cell-nightshirt,
certain of escape. She wakes up,
asks, Are we changing?





FORKED TRAILS

**I fall from the altitude of wife, our children
with car lights far below, lights
spelling: I forget.**

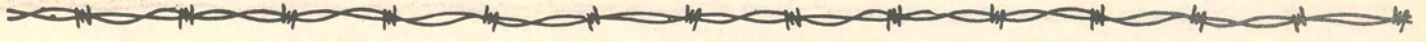
**As the plane spirals
down into Reno, I try to forget
all those autums Kate watched me give
my throwing arm its last test of a season.**

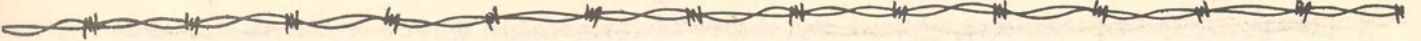
**I assemble all our photo albums in my head,
to locate whatever held me aloft,
high above the smokey wrecks
on hillsides eroded by corn and rain:
the marriages of friends.**

**Sage, I breathe
and smell that new perfume, smell that skin
stripped of a yoked cowgirl shirt.**

**I fall
from the plane and come down with desert rain,
dead middle of a valley. I walk to a saloon,
long abandoned, walls charred, and there's
a monument stone marked with all the names
they ever put on a wanted poster.**

**I hear
a train rolling toward Vegas. Sage's tounge
spells the beginning of something
and I read it with my lips:
a disaster of partings, the unsent letters
we read to each other on broken phones.**





DUCKING THE PERSONALITY PITCH

Stork hates getting thrown at. No one really likes it, but Stork hates it. His knees are tender and it takes to much effort to get away. Some pitchers are mean. Stork figures none of 'em are bright. He says a pitcher is a guy who's a million dollar airport with a ten dollar control trower.

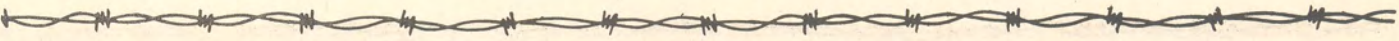
In spring training, Stork meets a recent Penthouse "Pet." She's a nice girl. She takes Stork to some fancy restaurants. a couple of movies, and for rides in her fast car. She gives him an autographed centerfold of herself: "To Stork, You've seen the best of me. Keep showing me the best of you. Love, Trixie."

Stork frames the centerfold and brings it back to the motel room. His roommate, Willie, an outfielder with power, actually stutters, "S s s Tork, you kn kn know her?" After Stork gets Willie his autographed centerfold, Willie buys Stork the next four meals.

A few days later, Stork and Trixie spend nearly a whole night together. "To hell with curfew," Stork says, "I got something important to do." Trixie signs 300 Penthouse pictures of herself with legs spread around a sand castle.

As each team is played for the first time, Stork visits the other clubhouse and distributes his presents. Opposing players now decide Stork is an alright, stand-up, fun guy. Secure he's not going to be thrown at, no matter who hit what in front of him or even if he's leaning over the plate, Stork knows his batting average is going to be thirty points higher.

He chuckles as he goes up to hit, grins at the catcher, says, "Trixie says Hi to all you guys."



HARRY

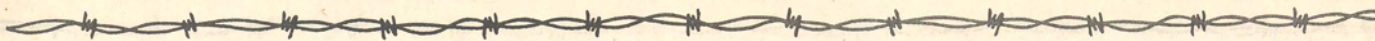
Don Richmond

If his ears hadn't gone bad, he'd have been famous.
I mean, he could flat play that old Gibson,
even after he went deaf.
For a long time, he felt the notes he played
and even stayed in tune.

But his ears went bad, and the barn dances
and radio stations and even the Salvation Army
let him go. Times being what they were,
deaf musicians weren't much in demand,
so there he was, stuck between starvation and a pitchfork
right at harvest time in Kansas.
He always claimed that deafness changed his life,
and I believed him.

Not that there was much for him to hear
what with him living alone and all that
He'd buy me a pop now and then,
and I'd write him notes, and we got along o.k.

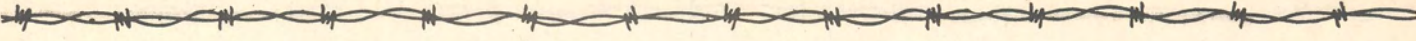
He never really got over the Salvation Army, though,
and all the travel it involved. Here's one you'll love:
he always rode the bus when he went out of state,
and it always gave him gas--made him "bilious"
as he said it--he talked delicate that way.
Well, anyway, all he had to do was wait for a bridge;
they were planks in those days, and noisy as sin,
and relax himself when the bus rumbled across,
and no one suspected a thing.
Like I said though his ears went bad,
and over the years, while roads and bridges improved
his hearing didn't
There was the day when he came home from Denver
totally put out. He'd come to bum a meal
and told us what had happened:
it seemed like after they'd pulled out,
his stomach went sour, and some guy gave him Alka-Seltzer.
"Biggest darn pill I ever swallowed," he said,
"and what I mean, I swelled up like a balloon."
He was craning his neck now, watching hard for bridges,
and when one came along, he really let go.



**"And those folks on that bus gave me the dirtiest looks
you ever saw!" Grandad laughed so hard
he couldn't talk for days.**

**I have Harry's Gibson now.
The finish on the neck is worn away,
and the dust inside the case
smells like 1930.**

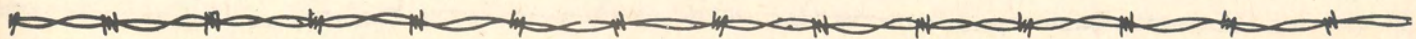




CATCHING CRAWDADS AT THE COUNTRY CLUB

John Kloefkorn

To get there, he says,
you have to walk through the tunnel that
runs under the street.
And the opening, he says,
is between the school and the swimming pool.
So walk through the tunnel and keep going,
even when it gets dark, keep going,
because, he says,
the tunnel turns and then you can see the
opening on the other side. And when you see
the light, he says,
you are half way there, and it's not that scary.
But when you get to the end of the tunnel,
look out for the golfer, he says,
doesn't like you sneaking onto his course
even though all you are doing is catching crawdads.
But maybe, he says,
the golfer won't yell at you since you are grown-ups.
But, he says,
you should hide in the tunnel when you see one.





He is right--
about the crawdads, the tunnel, and the golfer.

The golfer who, with a banker's swing deposits
a dimpled slice into the thick of the grass
just next to the water.

The golfer, who spots us, dip net and a half
bucket of blue-blooded crawdads,
while looking for his ball.
The golfer, who doesn't yell, and now must play
it honest, where it lies, while our public eyes
apply the pressure.

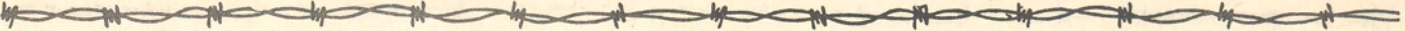
The golfer, who, after a few video-like practice
swings, sets his feet, then chunks up a divot about
the size of a catfish dinner.

The golfer, who, for his efforts, is rewarded, of course,
with a couple of smiles big as bait buckets.

The golfer, who, with nostrils flared, gives us a stare,
eyes cold as cash.

So we take the neighbor kid's advice and disappear
into the tunnel, where spray-painted concrete walls,
like the golfer, curse our very existence.





LETTING THE TRUTH GO

Release the
skinny little fiddler,
show pity.
Let the smooth, slick flesh
exit open palms,
spared from cornmeal and
fire, to return
to the rippled shadow
of the undercut.

So what
if you do return without
any evidence?
You would know the truth,
and it would be
in the river, in the channel,
invisible in the current,
deep.

Let it go,
then tell the truth,
empty-handed--
yes, tell the boys about your
honest to God
battle with Leviathon.





GUNS

Harry Humes

I had faith in them then,
sitting hours with one on my lap,
oiling the deep blue barrel,
wiping down receiver, bolt, and stock,
dry-firing once or twice
before I leaned it in the corner.
So easy to believe in them,
to draw them in history or math,
curve of pistol grip and trigger,
Mauser, Remington, Winchester,
trying to explain flat trajectory and spin
to Patty or Marilyn, how if you looked
over the line of sight just as you fired,
you could see for a split second
the bullet shimmering like a faraway car
in the heat of a summer blacktop.

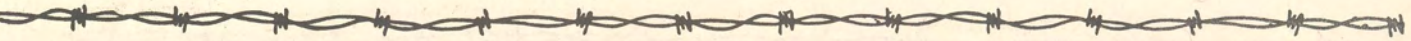
With our rifles slung over our shoulders
or cradled in our arms, we knew
who we were as we walked the coal banks
for birds or chipmonks or rabbits.
We'd build a smallfire, rifles stacked
a little way off. What did we say
to each other those mornings and afternoons?
Were our fingers quiet or still itchy?
What would we think about on the long walks home
to supper, bolts open to show the doubters
and worriers we'd learned the lessons
our fathers taught? What words did we know
that would so wonderfully bruise our cheeks
and imprint the skin below the thumb?
What else could our fingers ever touch
better than bullets, so small and so plainly magic,
that we could reach into our pockets for?
Distance so easy and the future simple,
a tin can with a neat hole
slowly filling with dark water.

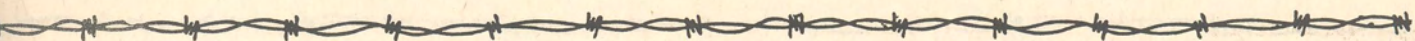




CLEANING RABBITS

It seemed a burlap bag of potatoes or rocks
my father took from the car trunk,
and into the cellar. Here, he said,
handing me his old Jackknife, one blade broken off,
the other sharpened down to almost nothing.
Then up he went to the kitchen and my uncles,
the wooden table with its pot of soup.
I reached into the bag for the first,
pulled off a strip of belly fur,
and made a slit from back legs to ribs.
Some had eyes shot away, others had legs
dangling like broken sticks. One had a hole
in its ear that I looked through
at the washer with its hand-cranked wringer,
my baseball glove hanging from its nail.
I pulled out bulging coils of still warm guts,
slippery and stinking, walnut-sized hearts,
spongy livers, gauzy lungs. The whole place
filled up with slither and whiskered heads.
Shot pellets clicked to the floor, and a few
I dug out of black bruises on flank or shoulder.
One by one I rinsed the rabbits in the sink,
spreading wide the belly cavities,
my hands sloshing back and forth
until there was not a trace of fur or blood
on this glut of flesh, heavy, I thought,
as the shadow house above me,
shaking with talk, the scrape of table legs.





WALNUTS

Some still green, most black and crumbling
around their seeping, wrinkled core.
Some were scarred by the mower.

I filled the wheelbarrow,
practicing long shots and underhands,
a steady filling-up,

then took them to the ditch
next to my neighbor's field.
All winter the pile would settle,

until by spring there'd be only a circle
of fine, dark soil, though even by then,
after all those months, my fingers

still carried that dark stain,
as if autumn had gone deep
as memory into my skin.



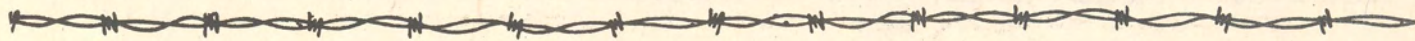
IN THIS MEAT AND POTATOES TOWN

Steve Langan

children lie and sweat their lust
on half-quiet July midnights,
aroused by the communal plots
of crickets, the woman who arrived
at the party across the street
for love, and now beats her head
against the hood of a car,
blood spitting like gunfire,
and centerfolds of Miss Every-Month.

They teach themselves the mechanics
of their mean sex, autodidacts
of desirable rage, in bedrooms
they share with misbegotten cousins
from Tallahassee, Florida,
two-time runaway sisters, starving
pets, head-count the pie-pieces
the government computes and mails,
dollar tossed deeper every month
into lottery and chance.

Every month the town killer
strikes, his psychological profile
and drawing displayed, revival timely,
his instrument a long knife.
This boy sleeps in a room of pets
and cousins, siblings in love,
ranting of the party across
the road a code he believes
he'll never decipher, and discovering,
for the first time, his inevitable sex,

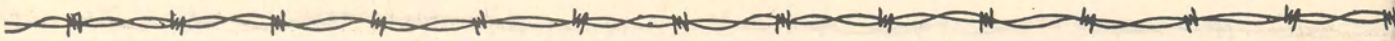




in a room of snores and snuffles,
in the stifle of July midnight,
rain rapping the loose storm windows,
grateful party noise slipping underneath,
for a blurred second this boy sees
someone hovering over him,
knife in hand, eyes beautifully insane.
In his David-mind's constant Goliath,
if he could make the killer his trophy,
mauler of his desirable classmates,

the penitentiary wall would unfold
to a blast of thunder for the prisoners,
and he would ride the shoulders
of the town's four inmates,
men of strength and reputation.
Ride like a victorious coach.
Ride like a jungle country's dictator.
Ride in a parade honoring him.
Ride the applause of God-fearing citizens.
Ride for the love of women.





Larry Holland

AND BILL, BE THIS NOT THE MOST
HAREM-SKAREM EXERCISE YOU HAVE EVER,
IN ALL YOUR BORN-AGAIN DAYS, BEEN PRIVY TO?

Queued up in finery fit to tie
New Yorkers to an Easter morn, great-
grandparents, grandparents, parents, siblings,
spouses, lovers, cousins, hangers-on and hung-over
party-goers revel into the gym to honor graduates
black-clad as Druids stumbling to a pre-dawn
sacrifice. Even before the local Shaman invokes
The Pleasure of The Almighty, tight-bladdered
toddlers and elders begin their grand
march to the privies, caring little that they miss
The Vice-President introduce success as honorees
from faroff and heathen lands called California and Iowa.

Then The President offers up the hot afternoon's high-
light to sweating bodies crowded like the condemned
on cattlecars bound for The Thirteenth Ring.
The Hallowed Head rises above the mike,
well-nigh one of Bill Shakespeare's apparitions.
And The Poet intones, like no address
this conflagration has ever heard, Poetry.

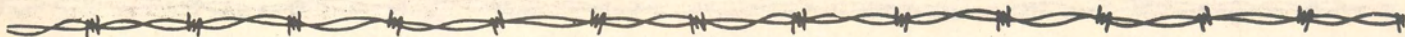
The lobby smacks of day-care, a county fair
to which no one thought to bring the picnic hamper.
A disconsolate mother with three nippers
who'd not yet got theirs but should have
asked after pop vendors. She'd gone sour
on commencement-committee foresight and non-
attention to the slight attention span of
a populace gone to mush on TV and rock concerts.
By the time the grads file after degrees and diplomas
the gym has seats aplenty, the hall mills like stock
cowboyed into a blind corral at branding time.

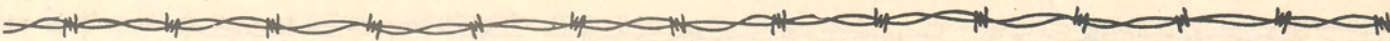




When Red says, "God, its like a boatdock at Smyrna out here,"
I've enjoyed about as much of it
as I can stand. We shuffle our Tony Lamas
into the Custodian's Office
for a sip, a chew and a spit.

(for Bill Kloefkorn)





NIOBRARA RIVER CROSSING

Late summer and flies. Shoulders
the grey of early-season Mule deer
quiver beside me in Nebraska's Sandhills
south of Merriman under river-sifted bluffs
where the four-point forded last fall.
The Arab--doe-eyed, nostrils flared, ears
like spearheads ready for the Infidel--
seems almost ambivalent, caught
perhaps in near-recollection of desert
in this land of grassy dunes.
Somewhere east, downriver,
a locust's drying wing-chirr
hangs like a season ending.

To add familiar sound
I tell the horse
the buck crossed north, head low,
to does in the cedars.
Each hoof delicate as matched teardrops
cleared knee-deep water, each down again
between limestone ridges.
Later, I say, I would wade
to find him curled as if asleep
beneath hanging cedar boughs,
the only sound sand-muffled water.

This time, I say, I stay dry.
Keep your head low to see the ridges,
put each lucky shoe in the right place,
take us across that sand and rock bottom.
There's grass on the other side,
grass your ancestors didn't even dream.
I'll loosen your cinch there,
lean back against a sand bank,
listen to the locust's prophecy,
conjure pipe smoke into
this fall's grass-country venison.

(for Richard Cobb)



DARK IS A WAY AND LIGHT IS A PLACE
(Dylan Thomas)

She squinted at the Sunday crossword puzzle,
too excited or too short or both to sit.
From a world of boxes nearly filled
she came back. "What kinds of poems
will you read to those people?"
Her pencil, gentle, uncovered a word,
an archaeologist spooning dust from bones.
About a rancher dropped dead in his pasture.
I told her, hoboos, and one about
innocence lost when a son's going
left guilt he couldn't take with him.

Grey eyes past eighty-five
years of their own perception
pored the last row of empty spaces.
"Where do you find the words?"
They're inside, I told her, wanting out.

"Like times you know you'll never get back?"
Softly as a woman with a new baby might, she smiled
and filled, just as certain of life, the last blank.
"Just like that," we said together and stared,
the words staring back, blind eyes
daring us to let them lead us
from the catacombs of memory.

(for Mom)



**THERE'S ONLY SO MUCH SPACE LEFT
IN MY MEMORY-BANK AS I APPROACH
THE GLIDE-PATH TO FIFTY-SOMETHING**

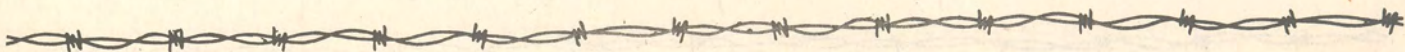
You say I forget to tell you
certain things like Kate's pregnant
or Barbara got a new car or Jim
and Judy are going separate ways,
or to pay the car insurance--
instead I tell you
how the Palmer Lake Trail and my pack
ganged up to drain my legs and dry my lungs
or that monster with gnarled oak for antlers
gave me cold chills when I was eighteen
or about waking up in the cold high dark and
the silence of the runoff from the snowfield
not running and the eternal pressure of the stars,
or how my fist of a heart clenched mush
the first time I saw you.



THE GRAND CANYON
(after an essay by Diane Sylvain)

Last night was flat black
across the plateau,
miles of pinion and juniper
no proof of a canyon
at the rim of it all.
Stars were holes
in the violet sky,
shadows shaped pine trees.
Breath caught --
the canyon humped and folded,
blue air filled the void,
thundered
perfect indifference.

I didn't have to see
to see
that dark wild place
exists, not to be admired
or visited or photographed,
but for the pure knowledge
that when the earth is turned
the river gnaws at black stone.
Now ravens hang in empty air,
the canyon shifts and sighs,
pitiless in sun and stone,
the memory of a dark face.



VIRTUE REWARDED: OR HOW BILLY DON HOFFERBER AND I GOT HOME
FROM THE RACES

I started out to say that we didn't have any blacks in the little town where I grew up in southwest Kansas, so we had to make do with Mexicans. But that's not quite the way it was. Mexicans were clearly second-class citizens in Kanhoma, but they weren't really analogous to blacks in say, Yazoo City, Mississippi, or even in Omaha. They were second-class because most of them were on the move so much they never really got any first-class roots down, and because they were Catholic and talked funny and had darker skin than we thought necessary. That combination of traits made us see them as second class without quite realizing that's what we were doing.

But I liked Mexicans. I didn't join in with the others in second grade who called attention to Gloria Martinez' dirty legs, and in high school I joked around in a real friendly way with her older brother, Willie, who was fast enough to run a respectable 220 on the half-mile relay team and big enough to play a competent tight end on the football team.

I liked them partly because I remembered when my father, who never did any yard work and who, despite being a farmer, never wore overalls, hired their father to trim up some of the scraggly Siberian elms growing in our backyard. I was about ten years old and I watched Mr. Martinez from inside my room at the back of the house. I was hiding behind the curtain and he didn't know I was watching. He was sawing away on a limb and just before it fell, he said aloud, "Adios." I was charmed. I'd never heard a grown man talk to a tree before and I wanted to tell my friends about it.

So I convinced myself that I liked Mexicans and I got a priggish little thrill of virtue from the thought, but it wasn't really on my mind ten years later when I was 20 and about to go into the army. Billy Don Hofferber and I drove his '53 Ford Victoria the 225 miles from Kanhoma to Raton, New Mexico, for a weekend of betting the horse races there. On Friday we won nearly \$100 between us, but on Saturday we lost \$75. That night we drank warm Coors in our scuzzy \$4-a-night motel room and plotted our way through Sunday's races in the Racing Form. It didn't do any good, though, and coming up to the last race of the day, we hadn't cashed a ticket. We had \$2.53 between us, enough we figured to buy gas to get us home. But we saw a horse in the ninth race whose odds were too long for the way we handicapped the race. He was going in at 4-1 to win and we figured there was really only one horse that could stay with him and that was the 3-2 favorite. We were pretty sure we were reading the form with more sensitivity than the others--there were lots of dark faces in the stands--and that's when you should bet, even if you've got only \$2.53 and you're 225 miles from home with a quarter tank of gas, and you haven't eaten since breakfast. So we bought a \$2 win ticket on our 4-1 baby.

He came in third behind the favorite and a 22-1 dog that shouldn't even have been in the race, so there wasn't anything for us to do but start driving east on

Highway 64. We figured we'd go until we got to the last town we could get to without running out of gas, then see what would happen there. It turned out to be 80 miles down the road, Clayton, New Mexico, a dusty cow-and-wheat town. just across the line from the Oklahoma panhandle. It was 9 p.m. and it'd been ten hours since our eggs and hashbrowns, so without even talking about it, we knew that we were going to do. We parked in front of the only cafe on main street; inside we slid into a booth and ordered four hamburgers, two orders of french fries, and two chocolate malts. Even in 1954, that cost about two dollars more than we had. And we were still 145 miles from home and nearly out of gas.

After we finished eating--it was the best food I ever tasted--we talked about just getting up and running out without paying. We'd done that in other places, usually by going to the bathroom in the back and slipping out the rear door so that we'd be out of town before our unpaid bill was noticed. But there wasn't a bathroom here, and running out the front door seemed too risky. We'd have to go by the cash register and the fat guy eating the banana cream pie at the counter--the sheriff for all we knew. And Billy Don's car was parked under a streetlight bright enough that you could see the numbers on our license plate from inside the cafe, and there wouldn't be any way we could drive away without big trouble.

So we decided to tell the truth--to throw ourselves on the mercy of the Roundup Cafe in Clayton, New Mexico. I'd had one more year of college than Billy Don, so I got to talk. "We don't have enough money to pay for this," I told the girl behind the cash register. "We're going into the army next week and we're about out of gas and we don't have enough money to pay for this."

She was about our age, black-haired and dark-eyed, pretty, I thought. In a Mexican sort of way. She looked at us and didn't say anything. I wondered if she understood English.

"We had \$2.53," Billy Don explained. "But we bet on the last race at Raton."

"Let me guess how your horse ran," she said, like she was talking to two little kids.

"He lost," I said. "And we're going into the army next week."

"I'll bet you are," she said, "But what are you going to do now?"

She looked at the \$2.60 bill. The fat guy had finished his banana pie and was looking at us over his coffee cup.

"I'd write you a check," I said, "but I don't have one. If you've got one for your bank, I could cross out the name and write in my bank. It'd be good. I've done it before."

"Not here you haven't," she said. "We don't take out-of-town checks."

I didn't say anything. Billy Don snorted the kind of laugh Kanhoma kids snort when they don't know what else to do. The fat guy was still looking, and he wasn't smiling.

"Well, shoot," I said. "I don't know."

"I suppose I could loan you the money," she said. "Is that what you want to do?"

I wish I'd said something heroic or witty, like "More than the whole world, Ma'am." But I didn't I said, "Well, yeah. Okay." Billy Don said "It'd be real nice. We'd appreciate it."

So she pulled a little purse from under the counter and took out three wrinkled



ones, four quarters, and two halves.

"Take five dollars," she said. "You need some gas. Shamrock's supposed to stay open till ten, but sometimes they close early, so you'd better hurry."

We got her lovely name--Dolores Sanchez--and we backed out the cafe door, scraping and grinning and thanking her and talking about how we'd sure mail that \$5 back to her next day as soon as the bank opened.

We did, too, and all the way home from Clayton that night we talked about how much we liked Gloria and Willie Martinez and about how we'd like to find a Mexican in trouble somewhere so we could held out.





Jack Ridl

TRAINER

Across his landscape, trainer lets pain
lead, trusts the way it takes him
to the perfect touch, the perfect
place to stay,

He knows pain's every name.
He knows it lets him
watch the passing of his days.
He knows that on its own,
late at night or in the sudden daylight,
it can become a priest who listens
to the way he pictured God, about the way
he's found a home
within the skin, the muscle, bone and blood.

He often sits, imagines pain
relaxed, smiling, enjoying its stay.
They talk. Their conversation quiet.
They know.





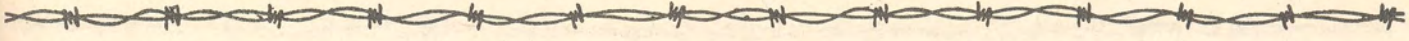
COACH VISITS THE BASKETBALL HALL OF FAME

Standing out front, Coach sees a hand
waving to him come in, to
stand awhile among the winners.

He shakes his head, wondering
if there is a hall of losers,
a place where sleepless nights
and the uniforms of lousy dribblers,
heavy-legged rebounders, low
percentage shooters, clumsy
defenders hang from the rafters.

This last stop of the inept
would welcome all, would say,
"Here, sit down, feel at home."
There's a photo of his Comets,
last place finishers three years running.
He notes their faces, remembers
that look, finds it down the street,
across the table, in the mirror,
behind his best friend's smile.





COMMUTER

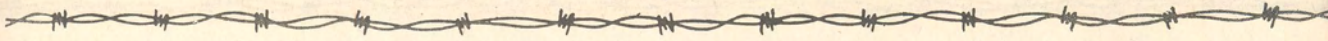
Tamora Whitney

Last week on my way to work
I drove past a head-on accident.
I met the ambulance heading back
and crept slowly past the twisted metal
and engines pushed into the front seat
windshields spattered
a pool of blood spreading at the shoulder
skidmarks leading a trail to that inevitable conclusion
Later I hear both drivers died
Later I hear there was another head-on
fifty miles north on that highway
then another on another road east of here.
That seems a lot of head-on collisions
in such a small area
but I can see how it could happen.

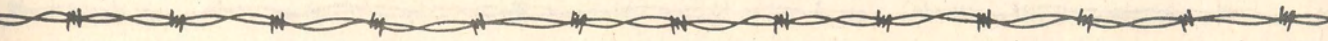
It's so easy to drift across:
you look down to switch the radio
you look in the rear view mirror a second too long
you look into a field
where a hawk returns stately to a power pole
and before you know it the yellow line is under your tires
the other lane is sliding under your car
before you know it, the other cars
are heading straight for you.

People get in a hurry and try to pass too close
on a curve or a hill
I've seen it happen
scared I would be a witness
or they doze off or just lose track of the road.
It's so easy, after driving the same road
every morning and every evening
it's so easy to forget the road
to think about the fight at home last night
or to imagine the one waiting at the office
then the flip-flip-flip of the power poles





leads you to a trance
after every day of corn field
milo field corn field milo field
after every day of nothing changing except the seasons
it's so easy to drift off
to leave the car, the road, the earthly distractions
to imagine yourself in some other place entirely
and before you know it
you are.



BRUNNERSAURUS

Leo Dangel

Old Man Brunner, with his rough face,
shaggy eyebrows, and hooked nose,
looks like a troll.

He's gruff with children
and says we're spoiled and lazy,
but I can't help hanging around him.

Tonight at Wendell's place,
while the men play cards,
I sit on the floor and page through
the school book I brought along.

Old Man Brunner leans over
and asks what kind of nonsense
they're teaching kids these days.

I show him the pictures of dinosaurs,
explaining that they vanished
millions of years ago.

But Old Man Brunner snorts
and says animals like that
are still around, living in the mud
at the bottom of sloughs.

He says they come out
when a slough dries up
to look for a new home,
moving at night like a river
over fields and across country roads--
he knows of cars
that slid into the ditch
on their slimy bodies.

Riding home later,
alone in the back seat,
I look ahead at the gravel road,
trying to imagine what huge mysteries
might be out in the dark fields,
hoping, as the car goes over each hill,
the headlights will shine
on a herd of ancient dragons.

I fall asleep and dream of beasts
by the hundreds, each one
looking like Old Man Brunner,
crawling across the road,
and I wake up knowing
he will never be extinct.

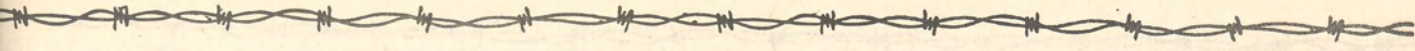




THE ONE WHO DIED IN THE WAR

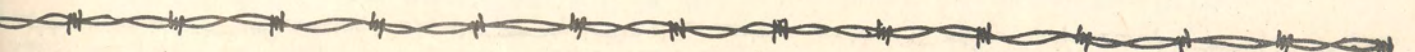
I was only seven,
and he was one of the older boys
who went to the country school
three miles west of ours.
I can't remember his face,
but once at a Sunday softball game.
he crawled on the grass
with me riding on his back.
Playing the horse to perfection,
he snorted, tossed his long hair,
and reared up, pawing the air,
the bend in his wrist
exactly horse-like
in a performance all for me.
Playing the rider but not too well
because I was laughing,
I gripped his T-shirt collar,
and, waving a stick for a sword,
shouted, "Charge ... charge."





THE ANNIVERSARY STORY

At dinner, when she served
his favorite dish, the scientist
realized he had forgotten
their wedding anniversary.
"It's been a long day," he said,
thinking fast. "You'll never believe
what happened in the laboratory.
We built a time machine
that could send back
an invisible camera eye
to any place, anytime,
and we could watch on a screen
what actually happened.
And because the machine
was delicate and fueled
by the rarest chemicals,
we knew it would work
only once, so we had
a hard choice to make.
Some wanted to scan
the grassy knoll
at the Kennedy assassination
for a second gunman.
Others wanted to see Shakespeare
or Jesus, but I spent hours
arguing for that summer dance
in 1959 so I could look at you
again for the first time."



He hopped on the old, candied-apple red Schwinn and let himself admire the polished chrome fenders glistening in the sun for only a moment before he stopped himself. He was 16 now and too old to be riding a bicycle at all let alone taking any pleasure in its crude aesthetics. He rolled down the drive and glanced down at the series of plate sized oil spots in the macadam street in front of the house where his father's 1959 Chevrolet Parkwood rusted at night, and he reveled in the idea that by summer's end, the green beast would be his --if he could make the \$250 for the car, \$100 for the year's insurance and another \$250 for gas for the year. \$600. Well, give or take a few dollars for oil changes, spark plugs, and a new seat cover to replace the ripped out vinyl rattan that had rotted out under what his mother determined was a constant exposure to methane.

He pedalled to the corner and stopped to admire the cottonwood which defied the suburban sprawl and grew defiantly along the banks of the Corporation Gulch which used to be Hawmow Creek before the Army Corps of Engineers homogenized it. He grasped the dirty white handle bar grips and thought how gracefully the big steering wheel would turn in his hand and how smoothly the wagon would round that corner and head to the grass shouldered highway which rolled from town.

The bleat of the Corvair's horn shook him from his driving south of town to meet the eyes of Janet Meyerson and her younger twin brothers Steve and Sam. He wasn't interested in what Janet's breasts looked like in the better part of a full moon when he had seen them last spring, two days before his last birthday. Walking home from a Methodist Youth foray to the Wilber Burial Vault warehouse, Jack happened down the poplar lined alley, kicking the white stones ahead of him. One of the stones banged off the back fender of a 1965 Rambler Wagon of fold down seats fame, mostly hidden from the house, which used to be the home place, by the poplars. The bang brought Janet, her bare torso, and her boyfriend up like those pop-up birthday cards his grandmother always sent him. Janet, once she realized who had happened upon them, waved to Jack with silly folded hand wave girls use, and returned her attention to her boyfriend. Jack was petrified until it was clear even to him that any further interaction would exclude him.

He walked the rest of the block home, eyes closed trying to recreate the scene of Janet's dancing breasts until he collided with the still warm trash burner in their own backyard. Since that night, Jack had never, until this moment, made eye contact with Janet. He thought that she hadn't noticed, but more probably Janet didn't care where Jack looked. For Jack, however, Janet's breasts were the benchmark of all breasts, being the only bare contemporary breasts he'd ever seen save for Tommy Fitzjames's sister's boobs. But Margret bared parts of her anatomy at the dinner table on a regular basis whether they had company or not.

Tommy said she was just plain crazy, and there was nothing anyone could do for her since her parents had even sent her to a psychiatric hospital in Omaha until their insurance ran out and Maggie returned sporting a new hairdo she picked up in the city. She was fine for sometime, maybe six months, but at the Veteran's Day Parade, she pulled off her skirt and hopped in a Pontiac convertible with the president of La Sertoma Club who covered her up with his gold La Sertoma blazer. That was Mr. Bodzek, and he had a locker plant on the north side of town and always let the boys who played baseball at Memorial Field stand in his cooler with the sides of beef on hot days after their games to cool off quick.



That was where Jack saw his first beef slaughtered. He thought about how funny it had seemed that that steer was alive one minute and dead as death in the next without much ceremony. This surprised him more than scared him, or so he thought. Maggie Fitzjames later only mooned a bus load of Hungarian hog farmers visiting some hog confinement operation in an adjacent county, and they put her in the State Hospital until she was 21. Bodzek killed steers with a \$17.00 J.C. Higgins .22 rifle while singing "Buffalo Gals" to a cooler full of sweaty, half-naked nine year old boys and cooling beef sides, and the same they who locked up Maggie elect him president of La Sertoma.

So, when Jack was offered \$2.25 an hour to load a year's worth of hides from Pruska's Packing, he said yes and worried about the particulars later.

Before Jack knew it, he had pedalled the tree miles out on highway 81 and over the viaduct that spanned the cattle pens and the Chicago Northwestern yard that had remained unchanged for 100 years save for the introduction of diesel-electric engines which replaced the steam locomotives, and that had occurred during Jack's lifetime though he couldn't remember it because he was too young to have ridden a bicycle out to the stockyard to see the trains and cows the way they had been shuffled since the 1860's. It was an historical fact none-the-less. It still smelled historical to Jack who, to himself, breathed in deeply and impersonated his father and said, "Money."

Dodging the hoots, insults aimed at the Schwinn, Jack sized up the other temporary workers waiting in the parking lot. The three ugliest, Jack recognized from football games where, drunk, they waged unsuccessful attempts at luring girls into their car during half time. They were older, but had fewer teeth, and all were dressed the same with greasy book-cut Levi's frayed at the cuffs by their dingy squared toed boots which begged for polish. Buffalo plaid shirts, thin at the elbows from hours of leaning on dusty bars over 25 cent draws and cigarettes, all topped by a red zipper hooded sweatshirt with heart-sized grease spots and hems and cuffs unraveling in the early morning sun--all leaning on the same prairie colored Nova held together by bailing wire and necessity, waiting for the foreman to gather them up and admit them to the old coal room where the year's hides were sleeping in bunks of salt. Jack shifted nervously by his bike and tried to make small talk with a kid his age whose last name he couldn't remember from freshman phys. ed. The only person Jack did recognize was Delbert Ironthunder, and the two weren't intimate. Someone had pointed Delbert out to him one night as they stood in line for a movie and he, Delbert, was breaking the heads from parking meters with the palm of his hand and picking up the change that didn't roll too far off. Jack's father said the police were afraid of Delbert since he had bitten a whip antenna off a cruiser while handcuffed and sprawled on the trunk like a deer. At the last telling, it had taken three city police, the county sheriff, two state boys and a platoon of National Guardsmen to subdue Delbert. He looked old.

The foreman appeared at the door and waved them in. Jack fell in behind Delbert and followed him into the plant through the cooler, past the boning table and down three greasy cement flights of stairs to the basement. The foreman shouldered the heavy oaken door to the hide room. Jack had no words to describe the smell. One of the buffalo shirt men vomited near a drain and ran out to the cool June air.

"This ain't work for the faint-hearted," the foreman laughed through his cigarette. The foreman walked toward a bunk, stopped and pointed upward to a large steel tube. "Watch



out fer the chute. Monday's a kill day." And as if on cue, a steamy mass of red dropped soggly on the floor.

"In coming!" one of the buffalo shirts said. No one laughed.

"Here," the foreman said and yanked a hide from its bunk by a hole which Jack assumed was where the tail had been. The foremen snapped it like he was shaking sand from a beach towel turning it inside out so the bloody side showed. "Shake out the salt, refold it (he reversed the action) and drag it over to the belt."

The belt was an old corn elevator, rusted and gummed up past easy recognition. It was Oliver, and it climbed up to some opened double doors and emptied into an old tractor trailer rig. Two dark figures sat on the opened end gate, the sun as a background, and waved.

"Hi, girls," one growled.

The foreman looked up and squinted, and without taking his eyes off the truckers the tannery sent said, "Delbert here will toss 'em on the belt." Delbert took a practiced position at the elevator and waited. "Well, whadda ya waiting fer? You boys (meaning Jack and Dave) will have to double up on them, they're heavy buggers." He lit another cigarette, smoked it as he watched the five work, satisfied that his insructions were clear.

In twenty minutes, Jack didn't notice the smell though the remaining buffalo shirts continued to make jokes about girls they had known. Jack and Dave, a high school wrestler also in need of a car, worked together quietly save for their grunting. They pulled the hides from the bunks nearest the elevator, shying every time a fresh hide dropped down the chute. Jack was alternately thinking about what kind of girl would date the buffalo plaids and comparing his biceps with theirs. Occasionally he caught sight of the two men in the truck who were stacking hides in the greasy old trailer pulled by a red, pugged-nosed Ford tractor. They laughed and spit down curses to Delbert who never took his eyes from the incoming stream of hides.

"Gloves. I should have worn gloves." Jack said to no one in particular.

At 9:20, the break whistle blew, and the crew marched up the stairs to the drinking fountain and stood in line. Jack watched the white clad men stained with blood, dipping their gnarled hands into white-meshed bags of boiled ground beef and sausages. He politely declined their offer at the bag from fear of the unfamiliar--not the food, but the manner of eating, and tried to drink the water which at first he thought tasted familar. Rust. No, more like the taste in his mouth when a slush ball caught him off guard, but how could blood get in the pipes?

At 9:45 when they returned to the hide room the buffalo plaids were gone, and the work slowed as the editorial comments from the black figures in the truck became more barbed. Delbert lit a cigarette and smoked as the boys stacked the hides at his feet. It was almost noon when the hide chute belched a bloody glob that pinned Dave to the floor. He struggled and cursed the hide and later Jack who was slapping the floor counting to three as he had seen referees do at wrestling meets. Delbert laughed into his cigarette and finally freed Dave from his opponent.

After lunch, when Jack's mother made his sit in the backyard to eat his peanut butter and cream cheese and bacon sandwich because of his smell, only Jack and Delbert returned. Jack followed Delbert down the stairs.

"You just drag them hides here, I'll shake 'em and chuck 'em on the belt," Delbert

said.

Jack dragged the hides from the far bunks and Delbert flipped them inside out, shaking out all the salt, and tossed them over his shoulder in one seamless move. It was all Jack could do to keep up with Delbert who stopped occasionally to smoke from the new pack of Salems buttoned into his shirt pocket.

The gray trolls above had long since stopped their verbal assault on Delbert who would not respond. Instead, they turned their attention to Jack.

"Hey, young thing. You know what a peg boy is? Huh? Do ya? How'd yooo like to be our peg boy?" The pair giggled and snorted happily like hogs. "Hey boy. Hey boy."

Jack and Delbert kept at their jobs, Delbert deliberately and Jack with a forced stoicism, a word Jack had learned from reading Shakespear's Julius Caesar.

"Hey boy, stand in the light. Hey boy, Jezus, yer cute. Hey boy," the pair snorted again and were silent for a trip or two. "Hey boy, how'd you like to back into these!"

Jack looked up and saw the pair exercising their greasy peckers.

"Jesus," Jack said, "Jesus H. Christ."

"Hey chief, toss that boy on the belt. Hey boy, how'd you like to ride in a big rig?" Again they laughed so hard they doubled over. "I'm gonna piss my pants," one said to the other. "Hey boy."

Each time Jack came into their view, he was assaulted with a new barrage of Hey boys long after their penis were sheathed. Jack quit dragging the soggy hides to the belt to avoid their badgering.

"Them dumb asses won't hurt you. They just talk. Bring them hides here."

Jack waited, holding a hide by its tail hole, staring at the chunks of salt on the dark cement floor. "They won't hurt you because they're afraid of you." Jack's eyes never left the piece of salt he balanced on the toe of his bloody sneaker.

"Hey chief, what's the hold up? That boy need some prodding'? Send him up, we'll motivate him. Hey boy." The laugh erupted again.

Delbert smoked a cigarette while looking at Jack. The trolls continued their barking, their tone becoming even darker. Jack remained fixated on the salt.

"Yer under the chute, boy." Delbert hopped butt first on the belt, swung his legs under him as he lifted his torso with his arms, the cigarette still between the fingers of his left hand.

"Christamighty, that big ass Indian is riding up the belt, Billy," one troll said.

"The hell you say," said Billy.

That was all the talk Jack heard until Delbert told him to turn off the belt. A moment later, Delbert slid down the belt, climbed off, and hit the start button.

"You had your rest. Drag them hides here, bo... drag 'em over here."

"Thanks."

"Shake a leg."

Jack pulled hide after hide to Delbert in silence. After about 15 trips, Jack mustered the courage to look up at the trolls who were stacking hides solemnly. Twenty minutes later, the foreman appeared.

"Hey Del, ya know what's black and brown and looks good an a lawyer?" the foreman asked.

"No, Larry, what?"



"A Doberman Pincher."

"Both men laughed. The foreman smoked a cigarette, told Jack that he was a good man and left. In another thirty minutes, the job was done, and the pair walked to the foreman's cramped office where he was busy with piles of carbonless forms.

"Goddamn government forms. Well, you live, eh?" he smiled at the pair. "Time for the eagle to squat," the foreman laughed and handed each of them an envelope.

Delbert folded his without looking at it and buttoned it into the empty pocket of his shirt. Jack stared at the picture of Andrew Jackson through the cellophane window in the envelope.

"Next Sunday we're cleaning the freezer. You two interested?"

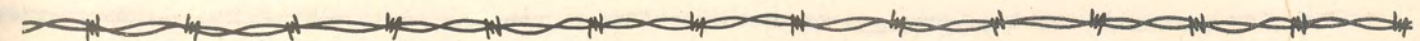
Jack looked at Delbert who nodded.

"Sure," Jack said.

"Great. Nine o'clock. Same pay. Thanks men," The foreman said and went back to his paper work.

In the parking lot, Jack absently said goodbye to Delbert and opened the envelope to find two twenties, a ten and a five. Twice what he expected. His heart raced.

On the bike ride home, Jack saw Delbert walking the rails through the empty cattle pens toward First Street. Try as he might, Jack couldn't conjure up even the slightest vision of Janet on the way. That night as he lay in bed listening to the faint dialogue on the television his parents watched, all Jack could see was bunks of bloody salt, his own soiled sneakers and Delbert walking alone down the Chicago Northwestern tracks toward home.





MILKING THE RATTLESNAKE

Neil Harrison

My Old Man

Morning. I ain't seen you boys in here before. Where you from? ... Connecticut? That ain't by Indiana? ... Oh, way up there. Well. Orville here tells me you was out this morning in the rain, fishing. Do any good? ... I'll be damned. I'd've thought they'd been biting.

Well, I'll tell you, if you're interested, tomorrow I could show you a stretch of the Rattlesnake not many folks have seen. It was my old man's favorite water.

It'll be too slick to get out there anymore this afternoon, but it should be dry enough by morning. If it doesn't rain again.

I don't know about this weather. It's been on and off like this for two months. But, that's Nebraska. Stick around a bit, it'll change. Reminds me of when I was a boy, the spring I started school. We had this same damn weather.

I remember the old man'd pick me up in the afternoons and we'd drive out to the river or come in here to Orville's, depending on the weather. Even then I knew what he was teaching me I'd never learn in a classroom.

He showed me how to read the river. How to fish a fly when you couldn't cast, letting the line float out with the current, mending its drift when you got a workable length on the water. He knew where the big fish like to lie up in the middle of the day, and how to lure them in when the other fishermen were on their way back to town to tell folks nothing was biting. In bits and pieces he taught me all he knew about taking fish on the Rattlesnake. And I never knew it at the time but on the wet and windy days, here at Orville's, he taught me even more.

It's hard to imagine this place now the way it was, before Orville tore out the south wall and built on after Arnie's went bust. Back then it was the skinniest little building on Main. A front of yellow stucco with a narrow window and a squat door, facing west. There was some neon above a weathered board with a green-lettered "Orville's" on the door. It looked like a big lemon getting squeezed dry between the Master Mart and Arnie's Western Wear.

There was still enough juice inside to make my eyes water when the old man opened the door and a blast of smoke





and sour beer, and damp clothes getting warm enough to steam, slapped me in the face. It was crowded, pretty noisy, and kind of dark in the room until your eyes adjusted. There was a long bar, a few tables, and an either/or restroom in the rear. Orville hunted back then and always had a few heads on the wall.

A permanent handful of old-timers played pitch at that table by the door. And when the weather was beyond hope, the local farmers strung in shaking their heads and planted themselves at the other tables. A few lonely ranchers got caught up in the migration and hung in clusters at the bar. We'd walk through and take up a couple of stools here in the back. He'd lift me onto one and we'd wait for Orville to come over with our standing order, a glass of beer and a bottle of cream soda. And when he came, Orville'd bring a shot glass with the soda so I could pretend it was 'red-eye' I was drinking.

The locals gathered in the front, so we'd sit back here where it wasn't crowded, sipping our drinks and listening to the dull hum of Orville's on those wet spring afternoons. There were always a few empty stools back here, and a table or two, like that one you fellows are sitting at.

Now and then we'd see some strangers when we walked in, and they were always here in the back where we liked to do our drinking. If we were already here when they came in we'd watch them looking over the crowd, maybe nodding to some of the locals as they worked their way back to where we were waiting. Then, when Orville brought over their drinks, the old man would clear his throat, and turn and look at me.

He generally spoke in a quiet voice, but he could get it loud when he wanted to. "Son," he'd say, and it'd kind of echo here in the back. "You don't know much about your grandpa, do you?" And I'd shake my head and say, "No sir." And he'd nod his head and say, "Well. Did I ever tell you about the time my old man" -- and he'd start the story about that record rainbow my grand-dad lost one night on the Rattlesnake.

I'd turn on my stool and face him. He'd be looking at me, and he wouldn't look away. But I'd glance now and then at those strangers at the table, and sooner or later they'd stop talking to each other. Then they'd sit and stare at me and my old man.

We must have made a pretty picture. It was the old man's bread-and-butter lure. Hand-tied. A professional job. You could see them nosing up to it, drifting along with the lead. When they bit they generally swallowed hard,





and seldom spit out the hook.

When he played a fish, or an out-of-state fisherman, the old man kept just the right drag on the line. And if the rainbows came hard and one at a time, neophytes were easy and traveled in schools.

And the old man had a gift for taking trophies. He knew the deep pools and the shady places where the big ones like to gather. The upper Rattlesnake was his favorite river. But I guess right here, Orville's was his favorite hole. Either place he'd read the water, then wade in and take his share.

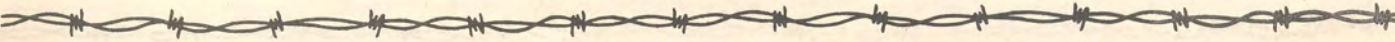
GOODMAN FALLS

My old man was the best fly fisherman on the Rattlesnake. You can ask anybody here at Orville's. And I'll tell you before you do, there'll be some folks who'll call him no-account. And, well, that's their right. But here's their reason. The old man didn't see things quite their way. And that always bothers folks who think their way is God's own.

One of the problems was the old man didn't look at time the way a lot of folks do. He never carried a watch or looked at a clock as long as I knew him. There was a gold pocket watch on a chain that hung from the mirror in his pickup, but I never saw him wind it or open it to check the time. He told me he'd got it as a gift from my mother, and he'd put it in his pocket and carried it for a week. And every now and then when he'd think of it, he'd take it out and check the time.

He said it was the worst week of his life. Every time he looked at it seemed to point two ways--one at him and all the things he had to do, the other at what little time he had to do them. It was the hardest boss he'd ever worked under. Each time he unlatched the cover it was pointing, saying nothing, tapping a foot. By the end of the week he was ready to smash it. And then he realized why it wouldn't let up on him, and he just stopped winding it instead.

He was through with clocks and tracking time, and with working regular hours at something just because someone with a watch thought he should. After that the old man never confused his services with his time, though there were folks who still liked to think they could buy the right to his time. They started calling him no-account, because he wouldn't work steady at the things they thought he should have,





like roofing their houses, and pouring their driveways, and fixing their cars. They were the services the old man sold, and they had little to do with his time.

He was a damned good carpenter though, and people knew it. That's why they were always offering him a job. So when we needed money he'd go ahead, start in stripping shingles, or digging a driveway, or tearing into somebody's motor. Then one of his friends would come by with one of those you-gotta-see-it-to-believe-it stories, some big hatch on the Rattlesnake or one of its feeders, and he'd take off fishing for a day or two until he had the real story on the fishing out there. And that was generally enough fix to keep him working until the job was done and he could get back to doing what he really wanted to do.

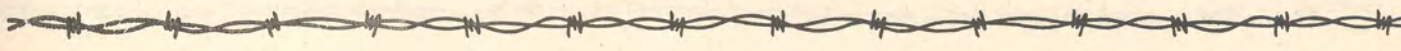
All he really wanted was to fish the Rattlesnake. It was like a mission he was sent to do. It came to him one night in a dream. He told me about it one time, not long before he died. It was like he'd been sent to bring the truth back from the river's mouth.

You know how there's all these fishing stories floating around all the time. It's like some folks got the devil's own habit of stretching the truth. And that's one thing my old man just wouldn't put up with. He wouldn't take anybody's fishing story for the truth unless he'd been out to the river and seen for himself. And when he got back and told you the fish were biting, and how big they were, you knew by God they were biting, and just how big they were. He had to whip me just once, and I learned. It's a point of honor in our family. You just don't lie about something as important as fishing.

All I know I learned from him. When I was six I was fishing alongside him, and when I was ten I was working alongside him too, when we needed the money. He spent every day he could showing me how to get along in this world. Up until that morning in May. I was just sixteen.

We were on the Rattlesnake above Goodman Falls. We'd left John Tabor's Chevy wagon up on blocks and headed out after Rafe Baker swung by and told us the Mayflies were coming so thick they'd trip you up on the water if you weren't damned cautious.

The old man was out of the pickup and into the water before I got my boots pulled on. And when I got down to the river, I saw his rod curled under the weight of an almighty fish. When he saw me on the bank he yelled, "I got the record here, Nathan!" He was laughing like some kid at the bell sounding recess. "I'll bet our next paycheck on it!"



I wondered what old John Tabor'd say about that next paycheck when he got home and found his wagon still up and out of commission in our alley.

But old Tabor's Chevy was the last thing on the old man's mind. "Wait'll you see the son-of-a-bitch, Nathan! It's a hog-and-a-half!"

I was looking out where his line disappeared in the water but I couldn't see the fish. It was in a pool of deep water, and stayed down. I stood on the bank and watched the old man play the fish out. He was a master at keeping just the right amount of drag on the line, letting the rod do the work. It took him a good twenty minutes, but he got the big bastard out of the pool and into the shallows, and then I watched him bend down and get a hold of his fish. He was laughing as he lifted it, the head making his hand seem small, the pink strip on its side coming up a foot, then two feet, and more, the tail still in the water. The old man was facing me, grinning a grin I'd never seen on him before. Then the sky lit up.

I watched the bolt of lightning rip down out of the blue sky, and then his nine-foot rod was a brilliant ray of light arcing up to meet it. The explosion blew him and his record rainbow out of the Rattlesnake into the breeze.

Everything went white. I felt myself lift slowly and go over backward. For a minute I lay on the bank, staring up at a map of shifting colors. Everything was silent. And then, a long way off, I could hear water running, coming closer, closer.

I scrambled up, blinking hard, and stumbled out into the river. I looked all around where he'd been standing. Everywhere I looked I saw jagged, colored lines like you see after a camera's flash. Even when my eyes cleared, I didn't find much, a burnt, length of bamboo floating away downstream and his hipboots drifting in the shallows. I caught up with the blackened rod, and then waded back and picked up his boots. I was a little afraid of what I'd find in them, but they were empty--as clean and new as the day he'd bought them.

I held his rod and boots and turned a slow circle out there in the river. I've wondered since why I wasn't crying. It might have been shock. I don't know. I just couldn't find anything there to cry for. Then it struck me a prayer might be in order, and I tried to recall something from that bible school I went to when mom was still alive.

I remembered a story about some prophet getting whipped up to God in a whirling fire. They had a hymn about it I



thought. I started singing the first part, about the wooden Indian standing by the door. Then he fell in love with an Indian maiden over in the antique store and I realized it wasn't a hymn at all, just something the old man used to sing on our way to the river after somebody or other'd told him we were fired for taking off to go fishing before their job was done.

I finished the song anyway. It was something the old man used to sing a lot. I remember him driving and grinning and singing the refrain--"Poor ol' Kawlija, he never caught a fish. Poor ol' Kawlija, he don't know what he missed. Is it any wonder his world turned out like this? Kawlija that poor ol' loggerhead."

I turned and walked out of the water with his boots and the remains of his favorite rod. They were all I had to bring back to town to let folks know what had happened.

When I got to town, the first thing I did was walk in here and tell Orville. He was the old man's best friend. They'd come up from Texas together back in '32. It was Orville's idea to hang what was left of the old man's rod up there on the wall. It's that long, charred, whip-looking thing up there among those diamondback hides. Between the calendar with the naked lady and Orville's Wyoming moosehead. The hipboots we kept for the funeral. They're all we had to put under his stone up there at Piney View.

