

# Coe Review



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**masthead**

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# CHRISTMAS LETTER FROM AN OCTOGENARIAN

*Ron McFarland*

Dear Editor:

Who the hell ever got the notion old people like children? I am an old person, as is my friend Carl Hansen, and we do not especially care for the little tykes a tall. Carl used to say he couldn't remembe when's the last time he met anyone under fifty that had anything to say. Yet, every year we are assaulted here at Paradise Villa by this horde of ten-year-olds from some damn grammar school come to scream offkey at us for about an hour. Then they come at us and ask what we do here.

(What we're doing here, Mister Editor, is dying. Goddamit!)

Yesterday, after putting up with the usual caterwauling (and in three different languages, for God's sake), this chronic nose-picker comes up and asks me how old I am. I tell him "I'm 83, you little fart." He says "Crap!" and walks across the room to pester Ella McGee, but she's deaf as a post and in two minutes the kid's right back at me. This time he just stands there and stares for several minutes. What do I have to say to a ten year-old kid?

Finally I break down and ask him his name. "Steven Allen Morscheck." A Polack fo rChrist's sake. He's got this long, shaggy blonde hair that needs washing. Looks like a girl. Besides, I've known two guys named Steve (one was the top sergeant in my outfit during WW I), and neither of them was worth a Goddamn.

Next thing I know the kid's asking me what I used to do. I tell him I used to be a cowboy, and he believes me just like that. He wants to know did I have a six-shooter, did I kill any Indians, and things like that. I tell him "hell yes, Apaches, Comanches" (I've seen the movies but never been west of Columbus). What I used to do, really, was sell hardware and appliances for one of the tightest old s.o.b's in Pittsburg. Thirty years.

I look around to see if Carl Hensen's down here, but he's opening some dinky gift from a little girl that's trying like hell to sneak off, but her teacher has her by the shoulders. (The gift was a bottle of cheap cologne probably

picked up on sale by her mother and tossed out by her old man, but Carl made a big deal out of it anyway, maybe because most of us didn't get anything. He isn't much good any more. We used to play some cards, but he can't even hold a hand now since his last stroke. And he isn't even eighty yet. Strange.)

"I'm going to be a wide receiver. Dad says I got the hands for it, if I can just grow over six feet. "The kid spreads his fingers about an inch from my eyes. "I can see." The kid's father is right about his hands, though--like a couple bunches of bananas. "I'm going to Play for the Steelers," he says confidently. I don't guess I'll be around to see it. Besides, I never followed sports much, not even on t. v.

Then he asks me do I want to play some checkers. I hate checkers, but we played for a while and then they all trucked off. The kid blabbed all during the game about some Mrs. Rainey and about how he was doing bad in math but good in science, and I couldn't concentrate worth a damn, so I ended up losing. He may have cheated, probably did, but I don't know. I hate checkers, and dominoes too. And I don't like kids any more than I ever did. If I'd wanted a bunch of kids running around I would've got married and had some.

Do you know what it's like for that toothless old bear in the city zoo, Mister Editor? The one they throw peanuts to and they just bounce off his nose, and he doesn't blink but sort of paws the air like he was waving off flies? I think I know what it's like.

Respectfully,

# **Trio of Amatory Stanzas**

*By Charlie McDade*

I

& the old  
opening, reopens  
the cleft  
mysterioso

puzzling its way  
along  
as a cloud  
full of petals

wonders what  
it bears  
&  
why

the softness of it  
opening  
in silence  
wet

II

the open length  
the seed-pod  
breaking  
like a wave

of milk-weed  
down  
along the cove  
& anchor

is the prime  
need  
the number  
two

unity or  
conjunction  
the shade  
of difference

III

the full weight  
a time of fruit  
the fruit  
of time

a moist thud  
& the tree  
hears  
nothing

not the wind  
or its leaves  
in  
the wind

not a shower  
or the wind  
in its leaves  
in a shower

## **On a Sunday Afternoon**

*By George Flynn*

The whole community  
Suffers  
If a strawberry blond is  
Dancing on the parquet.

The coffee boils...

In the heart of everyman  
There is a strawberry blond  
Dancing on the parquet  
And suffering.

## Waking Up

*Warren Miller*

Around midnight mushy snow had begun to fail. Shortly before dawn two males stationed themselves in the steeple of the Baptist church. Gig Stoneburner, a balding man, was an admissions counselor for Numa College. Nelson Dru, a suburban boy, was a student Stoneburner had recruited. The Baptist church stood on one corner of an intersection in Lint, Illinois. A second corner was occupied by the Lutheran church, and a third by the Methodist. Diagonally across from the Baptist church stood the Rysinger house, a steamboat gothic structure.

The snowplow's flashing yellow eye threw Nelson into a fit of the trembles. As the plow passed and repassed, passed and repassed loudly as a recurring train wreck in a dream, Nelson glowered as **if** contemplating hurling himself on the monster. Gig Stoneburner gripped the boy's neck. As the plow shrunk to an insect, the gothic house remained dead still. Nelson swept off a bearish cap, whipped sweat from his brow, and sighed. Stoneburner tousled the boy's shaggy hair. The snow had dwindled to stray flakes.

Later, instead of clapping hands over ears when the bell clanged, Nelson leapt for the trapdoor. Stoneburner grabbed a leg and clung. As the din died, he said, "Get us caught, Blue Eyes, and we'll miss all the fun." Stoneburner bound the wrist gouged by the boy's bootclasps with a crusty handkerchief.

"How can you know what's going to happen?" Nelson demanded.

"Being a twenty-nine year old local lad in a town of two thousand has its compensations," Stoneburner said. His yellow eyes flickered over the boy's heavy features as the sun appeared like a face behind frosty glass.

Below, a rumble began and shrill voices soared like defective fireworks. The service had begun. A light flashed on in an upper room of the Rysinger house--and then a second. Stoneburner pointed a chicken-bone finger.

Nelson Dru socked the black-gloved fist of one hand into the palm of the other, switching off every seventh time. "What's The Mummy doing?" he demanded.

Mademoiselle Opal Rysinger is soaking her thirty-nine year old charms in bubbles," Stoneburner said, staring at the boy's xyloid throat.

"When The Mummy bathes, does she take that stuff off her face?" Nelson Dru asked.

Stoneburner hunched sharp shoulders, threw hands outward, and said, "After her bath, Mademoiselle Opal will dress, turn out the upstairs lights, raise the blinds on the stair windows, stagger into the kitchen, flick on the fluorescent ring, and--just about then," Stoneburner paused for breath, "the street should be filled with the faithful shuffling out of these churches to stomp over to campus for The Great Man's traditional Town and Gown bunny fun. And just about then, there'll be screaming and shrieking. That side door will fly open and --there go the blinds!"

Lutherans and Methodists were already pouring into the street. "The Mummy can do her thing anytime, anytime now. Now," Nelson panted. The Baptists below were A-mening. The tumescent sun flickered, brightened, flickered, brightened. Gig Stoneburner had a fleeting vision of seeds, roots, buds itching beneath the snow as desire itches in bone marrow. Blue fluorescence lightnined on in the Rysingerkitchen as baptists appeared in the street. "Now, Goddamnit, now, for Christ's sake, now you embalmed bitch," Nelson begged.

"Give the old girl time," Stoneburner said huskily. "Right now, Mademoiselle Opal, age thirty-nine, is blinking her snail-gray eyes---"

"Shut up, shut up, Stoney."

--and saying "Am I awake ? Those pills do such que-weer things. But unless I am hallucinating, there appears to be, oh there is---"

"—'a Greek-god guy,' Goddamm him," Nelson said, "'naked as in the shower on my kitchen floor!' So kick the shit out of him."

No shadows moved against the Rysinger windows. The street was crowded with worshippers moving past the gothic house towards Numa campus. "Now, oh now," Nelson cried.

The kitchen door did not open. No Julius Ayers rushed stark naked into the crowd. "Why the hell doesn't it happen like you promised?" Nelson demanded.

"I never make promises--except to myself," Gig Stoneburner said softly. His eyes glistened. "Could be a little TV wrestling has developed. Young Julius may have to put up a fight for his lily-white bod."

"Julius wouldn't touch a crazy old bat like that with a ten-foot pole," Nelson said.

"Master Julius thought a certain somebody would though," Gig said, staring triumphantly into Nelson's ice-blue eyes. "La Rysinger, age thirty-nine, was supposed to have found a blue-eyed gift in her beddy-bye--to be initiated into the rites of Venus, to receive instruction in carnal knowledge, to be--"

"Initiated! That bastard! My own roommate, my best friend. Oh, I want The Mummy to pou rboiling oil--but, oh god, there's nobody to see."

The people were gone from the street as from life leaving behind foot-steps in melting snow. "Isn't it enough that we got Master Julius Ayers?" Stoneburner asked softly. "We turned the tables on him, you and I. Numal's rape artist has been royally had--ain't that enough, partner?"

"No, it is not. I want local yokels howling and dragging my roomie raw through the snow."

"There's something wrong with the world if such a natural wish isn't granted at once," Stoneburner said. He licked chap-cracked lips as he fingered his injured wrist.

Nelson Dru did not get his heart's desire although the two watched until after the worshippers returned home and left the thawing street empty to the triumphant sun. When the two parted in the alley below, Nelson trudged off as if pulling in Tug o'War. Stoneburner saw the promise he had made himself advance by a giant step.

When Opal Rysinger entered the kitchen, she saw what appeared to be a naked man lying beside the hot air register. Keeping the sleeping figure in view, Opal ran water, measured coffee, and plugged in the Sunbeam. The figure did not vanish. Opal was not quite certain whether she was awake or

asleep. That was because of the gray capsules Dr. Willis had prescribed. The dove gray capsules carried Opal to sleep on soft swift wings. The dove gray capsules did not carry Opal back to the world of day on soft swift wings. She was forced step by step into a cold rolling ocean of consciousness.

The naked man would be Harry Bruer out of a dream. Just as things from the day world make their way into dreams, so things from the world of dreams materialize in the day world Opal had learned. When the ground at your feet gaped blackly, first you had to find out whether you were asleep or awake and then whether the black chasm was a part of the world you were in. Harry Bruer had said, "Did you ever peep down the glory-hole of an out-door johnny at white maggots churning?" Opal had shaken her head. "Don't bother," Harry had laughed. "Just look in the mirror," he said, "at your face. With a whimper, Opal checked the bandages.

The coffee bubbled up. Sunlight pulsated in. Harry Bruer fought up to a sitting position, gazed at Opal groggily, and cried, "Oh, my God!" That voice dissolved Harry Bruer into Lord Byron. As Opal tested her bandage-veil, Lord Byron clasped hands over his crotch and clapped his knees together. Opal could not understand why she was dreaming of Lord Byron, as she had never particularly liked his poetry.

Lord Byron sneezed messily. Opal glided along the counter and dropped a box of Kleenex near him. Lord Byron spun on his bottom, keeping his back towards Opal. Lord Byron blew his nose violently, gasped for breath, and spluttered, "Towel--please."

Opal fetched him April from the rack. She rubbed the embroidery. The towel was real. Lord Byron rose unsteadily, struggling to stretch April around his waist, only to fall on his knees. The fall did not surprise Opal--because of the club foot. Opal did not look at the club foot. She wanted very much not to see the club foot. Lord Byron stroked his throat and jaws, moaning. He was in need of a shave. The odor of alcohol was stronger than the aroma of coffee blasting from the gurgling Sunbeam.

A drunk, Opal could cope with. She got Lord Byron's arm around her shoulder, her arm around his waist, and staggered him to a couch as she had

often done Harry Bruer. Opal brought Lord Byron a blanket and coffee. However, he was unable to hold the cup because of shaking. His teeth chattered so that he could hardly speak. He complained of freezing. Opal piled covers on and turned up the thermostat. She phoned Dr. Willis only to discover that it was Easter and, of course, Dr. Willis, who was Numa College's Health Service, was at the Town and Gown Easter Celebration. Opal left an urgent message.

Lord Byron appeared to have a dreadful fever which frightened Opal badly. He had died of a horrible fever in some forsaken place Opal could almost remember the name of. Lord Byron flung off his covers and fought with Gig, Drew, Nelson, Stoney. Opal was unable to make out what the fight was about. Col. Harry Bruer had killed an enlisted man during the war. The evening of the second day of a three-day drunk, Harry always killed the man Mumford over and over.

Lord Byron's forehead was hot as an iron, his pulse was a frightened rabbit. Opal lost the struggle to get him upstairs to a tub of cold water. As Lord Byron caressed her as Karen, Sylvia, Sharon, and Chris, Opal Rysinger massaged him with rubbing alcohol. She forced aspirin down. Harry Bruer, her boss, had not caressed. Harry had overwhelmed like a wave, leaving the survivor with a rapturous desire for life, leaving the victim lusting again to be the victim.

By the time Dr. Willis arrived, the young man lay in a troubled sleep clinging damply to Opal's hand. He had no club foot. He was Julius Ayers, a Numa student. "A Georgia boy," Chuck Willis said, "with wads of money to throw away." The "Gig" Julius Ayers fought with in a fever dream was a Numa admissions counselor. "And," Chuck Willis said slyly, "none other than our own old school chum." Gig Stoneburner had escorted Opal Rysinger in high school when he had to have a date. As for Julius Ayers, he had the mumps. Dr. Willis said, "The Numa College Infirmary lacks quarantine facilities-it has four beds--all full." He added with a wink, "With one patient each-I hope." The nearest hospital with quarantine facilities was thirty miles away-

-through snow--on Easter Sunday. And Dr. Willis was not a member there. So-o-o-- Oh--ooh.

The President of Numa College was known as The Great Man. The Great Man was noted for his mastery of the art of explanation, At convocations when The Great Man announced, "Numa College regrets the loss of Dr. Doe who leaves us in order to be nearer his home," those who knew anything at all knew Dr. Doe had been fired and had not yet obtained another position.

To those citizens of Lint and those members of the college community who questioned the wisdom of the medical arrangements made for Julius Ayers, The Great Man said, "Miss Opal Rysinger who has had the mumps herself on both sides has graciously consented to receive Mr. Ayers into her home to prevent the spread of the disease among the student body--and the town youth." After Spring vacation, to a group of students protesting Julius Ayers I living off campus in violation of The Great Man's favorite regulation when no other unmarried student was permitted to do so, The Great Man said, "It is not exact to say Mr. Ayers is living off campus. It is more precise to say he is recuperating out of his dorm." After Julius Ayers and Miss Opal Rysinger had been closely observed through the windows of Rysinger house dining by candle light with wine on the table, The Great Man said, "Although Miss Opal Rysinger has only recently returned to Lint, she is an alum from the days when Numa was Sophie Numa Woman's College where gracious living was a part of the curriculum." Finally, when Town and Gown speculated broadly on the significance of there being every night just one light upstairs where all the bedrooms were in Rysinger house, The Great Man took the occasion to call on Miss Rysinger and Mr. Julius Ayers. It was The Great Man's intention to thank Miss Rysinger in person for service to her alma mater during the mumps crisis. The Great Man had ascertained that not only was Miss Rysinger an alum but she had no known relatives and she owned Rysinger house, a valuable property,

When The Great Man arrived at Rysinger house with plans for the future he found a situation he had not anticipated. The Great Man was not quite certain what he had expected. He knew it was certainly not what he found.

The evening The Great Man called on Miss Opal Eysinger in person, Nelson Dru found himself martini-drunk in a shower with knobs that lied. The knobs read "H" and "C", but produced only either STEAM or ICE. The shower was in the Long Horn Meter Lodge in downtown Lone Star, Texas, where Nelson Dru as a special student assistant and Gig Stoneburner were recruiting students for Numa College.

The last time Nelson Dru had been in a shower that produced only either STEAM or ICE, he had gained a nickname that made him gnash his teeth--Sistine. Ron the Runt had grabbed Nelson Dru as he burst from the dorm shower stall and bet Nelson couldn't do a certain Tarzan thing and wouldn't even if he could even if the Tarzan thing was to get Doogle-ass, the House Head. In addition to acting as house head, Doogle-ass taught art.

Doogle-ass's door opened from a tiny vestibule from which two other doors opened at right angles. Ron provided a ladder and directed the naked Nelson Dru to brace his feet against the upper molding of one doorway and his hands on the upper molding of the vestibule entrance so that he arched rump against the ceiling. Ron pounded Doogle-ass's door until he got a "Who's there?"

"The Sistine ceiling."

Doogle-ass had said repeatedly as he had shown slides, "It is impossible for me to bring the Sistine ceiling to you. You'll simply have to go to Rome."

The door-pounding, the question, the answer were run through several times, always louder, during which a crowd assembled, before the angry Doogle-ass opened up. Ron announced, "The Sistine ceiling," pointing up.

Nelson Dru stared down groggily into a face he had longed to smash for what he saw there. You see things when you're drunk that you don't pay much attention to or miss completely when you're sober. That's because alcohol blocks out everything but what you're looking at. To see that at all you have to peer as through a magnifying glass. On Doogle-ass' astonished face, Nelson caught a look he would tolerate from no male.

The crowd applauded. The crowd cheered as Nelson crippled down. The crowd had vanished as Nelson flooded the vestibule with the contents of his stomach.

Nelson Dru came out of the Long Horn Motor Lodge shower with the Sistine ceiling episode bubbling in his consciousness. In the bedroom he found Gig Stoneburner flopped half out of a lounge chair. Yellow eyes flickering over Nelson, Gig slid to the floor at his feet.

"Oooh," Gig said, "I knew if I said my prayers every night 'fore I went beddy-bye, sooner or later, the Sistine ceiling would come to me."

Nelson Dru stared down into a look he could not tolerate and kicked. His leg was grabbed and a flurry of kisses fell on his foot and swept up his calf. "I could kill you," he raged down at Gig Stoneburner just as The Great Man encountered an unexpected situation in the entrance hall of Rysinger house.

As his fever abated, Julius Ayers had found himself tended by a bandage-faced woman. Her large hands were cool and compassionate. Her voice was softly shrill and rather far away and scratchy sweet like a singer on an old 78.

As the swelling subsided, Julius Ayers found himself in the company of an attentive and pleasant masked woman. She asked no questions. She made no demands. She volunteered nothing about herself. Her speech was like words in music. Let the masked woman make the simplest statement such as "The sun's out," and her voice suggested to Julius a dozen possibilities like a phrase in jazz--the promise of a good day--the sun had escaped--the sun had issued forth for the last time--the sun was not at home--the sun had failed--the truth or a lie was out in the open--

As pain vanished, Julius found himself anxious about the effect of the mumps on his performance and in the presence of a woman with long smooth limbs. Her breasts while not large appeared round and firm. She had wide hips and her tummy appeared soft. Plump bottom. Her thirty-nine year old bod was in good shape. Particularly the skin. No age-brown splotches. No fine wrinkles as on the surface of water skimmed by a cold breeze. She might look awful in a bikini, but luscious out of one.

The face?

Julius had already begun to question the Western world's emphasis on face when Dr. Willis pronounced him recovered sufficiently to return to campus and all normal activities. "Normal for me--or other people?" Julius asked with a smile he knew appealed to the lost youth in the middle-aged. Dr. Willis guffawed like a party favor popper.

Julius said to Opal, "You'll be glad to get rid of me. I'm like the man who came to," he hesitated, "to dinner."

Opal's beautiful hands either protested or expressed resignation.

"Well, the least we can do is celebrate," Julius said, pushing his lower lip up and frowning down at her, a look that had charmed from nursery days on.

"Your being well--yes," Opal said slowly. "There's wine in the cellar."

Not only was there a real cellar and not only wine, but sparkling Burgundy. The first sip and Julius felt a warm furry stirring in his loins. "Your house is full of surprises," Julius said huskily, a bait Opal did not take.

The face? During his convalescence, Julius and Opal had watched old movies on TV. Things that happened to the faces of Paul Muni, Joan Crawford, Kent Smith, Lon Chaney, Jr. , Claude Rains, Judith Anderson, Dorothy McGuire, Jane Wyatt, and Bette Davis led Julius to observe Opal's reactions closely. The face--knife scar? fire? hirsuteness? acid? scissors? raging ugliness? instant aging? obesity ?--Julius got no firm clue. Opal did not so much as tremble in front of the TV.

As sip followed sip and glass followed glass of Burgundy, Opal's throat became luscious, her elbows peaches. The face? Julius had searched the house surreptitiously and without success for photographs. And Julius had told Opal about his life in Tithonus, Georgia, and a military academy in Atlanta. Opal had worked for fifteen years as a secretary for a man named Harry Bruer who owned a trucking firm in Rocton sixty miles from Lint. Bruer had been a Marine colonel. Opal had left after Bruer had married for a second time. His second wife was a typist Opal had hired. The face?

As he savored Opal's father's Courvoisier, Julius found himself in the company of a lady whose face was gift-wrapped. She was gracious. He found

his way into her room and had her in the dark. She did not remove the mask. She refused to let him sleep out the night in her bed.

Julius Ayers returned to campus only for classes.

Julius found himself in the company of a deliciously soft-fleshed woman whose body received and gave with a passive abandonment that spurred and restrained him at the same time. Julius said accusingly, "You bathed me." Opal switched on the bedside lamp. She walked for Julian, and she turned, sat, and lay down on her stomach for Julian. As he explored with kisses, Julian said, "You're beautiful--like Diane de Poitiers."

There was a sob behind the mask.

"I--" Julian began, "Wait," Opal commanded and fled to the bath.

The doorbell rang until Julian answered it. As Julian listened to The Great Man in the hall, they heard footsteps on the stairs. A hand and arm appeared on the banister. Then at the turn of the stairs against stained glass, a profile emerged.

At that moment in the Long Horn Motor Lodge in Lone Star, Texas, Gig Stoneburner's smile lighted up Nelson Dru's world like an explosion in the night.

"I ought to kill you, " Nelson growled.

"All I want you to do is try," Gig pleaded.

Julian moved to the stairs and gazed into the face of Opal Rysinger.

The Great Man stared at the two and saw what he himself had never experienced. As he let himself out, he said, "The pink peonies are opening for Convocation, I am told."

## **First Encounter**

*By Cindy Veach*

Like a jade watch  
ticking you walk  
across the grass.  
Your flaming  
eyes are  
shadowed.

The sun is a spot  
like a sliver  
under your  
fingernail.

I crawl through  
the grass,  
a horny snail.

Greeting you.  
Greeting you.

## **You Would Not**

*By Robert Joe Stout*

You would not frown  
And turn away from the photograph  
Of a sycamore leaf in a stagnant pond  
Nor one of a mongrel dog  
Stretched across a highway  
Its paw covering its eyes.

So do not turn from the drunk beggar's  
Crusted, dirty hand.  
It too is a leaf, dangling  
In the raw winter wind.

## Poems Washed in from a Fragment of Cold Moon

By *Alan Britt*

2.)

A cow's shoulder bone bounces its head across a field  
the moon comes up over a wooden fence  
a wasp flies behind the moon

5.)

A lamb comes up from below the hill  
and passes by cold bushes

7.)

Arms begin to warm before a fireplace  
and fall from dark blackberries in the night

9.)

A blackberry pushes its cold body against my arm  
the moon begins to fly from the darkness of the stain

10.)

A horse begins to wander across a dark field  
the horse touched with the cold blue mouth of the moon  
it stops to drink from the wet grasses by a stream

11.)

A piece of whitened driftwood floats in  
untangles from the moon's hair  
reveals bruises on my hands

## POLKAS

*Gary Fincke*

"Christ, you'd never know this was a college faculty party." A circle is formed, everyone but our table clapping while the drunkest whirl around. The accordion players stomping their feet and laughing-the Beer Barrel Polka-I clapped to it when I was four on my father's shoulders watching Frankie Yankovic at the amusement park.

"Aw, come on, Nick, why shouldn't they have some fun?"

"Maybe, but what kind of fun **is** that? Just a bunch of pathetic drunken slob." The circle breaking up into more participants.

"Maybe you don't know how to have fun. You and Jack are so serious all the time."

Roll out the barrel,  
We'll have a barrel of fun, Roll out the barrel,  
We've got the blues on the run.. .

screamed by eighty drunks as they stomp and kick.

"It speaks for itself, I think."

"You two, the old peas in a pod routine."

"I think they might be right this time." Pauline breaks in with some common sense, shouting over the second chorus. (i want frankie's autograph, huh, dad, how about it there he is right over there giving away free records)

"All of you ? What's wrong with me? Too normal, right?"

I lean forward, interested a little. "Look. Open your eyes and see what's happening out there. How many of them would ever dare to do anything sober or out of the context of a party? These are the same people who whimper and moan, never thinking, just existing, teaching boring freshman courses, talking about compromise resolutions of the impotent faculty congress over lukewarm coffee. They go home to their plain wives and three teenagers who run the house and watch television like the guy from the mill, then come in

the next day and spice up their discussions with a critical analysis of the Man-nix plot. Jesus, it's no wonder they're stomping out there. It's desperation, not fun."

"Come on, Nick, they're not that much alike." "Sure, for superficiaals--age, house, classes--but the main things are all alike--none of them ever step out of line on politics, sex, religion--the whole damn philosophy of life. Ask them what they're working for--money and retirement. Security is what they're all interested in and it makes them all the same. They all want to make sure they're secure and the best way to do that is to stop thinking and feeling, and start stomping. If they had even one thought they'd know security was impossible even with their life insurance and hospitalization and retirement fund. So they have to keep stomping or they might realize what they're living for is futile."

"Are you in on this, too, Jack?"

"I'm not sure. But I do know that whenever I stop and think, it doesn't seem as if I'm accomplishing anything and that's a depressing thought. I spent all those years getting that Ph.D. and then I was done. All the flaming hoops I had to jump through to get that degree and then I leaped through that final hoop, through the fire and smoke, landed safely, smiled, patted myself on the back and then looked for what was next. And there wasn't anything. Not a damn thing. The hoops were gone, but so was the audience, and all there was was a huge, perfectly level plain."

"But there must be something." Pauline hoping as Caroline sinks back in resignation and I break in again.

"Sure, on the other side of that level plain is a mountain or a depression or an oasis or whatever you want--or at least we're told that the mountain is there. Everyone is running as fast as they can across the plain like some huge pedestrian homesteading rush. Some fall down at the start; some get trampled; others just drop out. But some are in good condition and they run out pretty far, leaving the pack behind. Even then, though, they don't reach the mountain. Nobody's ever even seen its outline on the horizon. The guy

who's in first place still hasn't seen anything but more level plain. And yet everybody keeps running, looking at that blank horizon."

"What sense is that?"

"It's all that's left--to run and run better than the rest of the crowd."

"But even that would be a waste because you'd have to stop sometime."

"Yes, inevitably."

Jack straightens up suddenly. "But maybe someday the guy in first place will finally get far enough to see the mountain and he'll know it's there."

"Who would he tell? He'd turn around to shout and the pack would be so far behind and so intent on keeping together they'd never hear him. Even if they did, they wouldn't believe him. Sure, they'd probably speed up for a moment with new hope, but they have to see for themselves and it's a sure thing they'll never get far enough across to see what he's seen."

"Yes," interrupts Pauline, "But he knows, and maybe that's enough for one man. "

I stop and look at her (I'll never get far enough, though, for then a glimpse won't be enough... I'll have to have the mountain and then the top of it and then the same nothing again would reappear on and on and on); smiling a little, I answer, "Perhaps."

The band launches into its third polka in a row, but the stompers have worn themselves out and straggle back to the bar. The four of us fall silent and no one begins again. A few minutes of silence stretch with elastic ease into a half hour of watching. When we decide to leave, Caroline doesn't even answer the goodbye formalities, but she has to go.

## FIRST CHORUS

Roll out the barrel into the huge party where the dancers pause between sets to stand before the bar and grab another mug, sit down on straight back chairs surrounding the floor--sprawl and swallow, sigh and swallow, begin to babble and swallow again and again.

Rollout the barrel for the band taking their break beside the bar, sipping slow and easy, no talking while they watch the crowd of dancers at rest and the four non-participants at the corner table who talk together, separated from the party.

roll out the barrels across the darkening swamp in the twilight of late october. . the men working in the quickened pace of panic, trying to fill the mire with the wooden casks before the light fades away completely... they work faster and faster, stripped naked in the heat, sweat pouring from them into the already saturated earth. . the barrels are hoisted down lines of struggling men, the old fire lines resurrected, bucket brigades attempting to lay a floor on the swamp surface.

in the half light an end man slips off the last barrel and falls screaming into the silent ooze, his comrades immediately stepping out one barrel each to absorb the loss, a new barrel shoved into the blackness where the grasping arms disappeared, forgotten even before the roar goes up from one of the other rows with the shout for "land, Land!" sounded by an end man exciting the workers to swing the barrels down the rows faster as the sun drops behind the distant horizon, leaving only the reflected colors to brighten the gloom... but the men work on, sure that the other is near enough to be seen... those near the end strain to see the solid bank, but then turn quickly to the next barrel, blaming their failure on the lack of light.

and another shout of "land, land!" from an end man muscular and heavy heaving a barrel in front of him to step onto for the leap forward, plunging instantly through the surface to his waist, thrashing in surprise and anger, then a grab for the barrels, all terror sinking to his neck, his mouth gaping, swallowing the slime and muck while disappearing beneath the newly placed barrel.

almost completely dark and the naked men begin to shiver, their sweat drying in the dropping temperature though there is no time to get redressed... they must work faster to keep warm, for only the air is cold, the swamp warm and moist even as the frost settles on the barrels... the men light candles, but the glow is feeble and the smoke causes them to cough... shivering bodies slip

off from all parts of the lines, the swamp more welcome now... the warmth of a few moments before disappearing.

the cries of "land, land!" grow less and fainter, but the work goes on... a man turns and tries to run back toward the beginning of the barrel rows and is shoved off by impatient workers... more turn to go back, but none get farther than a few barrels before they are pushed off... the reversals are far out into the swamp, though, for near the beginning of the barrel rows the men crowd eagerly forward, the late comers dressing in the discarded clothes of the early workers, smiling and confident, warm as they lift the barrels forward from the ever smaller stack on shore.

only one man sits on the bank... he watches without moving, cursed and jeered at by the thinning crowd waiting to work across the swamp... but the curses recede with the crowd as the final new workers leap forward with the final barrels. . . he watches in silence after the last loud shouts that rose with the final barrels ... all that is left to see is the careful balancing of the workers as the few on shore leap onto the barrels, the line of men surging away from him, eager after the task completed... the weight shift pulls the anchor barrels away from shore and they float free on the swamp, leaving the watcher straining, standing to see the ends of the drifting lines in the darkness, lit only by irregular rows of candles... and then a roar sounds from far away, sweeping nearer and nearer until it reaches the closest end of the barrels in a scream, shrill cries of "nothing, nothing!", the men near the end turning around to face him and seeing the gap between them and the shore, leaping toward the watcher and the bank anyway, but all falling into the mire, soft sloshing replacing the screams that drift farther away into the night with the barrels.

the candlelight disappears and the blackness is total with the silence for the watcher... after midnight he searches along the shore. slowly feeling with his hands along the bank of packed earth... finally he smiles as he pulls on an abandoned overcoat, a pair of fur-lined gloves, a warm hat, a pair of boots ... dressed comfortably, he turns from the swamp, walking carefully, though, for it is very dark.

## SECOND CHORUS

We'll have a barrel of fun scream the partygoers inside the revolving cylinder that turns slowly, a giant cement mixer cauldron grinding endlessly around and around as the band picks up their instruments for the final set.

More beer, more drinks flow from the barrel to the stompers who return to the floor, unaware that it is constant motion, for it turns too slowly for them to notice. But the four who sit on the edge can feel the cycle and sense the force.

Slightly tilted, the giant cylinder's inside surface becomes slippery from the renewed dancing. Couples stumble and fall, laughing with the crowd as the band picks up the tempo with furious pounding of drums and accordion, the sing along easy rhythm scooping up the entire hall but the four conversing and watching near the edge, hesitating now in silence as they feel the dangerous tilt. More dancers slip and fall until one couple cannot regain their feet--crawling along the floor against the angle, they slowly slip backwards toward an open door.

The man struggles to help the woman for a moment, but he sees the nearness of the door and her screams drive him to crawl by himself, grasping at the heels of a man thrashing in front of him without realizing there is no hope in the flailing legs. He does not turn even when his partner's scream disappears through the door into the darkness, suddenly silent but taken up by more floundering women and finally by the men who forget their double standard near the open door.

The band plays faster and faster as the couples disappear at the dark end of the revolving, tilted hall. The bandstand is secure and they laugh as they play.

The four watchers sit staring after the final departing dancers who thrash a final few steps into blackness.

The room spins unhindered now with the door closed, the dance floor empty, the band packing their instruments, the watchers dressed to go home. Walking to the other side of the room, avoiding the slippery dance floor, they

stretch out on empty tables and sleep. The band crawls inside their cases to wait for the next engagement.

Outside in the dark there is no movement, no sound, nothing but a soft, fused mass that can hardly be seen in the gloom. By morning it will be dry and hard.

### THIRD CHORUS

Roll out the barrel for a small boy who sits on a green carpet stacking tiny plastic barrels into a pyramid. Laughing, he reaches for another to place in the narrowing rows. He has to stand now to reach the top and only a few barrels remain of the original set.

A level of just four. A level of two. And the last barrel on top, just above his head. He laughs again, shouts his triumph and runs around the pyramid, looking at each side's perfection. He climbs onto the couch and looks down at it. He lies on the floor and looks up at it. Each piece is perfectly placed; the symmetry is complete. There is no wobble, no shakiness in the structure. Another shout and he runs through the house looking. He searches the rooms one after the other, looking in closets and under the bed, repeating rooms, running faster as he searches.

Finally he remembers the basement and rushes downstairs, looking in the game room, behind the television, in the laundry room inside the drier, in the garage under the car. Outside he races around the house, looking in trees and under bushes. Nothing.

Then he rushes back inside and into a closet. He pushes aside the rows of dresses and pants and shirts, stepping over a huge shoe tree to reach for the trapdoor in the ceiling. A struggle to pull it down and then a leap back to avoid the falling dirt and dust that settles onto the neatly hung suits beneath it.

The stairs are easy to climb except for the dirt and thick dust that puffs up around him as he ascends to the attic. In the darkness at the top his eyes gradually focus in the gloom, settling on the three figures that lie together in the corner.

The woman lies closest to him and he reaches out to tug at an arm that lies extended into the dirt. He pumps it, but no response. He speaks to the open eyes and mouth, but no answer. He pulls at the other arm, ignoring the full, perfect breasts and inviting naked thighs that sprawl apart. Pumps again, but nothing.

He shouts now, turning to the man beside her, punching at the protruding stomach, beating on the chest and shoulders, but no response even when he kicks between the naked legs.

Only the girl remains to be tried and she is huddled against the wall, turned from him in nakedness. He kicks at her back, pulls her long hair, rolls her over to face him, staring not at the perfect body, but at the eyes that stare back over his shoulder toward the cobwebbed rafters.

Frustration to frenzy in his stomping on rigid legs, arms, stomachs, faces, eyes unblinking at the heels across the bridge of the nose. Screams louder and louder, coughing in the dust clouds.

Downstairs again and a leap across the floor onto the perfect pyramid crashed under him, barrels rolling under the couch, out of sight in the darkness that is nearly matched within the room, slowly covering the barrels and the body.

#### FOURTH CHORUS

We've got the blues on the run shout the bandsmen and dancers, a final hectic chorus of polka--"everyone join in" the yell through the microphone--and success but for the watchers.

In the fading twilight a crowd runs at top speed toward the west, dragging huge spotlights that shine toward the horizon, brightening slightly the fading color of the clear sky. The mass moves constantly forward, always westward, but the lights are heavy and hold them back until they no longer can keep any color in the sky. A groan swells up from the crowd with a call for more lights, but already the light keepers are deserted by running files of

those without anything to carry who sprint toward the faint glimmer in the west that they pray must be still there though they cannot see it.

The spotlights cannot bring back the color. but they pick up the outline of the dash, the figures in focus as they fall exhausted and lie still, the black enveloping them as the lights begin to burn out. the black grasping the throats of thousands in mass strangulation, the bodies frozen in seconds.

the blue stretches out to relax behind the horizon, smiles as it feels the cushions beneath it, rolls over to watch the band return from its engagement... they wave a greeting and begin to play

... roll out the barrel. . .

but have to stop because of the laughter.

# **You Hand Me a Silver Key**

*By Duane Locke*

You hand me a silver key  
and a silver rod  
and say  
throw the key in the sky  
and unlock  
with the rod  
the stone

This stone once an angel  
Inside its door  
a feather of air  
You can put this air in a bowl  
and teach it to perform  
Like a dolphin  
it will leap  
when you hold a fish  
between your teeth

## **Oaks**

*By Duane Locke*

Oaks

skim up

from the water

the limpkin's cry

and place it

inside a leaf

## **Sacrifice**

*By Mike Magrath*

The priest and magician prepare  
an offering. Barefoot,  
with blue feet, they light  
the fire, father flame.

They approach the child, tied to a rusting  
automobile in a field, hands and feet  
bound with weeds, hair cut short  
and free of lice.

The field is full of automobiles  
all old  
all without window-glass  
each holding a blackened corpse, as if  
they had driven to this place to die in the flames.  
Some automobiles are covered with weeds, are  
almost invisible, some, the newer ones  
stand upon charred ground.

The priest and magician bathe  
the child with gasoline and cover him with brushwood.  
The blue flame rises and grows

## ALIAS NICK DODGER

by Tom Sinclair

At twenty-eight Nick Dodger has a bad cigarette cough and drinks Boone's Apple Wine to sustain himself while, within a period of ten days, riding Greyhound buses first from Miami to Kessimnee, Florida, and back, and subsequently to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Accompanying him on their visit to Disney World, and on their return to Miami, Eleanor Justice (she retained her husband's surname and a substantial portion of his fortune after the divorce) paid Dodger's bus fare and his way during their stay at the Intercontinental in Kissimmee (seven or eight miles south of Orlando--the home of Disney World). Additionally Eleanor bought Dodger a bus ticket to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina for a journey she wouldn't share. Eleanor gave Nick a Stingray for Christmas...and of course sent him a Christmas card by Hallmark. Why Nick didn't drive the Stingray to Kissimmee remained unknown--wasn't spoken of. Eleanor owns an apartment building. The land on which the building is erected is worth \$247,000. The building is appraised--for *ad valorem* tax purposes--at \$1,450,000.

Nick left the University of Maryland, his mother, his father and their home in the District of Columbia when he was twenty. He enlisted in the Marines, fought, died and was born again in Viet Nam. He continues to resent all enlisted men and officers with rank superior to what was once his. He doesn't write letters; he doesn't make telephone calls. He responds to letters and will answer the telephone. He's lived and worked in Boston, L.A., Anaheim and Miami and hasn't been to Washington in eight years. He tends bar only when he is not a pool manager serving the needs of Jews who spend their winters in Florida and the summers in New York and New England. The Jews are elderly. There is no gambling in Miami Beach: an issue upon which there is continuing speculation. Nick believes the Miami Beach hotels are truly Jews' headstones. If he served Catholics, the hotels would become Roman ruins in their time. Dodger would serve neither Episcopalians nor Presbyterians.

They would not be served by him. They would be frightened for their wives...justly and unjustly. They would frequently ask Dodger what he was doing with his life. Dodger would respond, "I don't have time for that bullshit!" When thereafter they touched his arm or shoulder, Dodger would leap back and warn them never to touch him. Dodger studies all Episcopalians and Presbyterians carefully and briefly. He treats them the way they treat him. What he has been taught as a younger man, a child, a boy, he is convinced no longer works. He was very nervous when he sold what he owned before he left for Myrtle Beach. His hands trembled. He went to Myrtle Beach because he'd put Stitcher up for two months. Stitcher's father owns two clubs in Myrtle Beach. Stitcher is operating one. Dodger will tend bar in the other. And Dodger will pad down with Stitcher until he finds his own place. When he returns to Miami in September, Eleanor and he are going to do Europe in a rented Volkswagen for one year. Eleanor's older child, Dody, will spend a year at Rollins College; Lew will live with his father. Dodger'd been lucky. It had taken him eight years of hard work.

Terribly expensive, Dodger's freedom is precious and vile to him. He is the last member of his generation to have remained unmarried. He would not bring a child into the world as it is. He is restless, very restless, and must move from time to time. When he told Eleanor Justice he had to go to Myrtle Beach, she cried...and only after knowing him for five months. He told her he had to be with younger people. She will fly up to Myrtle Beach during the three and a half months of Dodger's absence from Florida. A Columbia woman, from Cali, will fly up to Myrtle Beach during the period of Dodger's stay. Dodger might have gone to Cali to eat coco weeds. Cali or Myrtle Beach would have been equally agreeable. The Columbian woman is traveling to Brazil where she plans to remain for some indefinite number of years. Nick will close no doors. He will not drag other bodies than his own across the stones of his needs. He believes this would be unfair: dragging bodies other than his own across stones. They would be insecure and frightened, and he would have to excuse his behavior. He would find that situation as intolerable

as the bodies would. He believes all the men he knows have traded money for ass (married and supported it). He believes it is possible to live with one or another person protractedly in order to know them. He speculates that the time may or may not be extended from protraction. He isn't certain...about anything. It isn't a question of an eye for an eye with Nick. It's cutting his enemies off at their kneecaps for an eye. On his trip to Myrtle Beach he reads *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran. It is Eleanor's favorite book. She bought it for Dodger--she bought the Boone's Apple Wine for the same reason--to get him over the downs on his bus ride. Dodger reads Robbins and MacDonald. Eleanor had written an inscription on *The Prophet's* flyleaf; her hand is open--controlled. What she has written is too personal to reveal. Dodger likes Gibran and uses the postcard-size, color photograph of Eleanor, Dody and Lew to keep his place. They are all red-haired...except Dodger who is not in the photograph and has black hair and grows a temple to chin to temple beard. Eleanor was attracted by his beard. Dodger met her at Big Daddy's on 135th Street where she had been accompanied by one of his friends. Eleanor preferred Dodger. This was the reason for, as well as the fashion of, their relatedness. Dodger is fond of Eleanor. He is fond of his prospects of being happened upon in Myrtle Beach.

In their fifties and sixties the wealthy widows in the Blue Room in the Fontainebleau want more of what they had before. Thus they get banged and return the following winter in search of more of what they had before. Dodger knows that in order to work the Blue Room one has to be well-breaded. Being will hung is no advantage. Sleeping with the wealthy widow offers little pleasure. They are girdled and have auburn hair and faces made of buckram. They are fearful of bed...unfamiliar with it. Larry Csonka, fullback for the Miami Dolphins, is big and crazy. Crazy. He and Kiick are great guys. Mercury Morris is too...except that he played badly in the play-offs--but he was a miracle during the season. Only Eleanor and the Dolphins carried much pleasure for Dodger during that winter. Dodger thinks his friends from childhood are serving sentences...working fifty weeks a year to bring home

paycheck to have two weeks more of the same every year. Dodger thinks they will grow old then ask themselves why they threw away their lives. Dodger just wants to tend bar in Myrtle Beach for the summer, then on the beach in his time off and let what will happen to him happen. He was once concerned with what happened to him; his concern served no purpose. The circumstances of his life haven't changed in any way since he discontinued concerning himself about them. His life has simply gone on as it has before. Eleanor was pure luck.

There are underground people in Miami. They're to be found at two of Big Daddy's places: on 65th Street and 135th Street. Among them there are secretaries, nurses, waitresses, clerks, some lawyers. They remain at their jobs throughout the year and live with some pleasure during the year. Dodger doesn't regard them as he does his friends he has known since childhood. Dodger is curious about that regard. He doesn't wear his good things on the Greyhound to Myrtle Beach; he wears jeans, a well-worn, green T-shirt and a narrow-brimmed, flowered beach hat that is a comfortable hat. He's blown what money he's earned as a pool manager at the hotel. Dinner with Eleanor cost twenty-five or thirty dollars each time. Clothing was very expensive. Whatever he needed was very dear. He could have eaten in the workers' mess kitchen at the hotel, but he wouldn't. The guys in the kitchen would fix up a tray of salami, roast beef, baloney, ham, sliced chicken and turkey each week to stick in his refrigerator. By the time he's left for Myrtle Beach, he couldn't have survived more of the old men and women at the hotel. He like to work at the pool. It was possible to drown in it: take that one additional step...the lungs would fill with water, and the bather would panic. Dodger like to save drowning men and women. They showed no gratitude for their lives being saved. Dodger resented that but understood further that perhaps he had rescued men and women who truly had not wanted to be rescued: in which case Dodger's portion should have been less what it was.

Eleanor and he had put their heads together in Disney World. It was the rea-

son they went to Disney World. Dodger like Disney World. It wasn't crowded during the week-end he and Eleanor spent there. They talked about his going to Myrtle Beach. Eleanor understood that he had to get away; it was the reason she bought his ticket. Eleanor didn't want him to marry her; she just wanted him to be with her. Dodger thought that was out of sight. He either did or did not understand what she would have forsaken if she had wanted to marry him. He may have understood that Eleanor would have had to surrender some monthly endowment from her former husband. Dodger never gave that a thought--couldn't care. He knew that if he had ever married, it would have been a bad scene. The only reason he sees for marriage is if a child is born to a pair. He knew that the child could be responsible for twenty bad years. In that event he saw no reason for marriage at all.

The day of his bus trip to Myrtle Beach was a good day for traveling. It was raining...there were heavy thunderstorms. The driver, Shepard (his name was engraved on the slotted plastic rectangle) wouldn't think it was a good day for driving. The bus windows were fogged. The air conditioning was useless. The traffic from Second Street had been very heavy through North Miami Beach, Hollywood and Fort Lauderdale. The driver told one of the passengers there would be no time to buy a newspaper. The frustrations in the bus, if they could have been bottled and sold, would have brought a fortune in money. There were other ways to have gotten out of downtown Miami. (Across the street from the bus station there was a mini-theatre and its associated ell for the purveying of adult books. The ell's windowpanes had been painted yellow--were opaque--to prevent inspection by the inappropriate.) The late-twentyish blonde who'd boarded the bus with the fat, bald man should have been a singer. Her voice sang when she talked. What she talked about--some days of service as a juror--was interesting. She wondered aloud why four members of a drug ring were being tried together rather than separately. She thought (aloud) further that the one or two members who had pleaded their guilt had, in effect, harmed the chances of the remaining members of the ring to achieve justice. She also decided that she would have pre-

ferred the judge before, or with whom she'd sat that day to be her judge. Another judge had made the men and women on the jury nervous.

The old black asked Nick if he didn't think Roosevelt was the best President the country ever had. Dodger said he didn't know. The old black sang him a song that went something like, "In 1932 he took us out of a mire of clay; in 1945 he lay down and died. If you want to speak to anyone now, you have to speak to the next President--Jesus." The whole song rhymed when the old man sang it. The old man didn't like kids saying, "Yeah," and "No." When teachers made thirty-five, forty dollars a month, kids said, "Yes, Ma'm," and "No, Ma'm." The old man thought you had to treat kids like you'd treat a dog: feed'm and love'm and cuff'm when he needed it, and then the dog would just come running when he saw you coming. The old man wouldn't stop talking...just kept running on and wouldn't quit. He'd come down from Jacksonville to see if he could find a brother he hadn't seen in thirty-two, thirty-three years. An old friend had gotten in touch with him and told him that his brother was in Miami. The old man'd gone to the Social Security Board, but they wouldn't look up the old man's brother's records...said they couldn't. Dodger didn't say it but thought that was shit. With just a few stubs of teeth the old man couldn't speak clearly, and remembering everything all at once went on about it too quickly anyway. But he was a good, old man--thin as a wire in a brown suit that didn't fit him and wearing an old, brown felt hat and a tie that dim it couldn't be seen if he was wearing a tie.

The bus pulled in at Fort Pierce. The driver, Shepard, warned there'd be a half an hour for supper, that the bus would leave at six-thirty with them that was aboard as well as without them that wasn't. He said he'd make the announcement himself: The Jacksonville Express. Nick ate with the old man. When the old man said Nick was stokin' himself pretty good, Nick laughed. The old man thought grape juice and water at thirty-seven cents a cup was crazy. The old man'd figured his supper'd cost him like a buck ten instead of the buck ninety-five it did cost him. Dodger took a walk until six-thirty and

then moved his stuff (a small bag and *The Prophet*) to the back of the bus, to the row of seats that didn't have any armrests, so he could lie down and sleep. He'd knocked off the Apple Wine and gotten sleepy.

Dodger didn't dream when he slept; he either writhed or didn't--no matter what. He knew that happened. He'd tried to figure why he'd writhe one night and wouldn't the next. He couldn't figure out no connection with anything, no relationship between how he slept and what he'd done in the previous twenty-four or seventy-two hours.

Nick had played some ball at the U. of Maryland. He knew he was big enough to say, "Fuck you" to anybody. He knew he didn't have to be big to say that, but he was big: about six three or four and two hundred odd pounds. His hair was black, and he had good features and knew that if he didn't have confidence in himself, no one else would have any confidence in him. He didn't give much thought to his feelings of self-esteem or whatever. If he liked what he did, then that was all right with him, was the only thing that mattered: that he could square it with himself. He didn't know what that was, but he could feel it--feel if what he did was right for him. When he left the pool job at the hotel, he left the management with a good taste. He'd given notice and gotten someone to replace him. Everything was all right. It would be better in Myrtle Beach and best in Europe where he'd been in Italy and Spain as a marine. All he knew was that he just had to move on when he felt like it. That was all he needed money for; that was the reason he prized money. He hadn't seen his family in eight years, and they were better off for that, and he was too.

# THE LADY OF THE HOUSE

*by Guy Beining*

the vegetable man hung around the gate  
all morning with his basket of beans & corn  
the lady of the house ordered cucumbers  
with large warts,  
honed this life hoed between  
the sacks of window spread,  
she whispered, goring another eye  
of some buggy insect.  
the fruit man jumped the gates  
hanging by the porch  
with his sweet plums,  
sucking them and making the sun black  
thru his purpled mouth  
the lady of the house wanted two peaches  
fuzzy and not too smooth  
she sang low and warm to him.  
the wine man broke thru the gates  
crashing past the porch swinging thru the screen door  
letting bees buzz out his words,  
wines dripping from his loose-fitting clothes;  
even with all his wines and mortal songs  
he still did not run past the stairs  
to the lady of the house.  
the junk man came rounded and dim  
carrying broken plates, bent spoons &  
effigies of things, rotten space,  
gathered glands, facial cats, immortal lambs.  
he whistled well & sang of hell and tinkered with his bell.  
the lady of the house swept up her clothes

into the closet space & dropped her silky hair  
to her greedy lap & called the junk man to stare.  
I burnt my youth on that porch  
and all surrounding trees  
never to know who made the winners win  
and the losers breath.  
the junk man was carried to the junkyard;  
circled by rubber tires,  
the kerosene making gullies on his fishy skin,  
his belly but a den of wine;  
his oily hands licked the dirt;  
his head atop a crate of rotten rinds  
while the lady of the house feasted  
in the land of skins, be it rabbit, mink, or twine.  
the junk man lay for one sad week  
before the garbage ate him up  
and he was lost in levels of other peoples  
dirt and thoughts,  
the fools consumption burying him.  
the lady of the house hung flowery skirts  
from her clothesline, waving to all men passing by.  
the men gasped and gaped at her two  
full-grape breasts  
swear pouring into their eyes,  
the sun slowly blinding them  
and turning them to stone.

## **BAD DREAM**

*by Joan Colby*

a dock  
ending inland with shops  
where a vivisectionist  
carves lost dogs  
his glasses steaming, he  
quaffs a beer then  
one ear tuned to the Bach  
fugue, the garden hose  
tendons of his throat working  
he continues  
incising the Pomeranian's  
liver. I am coming in  
dressed in pantyhose, my  
breasts small and firm as ripe  
Winesaps. i lift my hand  
as outside everything  
blows up, lights flash, the  
hot room rocks, the dog  
awakes, a screaming pinkish  
muff. His goldwire glasses  
falling off, the doctor  
begins to weep and pray, stabs  
a dinner fork into his rosy gut  
shouting "my aim  
was only to cure cancer", sirens  
begin over the blazing lake  
a baby wails and wails  
there is a run  
in my pantyhose, my tits

turn to knuckles, the sky  
in now a collage of black and blood-flare  
explosions, shrieks, smoke  
rings in my hair I comb  
my fingers through,  
the doctor clasps my ankles  
begging "forgive us" I  
stroke his dry hair, the  
roof falls in, a fire-tide  
engulfs the shattering  
boardwalk, the  
world ends.

# MOTHER'S TRUNK

*by Sharyn Skeeter*

## I.

I like Mother most when she speaks in tongues. Grandmama left her a spirit in a trunk that contains a large green print cloth, bones, claws, teeth, powders, sand, blood, sticks, candles, incense, herbs and other things that I haven't been allowed to see. These things either came from Africa or the botanical down the street. They're wonderful. My mother, Nana, has been smoking some good grass. She passes the joint to me so she can wrap herself in the cloth. Nana's skinny brown face disappears in the smoke. She's in the trunk setting up the altar behind the haystack. They say that's where I was born.

All of these pieces, all these little pieces of animals, plants, mountains in front of Mother on the sidewalk. I don't know what their symbols mean but they make sense.

Um-bab-da-da-ma-pa-we-gee-ooo-na.

Even Nana's moaning makes sense. Grandmama knew, everyone's mama knows the meaning. I just have to make the connection. Mother is whirling in the smoke, eyes closed, babbling. She is a magnet but I resist her circles. Her poles aren't mine. But the spirit around us makes me dizzy. Where is my daughter?

## II.

Mother's old classmate, Bobby, goes to work on Main Street. Actually most people do. Nobody ever notices him. He's fifty-six and never married--doesn't know how to talk to women and doesn't care. He buys a donut and coffee in the greasy spoon across the street where he is shot, sprawled at the door in his blood. We're all late for work and jump over his bulk. There are red trails on the sidewalk. I'll have to remember to tell the garbageman on the way home tonight.

Holy brother, mother, sister, father protect us.

Mother and her three friends are in a circle chanting for Bobby.

At fifteen the four of them raped him because they wanted to see if he really had no cock. He was the best they ever had. Next thing he knew they had cut it off, erect, embalmed it and had given him a vibrator for his trouble. Every full moon they take it out of the oak jewel box, go to the field where it happened, and the have orgasms to its memory till sunrise.

I never saw much pleasure in this so I married Jimmy.

### III.

I feel strange today. When Aunt Maud came by our house a few weeks ago for a potion for Uncle Jeb I didn't think much of it. Mother and Jeb used to be what you'd call kissing cousins. But so were Father and Maud so I guess it was even. Mother and Jeb used to go down to the lakeside to catch toads then go to Main Street and set them loose, watch them hop on the concrete and get run over by trucks.

Jeb has cancer of the throat. It's coming out of his neck like confetti. Maud gave him the potion to sip through a straw. She went to the bathroom, stood on the toilet, put her head out the window and giggled.

Today I see this. I am walking into their house to pay a visit. Bony Maud is sitting in a nightgown on a kitchen chair in piles of her own shit. She's holding Jeb's face. His body with the neck is standing in the pantry. She says, My pretty cat has left me. I look for it on top of the china closet and it's not there. Mother is behind me wringing her hands. I feel like I want to cry but I'll save it.

### IV.

Nana wants to teach me some more about her trunk. I tell her next Wednesday would be better because I want to fuck around. She unbuttons the top of her checkered housecoat and shows me her tits. They look like two corn flakes. I'm ashamed so I'll stay here with her.

She ran out of ancient incense so she's spraying pine scent from an aerosol can. I'm sitting in the armchair waiting for her to bring out the grass. Instead she takes a wishbone from the trunk and tacks it over the doorway. I'm slightly disappointed. The pine spray is burning my eyes.

Soyini, take off your clothes and sit cross-legged on the floor. I do it because she's my mother. She sprinkles some dark powder on my shoulders while moving her lips. Then she smears it down the center of my face, circle my nipples with it and outlines my crotch hair. I'm trying to hide the tampon string with my hands. She notices and laughs mumbling something like, From-woman-comes-woman-from-woman-comes-woman...

Don't look for another meaning.

# **PAINTING BY THE NUMBERS**

*by Albert Drake*

A virgin's heart on an acre of sheet

