

TOWERS LIII

Towers LIII

Northern Illinois University

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Judge: Donald Murray

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Dead Trees by David Stine

Judge: Sean Shesgreen

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Roots: by Dennis Lynch

Judge: Charles Hagelman

Towers is recognized and
funded by the Student Association.



Carole Bruton



Dan Mills

THE HABITAT

There are only weeds,
Clouds of clover, seeds
Flying, mustard spills,
In the field there now.
The farmer would not plow

That corner, or plant crops.
The land escapes. It drops,
A basin, and fills
To grasstips when it rains.
White flowers wind in chains

Up to the road. The redwing
Rocks a stalk, surveying.

It deepens with the rain.
It deepens with the rain,
A pond rimmed with reeds
Of last year's corn. The light,
Watery gold and white,

Whirs with dragonflies,
And down from trackless skies
Two ducks: the mallard leads
His clucky gypsy in
The broken flowers spin—

A boy, watching them float,
Bunts the wind home for his boat.

Monica Heilbronn

CAMERA OBSCURA
(Impressions of a Closed State Hospital)

I

Ochre flakes dust onto the road
in weed filled cracks crazing from
chained entrance monuments
to granite exit markers
sinking in an overgrown plot
laced by broken gray pickets
and a one-way gate.
Maze-work building after building
venetian blinded behind bars
bolted against strong oaks
rigid in the sea-green park
washing through windows of one-way glass.

Rows and rows
of rusted bed springs
bend with the heaviness
of load of load of hours
spent staring at high white ceilings
dropping milk-white globes of light
across Pacific-green walls.

II

A cloth doll, faceless with flowers,
lying on a playroom floor
patterned with diamond shadows
of steel mesh stretched across the sun.
Brilliant blue and green watercolors
streaked with red splashes of fingers,
paper and paste, a scrap of blanket,
broken crayons, only the black whole,
a chipped white enamel basin
holding dried mud
and cracking handprints of adults.

III

Echoes of dripping water float
in the gray infirmary basement
filling rows of concrete tubs
with soothing waves of sound.
Wheel-worn linoleum peels away
toward a windowless room,
soundproof and rubber floored,
lined with strong wood tables
still faintly electric
in the crackling dust.

IV

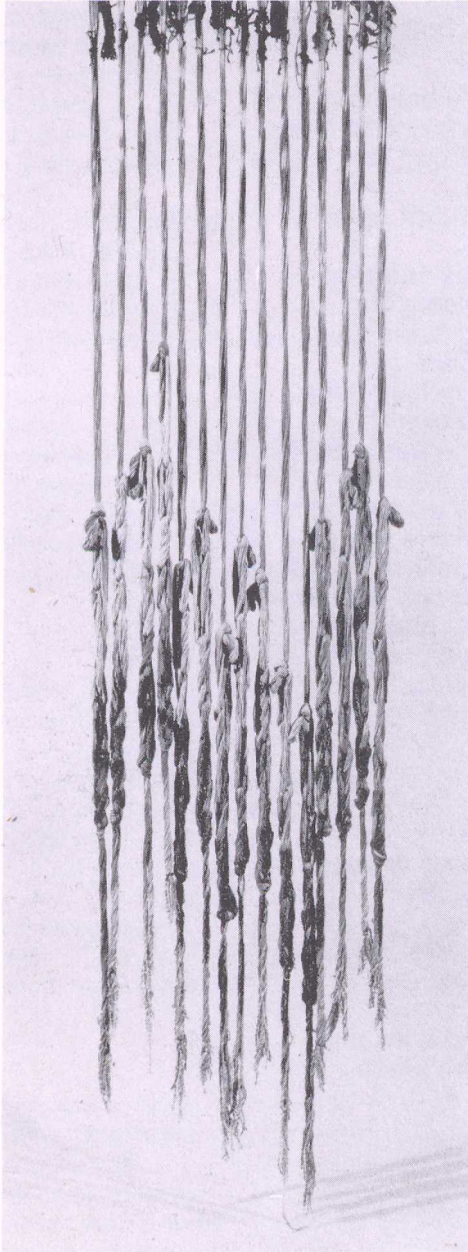
Through the only unlocked door,
RECEPTION shrinking in moss,
mahogany stairs curl four flights
to an attic room
packed with spindrift pawn.

Dust-drifted veins of leather
crack in the desicant air
and buckles and bows
of trunks and shoes
drop soundless in the nights.
Cedar-wood boxes with
"St. Louis" and "Niagara Falls"
tarnishing in the tops
spill out watches stopped at eight,
darning eggs, severe tintype grandparents,
wicker-framed pictures of yellowed weddings,
shocks of hair bound with satin
framing faces of children
who lived on dark pianos,
hairpins and nailfiles,
brooches and teeth.

V

Under the eaves,
hung with flowered dresses
and gabardine suits,
stained oak barrels
hold jumbled angles and curves
of crutches and canes
pointing to the rafters
where rows of artificial legs
climb through the night.

Donald R. Libey



Marianne Moore

HOUSEWIFE

standing on the picket fence
stepping from peak to peak
she sips brandied nine a.m. coffee

miles below he shouts
"have a good day, dear"
and children echo
"the cheese is moldy
& where are our tennies?"

"sure will, you too,
throw it out, look under your bed."
reaches up, grabs the feet
of a passing jay
and spends the day
in the backseat
of a '57
gondola.

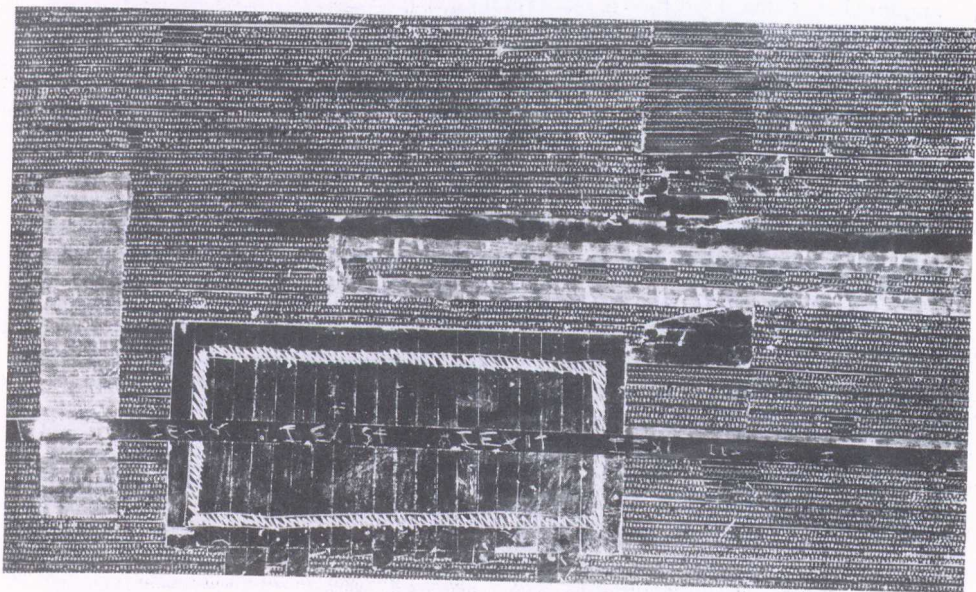
Sue Larson

DRUNK

Your hubris is sublime.
Overcoat full in the breezing wind,
you walk against the traffic
and give drunkenness them
in the face
and agilely stagger
off the curb
to diagonally cross the street.
A car stops as you reel nimbly before it.

You are your mask of smiles.
The hat,
which is merely contingent,
must be nailed to your head;
your shirt, neat, seems pasted on
like a label.
Your clothes obfuscate the argument:
now is drink
and the foot of bacchus pounding the earth.

Michael Hann



Pete Gagnepain

DEAD TREES BY DAVID STINE

He rose that morning at six-thirty—the usual time. A quarter-of-a-mile down the road his son was rising and an hour-and-a-half away his grandson too was leaving a warm bed to face the cold November morning. In a couple of weeks it would be Thanksgiving and they would all be together: his son and wife and their children. This thought cheered him as he fastened the snaps on his overalls. In the growing light the outside thermometer registered zero. The house was dead quiet; outside the gray light promised a cloudy day, possibly snow. It would be best to get at the brush pile soon. Now that the season had ended and the crops harvested there would be time before the snow. A noise from the bedroom indicated that his wife of fifty years was awake. Soon she would shuffle into the kitchen, turn on the radio and begin breakfast. By then he would be beginning morning chores. After so many years they moved through their daily jobs like hands at the ends of outstretched arms of one body. Although he spent his days at the farm and she spent hers at home there was rarely a missed meal, or a derailment in their schedule. Sometimes he good-humoredly chided her “pokiness” or kidded her about getting old and slowing down but they remained faithful to a daily routine that had been established long ago. They had known no summer vacations; he had aborted the only one they had attempted. The farm was his life and his happiness.

The downed trees bothered him a little. He liked the farm to be neat. During chores his son assured him they would cut up the dead trees after lunch. There were errands to be run in town that morning and they could easily finish in a day-and-a-half. “Don’t go up there alone,” he warned. His son worried too much about his capabilities. Why several years before he could easily hoist two hundred-pound milk cans into the cooling tank with little effort. Sure he got winded a little more easily these days but he was still strong. He would have to find some task to help pass the morning.

After breakfast he decided to tinker in the tool shed. He would be out of the cold wind and there was always something to straighten up. In the dark of the shed, lit only by a couple of bare bulbs, it felt good to get out of the cold air. It was still early, maybe it would warm a little. Surveying the workbench everything seemed to be in order. The bench stretched for almost twelve feet. Its two-inch thickness had been stained over the years by oil and grease giving it a dark, almost black dull shine. A foot above the bench was a shelf just as long, broken in the middle by a beam. Another foot above the shelf was the top shelf a foot deep. Years before, he had made a sort of aluminum awning to keep the bird droppings off the tools. It was attached to the inner wall, high above the top shelf. The spare parts were stored on the top shelf. Parts to machines, some prehistoric, rested in dusty boxes along with various belts, pulleys, old harness, plow and cultivator handles from the horse-drawn days, an old Key Work Clothes sign, and the big electric drills held domain over the top shelf. Below, on the second, were wooden cheese boxes, Bugler Tobacco tins, coffee cans, glass jars, plastic trays, metal boxes, Curad Band-Aid tins, and canvas sacks—all containing various sizes of nuts, bolts, washers and screws. The helter-skelter assortment had switched containers over the years but remained organized by weight alone. Heavy bolts, nuts, and screws on the bottom, lighter objects on top. At the end of the workbench, near the door, was bolted a vice that was also an anvil. Various wrecking bars hung next to it from the top of the bench. Hanging from nails next to the vice were several well-used saws. Behind the vice and spreading like a weed patch were gallon oil cans that had been de-lidded and equipped with wire handles. Several were filled with fence mending tools: a hammer, wire cutters, nails, staples, steel post wires, and leather gloves. Several more cans were equipped with general building repair necessities: a hammer, screwdrivers, nails, wood screws, a hinge or two, and tin snips. Large, machine-size nuts, bolts and washers filled other cans. Sprinkled among the cans were new hammer handles, broken screwdrivers, hacksaw blades, broken drill bits, oil rags, sacks of rivets, pencils, squares, washers, goggles, cogged pulleys, a calendar with a picture of a red barn dated 1955, and assorted fan belts. Metal boxes containing assorted drill bits, coiled extension cords, spools of wire, an electric fence

control box, an old straw hat, oil cans, metal punches, lengths of rope, and an electric grinding wheel, filled the rest of the bench. Underneath the workbench, buried partially by the dirt floor, were crowbars, greaseguns wrapped in canvas, tool boxes, shovels, axes, picks, sledge hammers, an electric sander, a pile of clean rags, and some discarded paint clothes. It would take too long to re-sort nuts, bolts and washers. He put the new hammer handles in a half-quart tin and began searching for smaller objects, nuts and washers that had been tossed carelessly, missing their intended target. While working, he thought of that bright day in '41 when he bought the farm. So much he could be doing on all that land—something much bigger than sorting washers.

A small group of men had gathered on the hill in front of the big red barn. FOR SALE 206 ACRES. A barn that needed rebuilding, fields choked with cockleburrs, gullies that you could hide a car in, a gash of a dirt road to town that halved the property. Yet there was only a mile to town, a running creek, fairly level ground, a stand of timber, and a sturdy house. He wanted the farm. He wanted the chance to be on his own. The gullies could be filled, the cockleburrs unearthed, the barn mended. And that summer day in 1941, with a loan from his father-in-law, he left Garner's Feed Store forever. He became a farmer. The war brought the need for goods and the farm was soon paid off. There was something about looking out over your fields in the evening. Something in knowing you'd taken the soil, planted seeds, cultivated, grown crops and fed livestock. Something in working everyday on your own land, supporting your family, and watching them both grow. For thirty-five years he had been doing this job called farming. He didn't like fiddling about the tool shed waiting for his son. His body had been used hard and long—it made him nervous to waste time. The day wouldn't be so cold if he worked hard.

At eleven he mixed fuel for the chainsaw. He checked the teeth for sharpness. He backed his old car up to the shed and loaded the saw, fuel, and an axe. The car jolted over rough spots in the hard dirt road that wound south to the brush pile. The air was still cold—it sort of took your breath away. Stub-end corn stalks stood like regiments in several fields. Across the field his neighbor was still picking corn. The green combine devoured rows of corn, belched orange grain into a hopper, and blew dust and ragged stalk trail out its behind.

He would cut up the smaller branches first and save the logs for his son. Parking as near as possible, he opened the trunk of the car and filled the chainsaw with fuel. The air tingled and nipped at his nose. He zipped his jacket up around his neck and put on his mittens. The chainsaw sputtered several times as he yanked the starter. Choking the engine seemed to help. Finally it snapped, exploding a gray-blue cloud, and began its loud buzz.

A mile away and below him, near the highway, his wife saw the speck of her husband from the kitchen window. "Crazy fool," she muttered, "got no business being up there." After breakfast she had dusted and cleaned the bedroom and living room—her daily chores. Preparing lunch, she looked south out the kitchen window. She looked out a lot, noticing if the neighbors were home, if the men were in the fields, if the mailman had gone, what the temperature was, or what the sky looked like. Only a couple of degrees. It would be cold now. The phone rang, and one of her cronies took her away for a half hour of chatter. In her pale blue slacks, pink flowered blouse, and green apron she sat hoping her meat wouldn't get over-cooked. His meal.

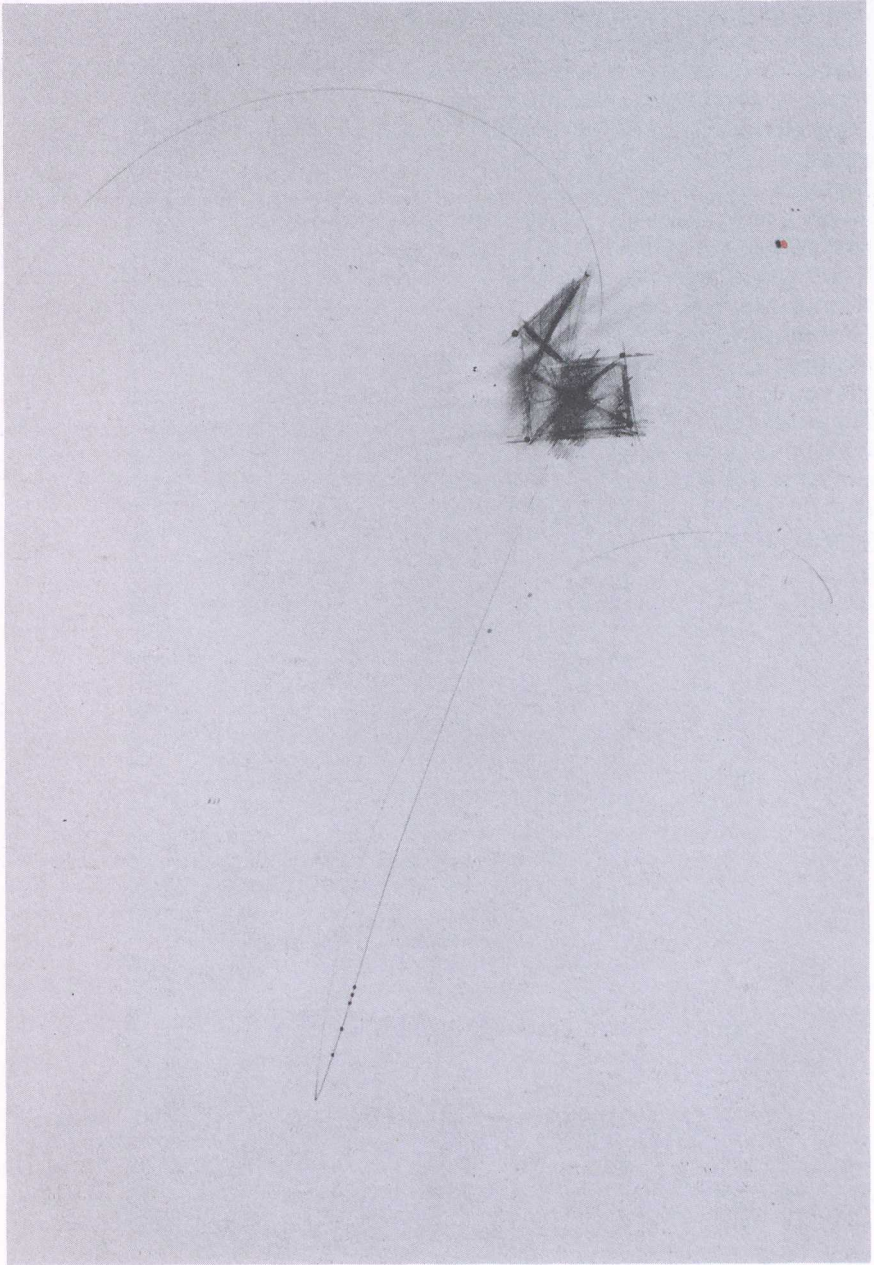
In town, his son waited at a counter while the clerk searched for a hard-to-find tractor part. So much stock was moved to make room for new, and the younger employees just didn't know the right place for it. The clerk knew he had the part, somewhere. The son looked through a brochure on the new Oliver 1860 diesel and noted the high price of leather gloves. He liked coming to the implement store usually, talking with other farmers, looking at new equipment—but today he felt anxious to get home. He didn't feel like wasting time. It would take a couple of days to saw up the dead trees they had piled near the east fence line. It would be best to get it out of the way before the snow. The tractor needed to be operating too. Soon things would slow down a little. Finally the clerk found the part; its box had been lost; it had been tossed carelessly in a bin with some other parts; luckily someone had left a tag on it. At eleven the son walked toward his pickup. He could put the tractor back together before lunch, and they could start on the brush at one. If they worked until dark maybe they could finish tomorrow. He noticed how gray the sky was as he neared the farm. It would probably snow soon.

She had seen him drive up in the field, his son's wife. While doing the ironing, she had heard him back his car up to the shed. It was too cold to paint, and the fences were in good repair. "What could he be up to?" To her he was a nervous man, always fiddling with something. He couldn't even talk to a farmer without polishing his car with a bandana. But because of him, the buildings were always in good repair and well painted. There was no junk sitting around getting rusty. The farm always looked neat and bright. He'd been working so long that he knew nothing else, she thought. Never took a vacation, never caught cold, never complained. Eighty years old and only a few wisps of white hair, a cough he brought back from the war—remarkable. Even though he made her nervous, he was a farmer of an era almost gone. Her husband would probably be the last one to work this farm—just two generations. Their son was interested in books; their daughter married a businessman. Around eleven she heard him roar toward the field in his old car. "What *was* he up to?"

He liked the smell of the wood as the saw ripped into it. Small chunks, flakes of white, made a flurry around the blade. These trees had once provided refuge for rabbits and a few stray deer, pheasant and quail. Most of the animals had vanished—moved, killed off, run over. Lightning had severed several trees. Old age had taken the rest. Things come and go. He thought of how his grandchildren had played on this part of the farm. Hiding in the little gully, pretending to shoot each other. From a tractor he had seen a lot of rabbits run through this brush. A lot of birds in these trees too: wrens, orioles, finches, cardinals, blackbirds, crows, robins, pigeons, even a couple hawks. In summer storms he had seen these trees bend so far that they seemed to be praying against the purple sky. Now they were dead. Once they were cut up and cleared, a couple more rods of corn could be added—if the gully was filled in. The sun was a vague white ball in the gray sky. The wood looked black by contrast. Maple and hickory. The box elders had gone first, then a couple of cedars. Now these maples. The oaks and pines would probably last forever. When the cedar got hit by lightning he had taken chips of the sweet, red wood home in a small canvas sack to his wife to put in the dresser drawers. The yellow chainsaw grew heavy, and the vibration made his hands numb. Soon it would be noon and he would quit. There would be hot coffee, bread, butter, meat, potatoes, and a salad; maybe some cookies or a pie. My, the chainsaw was heavy; it pulled on his arms so. He grew careless about stopping to stack or separate branches and logs. Almost in a frenzy he reduced limbs to small cylinders. He could finish this tree by noon. A sudden coldness shot through him. He shut off the chainsaw and walked to his car. The cold air pushed against his chest. He noticed the dust his son's pickup was raising on the road.

And suddenly the light changed and it was a sunny spring day and he was being taken to his aunt's house to live. Then he was a young man in a buggy with a black horse, going up a tree-lined road to court a girl. In a drab uniform, wet and cold in France, lugging feed bags in Garner's Store. A man of thirty-three being married in a small church, calling the doctor on a new phone to deliver his son, standing at forty-five on a hill in front of a big red barn, the first view of his grandchildren. The images sped. He sat down next to the car, cold and numb. The sun was very pale—the light was fading. It was his heart—after all these years. He should have taken it easy. No air. Cold. No air. Cold. In the dying light, he saw the form of his son running to him and the faces of his family and everyone he had known and finally, a face he had never seen.

This may have been the way it was. I don't know. I am the grandson who was miles away. I didn't believe it when I got the phone call. He was as strong and ageless as the oak tree near the tool shed. The mahogany of his hands and arms, the striped overalls and rolled-up work shirt, paint splattered shoes, work cap folded to protect his eyes, the whitewall haircut, German nose, pocket watch, blue bandana—all these things that were him stay with me. It snowed the day after. I was a pallbearer. I hear his voice still—it whispers through the leaves of the trees.



Robert Sill

TERRE HAUTE

Indiana lingers in the night.
Memories of musty rooms with mildew-laden chairs
And sugar-starched doilies grown limp.
Screen doors banging,
scraping cement steps as they close.
Flecks of red paint clinging to moist palms
after slicing night air with pump handles.
And bats shot with B.B. guns littering the ground
beneath telephone lines.
Rusty chains mewing like a kitten's pink mouth,
protesting the motion of a porch swing.
Dead grass and clover left in the wake of tire tracks
from a green truck parked beside a hill-cellar.
Strains of fuzzy jazz tunes
slipping over warped window sills,
blending with the rumbles of nearby trains.
A glimpse of flying barefeet slapping
on a glistening clay road,
dodging bruised corn cobs and Buckeyes.
But the recollections fade with a rush of the wind
that scatters the patches of sweet, damp air.

Tricia McNellis

STILL LIFE

The violin laid on the bed
needs no rest. The curtains

splash around it; sun squeaks
in its scroll. The bow's caught

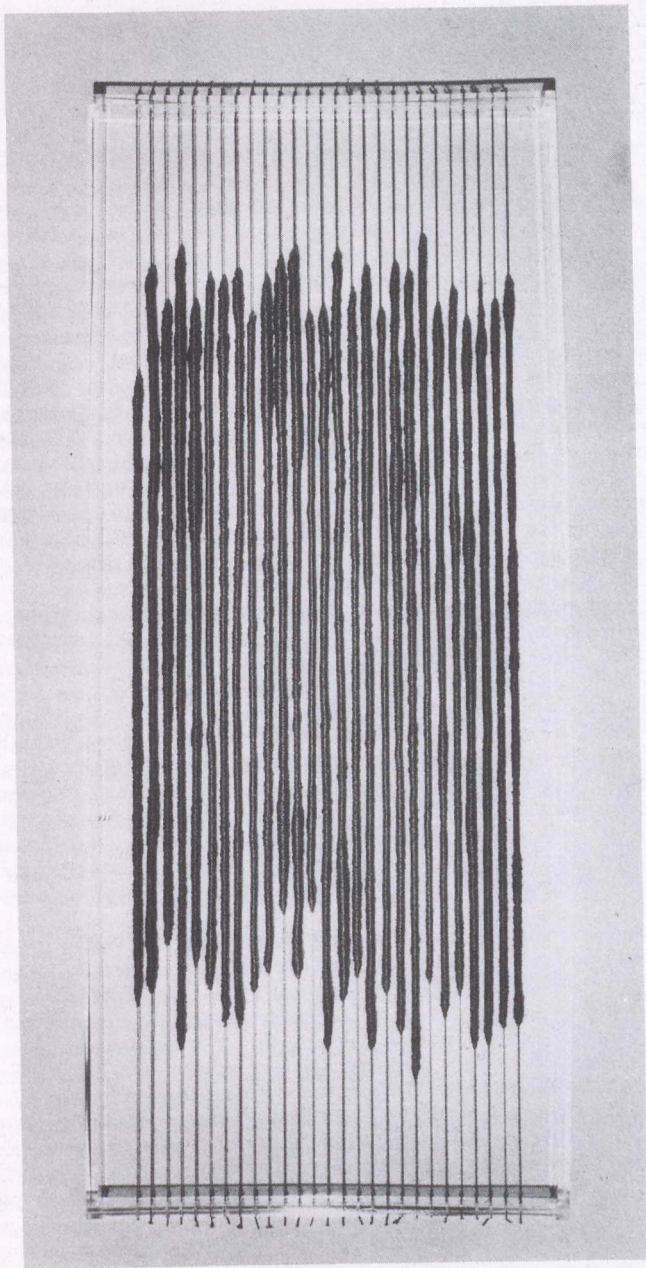
on the zigzag rocks of Kreutzer,
abandoned on the bleached bedspread.

Wild roses framed above flare
with brushes of light. The room

is blue as a southern sea—
wind, its whipping spoon. Silver

strikes a string: an open E
sings straight into the eye.

Monica Heilbronn



Pamela Palmer

GENEVA RYAN
BY JEFF LARNEY

We were required to clean our lockers out before Christmas break. The Irish Christian Brothers who ran St. Mary's insisted we take home every personal possession, including textbooks, for the two week span between semesters. The school had to be barren of any trace of the students: even the thought of a stray jacket or lost notebook infecting the school's clean void infuriated the brothers. They were fanatical about this, and anyone unfortunate enough to leave behind a messy locker was dealt with severely after the holiday.

Unlike the other boys, I waited until the last day to clean my locker out. I threw all the scrap papers and useless notes that I had saved into the wastebaskets at the end of the hall. The rest of my things were stuffed into a bulky laundry bag I used to carry my gym uniform in. With my gym suit and books inside of it, the bag was heavy and hard to handle. I dragged it down the hall after my last class, picking it up in my arms before I stepped out into the winter weather. The ground was covered with snow, and I didn't want the snow soaking through my bag and ruining my things.

It was cold outside. I had to stand in line and wait for the bus to arrive. There was a cold, wicked wind blowing. It penetrated my winter jacket and made me shiver. I kept shifting my weight from foot to foot, hoping to stay warm. The wind gathered snow from drifts, powdering my hair and reddening my face. All around me, students were blowing into their hands for warmth. I was stuck holding my laundry bag in a cold embrace. After a few minutes' wait with no sign of the bus, I became desperate. My hands were freezing. I shifted the bag's weight into one arm, leaving one hand free to blow on. When I held my hand up to my face, I could see that it was as red and raw as my classmates' exposed faces. It looked more like a claw than a hand.

The private bus that transported us from our suburban school to the city arrived late. A huge crowd had gathered and waited impatiently for the bus. At the sight of the bus, order disappeared. Boys pushed and shoved, as anxious to escape St. Mary's for two weeks as they were to escape the cold. Curses were exchanged as our bodies pressed together in a forced movement toward the bus doors.

The driver refused to open the doors. He sat calmly behind the wheel of his heated bus, waiting for an orderly line to form. In the meantime, tempers flared openly. The push forward left students jammed against the bus, struggling for room. There were shouts and obscene chants directed against the driver. Students pounded on the bus with their fists. Somebody actually spat on the windshield. There was a sea of angry, raised fists and fists with just the middle finger raised; all were obviously intended for the driver who surveyed the whole scene stoically while the winter wind gusted and grated against us outside.

Usually a brother stood by the bus to maintain discipline. Today, when one was needed, there was no brother on hand; they were too busy preparing for the holiday. Even without a brother the boys finally calmed down. It was too cold to stand outside very long. There was a peaceful interval and a sudden explosion of rage when the driver failed to react. Students fanned out along the bus and pounded on windows and doors. Everything was worse than before; it was a small riot in the winter. The driver pretended not to notice the screaming students, which only incited them more.

I was in the back of the mob, still clutching my bag as though it were a part of myself. I hugged it close to my body to block out the wind. My hands and ears were numb. I was too cold to be enraged. The students' screams seemed distant to my ears; I felt a million miles removed from my classmates and watched them without any curiosity or rage. I saw a calm, almost beatific, light in the driver's eyes. The whole thing was hopeless. I headed back across the snow-covered lawns of St. Mary's, hoping to wait in the warm building until the students gave in. Before I reached the door, I saw Geneva Ryan stride out the hall door and head for the bus. It was finally time to leave.

Geneva Ryan taught English and French at St. Mary's. She was the only woman teacher in the all boy, Catholic high school. In a world full of adolescents, she became a focal point for erotic rumor and a constant topic of conversation. She was discussed during lunch and in the locker room. She was the subject of a poem in the "B" wing bathroom. Everything she said and did was analyzed for sexual content. It was all very innocent and adolescent despite the boys' rowdy, vulgar attitudes. Most of the boys were still timid and untried; they went to ridiculous extremes to seem worldly. It wasn't until senior year that anybody changed. All of the attention paid to Ms. Ryan was mainly a case of Catholic boys (even in this "liberated" time) exploring one mystery the Brothers didn't dwell on often.

By the time Ms. Ryan arrived, the boys were too cold to disobey her. The cold had destroyed their fight. They obeyed her orders sluggishly. A few continued to curse, but most were too numb and frost bitten to haggle with her. Everybody realized that the driver would have to open the doors now that a member of the faculty was present. An orderly line formed. The boys, all red faced in the winter wind, stood patiently while long seconds passed. The driver didn't act appeased. The doors remained closed. Finally, Ms. Ryan made an impatient gesture with her hand and the doors flew open.

The students surged forward in a human stampede. Bodies bounced off of each other, scrambling for the open doors. Ms. Ryan tried to maintain order, but couldn't. It was the last day of school: this knowledge, coupled with a sincere belief that the driver was defenseless with his doors open, fuelled open rebellion. Students lunged on the bus without paying, raced to the back seats, and began making loud comments about the driver's sexual preferences and ancestry. Wads of paper were heaved at the driver from the back of the bus. He ignored them.

The bus driver remained calm. "You aint leaving till everybody pays", he said in a bored, hick voice. He turned off the engine. "I git paid by the hour", he said to nobody in particular. There were loud moans. Geneva Ryan had us line up again. The students were sullen but defeated.

Ms. Ryan stood off to the side while the students marched in single file through the open doors. The wind blew her long, blond hair around her face. She looked tired and sad. Standing there in the wind, she looked nearly as beautiful as the other boys said she was.

Our eyes met and locked for a second. I looked away, embarrassed. With both arms wrapped around my laundry bag, I must've looked pretty comical. When I looked back at her, she smiled at me. Ms. Ryan had a smile capable of brightening up even the most taciturn brother. I think I blushed. Nobody could have noticed—all of our faces were red from the wind.

"Is that your dancing partner?", she asked in a low, husky tone. I could see her breath rising white in the cold morning. The air was like a cold sea around my body.

"Well, you know how it is," I said, trying desperately to be funny. When she laughed, I relaxed, relieved that I hadn't said anything too dumb. I revised my opinion of Ms. Ryan. When she walked the corridors of St. Mary, everybody was always silent around her. She travelled in a hush. I had always assumed that she was somehow responsible for this silence, that she triggered off this reaction. After our five second conversation, I felt that it was not her fault.

As I was about to climb on the bus, she stopped me by tapping on my bag with her index finger. "You should prepare ahead of time next semester," she said warmly. She seemed to mean it in a humorous way although it came out sounding like an excerpt from a boy-scout manual. I shrugged, she laughed, I climbed aboard the bus and paid my fare. The boys were talking loudly, laughing, even singing songs in raucous voices. It looked like the beginning of a typical ride.

Before the bus could leave, Bleeker, the only senior on the bus, opened a window and began shouting at Geneva Ryan. He called her a bitch. I could see Geneva Ryan's eyes widen with shock; then a pained look appeared on her face. Throwing my bag down, I hurtled myself at Bleeker, hoping to do some real damage to his face. The students held us apart, fearing some reprisal from the driver. Since the students loved fights, it was unusual to have them break one up, but I guess they all wanted to get home.

Once the bus began to pull away from the curb, I quit trying to hit Bleeker. I could see a look of dismay on Ms. Ryan's face. I felt sorry for her. Then I noticed that someone had dumped my bag out the window during the attempted fight. I saw my books scattered in snow drifts. My gym suit littered the street. Wishing to get away from St. Mary's as soon

as possible, I didn't say anything. I wasn't sure if there was anything I could say. I sat down and shut up and enjoyed my ride.

ii

Geneva Ryan was my instructor for the spring semester. Every week I spent hours in her classroom, learning a new language. I was unusually attentive, and soon grew more proficient in French than any other member of my class. With little effort I could conjugate even the irregular verbs. Each French class, I could be found sitting in the front of the room by Ms. Ryan's desk with my notebook wide open and a steely look of concentration on my face. I was a perfect caricature of the ideal boy found in the dreams of Irish Christian Brothers.

I always stayed after class to ask her questions. Sometimes I would talk about other matters or make up jokes. We became fast friends. I often walked with her to lunch after class. As we walked together, I felt that she enjoyed not having to walk through the tomb-like halls alone.

Our lunch room doubled as an auditorium. It was frequently used for dances or wrestling matches. Students sat eating off of collapsible, formica-topped tables, which were removed for any occasion that demanded a small auditorium. The faculty sat on the stage, facing the students from behind a single, wooden table as they ate. Two brothers always patrolled the aisles to make sure that nobody smoked or talked too loudly. They always made me take off my hat if I wore it at the table.

Geneva Ryan sat between two of the younger brothers during lunch each day. The three of them talked constantly. This caused all the boys at my table to trade jokes about Ms. Ryan and the brothers. They were crude jokes, and I never paid much attention to them. Occasionally I would pass the stage on my way for more food, and Ms. Ryan would wave to me. I'd give her a nod, praying that nobody at the table saw me. They always did. I would join Ms. Ryan and the brothers as one of the butts of their jokes.

One day I was in line for milk when Ms. Ryan came over and talked to me for five straight minutes about her sister who worked with juvenile delinquents and troubled children in Idaho. I said that I didn't know there were that many delinquents in Idaho. She laughed and said there were troubled children all over—even in Idaho. When I sat down I was razzed royally by my classmates who had watched the conversation from our table. Until the semester ended, they would cut me up for that conversation.

After gym the next day, I heard two classmates talk about me. I had just finished my shower and was drying off by my locker when I heard two voices from another section. At first I ignored the voices, but they seemed to float over all the other gym noises, (shower sprays, tired sighs, the sound of lockers closing and locks snapping shut) as though the voices were especially intended for my ears. I listened closely. Soon words were distinguishable. It was a long, vicious attack on me, centering mainly on my sexual practices and poor performances with anything resembling a woman. It was a typical conversation. What was strange about it was that one voice had a note of pure hatred in it. Usually these talks were not very malicious in intent. It upset me to know that someone hated me so much. "The bastard," I heard a voice I recognized as Bleeker's say and then repeat itself.

iii

"Why don't you stop into my room for a few minutes before seventh period?" she asked me.

"What for?", I asked innocently.

"I want to talk to you about something".

I didn't ask her another question. She acted like it was so obvious why I should show up that I didn't want to act like a fool and ask her. Seventh period was after lunch. I didn't know why she couldn't talk to me before class or right after. I couldn't think of any real reason for the meeting. I noticed that she left the lunch room early that day and didn't return. My mind was filled with reasons for a conference. Some were exciting, others dull. None of the reasons were very feasible.

Because she didn't give me a hall pass, I had to sneak out of lunch and risk a detention by going to her class without official permission. When I reached her room, there was no sign of Ms. Ryan. I sat down at my desk, waiting to find out what merited this meeting. Time passed slowly without a trace of her. I tapped my fingers nervously against the desk top and listened to the ticking of the clock on the wall behind her desk. Impatient and vaguely afraid, I stood up and paced the room. She still didn't come. When the bell rang I left for class. There were two signatures on my tardy card: a third one meant a detention.

"I'm sorry I couldn't make it," she said the next morning. "Why don't you stop by and we can talk today instead?"

She left class early that day: I had been determined to ask her about our meeting on the way to lunch. On my way to lunch I saw her talking on a phone in the foyer. She seemed upset. During lunch I thought about her; I noticed that she skipped lunch. Everything she did was a part of a puzzle I couldn't solve.

Sneaking to Geneva Ryan's room was no easy matter. I had to cut across the lawn and enter through a hall door. Brothers policed the area outside to insure that no students were smoking or doing anything else that conflicted with school rules or Catholic etiquette. I made it across the lawn, but was caught entering the hall by an older brother. I escaped without detention by mentioning Ms. Ryan's name. I felt like a spy on a mission in a foreign country until I realized how foolish it was to feel this way.

Waiting in Ms. Ryan's room was frustrating. Time passed slowly, again with no sign of Geneva Ryan. The room was still and deathly silent except for the ticking of the clock, which was more an aspect of the silence than an actual sound. When Ms. Ryan rushed into the room, I was startled by the abrupt explosion of sound she ushered in with her. The surprise of her presence alone was enough to jolt me; I hadn't expected her to show up, certainly I didn't prepare to see her crying.

Her face was pale and shaken. Tears streamed down her face. Brushing the hair away from her face with a thin hand, she sat behind her desk, crying softly into her hands. She was unaware of my presence although she had nearly run into me when she had come in.

I was embarrassed. I didn't know how to console her. After a few awkward seconds, I patted her on the shoulder. She looked up for a second, then turned away. She sobbed. With no idea what was wrong, I just stood there with one hand resting gently on her shoulder, unable to say anything.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked her. I felt lost. Looking at her closely, I realized how young she was—she was probably only a few years older than me. This was strange knowledge. I saw her differently; she was vulnerable, human. I felt a deep, guiltless sympathy for her, and wondered what had happened to shake her so much.

The bell had rung and students were filing into class. They gaped at the sight of Ms. Ryan in tears. I ignored them. Ms. Ryan didn't notice them. After about a minute, she sat up straightly, in control again. "You're late for class," she said simply. I left.

I received a detention that day. After my confused meeting with Geneva Ryan, I showed up five minutes late for my seventh period class. The brother, who taught geometry, cheerfully signed my tardy card and marched me down to the dean's office to make an appointment for a Saturday jug. When the dean asked me for reasons to excuse my tardiness, I couldn't think of anything to say. "Nine o'clock, Saturday morning," he said, writing my name down on a pad of legal paper.

Geneva Ryan missed school the rest of the week. By Friday, I had exhausted every way of examining the scene in her room. I was happy to forget about her and my jug for an hour during gym class. I concentrated on basketball. Charging the basket constantly to deliver a perfect lay-up, I began to feel pumped, loose and happy. I could feel my blood circulating, my muscles stretching and flexing, the way my whole body was working together. Every move I made was effortless and efficient and graceful. I ran the length of the court without any hesitation or loss of speed. My body ached and sweated, but I pushed it forward at a constant pace. I made shots from twenty feet out with ease. In the very last seconds of the game, I drove to the basket and leaped high over Bleeker and one of his team mates to ram the ball through the hoop with a vicious, game-winning slam dunk that left everybody on the court amazed.

I arrived at school Saturday with a host of students who were serving jugs also. The school was dark and quiet. The lights were turned off in the halls, and it was almost eerie to walk through the dark corridors without hearing the clamor of students as they rushed to classes. Our voices echoed softly as we talked among ourselves while waiting for the dean to appear.

The dean arrived, smiling in his long, black robes, and assigned work. I had to scrape paint off the gym lockers with a wire brush for an hour. My next job was to help prepare the lunch room for a dance. I had to carry the tables out of the lunch room and sweep up the dance floor. Again, I worked for an hour. Finally, I had to work with about a dozen other boys to clean up the athletic field. It didn't look very littered, but the grass was full of candy wrappers and broken beer bottles. I had a small, rusted hand-shovel to scoop up dog shit. When I finished and was signing out, the dean offered me a coke and asked if I needed a ride to the city. I politely declined his offers, walking home instead. I looked at the field on my way home; I couldn't believe the field had been so littered. It didn't look any cleaner than it did when I arrived.

On a whim, I went to the dance that night. I danced with a few girls but didn't talk to any of them. The band was too loud; they couldn't rock anyway. Most of the time, I stood outside with other students who were bored too. We swigged a few beers, always watching for the brothers who policed the lot every twenty minutes. They had had a boy arrested for drinking once last year. Some leeway was allowed at dances, but not very much.

Inside it was a very strange scene. The dance wasn't very well planned, and some couples showed up informally dressed in jeans while others wore expensive dress clothes. There were swirling, psychedelic lights. A brother was dancing with a young girl in the center of the floor. Not many others danced. Most watched the brother and talked.

I saw Geneva Ryan standing by an exit, guarding it against amorous couples. She waved to me. I nodded to her, and she came over. She took me by the hand, dragging me to her exit. We tried to talk, but the music was too loud. Still holding my hand, she pulled me out through the door, into the night. We were standing on the lawn when a brother, thinking we were lovers, jumped out from behind some bushes and shone a flashlight on us. He stalked off in disappointment when he saw it was Ms. Ryan. We both laughed.

"I just want to apologize," she said. "Well, not really apologize, I want to thank you. My father died that day I saw you in my room. I had been expecting it for a while—he'd been very ill for a long time—but I was still shocked when the word arrived that he was dead. Some things you can't prepare for, I guess. Thank you for helping me . . . cope with it." She leaned forward and kissed me softly.

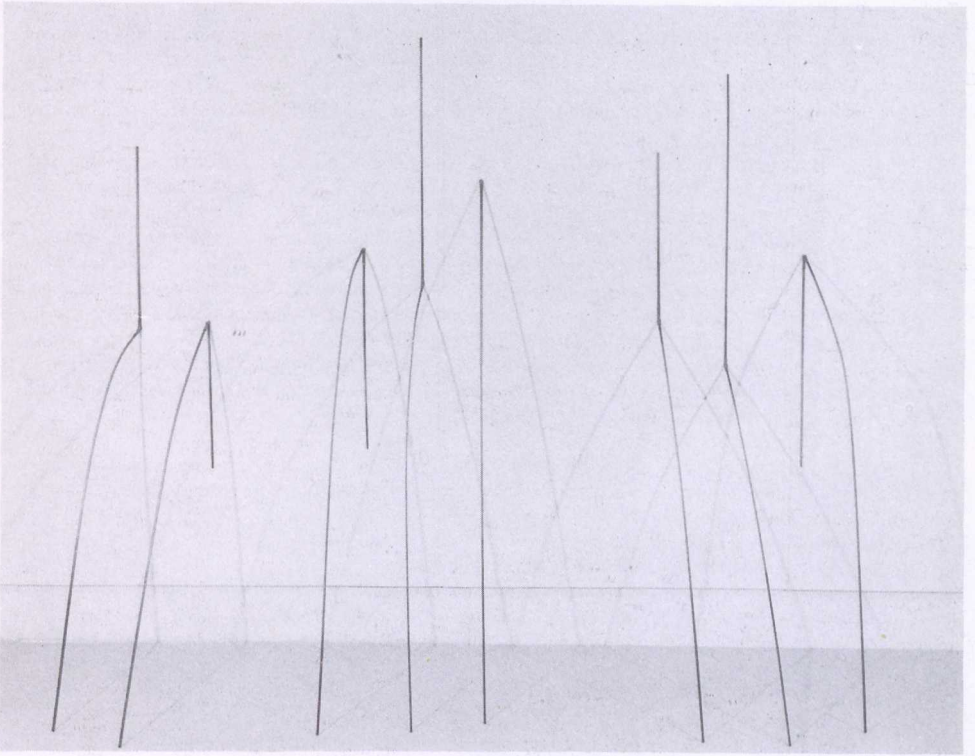
We were both quiet for a few seconds. The band playing in the other room could be heard. Only the bass could be made out; it sounded like distant thunder or the artillery in a war movie.

"Ms. Ryan," I began to speak.

"My friends call me Jean," she said in the dark.

"Geneva's much better. It's so exotic."

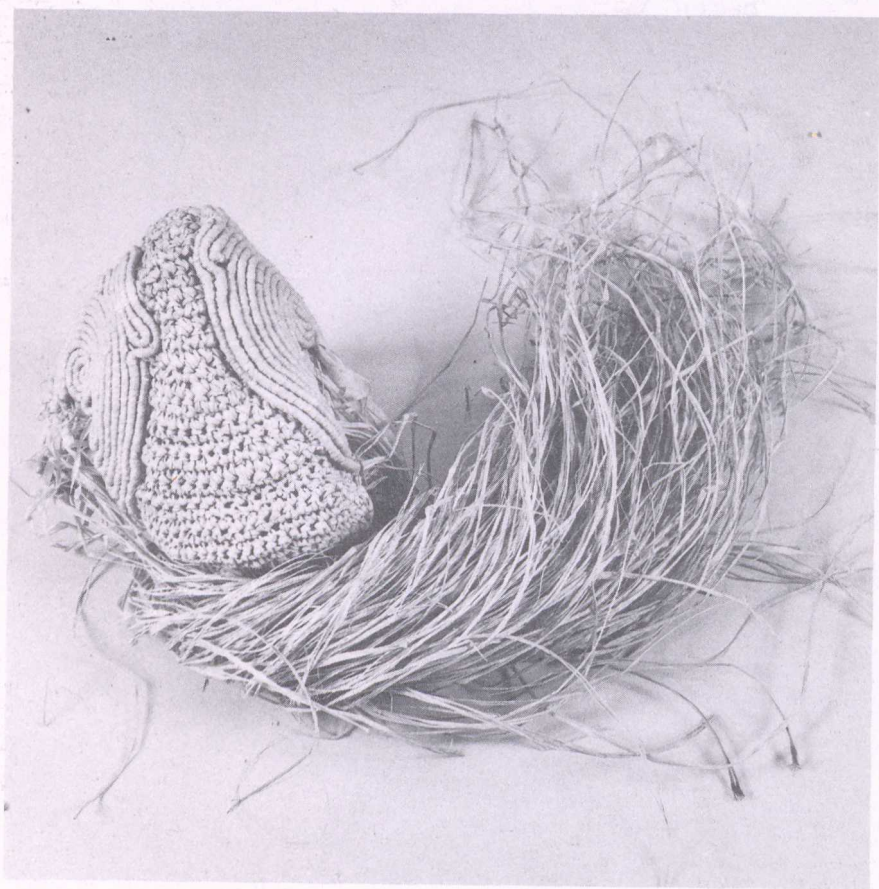
"I prefer Jean," she said as we walked back into the room where the dance was held.



Sandy Geiger







Deborah Gorchos

NIGHTMARE

riding,

still,

throughout
everynight,

almond-bitch
eyes
drag me
out of sleep.

back in saddle—
my nocturnal
obsession
reigns over me.

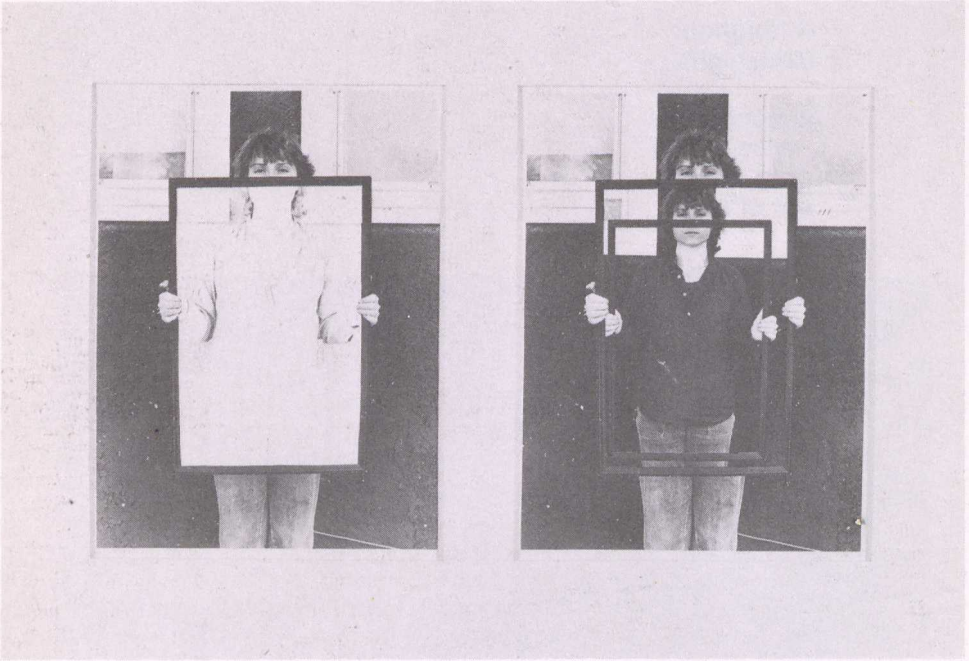
thighs—
leather-smooth
against this
rider,

mane ablaze
with bedsheet
heat—

unbridled
i ride the night
to its precarious end,

and rise...
saddle-soaped
in glory,
to slay the dawn.

Scott Tompkins



Carmen Wolff

WHEN THE DOG IS MASTER, OR
WONDER IS A SOAP BUBBLE DREAM

Before: It was
a sonic sphere of wonder,
shattering the crystal
palace of the mind.
Sending Reason scrambling
tail between its legs
yelping for Logic.

Inside outside now
no sides at all.
Not eyes seeing
nor ears hearing
moon in the juniper
ocean playing pebble castanets.

Logic rallied
Reason prevailed:
Rebuilt the walls,
raised the turrets,
burst the bubble.

After:
just a raven's cry.

Guntis Bisenieks

HAIKU

1.

Lucky young cricket!
That battle-severed back leg
Saved you from my heel

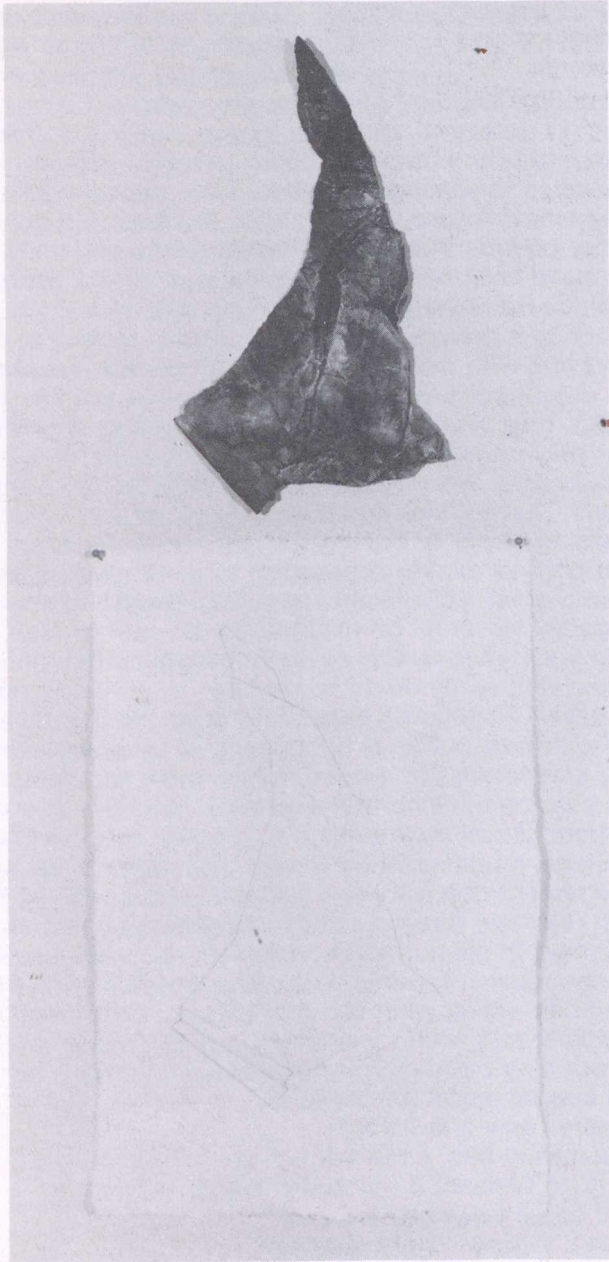
2.

Watch the restless wave
Shrug its shoulder at the sun
Roll over and sleep

3.

Ice-pool broken loose
A tuft of duck-down
Bursts a bubble in the mud

Tim O'Grady



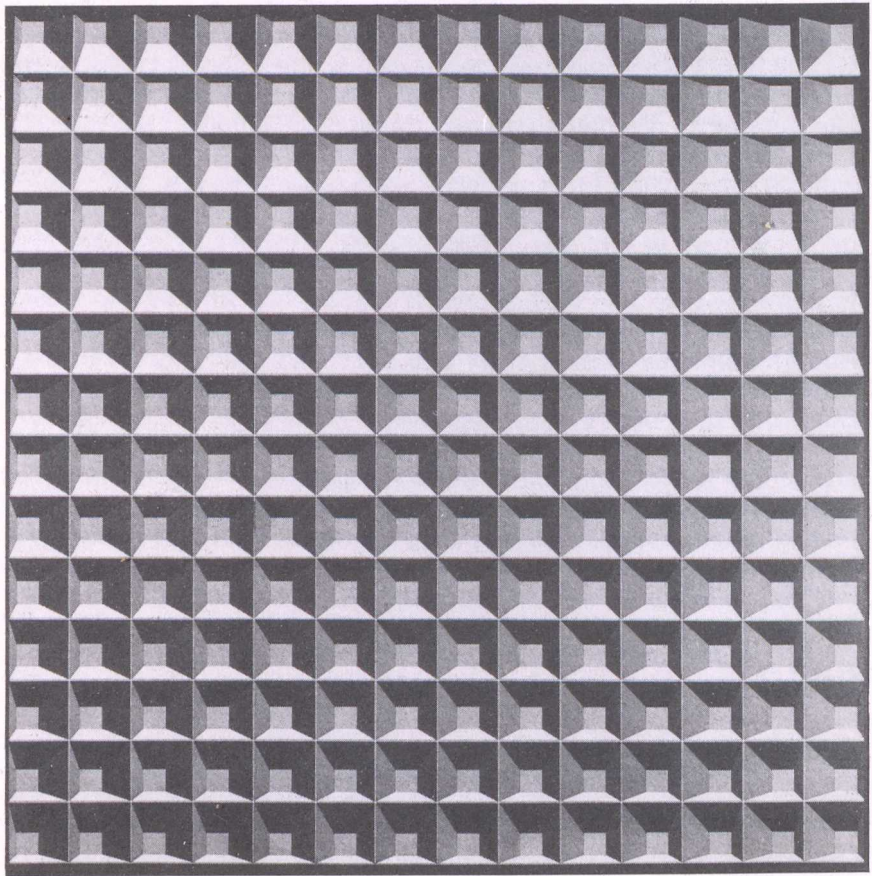
Denise Bellezzo

TO THE AUTHOR OF THE EXCELLENT
PLAY ON ALEXANDER THE GREAT,
A POEM OF CONGRATULATION
(BY J. DRYDEN, ESQ.)

"A poem of congratulation,"...Hmmm...
a good start, if I do say so myself;
it carries thought both noble & sublime
which, if reflected in succeeding lines,
should move him to infuse his plays
with a warmer passion than he had before.
But how to move him? Now that's the thing
that could elude me if I were alone
in fanning him to a greater heat,
but the times join with me in my wish
and sue for eloquence beyond mortal skill.
Now, to begin, how shall I start the work.
"About your play on mighty Alexander
Your theme is great, your music even grander."
even grander? That will not touch his soul;
I'll try something closer to the mark.
"About your play on mighty Alexander
Your theme is great, your music more than good."
more than good? He won't go for that;
the rhyme is gone, though the words ring true—
at least to one who really ought to know!
What can I say? This fellow's hard to know.
I've worked with him, but he is full of rant;
he lacks the smoothness of a poet born.
A resistless passion fills him to the brim,
runs over, drenches all his friends,
damps the stage, muddies Drury lane,
and floods a later Globe with loud fustain.
Yet, through rejecting Reason's cool repose
he gave his mind to get a greater part
and gained the warmer regions of the heart.
But still the poem waits; what can I write?
So little seems to suit what I would say.
"Through your play on Alexander's wives
You give a special moral for our lives."
a moral? There I saw him flinch;
a moral doesn't suit him, I can tell.
He's above it (or beneath it—who can say?)
but he'll add one if I ask him to.
Or, if he won't, I think I might suggest
that I write a prologue to his play.

But,...that's been done by a baronet
who retired to his quiet country home
to damn excesses in our present age
through his absence—Puritanic fool!
This age is ours; the Commonwealth is dead.
Precepts to the Leviathan are no longer sent
commanding it to come ashore where once it died,
drowning violently in our airy sphere.
The times were wrong; how could they be right?
Excesses are our essence, cold and hot.
I feel the chill, and others feel the heat
(as Alexander felt his passions move,
through my friend who put him on the stage).
But which is greater, which the most supreme?
In the unsettled wine of human life
the cooler will rise to ascendant foam,
the hot will sink as the dregs & lees.
Or will they? What about his play.
Alexander haunts me with his greatness
like the martyr of a failing power.
I wonder that such genius is allowed
without the guiding force of moral strength.
Was he alone in power? Or did his warmth
generate, near to him, his opposite—
one who could direct his vital force
to a greater end than he foresaw.
Opposites attract, although one may rule,
And partnerships exist in every age.
One must drive; the other must direct.
But if one fails what can the other do?
The age will fail and restoration end
and all the world might well be lost for love
unless we fall and begin anew—
renewing forms, beginning life anew.
But one alone, how can he begin?
Perhaps I'll write a Prelude, but to what?
I think I'll leave that to another age....
An Alexander poem? That might do.
Nothing else is left of what we were.

Earl Lee

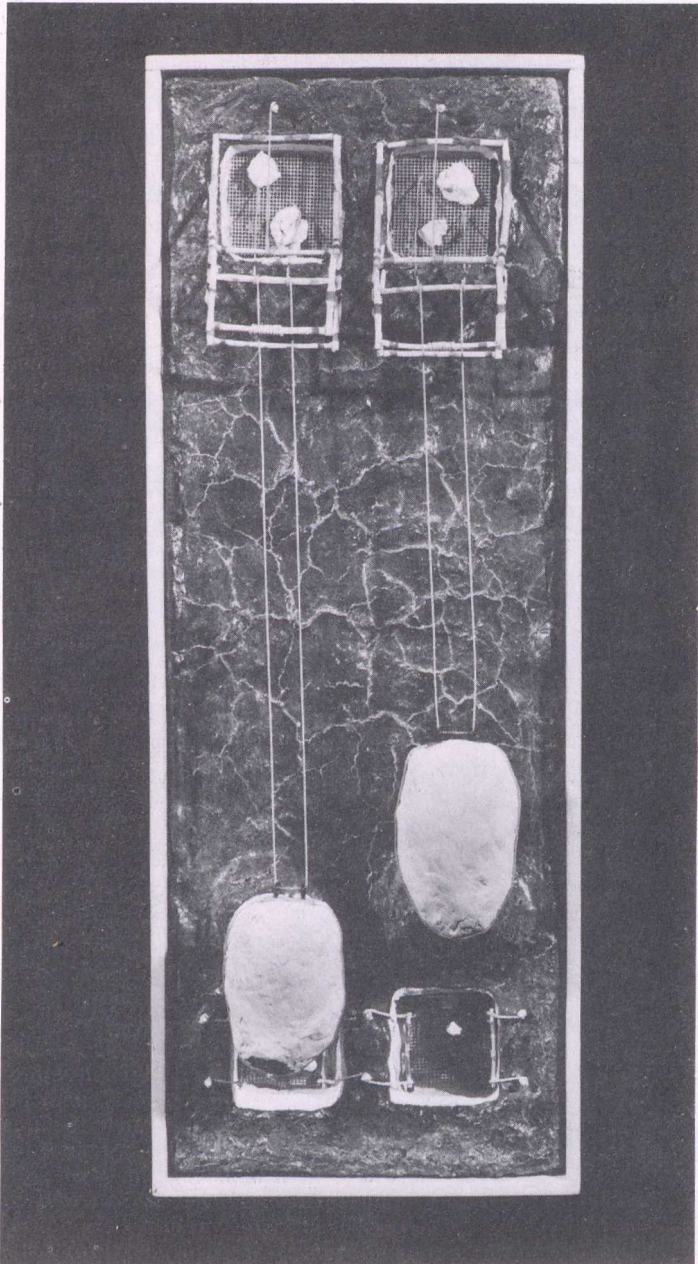


Frank Kulesa

ENLISTED ENTOMOLOGIST

At dawn, six inches from my face, a black ant
Scaled sticks, crumbs of earth and matter zig-zag
style, determined on some far haunt.
Cross-eyed witness, I watched him wait one twig
Before encountering a red cousin
Ant, attack from ambush this apparent
Enemy and find an equal match in
Skilled combat and hatred. The defendant
Was joined soon thereafter by other reds
Who readily tore at the black. Black's death
Near, brother blacks arrived too late to stead
Him, but straightfast took the cause. The field breadth
Now colossal, soldier ants filling my
Prone perspective in the morning sun's first
Light, our first sergeant whispered out hoarsely
"Fix bayonets." Rapid fire, a loud burst
Met "Move out!" I crawled forward on all fours
Crushing red and black bodies in my course.

Michael Kisluk



Peter Solarz

THE COVENANT

"And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be
blessed, because thou hast obeyed my voice." Genesis 22:18

Hearing the hungry whispers of the corn,
I check the children in their beds.
I've begged Abe to take us anywhere
But where corn lurks outside,
He laughs, says there is only Corn.

Before dawn melts over the elbow-polished sill,
He leaves me for his fields.
And I rise to watch the whispers
Slip through the screens
Hover above the children's beds
And smother any law school dreams
Like hot cat breath.

Yes, I've watched beside the broken stubble
After Abe's face softened and uncracked
Yielding roses in green tissue, and Isaac,
After the rain of harvest.

But one day the children won't be in their beds
And the corn will look less hungry
And on the slope of an east field

My leaned children will reach up pointed fingers
Their bare legs green in the light between the rows
Whispering a tassel chant pared in the earth.

Cheryl Turman

NEAR WARNER'S POND

I sat
Fingering the ribs on a carcass of an old row boat,
And squeezed the spongy bones
Till tobacco-stained rainwater
Ran between my pale fingers
And I wondered.

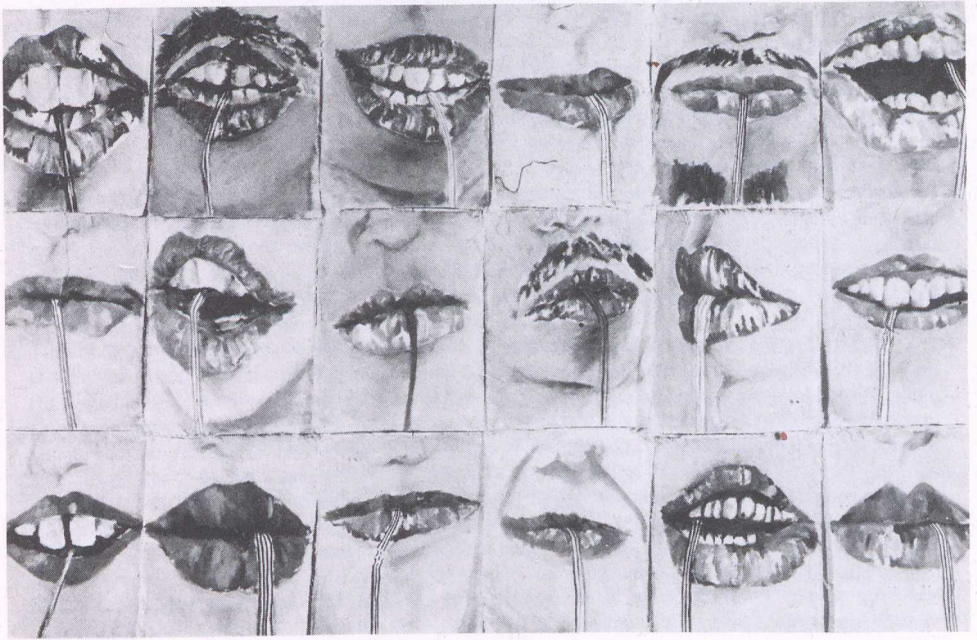
Its belly faced the sky
And sunlight streamed through gaps in the framework,
Cutting lighted furrows
Into the tangle of Sweet Grass and Dog-Toothed Violets
That lay beneath the dome.

And I wondered how it came to be here,
Oarlocks landlocked, sunk beneath a soil sea,
The nearest escape to free float tucked behind
Patches of Pine and scattered Scrub Oak;
A bloated green pond,
Stubbled with a Cattail crew-cut,
Brushed with Wood-Duck calls.

But that was so far removed.

And I wondered if perhaps when leaves came spiraling down,
And coated the rising floor,
And reeds dulled the clipped shoreline,
It had dragged its battered hull away
And lay staring up at the sky,
So as not to witness
The death
Of a pond.

Tricia McNellis



Pam Golden

ROOTS: A REAPPRAISAL BY DENNIS LYNCH

Occasionally a book comes along which is so acclaimed that it becomes a cultural phenomenon: *The Catcher in the Rye* was such a book; so was *Portnoy's Complaint*. But no book of the past thirty years has received such a favorable critical and popular reception on publication as Alex Haley's *Roots*. It has not only been a massive bestseller translated into twenty-four languages; it has also inspired the most watched television series in history, has been praised by two Presidents and both houses of Congress, and has made its title and author household words. In the eyes of many the book is an instant classic. Yet whether *Roots* can stand the test of time is another matter. Re-reading the book a scant three years after its publication and judging it as I would any novel, I found *Roots* to be a very aesthetically flawed book.

To judge *Roots* as one would a novel might seem irrelevant to many people. After all, both its publisher and its author label *Roots* "non-fiction," and many naive readers will assume that everything in the book is true; they will be mistaken, however. Although it is certainly true that Haley is writing about ancestors of his who really did exist, he knows precious few facts about each of them. For example, Haley learned from his aunts and cousins that his forefather Kunta Kinte was born in Africa and was captured by slave traders one day while chopping wood; he also learned that Kinte's native word for guitar was "ko" and for river *bolongo*. From the *griot* in Juffure, Haley learned that Kinte's father was named Oomoro; in his research into legal and naval documents Haley discovered that Kinte was transported to Virginia in 1767 and named Toby. With only a handful of facts such as these, Haley wrote over four hundred pages on Kinte's life; the vast majority of *Roots*, then, is fiction, not fact, and Haley's work is more accurately viewed as a novel than as a history text. Haley admits near the end of the book, "Since I wasn't yet around when most of the story occurred, by far most of the dialogue and most of the incidents are of necessity a novelized amalgam of what I *know* took place together with what my researching led me to plausibly *feel* took place."¹ Like any novelist, Haley uses his imagination to flesh out his characters and to construct plots for them, and, like any novelist, Haley is concerned less with literal truth as he is with mythic truth. Had literal truth been Haley's only concern, *Roots* would be a very short book indeed; instead, Haley engages in over seven hundred pages of myth-making.

The trouble with this book is that its myths are so simpleminded. Consider, for instance, Haley's treatment of Africa. It is perfectly understandable that in a book about slavery life in Africa would seem to blacks to be vastly preferable to life in America. Haley, however, is not content with just this; instead, in *Roots* Africa is pictured as nothing less than a paradise. In Kinte's village no black ever hits another in anger, no one swears, no one steals, no one kills, and no one covets his neighbor's wife or goods. All honor their parents and their God, and for all life is blissful. But there is a snake in this Garden of Eden, a white snake called the *toubob*. In *Roots*, *toubob* is the term used by Africans to label white people; it is the black man's equivalent to "nigger" and like that word it is totally dehumanizing and reduces individuals to stereotypes. The *toubobs* are evil incarnate and they let loose a Pandora's box of evil in Africa. Kinte "found it difficult to think of *toubob* as actual human beings" (p. 310), and that is easy to understand because of the way Haley characterizes them. Whites in *Roots* are constantly being compared to animals and are also described as ugly, greedy and rapacious. Whites are creatures who have "a peculiar stink" (p. 69), who seem "to enjoy causing pain" (p. 142), and who seem "to respect nothing to all" (p. 192). A *toubob* "lies for nothing and he cheats with method, as naturally as he breathes" (p. 136). The *toubob* women are so unfeeling and unmaternal that there "ain't hardly a massa in Virginia ain't sucked a black mammy, or leas' was raised up by one" (p. 311). This gets carried to ridiculous extremes: not content to vilify the *toubob* men and women, Haley's characters even besmirch the heavenly bodies which appear over *toubob's* land, as when Kinte decides that the moon that shines over Virginia is not "so beautiful as in Juffure" (p. 238).

In contrast to these terrible toubobs, Kunta Kinte and his descendants are models of decency, integrity, fidelity, and humanity—as well as of any favorable trait one would care to think of. In a typical example of the family's virtue, Haley's grandfather Will Palmer rides his horse "eight miles through drenching rains" (p. 697) to pay a bill one day overdue. How fortunate it is for Haley that when he traced his family tree he discovered fully seven generations of paragons of morality; how fortunate for him that he discovered not one relative with even the least hint of evil (or even of unattractiveness) about him or her. How fortunate, and how unrealistic, also; but *Roots*, for all of its "non-fiction" label, is at heart a mythic romance. As in most romances, the conflict here is between good and evil. The theme of the book is clearly shown by the story Kinte's grandmother tells him about the young boy who went to the aid of a crocodile only to be captured by the animal. The moral of the tale is that in the world "goodness is often repaid with badness" (p. 20). This allegory encapsulates (rather too obviously) one of the central ideas of *Roots*: the good of the humane Kintes is constantly being repaid by the evil of the animalistic whites. If *Roots* is a romance, Kunta Kinte is the romantic hero. Traditionally, the heroes of romance come from the upper echelons of society, and on the surface that might not be true for this book. Yet Kinte, after all, is the grandson of a holy man and a descendent of the founders of his city; his is one of the first families of Juffure. In America he and his descendants are never mere slave hands; instead, all of them have prominent jobs of their plantations: gardener, driver, housemaid, cockfighting trainer, blacksmith, and so on. Haley expresses the hope that the story of his ancestors "would automatically also be a symbolic saga of all African-descent people—who are without exception the seeds of someone like Kunta" (p. 722), and such a statement reveals the mythic and romantic impulses of the book. Yet what a self-flattering myth this is that Haley creates; what black family would not want to believe that their ancestors were as flawlessly noble as Haley pictures his?

Of course every novelist engages in myth-making to some extent. But apparently some myths are easier than others for some readers to accept. Consider the case of William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a work, like *Roots*, about slavery from a black point of view. Like Haley, Styron engages in myth-making in his novel, but unlike Haley's his myth is a rather complex one. While Styron's book is sympathetic to blacks, his black characters are not flawless; Turner, especially, has shortcomings. Likewise, Styron's whites are not all villains; a few, such as Judge Cobb and Margaret Whitehead, have redeeming qualities. Yet Styron's book outraged black critics whereas Haley's has been universally acclaimed. Although it is not surprising that Haley's myths about blacks are more appealing than Styron's to blacks, what is surprising is that a critical double standard has been used to judge these two books. In rereading *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* I found many arguments that were used to prove Styron's book is not only an artistic failure but also racist; oddly enough, many of these same arguments could be used against *Roots*. To date, though, this has not been done to any extent.

One example of this is that Styron was soundly criticized by black critics for not following some of the known facts about Turner. This was even though many of the "facts" about Turner's life are in dispute, and even though the book was clearly labelled a novel in which, as Styron admitted, he allowed himself "the utmost freedom of imagination."² On the other hand, Haley's book is labelled as a work of "non-fiction," the product of years of research. I have already suggested that there are relatively few known facts in this book; but Haley even diverges from some of the little that is known about his ancestors. For instance, the historian Willie Lee Rose notes in his review of *Roots* (*New York Review of Books*, 11 Nov. 1976) that Juffure in 1767 was not a quiet village but a major trading city which was so tightly controlled by its king that slave traders could not have taken one of his subjects without his approval. An error such as this seems minor to Rose and does not affect his enjoyment of the book; but compare this reaction to the outrage which greeted Styron's every divergence from fact. Moreover, Rose's point does not seem unimportant to me; indeed, it calls into question the very myth which is the cornerstone of the novel, the myth of the idyllic, peaceful, non-materialistic Juffure. Furthermore, it raises troublesome questions: If he could not have

been abducted, then was Kinte sold into slavery by the king or other blacks? If so, why was this? Had he broken some law? In any event it appears that Haley, like Styron before him, has changed some facts to fit into his novel's mythic structure. But though Styron was attacked for this, Haley has not been.

Similarly, Styron was chastened by black critics, especially Mike Thelwell, for writing that other slaves aided in putting down Turner's rebellion. Nevertheless, there are several sources, including Drewry's *The Southampton Insurrection*, which document this. But Thelwell felt that such a scene underlined "the book's emphasis on the benign nature of 'aristocratic slavery' which was able to claim the loyalty of the slaves."³ However, as far as I can ascertain, no critic has been offended that in *Roots* Haley repeatedly has blacks aid whites in oppressing other blacks. This begins with Kinte's capture in 1767 by whites aided by "slattee traitors" and continues through the Civil War when Haley reports that blacks aided in the capture of Ft. Sumter and loyally guarded plantations while their masters, for whom they shed tears of sadness in farewell, went off to fight a war to try to keep them enslaved (pp. 665-6). Likewise, Styron was attacked by critics for having his black characters speak in an uneducated dialect. This "Amos and Andy dialect" missed entirely "the beauty of Afro-American idiom," John Oliver Killens wrote.⁴ Yet Killens neglected to write that Styron's Turner speaks in an uneducated manner only around whites whom he feels threatened by. Around blacks, Turner speaks entirely differently, and of course his writing style is, as Styron renders it, very sophisticated. Styron, then, developed nice ironies among Turner's various voices. But in *Roots* the black dialect is pure "Brer Rabbit." For example, going is always spelled "gwine," catch is "cotch" and child is "chile." The demonstrative pronouns of Haley's blacks are always "dis," "dat," "dese," and "dem." "Yawsuh, massa!" they say, and even "Sho'nuff!" Haley's blacks speak the same way among themselves as they do with whites, and, oddly enough, only blacks use this dialect—not even the po' white trash speak like dat. Again, the difference in critical reaction to the two books is stunning: a trait which one might consider one of the finest features of Styron's book, the author's use of language, is viewed as a fault; meanwhile, what seems in Haley's book like an obviously hackneyed way to use language has provoked no comment.

Styron also offended blacks by not portraying Turner as a totally unbowed revolutionary. Some critics were appalled that at the end of the novel Turner no longer seeks mindless vengeance. It was felt that Turner was not the type of black leader who should be pictured in a novel. Furthermore, Styron was also condemned for suggesting, as historian Stanley Elkins has, that not all blacks yearned to escape. Styron believed that slavery was a wretched, dehumanizing institution that it produced a large number of "Sambos" resigned to their lot. According to Styron the black revolutionary like Turner was apt to be a very exceptional slave, one who had experienced some measure of freedom and wanted more. This is a "fraudulent and untenable thesis," Ernest Kaiser writes; the South was full of revolutionary blacks.⁵ "Dear old Dixieland was in a constant state of insurrection,"⁶ says Killens, and Thelwell adds "The reality of slavery was that the slaves were constantly resisting and rebelling, whether by sabotage, malingering, escape to the North, physical retaliation to attack, plotting insurrection . . . running off to join Indian tribes, or forming small bands of armed guerillas operating out of swamps and remote areas."⁷ Yet compared to Styron's blacks, the slaves in *Roots* are positively docile and seem to confirm Elkin's hypothesis that has so offended black critics. Kunta Kinte is the only member of his family who forcibly tries to escape from slavery, and this is largely because he is an exceptional slave, one used to great freedom in Africa. Kinte notices that the other slaves are not like him. "Any kind of respect or appreciation for themselves had been squeezed out of them so thoroughly that they seemed to feel that their lives were as they should be. All they seemed concerned about was not getting beaten, having enough to eat and somewhere to sleep" (p. 271); in short, they have become Sambos. Kinte himself gives up his attempts to escape after one year in America, and settles into a relatively comfortable life. He learns to make "de best of things de way dey is, 'stead of wastin' his younger years . . . plottin' what cain't be done" (p. 277), and realizes that he prefers life "on this plantation to the certainty of being

captured and probably killed if he tried to escape again" (p. 287). Kinte and his descendants are seldom abused by their owners, and all find a measure of happiness. Any idea of revolution is out of the question. Kinte feels that "any attempt at revolt would end in defeat" (p. 302) because of the greater firepower of the whites. Besides, Uncle Mingo says, "Niggers ain't gwine never do *nothin'* together" (p. 509). As Kinte thinks, the blacks worst enemy

was themselves. There were a few young rebels among them, but the vast majority of slaves were [sic] the kind that did exactly what was expected of them, usually without even having to be told, the kind white folks could—and did—trust with the lives of their own children; the kind that looked the other way when the white man took their women into haymows. Why, there were some right there on the plantation he was sure the massa could leave unguarded for a year and find them there—still working—when he returned. It certainly wasn't because they were content: they complained constantly among themselves. But never did more than a handful so much as protest, let alone resist. (p. 314)

It could be said about *Roots*, then, as was said by Alvin Poussaint about *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, that the book tries to be sympathetic to blacks but instead pictures emasculated blacks who are ineffectual as revolutionaries and who apparently do not have such a terrible life as slaves after all. Thus, one could call the author "an unwitting victim" of his own "unconscious white racism."⁸ One could even argue that Styron's book is harsher on slavery than Haley's. The terrible institution of slavery in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* produces such neurotics as the violence-crazed Will, the obsequious Hark, and the fanatic Turner. But how terrible can the slavery of *Roots* be if it can produce such well-adjusted and loving individuals as Bell, Kizzy, and Tom? It was such tortuous reasoning as this that was used to show that Styron's book was the product of a "vile racist imagination."⁹ Haley's work has escaped such criticism so far. Though both books offer a message that love can overcome racism and violence, one book was attacked by black critics, the other acclaimed. Part of this is perhaps because the myths Haley presents are generally more flattering to blacks than those of Styron; a larger part may well be that Styron's message was offered in 1967, a time of strife, from a white man, whereas Haley's message came in 1976, a time of reconciliation, from a black. But this, along with the examples cited above, constitutes a double standard, one which allows politics to dictate aesthetics.

If there is any doubt whether a double standard has been used to judge these two books, imagine what the reaction of black critics would have been had Styron's narrator commented, as Haley's does, that the slaves had a "great love of singing and dancing" (p. 244) and also "Loved the large fruit . . . called 'watermelon'" (p. 238). What, too, would have been the reaction had Styron invented a character like Haley's Chicken George and dressed him like this for his wedding:

After climbing into his cotton long drawers, he slipped on his blue stiff-front shirt, red socks, yellow pants, and yellow belt-backed suitcoat, and finally his brand-new bright-orange shoes. . . . With the mirror's help, he carefully arranged around his neck the green woolen scarf Matilda had knitted for him. Lookin' good, he had to admit. There remained only the crowning touch. Pulling a round cardboard box out from under the bed he removed the top and with almost reverent gentleness lifted out the black derby hat that was his wedding present from Massa Lea. Turning it slowly around and around on stiff forefingers, he savored its stylish shape almost sensuously before returning to the mirror and positioning the derby at just the right rakish tilt over one eye. (P. 534)

Double standard or not, *Roots* has many flaws which cannot be denied no matter what evaluative basis is used. For instance, for a work of "non-fiction" *Roots* is full of errors. There are several anachronisms in the book, among them a character in 1770 speaking

of the states of "Louisiana, Miss'ippi, an' Alabama" (p. 293), and another character discussing in 1849 the Lincoln-Douglas debates (p. 586). In addition, there are numerous problems in this book with the dates of the births and deaths of its characters, and with their ages at various times in their lives. This is especially shocking in a book which has genealogy as one of its main concerns. The most serious problem of this sort involves the birthdate of Chicken George. His mother, Kizzy, is born in Virginia "one night in September of 1790" (p. 362). When she tries to help her friend Noah escape it is "a week after Kizzy's sixteenth birthday, the early morning of the first Monday of October" (p. 444); the year, then, must be 1806. Kizzy's part in the escape is discovered and Kizzy is promptly sold to a plantation in North Carolina where she is raped by its master, Tom Lea. She then gives birth to Chicken George in "the winter of 1806" (p. 462). By "winter of 1806" Haley cannot mean the early months of 1806, because Kizzy was in Virginia then; so "the winter of 1806" must refer to the last months of 1806 and the early months of 1807—an odd use of the expression, to be sure. But if Chicken George was Tom Lea's son, as Haley claims, his birthday could be no earlier than July, 1807. Haley, then, has muddled the dates; this happens frequently in the book. For example, Maria Murray is "a half year old" (p. 660) in November of 1860, but when the local school opens in Henning in 1875 Maria is only twelve (p. 692). Not only does the aging process unaccountably slow down in *Roots* for some characters; even the calendar itself has a way of moving backwards. When Lea loses his fortune to a visiting Englishman it is November of 1855 (p. 590); but even though months pass the next season is called "that 1855 summer" (p. 609). There are many errors like this in *Roots*. Admittedly, these lapses do not bother the reader too much or detract from the story any more than Faulkner's chronological errors do. But this is an indication of how much *Roots* is like a novel; were it truly a history book such lapses would be unforgivable.

A more serious problem with the book is that it is not structurally sound. Since *Roots* is advertised as "the saga of an American family" one might assume that each generation of the family receives equal attention. This is not so, however, because some of Haley's ancestors receive vastly more attention than others. One might then assume that since this book is labelled "non-fiction," Haley's more recent relatives would receive more attention than his earliest ones, because surely there would be overwhelmingly more "facts" known about, say, Simon Haley than about Chicken George. This, too, is not so. Instead, Haley's earliest forebears get the most treatment; Kunta Kinte is the focus of over four hundred pages of text, Chicken George of over two hundred, and their descendants of relatively few pages. As a result, *Roots* is top-heavy. Kinte's story holds our attention and, to a lesser extent, so does Chicken George's; but the story of the next generations offers little narrative interest. Only at the very end of the book, when Haley is describing his own research into his family's history, does the story come alive again. The reason why Haley's more recent relatives do not supply such compelling reading as his earliest ones has in part to do with the myth-making process. With Kinte and Chicken George, two people whom little was known about, Haley could give his imagination free rein and was able to create dramatic, novelistic situations. But with his most recent relatives, about whom much more was known, Haley perhaps felt compelled to keep within the known facts about them. Their lives, like those of most people, were relatively routine and unsensational. Since Haley engages in little fictionalizing with them, their stories are brief and uninteresting.

Thus, except for the final scenes of Haley in Juffure, there is a steady decline in the time and care taken to tell each character's life. No one can deny that Kinte's story is skillfully crafted by Haley, or that Kinte emerges as one of the most memorable characters in all of contemporary literature. His idyllic life in Africa is tenderly, lovingly evoked; his capture, transfer to America, and escape attempts are terrifyingly narrated; his subsequent reconciliation to life in America and his courtship of Bell are carefully told. Kinte, like no other character in *Roots*, grows as his story develops, and the reader is able to follow each subtle shift in attitude he undergoes in his life. Kinte's final appearance in the novel, after Kizzy is sold from him and he destroys the gourd which is his last link to Africa, is as shattering a scene as any novelist could hope to write, and is

one of the most shocking exit scenes in all of literature. The superlatives used here are not unjustly overstated; Kinte is indeed a magnificent mythic creation of Haley's imagination. Unfortunately, his is the only story so finely crafted in the book. Chicken George's tale, the other major story in *Roots*, pales in contrast. Much of Chicken George's story focuses on cockfighting; this is fine in adding a bit of local color to the book, but the gamecock scenes go on far too long and divert too much attention from the main themes of the book, family life and slavery. The subplot of Massa Lea's adventures is pure melodrama. Lea, a poor white trash sharecropper, wins a gamecock in a raffle. He parlays a string of victories into buying a plantation, slaves, and hundreds of birds. This is romantic enough, but Lea's comeuppance is too much. Many years later an Englishman bets \$10,000 that his bird can beat Lea's. Not content with the bet, which only represents his entire life savings, Lea doubles the ante. Moreover, also at stake is freedom for Chicken George and his entire family. After a tense battle Lea's bird wins and Chicken George thinks "*We gwine be free*" (p. 603), but of course he thinks too soon. The Englishman offers a double or nothing bet, Lea incredibly accepts, and naturally Lea loses. Of course, it never occurs to Lea to offer the Englishman a third match; instead, Lea gives up his plantation, slaves, and birds, and is once again as poor as he started years previously. Meanwhile, Chicken George and his family give up their hopes for freedom. This is a crude, clichéd scene. Admittedly, Haley needed to flesh out his book with invented scenes. But while with Kinte Haley is inventive and moving, with the other characters Haley's imagination falters and settles for cheap, easy effects.

Haley's imagination also falters in drawing minor characters. All the old men in *Roots*, whether called Mingo or Pompey or the gardener or the fiddler, all seem so alike as to be indistinguishable, as do the old women, who appear in the various avatars of Sister Sarah, Miss Malizy, Sister Mandy, and Aunt Sukey. An even more serious flaw is that Haley fails in his creation of white characters. As I've suggested earlier, whites in *Roots* are one-dimensional stereotypes: the raping massa, the cold but fair massa, even a racist deputy sheriff. Only one white is presented sympathetically in the book and even he is a caricature. George Johnson, the poor white boy of almost Dickensian youth and thinness, is the book's only decent white character, and Haley even makes him an outcast from white society, someone forced to scavenge and aided only by kindly blacks. Still another serious failure in characterization is that Haley fails to create a female character equal to either Kinte or Chicken George. One would think that in the "saga of an American family" women would receive equal attention as the men. One might also think that if Haley were creating a new black myth he would create an Eve to go with Kinte's Adam. Regrettably, this is not so. Kinte has a wife, of course, as does Chicken George and the other males in the family; but, like the old men and old women of *Roots*, the wives of the book (Bell, Kizzy, Matilda, Irene, Cynthia and Bertha) are all very much alike—all are gossipy, deeply religious, very conventional, and firm believers in keeping alive the family history. Apart from this we find out little about each of them. Surely none has the stature of a Kinte or a Chicken George. Perhaps Haley was trying to offer an alternative myth to the myth of a black matriarchy by presenting seven generations of strong males. But a book which pictures seven generations of relatively uninteresting females is an odd tribute to a sex which makes up half of the black family.

Perhaps some of the problems of *Roots* were caused by Haley trying to meet the book's publication deadline. The latter portion of *Roots* seems especially rushed. At several points near the end of the book transitional passages are discarded altogether, and characters suddenly age ten or fifteen years from the end of one chapter to the beginning of the next; the resulting abruptness is unfortunate. Haley admits in the acknowledgments to *Roots* that in the "book's pressurized completion phase" (p. 9) his editor, Murry Fisher, drafted some of the scenes of the book, and this perhaps indicates that Haley was unable to devote full attention to all parts of the book. Perhaps it was at this time, too, that the notorious plagiarism from Harold Courlander's novel *The African* occurred. Though he paid damages to Courlander, Haley claimed that any borrowing was accidental; nevertheless, it is another example of the sloppy construction of the book. It is also exceedingly strange that for a work of "non-fiction" Haley's research should take him to a novel. Yet this, too, is another indication that Haley was more concerned with literary myth-making than scholarly history.

The sloppiness of this book extends to its grammar ("Kunta and the others tried to act as if none of them were really giving the matter any particular thought or concern"—p. 100) and to its punctuation ("She rushed home shouting 'Kunta likes me,' and after careful consideration, her parents gave her permission for them to marry"—p. 132). There are other examples of stylistic clumsiness in *Roots*. In one paragraph Bertha speaks of a young man she met at college, "his name, Simon Alexander Haley" (p. 699). After another paragraph Haley tells us Bertha is bringing home "Simon Alexander Haley—his full name" (p. 700). These are minor faults, of course, but they happen frequently enough to be irritating. A greater flaw is the awkward way history is brought into this work of "non-fiction." Occasionally, seemingly for little more purpose than to record the passage of time, Haley will have one of his characters comment on some recent event of note. Thus, one character will mention "some big fightin' up Nawth somewhere call Boston! It's dem white folks so mad 'bout dem king's taxes from 'crost de big water" (p. 295); a few pages later a character will hear "somethin' 'bout some Decoration a Ind'pen'ence" (p. 301); and two pages later someone cries "Cornwallis done surrendered! War am Ober!" (p. 303). History passes through *Roots* like a historical personage passes through a costume romance. It adds a little color, certainly, but it has little bearing on the main plot; moreover, its entrances are hopelessly clumsy.

However, the worst stylistic shortcoming of *Roots* is its hackneyed writing. Haley used cliché after cliché to describe the feelings of his characters. If a character's heart is not skipping beats (p. 518), it is pounding, or sinking (p. 189) or leaping in his throat (p. 109), or reaching out to someone. In *Roots* a character darts glances (p. 210), doubts his ears (p. 601), runs like one possessed (p. 262) and feels as if lightning had struck him (p. 211), and nearly jumps out of his skin (p. 106). When someone is excited, his face blanches (p. 603), his eyes narrow (p. 606), he is beside himself (p. 520), and an eternity passes (p. 601). When someone is scared it is because of a terror which is always nameless (p. 211), when he imagines something it is in his mind's eye (p. 721), and when he goes unconscious or drifts off to sleep all goes black (p. 253). Moreover, when the slaves are unhappy it is because of a black depression (p. 359)—an odd choice of words, surely, but any irony or humor here is unintentional (as it is when Haley reports that Cornwallis surrender "set even slave row shouting . . . 'Freedom am won!'"—p. 303). This, then is clichéd writing used to describe clichéd sentiments. The trouble with writing such as this is that it brings us no closer to the characters and situations it describes. Instead, it encourages the reader to think of them in stereotyped, clichéd terms. This is not what a good work of art should do.

Instead, a good work of art should break down stereotypes. It should give the reader pause and make him reconsider the life around him and see it in all of its complexity. Haley's trouble, ironically, is that he has too much a black and white view of things. Haley's whites almost all have hearts of black; Haley's blacks are all full of pure white goodness. Whites do little right in *Roots*; blacks do nothing wrong. Even Chicken George, an adulterer who does not hesitate to leave his family for long periods of time, is veiled favorably. And, incredibly, though Haley views America's white-dominated slavery as an abomination, he suggests that Africa's black-dominated slavery (of which Kinte's grandmother, Nyo Boto, was a part) was decent, humane and unobjectionable. Only infrequently, as in its descriptions of the aging Kinte or in its account of Haley's trip to Juffure, does the book rise above formulaic attitudes and sentiments. Thus, though it may still be heresy to suggest this in some quarters, I do not believe that *Roots* deserved the instant assumption it underwent into literary valhalla. *Roots* is an aesthetic failure, flawed by poor characterization, structure and style. To some people this book is above aesthetic criticism because to them *Roots* is a holy book, a new bible of sorts. Such is perhaps the finest tribute that can be made to Haley's myth-making power. This myth is indeed a very strong and appealing one in many ways, and, in its stress on the importance of family ties, it has something to tell all of us. But the power of the myths of *Roots* should not make readers avoid a close examination of the vehicle which carries those myths; nor should the "non-fiction" label scare off literary critics. Instead, *Roots* deserves as rigorous examination as Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* received. Haley closes his book by hoping "that this story of our people can help alleviate the legacies of the fact that preponderantly the histories have been written by the winner"

(p. 729), and this is a noble and worthy ambition. Black historian Herbert Aptheker writes, "History's potency is mighty. The oppressed need it for identity and inspiration; oppressors for justification, rationalization, and legitimacy,"¹² and Haley obviously attempted to write a work which would provide "identity and inspiration." But to replace the narrow myths of the winners with the equally narrow myths of the losers brings one no nearer to the truths about American slavery. All Haley accomplishes is to substitute a self-serving black myth for what has been too long a self-serving white myth. Haley's book fails because it cannot see blacks and whites in the full complexity of their humanity; instead, *Roots* preys on cheap emotions by reducing races to stereotypes and by reducing history to a conflict of heroes versus villains, blacks versus toubob.

NOTES

1. Alex Haley, *Roots* (1976; rpt. New York: Dell, 1977), p. 727. All further references to this work appear in the text.
2. William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967; rpt. New York: Signet, 1968), "Author's Note."
3. Mike Thelwell, "Back With the Wind: Mr. Styron and the Reverend Turner," in *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 90.
4. John Oliver Killens, "The Confessions of Willie Styron," in Clarke, ed., p. 43.
5. Earnest Kaiser, "The Failure of William Styron," in Clarke, ed., p. 54.
6. Killens, p. 42.
7. Thelwell, p. 87.
8. Alvin F. Poussaint, "*The Confessions of Nat Turner and the Dilemma of William Styron*," in Clarke, ed., p. 22.
9. Kaiser, p. 57.
10. Quoted by John Henrik Clarke in Clarke, ed., p. viii.



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