



stylus

2002-03

the literary annual of
midlands technical college

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Stylus 2002–2003

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Creative Nonfiction: Lorri Shannon

Fiction: Laura Carmen

Poetry: Jason R. Gilliland

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William C. Goodwin IV Memorial Art Award:
Jesse Johnson III

Jock Itch

MEG CLARK

I HEARD THE PERSISTENCE OF THE CAR HORN from inside my bedroom. I knew if I stayed there long enough she'd quit honking and just come in like she always does. She commenced to yell my name over and over and it got louder as she got closer to my bedroom door.

"Girl, get outta bed! It's noon-thirty and I'm hungry! I'm havin' a Big Mac attack!" Celia hollered at the reflection of herself in my vanity mirror. She spritzed some perfume and it made me sneeze.

I heard the soft popping of lids being put on and pulled off of mascaras and lipsticks. I sneezed again.

"Ok, you're up and in my car in 10 minutes or I'm leavin' without you," she lied. She plopped down on my bed and turned back the covers.

"It's cold! Quit it." I rolled back under the warmth of the electric blanket. "You go. Call Brett, she'll go get a burger with you," I lied. Celia knew just as well as I did that my lazy ass was getting up outta bed and goin' to McDonald's, of all places. My car was dead and Celia knew it, and I'd be trapped in the house all day doing chores for my parents if I didn't get out now. The thought of unloading the dishwasher and being at my mother's beck and call all day did not amuse me. I sat up. I was being pelted with a sweater and some jeans, socks and boots. Followed by a ball cap.

"Now come on. You have no excuse. I've dressed you." She paused to take back the original sweater she'd thrown at me to hand me a different one. "And you look fine. We're only going up to McDonald's. Come oooooooooonnnn..."

I hated it when Celia whined and she knew it. I jerked on the boots and laced 'em up, and when I sat up, I was kind of dizzy. Yeah, I guess I could get something to eat after all. I gave myself a quick look in the mirror, licked my forefingers, and ran them underneath my eyes, trying to rid the smudge of mascara that was left from the night before. I slid my hair through the hole in the back of the ball cap and followed Celia out the back door to her car that was still running.

We pulled up and parked right outside the door of McDonald's. We had a quiet ride there, Celia listening to a new CD she'd bought and me staring out the window trying to wake up, wondering to myself why the hell Celia doesn't sleep in on Saturdays like the rest of the teenage population. She had already gone to clean out her car, went to Sounds Familiar to get this whatever-it-was CD, and had her oil changed. She told me about all of this as we walked into the doors of the local Mickey D.

"Aaaaaah," she sighed. "Nothing like the smell of grease bombs in the morning." She turned to me and smiled. "Whadd-ya want?"

I stood in the back of the back of the line, not wanting to step up into the actual line because I hadn't quite committed myself to a Number yet. She always got the Number Two. I always had to decide. Celia smiled at some kid that was ogling her and waved like you do at a little kid and smiled real big. All of this was enough to make me sick.

I decided on the Number Three. We stepped up into the real line and waited for our turn. Celia was ordering for the both of us, as she usually did, when I whispered to her, "...and a cherry pie."

We both snatched hot fries and shoved the crisp greasy explosion into our mouths and munched hard as we found a table under the window, close to the front, because Celia liked to watch the kids on the playground. She sat the tray down, and we set our food to the side of it and put the tray on the table next to us.

"Listen, I'm gonna go wash my hands. You didn't even let me take a shower before we left," I complained, feeling grungier by the second.

"No need to explain. I'm coming with you."

I put a few more rogue fries in my mouth that had fallen out the box and proceeded to lead Celia to the bathroom. We washed up. I tried again to get the mascara out from under my eyes, decided it was futile, dried my hands, and followed Celia back out into the dining room.

She was so busy chattering on about who might be at the party later tonight that I saw him before she did. And I couldn't believe what I saw. There he was: middle aged, balding, with a paunch enhanced only by the screaming stretch of his faded red wife beater that had the Nike swoosh on the front. He had on shiny black Umbro soccer shorts that competed with the shiny lines of sweat that trickled down his neck into the faint patch of chest hair that gratefully disappeared under his shirt, only to reappear at his armpits. He had on black and white Adidas sweatbands around his wrists and white Nike swoosh ankle socks that wrinkled out of a pair of vintage black and white Adidas, old skool Run DMC style.

He ran a dirty fingernailed hand over the top of his gleaming dome, smoothing down what hair he had left. Before I went running for the fashion police, I instinctively took a second to check out Celia's expression. It was blank. I stood there watching her watch him eating our fries. She stopped dead in her tracks and wheeled around and had this look of complete astonishment and half embarrassment on her face. "Oh my God!! That Richard-Simmons-very-sweaty-man is eating our fries!"

Her face turned as red as mine did. I couldn't help but to laugh, which provoked a quick slap on my arm by Celia. "I'm serious! What the hell?" I looked over her shoulder and the very-sweaty-man, sure enough, was now opening a ketchup pack and squirting it into a pool on the corner of Celia's now opened cheeseburger wrapper. "Do something!" she half whispered-squealed-whined.

"What do you want me to do, Ceil?"

This is so damn embarrassing, I thought. She's the one who wanted to come here in the first place. What the hell am I supposed to do, exactly? Get the manager? I could just walk up to this loser; maybe he's got the wrong table or something. It could be an honest mistake.

Celia stood there looking at me expectantly while I fidgeted with the random thoughts that came flying into my head. "Okay, check this out. Maybe he's just got the wrong table. Let's go talk to him."

"But he's already eaten my first cheeseburger!"

"I know, I see that. Be cool. I'm sure everything will be cool," I told her as much as I was telling myself. I took the deep breath that went along with being cool, readjusted my hat, and walked towards the very-sweaty-man who was

now taking a big swig out of my Dr. Pepper, which was apparently favored over Celia's Coke. He continued to eat our fries as we stood over him.

He looked up. I held his stare. "Hello, sir," I began. "My name is Billie, and this is my friend Celia. I think you might be at the wrong table or something, because you're, uh, eating our food." I felt my face go horribly red. He just looked at me. And then he looked at Celia. And then he looked at the cheese-burger wrapper. He ran his finger along where it was printed *McDonald's*.

"McDonald's," he said with a gushing mouth full of food.

He sounded like an idiot. "Yeah, McDonald's," I said. "So what?" He looked at me and Celia and back to me. And ate another fry. "Listen, you're at the wrong table, man. This is our food. This is clearly some kind of mistake. Maybe if we could..."

"If you could what?" came booming out of his fry-infested sweaty-man mouth. I was shocked.

"I'm sorry?" I was stunned into stupidity.

"If you could what? Maybe if you could go and get me some more ketchup? That would be great."

Celia and I couldn't believe what we were hearing. He shook a massive amount of pepper into his ketchup, and it made me sneeze again.

"Listen, if you girls are just gonna stand there sprayin' germs all over my food I need ya to move on, okay? I don't like people standin' around watchin' me eat."

I had to say something. I had to save our food. "Sir, I'm sorry, but it's *you* who has the wrong table. This is our food. We paid for it."

Celia whispered, "I paid for it."

"I mean *she* paid for it, and it's ours!"

"Well, if it was yours it would have your name on it, and your names ain't on it. It says McDonald's. Either you girls named McDonald's?" He looked dead in my eyes and he took a big huge juicy bite out of my Big Mac. And smiled.

"That's it!" I yelled. Celia was three steps ahead of me, already talking the manager's ear off and telling him what was going on. I got over there and put my two cents in. That guy was mackin' on my Mac! And I wanted him to pay for my lunch and I wanted a refund and free lunch and, man, I went *off!*

I was so goin' to town on this manager, I barely heard the familiar wailing of Celia's car horn over my own ravings. I looked out the front door and saw Celia looking white as a ghost. She was frantically waving me over to the car to "*Come on! Come ON!*"

I left the manager standing there and ran out the front door to the driver's side window. "What are you doing in the car? You just want to leave after all this guy...?"

"Girl, get in the car," she said. "I stole that man's Adidas bag!"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I ran round the car and jumped in and she took off down the road. I looked at her all hot and bothered sittin' there drivin' hard. I looked in the floorboard behind her and sure enough, there was a big blue bag with the signature white stripes and a big Adidas logo on the side. She read my mind. I didn't even have to ask. She could barely stop to breathe she was so hopped up. "...And you were going off on that manager and you were being so rude to him so I walked away because I didn't want anyone to think I was with you, and then I saw that man get up to get more ketchup and I ran over and grabbed the bag he had on the seat beside him and I just ran! All I could think was him telling you, *Your name ain't McDonald's*, and man, that burned me up, so I just went over there and grabbed his bag, because by God his name sure as hell wasn't Adidas! So I took it!"

"You did *not!*" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I bet that man was looking all over for his bag. Now that was some funny shit. I kept playing his reaction over and over in my head and Celia and I both had our sides and cheeks hurtin' from laughing so hard. "You are crazy!"

Celia popped in the new CD she bought much earlier that day and blasted it loud. We rolled down the street laughin' and singin' and went through the BK drive-thru where I always got a Big Fish and she always had to decide.

We were waiting for our food at the second window when Celia said, "Hey, turn around and look and see what's in that bag."

I was just as anxious as she was to see what the very-sweaty-man had in his Adidas bag. I don't know why, really. Maybe it was to see if it held some kind of answer as to why this guy had been such a jerk. Maybe it was to see if he had something worth anything in there. But neither was the case. As I unzipped the bag, I dumped it upside down on the floorboard, and the foulest of odors came

rushing out and filled the car with nauseating nastiness. It was a pile of clothes, black with mold and mildew. Socks that were crusty and yellow stained t-shirts. The windows couldn't come down fast enough. It was truly disgusting. We both hollered and cursed and made faces as we frantically tried to rid the car of this wretched discovery. I opened my door and pushed them out with my foot. They scattered all over the BK drive-thru in a big nasty mess. Celia was steady spraying Ozium all in the car. I gagged. I threw the Adidas bag out of the car with the clothes. But as I made the back swing on the Adidas bag, the last of the contents came flying out and wrapped itself around Celia's rearview mirror. A jockstrap. The very-sweaty-man's jockstrap. We both yelled. "Get that thing out of my car!" Celia yelled.

"I am so not touching that thing!"

"Well, I'm not either! Damn! Just get it out!" Celia was starting to get mad. About that time the lady came out of the drive-thru window, trying to hand us our food, and saw the commotion. And smiled at us. Celia looked at her desperately and the lady calmly handed her a straw. Celia gladly accepted it, gingerly wrapped a band of the jockstrap around it, and like she was playing Operation, slowly lifted it, holding her breath (as we had been anyway) and tossed it out of the window. The drive-thru lady continued to try and give us our food. She was beginning to get annoyed. The foul smell of that bag and its contents were lingering and we had both lost out appetites. Celia took the food from the lady anyway. I held our drinks and Celia checked the bag to make sure our order was right.

"Ya'll aren't gonna just leave that mess for me to clean up, are you?" the drive-thru attendant said, referring to the pile of clothes and Adidas bag that were left in the drive-thru lane.

I guess Celia decided she'd had enough because she didn't say a word and just drove off. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the sight of the drive-thru lady's head poke out of the window. I turned back and witnessed the scene of the crime: the BK drive-thru littered with nasty-man clothes and that wretched jockstrap lying there. The drive-thru lady's face went severely red and she screamed after us, "Next time you girls just go to McDonald's!"

Cockfight

LISA MOORE

IT WAS DAWN ON FRIDAY, July 22, 1973. It was 84 degrees in the shade at 7 a.m. The recent hot summer drought had brought the usually noisy Broad River to a quiet stream trickling down from the mountains into the foothills of Cherokee County, South Carolina. The dust was so thick on the dirt road leading down to Elsie Jenkins' house by the river, that the preacher told the whole church last Sunday that he needed to turn on his windshield wipers to see how to come callin' on his flock down there on Beagle Club Road where Miss Nora Lee lived.

She didn't take all that attention too good last Sunday, but she reckoned that the preacher went to see others there on the dirt road too. It's just that she lived a humble life there by the river, doing things the way they'd always done them there; raising chickens along with the prize Bantam roosters that her Daddy and Granddaddy were so known for before they died.

Others must have been proud of them too, because they sure did drive a long way to buy them. She had a man last week come all the way to Cherokee County from Missouri, and when he came pulling in the driveway in his shiny new pickup truck, Gordon thought it was the preacher. Because in this neck of the woods, only the preacher could afford to drive something that fancy, not her neighbors who worked in the weave room at the mill or over in Blacksburg at the dye house for Peeler Rug Company.

Nora Lee woke up when the Bantam roosters in the backyard pen began to crow. She had some age on her now, and she felt the arthritis in her left leg ache

when she pulled back the quilt from her bed, placed her feet on the dingy shag carpet of the trailer she lived in, and shuffled into her bedroom slippers. "Shit, another day a-burnin' up in this trailer," she mumbled. She rose slowly from the bed, glanced in the mirror at the sagging skin on her arms from the house coat she'd put on to sleep in the night before, and walked up the narrow hall in the trailer to the kitchen.

"G-o-r-d-y! G-o-r-d-y! You'd better be a-gettin' up, cause I'm gonna have breakfast ready shortly," Nora Lee told Gordon, her grandson she had raised since birth, when the State declared his Momma, Elsie, mentally unfit to raise her only boy.

"Granny, I ain't ready to get outa bed", said Gordy with all the power a little nine-year-old boy could muster from his own voice.

"Well, I said get up, and if you thank for one minute that you can't mind me, I'll have you go out thar to the back yard and pick ye own hickory switch."

Gordon knew that Granny meant business about getting out of bed, so he pulled back the light blue Mickey Mouse sheets that Mary Sue, his favorite neighbor across the path through the woods had given him when her daughter, Geneva, had grown tired of them. "Yes mam," was his next reply, trying to avoid the hell fire and damnation he knew that his Granny would inflict on him if he didn't mind her.

"Granny, why ain't the river loud no more?" Gordy asked in a curious nine-year-old kind of way.

"Because we ain't had a drop of rain ever since the preacher had the Home-comin' thar on the church grounds, and that was way back on Memorial Day Sunday," said Nora Lee.

By now, Gordon was watching Nora Lee knead the dough for the biscuits from the same wooden biscuit bowl that her Momma used. "Granny, can you make me a hoe cake this mornin' and lots of eggs with gravy?" Gordon asked.

"I reckon so, Gordy, but why do you eat so much?" she asked.

"Cause I'm a-growin', Granny, and purty soon, I'll be a man," Gordon said.

That caught Nora Lee by surprise and it dawned on all of her 74 years that this little baby she'd taken to raise would one day be a man. "Gordy, just take it one day at a time," she said. "Enjoy being a boy, playing with ye little playmates, swimmin' in the river and agoing to church with me."

He always liked the way Granny petted him. What she said always seemed to make perfect sense to him. "Okay, Granny, but like it or not, one day I'll be all grown up," he said. Nora Lee smiled, proud of the goodness she'd tried so hard to put into that boy.

Suddenly, it sounded like there was an explosion in the den. But it was no explosion at all. The front door of the trailer had been knocked completely down off the hinges and there stood Elsie Jenkins, Gordon's Momma, Nora Lee's daughter. She'd escaped from the Columbia mental hospital and only God knows how she'd made it back all the way to Beagle Club Road, some 100 miles away.

Elsie came in and lunged straight for Nora Lee just as she was pouring the coffee in the sausage grease to make the red-eye gravy. Gordy screamed. He didn't really know his Momma but he knew she wasn't supposed to be nowhere near these parts of the woods by the river. "Momma, what are you doin' here?" he screamed.

"Get away from me, ye little piece of shit!" said Elsie. Gordon was so scared that he pissed in his underwear and then stood there trying to cover it up with one of Granny's dish rags he'd rushed to pick up off the counter.

Elsie just got right up in front of Nora Lee and said, "I ain't got no use for ye! You took my baby away from me and sent me off up thar to that hell hole in Columbee!" She was referring to the court order that named her mentally incompetent to function in society while pregnant with Gordon. She was sent to live out the rest of her days at the state mental hospital.

"Now Elsie, I didn't have anythang to do with that! You made ye own bed when you was out thar wonderin' the streets, hangin' out in ever beer joint, drankin' and takin' them pills and a-takin' on any ole man who would give you a dollar," Nora Lee said.

That made what little sense Elsie had leave her and her eyes began to glare with a look that Gordy was sure to never forget. Elsie lunged at Nora Lee. "Momma, what are ye doin'?" Gordon screamed, tugging at Elsie's hospital gown to get her away from his Grandmaw. "S-t-o-p it, s-t-o-p it!" Gordon pleaded. Elsie turned and gave Gordy the hardest backhand across his face that she'd ever attempted. He fell hard to the floor in a heavy thump, spitting blood out of his mouth along with one of his front teeth.

Then, Elsie reached down and grabbed the belt right off of Gordon's britches and wrapped the belt tight around Nora Lee's neck. Nora Lee tried to fight off Elsie but she was too weak from her blood sugar to do much about it. "I finally made it out of that hell hole last night, and it's time for ye to pay for takin' my boy from me!" said Elsie.

Nora Lee silently prayed to God to have mercy on her. Elsie grabbed both ends of the belt and pulled it tight. Elsie's lower denture fell out and cracked on the floor. One of Nora Lee's eyeballs popped out to the floor along with a big gush of blood, drenching Elsie's white cotton hospital gown. Nora Lee was spared no mercy, as she lay slumped on the floor. Elsie took a bobby pin from her hair and stabbed it into the other eye left on Nora Lee's face. "Thar!" she said. "You ain't a-layin' eyes on him no more!" she said. Elsie stood there thinking that she had finally finished what she had come to do. She rose to her feet, turned off the burners on the stove and ate a handful of raw biscuit dough. Then, she left out the front door and started walking down the dirt road toward the woods.

Gordon had managed to get to his feet and take off running as fast as he could run in his bare feet down the trail by the river to Harvey and Mary Sue Walker's house as soon as Elsie took the belt off his pants. He was crying and saw Harvey Walker plowing out in the field on his old Massey Ferguson tractor that cranked in the front with a big long handle. "Momma's out, Momma's out!" he cried.

At that moment, Harvey saw the terror in Gordon's eyes—a look that he'd never seen before. He stopped the tractor, got off and came over and placed his hand on Gordon's shoulder. "What the matter, son?" Harvey asked.

"I said, Momma's out. Help me, Mr. Walker, help me!" he cried. "I thank she's a-tryin' to kill Granny."

"Now, wait a minute, Gordy. What in the devil are you a-talkin' about?" said Harvey.

"I said that Momma busted into the house awhile ago and the first thang she did was go after Granny," Gordon replied. Harvey picked up Gordon and he carried him up the dirt path from the garden to the house he had shared with his wife, Mary Sue, since January 24, 1961.

They approached the Walker's house and Mary Sue and her little daughter Geneva were sitting on the front porch shucking corn from the garden. Geneva was in Gordon's fourth grade class at school. "Momma, that looks like Gordy

that Daddy is totin'," Geneva said.

"Harvey, is that little Gordy? What in the dickens has happened with that child?" said Mary Sue. "Genever, go in the house right now and play with them baby dolls over thar in that old tater box!" Mary Sue told Geneva.

"But Momma! Gordy's in my class at school!" Geneva told her Momma.

"Do what I said Genever! This is grown folk business!" Geneva got up from the front porch swing, put down the corn, and reluctantly went inside to her bedroom. Mary Sue opened the screen door and hollered to Geneva to stay in her room until she was told to come out.

"Harvey, what happened?" Mary Sue asked.

"We ain't got time to go into this by speckalatin' and gossipin'. We got to take care of this youngun!"

Harvey walked inside and placed Gordon on the bed in the guestroom. Mary Sue walked into the den, put a washrag into the sink, wrung it out and came back. She started wiping off Gordon's head. "She shore put a beatin' on him. It's pitiful. Children are God's gifts to the world. Little Gordy and Nora Lee ain't never hurt nobody. Why in the world would Elsie want to come back to these parts and inflict such a devil-like thang on them? What we gonna do now?"

"I got to go get Preacher Jones to ride over thar with me and see if Nora Lee is all right," he replied. He leaned over and kissed Mary Sue with the deep heartfelt love he had had for her since he met her at the county square dance in 1960. "I'd better skedaddle out of here and get the preacher," Harvey said.

"Be careful, Harvey," she pleaded.

Harvey walked outside while the screen door quickly slammed behind him. He started the engine on his pickup truck and started down Beagle Club Road, wiping the dust from his eyes as it came in the window he had rolled down to escape the 97-degree heat on that hot summer day in South Carolina. Harvey turned right onto Ridge Road. He knew the preacher would probably be at home. The preacher lived about a mile further down Ridge Road. Harvey's truck pulled up into the drive and honked the horn.

Rev. Jones heard the horn and walked out onto the porch. "Well, Brother Harvey, what brings you over?" he asked. "You bringin' another bushel of butterbeans and tomatoes today?"

“Nahh, preacher... I wish that was why I came a-callin’ today but that ain’t the reason,” Harvey told the preacher as he reached down into his overalls and pulled out a soiled handkerchief to wipe the sweat off his brow. “We got a bad thang happened over thar by the river,” Harvey told the preacher. “Miss Nora Lee Jenkins has been hurt,” he said.

“Miss Nora Lee? Why, she ain’t never done nothin’ but good to anybody she ever came around,” the preacher said.

“I know,” Harvey replied. “Preacher, will you ride over thar with me to see just what’s the matter? Little Gordy came a-runnin’ over to the house a while ago and he’s in pitiful shape. Pray for him, preacher,” Harvey said.

“Yes, I’ll pray for him,” the preacher quickly said. “Of course I’ll go, Harvey. Let’s get in the truck and get right over there.” The preacher reached over on the coffee table and put his bible in his right hand. Then they walked out the door.

Harvey and the preacher got in the truck and rode over to the Jenkins’ trailer on Beagle Club Road. Right away they saw the door was torn down from the front of the trailer. They got out of the truck. Slowly, Harvey walked up to the trailer and peered in the window. He stepped back and vomited on the grass.

“What is it Harvey?” the preacher asked.

“Come here, Preacher. It’s much worse than anythang I ever saw in Korea,” he said.

The preacher walked over. “We got to call the Law,” he told Harvey. The preacher knelt and prayed out loud that God had spared mercy on Nora Lee. Then he walked in the trailer and picked up the receiver of the rotary phone hanging on the wall. The heat and the odor of the dead body were unbearable.

He dialed the Sheriff’s Department quickly. He knew the number by heart because Sheriff McKinney was the chairman of the deacons at the church and he called that number at least once each week to arrange to have lunch with him at the Peach Orchard Café, and then go fishing for catfish at Broad River.

“Cherokee County Sheriff’s Department,” the woman on the other end of the line said.

“This is Preacher Frank Jones from Grassy Pond Baptist Church here in Cherokee County. We got a woman who has been killed in her trailer. Please send out a deputy.”

“Oh my God, Preacher. What happened?” the operator asked.

“We ain’t got time for that,” he told the dispatcher. “It’s so hot out here the body’s gonna have rigamortis settin’ in if we don’t get someone out here. Send out the funeral home and the deputy to make a report.... Is Sheriff McKinney working today?”

“No, Preacher, he’s gone fishing in Santee for the weekend,” she replied. “I’ll send somebody out thar right away.”

No sooner had the preacher hung up the telephone than Elsie appeared stumbling down the driveway. “Preacher! Thar’s Elsie,” Harvey said, and they both ran toward her. She began cursing them. They grabbed her and wrestled her to the ground.

Elsie struggled and spat on the preacher. The preacher and Harvey held her to the ground. She reeked of intimate female odor. The Preacher felt nauseated from the heat and her smell.

“We ain’t a-lettin’ loose,” Harvey screamed. Harvey pulled out a short piece of hay bale twine from his back overalls pocket and tied her hands tightly together. They heard the sirens of the Sheriff’s deputies as they sped down Beagle Club Road. They could see the dust from the patrol cars over the tops of the pine trees across the field.

Two deputies pulled into the drive. “You’d better get this gal and carry her back to Columbia as fast as you can,” Harvey said.

“Yes sahh,” they replied. The deputies got out the handcuffs and threw Elsie in the back seat of the deputy’s car. She was kicking the windows and screaming. They could tell she wasn’t wearing any underwear.

“What happened, Preacher?” one of the deputies asked.

“Her little boy, Gordon, came a-runnin’ down to the house tryin’ to tell that his Momma had got out of the crazy house in Columbia. She was hurtin’ his Grandmaw, Nora Lee. Well, take a look in the house. She killed her with that belt layin’ on the floor. Pulled it so tight that her eyeball popped out beside her head.”

Elsie was still spitting and screaming. “What should we do with all them roosters in the back?” Harvey asked the preacher.

“I’m sure that somebody having one of them secret cockfights down here by the river will be glad to take them,” the preacher said in a way that all people

in Cherokee County talked about the cock fights—in a hushed whisper. Illegal cockfights were a rite of passage for young boys there, just like hunting and fishing were. They always went to them with their Daddy, Granddaddy and Great-Granddaddy because it was a secret backwoods southern heritage passed down since the days of the Civil War.

The deputies got in the car and drove away with Elsie. She was placed in a maximum-security section of the mental hospital, committed to live there for the rest of her lifetime. Harvey and Mary Sue agreed to be foster parents to little nine-year-old Gordon until the State decided where he should live once again.

Things settled back down in Cherokee County to a slow pace. It rained the whole month of August 1973. Ike and Tina Turner were singing “Proud Mary” on the AM radio stations. And at last, one by one, they came riding in the back of pick-up trucks, on blistering Sunday afternoons, down the dusty trail by the river, with their inner tubes, to go for a ride on the swift currents just after Labor Day and all of the month of hot September 1973, as the Broad River once again returned to a noisy roar just beyond the pine trees of the Jenkins’ trailer.

The Plight of Ms. Lola Princess Goodfellow

STANLEY SOLOMON

I

I WONDER WHO WILL BE THE FIRST FOOL to get on my last nerve today. The same line every morning: “How are you today, Ms. Lola? Did you sleep well, Ms. Lola?” The same stupid line—do they think I’m a child? If they knew better they would get out of my face and leave me alone to my thoughts. I got a good mind to cuss them out, but I am a Christian woman, and the Lord don’t like ugly.

Been here in this nursing home for nearly eight years. They call this dump Happy Valley, but they should have called it Hell’s Kitchen. Whoever built this place must have been on the run from the law, because it’s located way back off the main road. The only neighbors we have out here in Florida are the gators and them pesky mosquitoes. The food is so awful and it smells real bad. I think some old fart must have died in the corner and they left his body to rot. These people are always in my face. Can’t they just leave me be?

I miss my little cat, Mae; she always brought me such joy. If she was here, I know she would probably scratch this old witch’s eyes out for bothering me. She probably don’t even know my last name. Ms. Lola this and Ms. Lola that. My name is Ms. Lola Princess Goodfellow and I got drawers older than that witch, and all she knows is Ms. Lola. I got a good mind to hit her with my cane; maybe that will knock some sense into her knucklehead.

I just look her way and roll my eyes, and grin. Nurse Haddie has been working here since the day they broke ground on this old nursing home. She dresses like she just woke clean up and got out of bed and smell of old cat piss. I wish she would at least buy a new dress. The one she got is so old you can see all her business. That ain't too lady-like, cause a decent woman would want to keep all her business to herself. I hear tell she was married once and her snake of a husband ran off with her best friend, and ole Ms. Haddie ain't been right in the head ever since. But I just grin and keep my thoughts to myself, because I am a good Christian woman, born and raised in Elgin, South Carolina. Elgin is a quiet town where everyone minds their own business and keep to themselves. Not like this den of thieves. I can't even leave my room without someone peeping around the corner waiting to get into my things.

Yes, Elgin is a great place to live and raise children, all quiet and peaceful. Around here, I can't even take a good nap before somebody is slamming a door, or asking something crazy. I used to set on my porch and dream of faraway places of sandy white beaches and them there tropical drinks. I think they called them Pina Colados; all I've been told is that they taste right good on a hot day. But I'm a good Christian woman and alcohol don't sit too good with my teaching, but maybe a little taste won't hurt. With Jesus' blessing, that is. I miss my home every sunny day. One day soon, I'll see my little patch of land and sit on the front porch and just enjoy the sun on my face.

I might even get me a new beau. Even though I've been married three times, I think I still have some life in these bones, for the right fellow that is. In my day a woman had to get married right quick before her gray hairs started setting in. A full set of long black hair will catch a fella's eye every time. And I had the longest set of black hair in the neighborhood, right down to my behind. It's still kinda like that to this day. That's why I keep it pinned up; I don't want any of these old goats getting any ideas. They probably wouldn't even know what to do with a good piece of woman like me if they had the chance. I could bet on a good day that their plumbing don't even work. But I'm a Christian woman and I don't gamble or fornicate. And besides, I'm not studying them broke busters. The only thing they can do for me is take my trash out and they couldn't even do that without slipping and falling.

"Ms. Lola, it's time to get up!" I hear Haddie's big ole mouth over my

shoulder. Nurse Haddie must think I'm hard of hearing. She talks so loud like she's calling some hogs or something, but I just grin and look her straight in those sneaky eyes. I haven't spoken a word since that big ole police dropped my purse and me on the steps of this awful place. The last thing I remember them saying was that I hit someone with my cane, and they thought I was crazy living in that big house by myself. But I was fine, my cat Mae and I. I sure do miss my big house and my beautiful yellow daffodils and tulips as big, bright and inviting as cantaloupes on a hot summer day. I used to work in my yard for hours, just Mae and me. Mae used to run and chase squirrels all around the yard and come up to me afterwards as if she had run the race of her life.

"Ms. Lola, time for breakfast!" I hear Haddie shouting over my head. I got a good mind to tell her off just to shut her up. But I feel my pressure coming up on me. I don't want to get to upset on an empty stomach. I wonder what they are cooking me for breakfast this morning. Must be the same ole nasty grits and toast. I hope they give me a slice of that creamy butter this time. That's really the only thing I like about this place. That butter makes mighty fine hair grease. I still like to keep my appearance up just in case I meet my new beau or my maker in heaven, whichever comes first.

Lordy be, I thought I'd never get to the dining table. Haddie nearly killed me rolling me in this wheelchair from side to side. I think she must have it out for me, but Haddie is too scared the other nurse would catch her if she were to raise a hand to me again. The last time she waited till I was drowsy from sleep and knocked me clear to the floor. The only reason she had was she didn't like the way I was looking at her. But I didn't say a word because I think one day soon she's gonna make her move to cuss me out and knock me right out of this wheelchair. But I'm a Christian woman and I pray for all God's children no matter how evil their spirit. But if she tries that mess again I will beat her from the book of Genesis to the book of Revelations. Me being a Christian woman, I don't think the Lord would approve of me raising my hands to an ignorant soul. He might just let me get one good slap in, though, just to make her see those heavenly gates, even if she won't make it through them.

Breakfast is over and I steal the usual knife and fork and put them in my bag for later, because I think today I will try to pry that old door open and find my freedom. They will be surprised because they think I can't walk or talk. But they

will soon find out, I still have a little spirit in these old bones and a lot of schooling to boot. I'm trying to wait for the right time. I think it will be tonight. I hope I can still flag down a ride to the city. I think the time is right, because I'm getting old as each hour passes on the clock. Yes, tonight will be the night. I think I will lie down and rest a spell. I'm feeling a little tired this evening.

That clock can't be right. Looks like eight at night. I have slept clear through dinner and that witch Haddie didn't even wake me from my nap. That's all right; I will leave her a mean letter, and give her a piece of my mind. I don't have much time; tonight is the night I make my escape. I hope I can still muster the strength. If not, I know the good Lord will be on my side. He is the only one who knows how unhappy I've been since I've been in this dreadful place. I would not wish this place on my worst enemy, if I had any.

Where's that big bag that Bertha bought me last year? I can probably fit my whole life in it. Ole Bertha always knows how to treat her friends. She will be the first person I visit when I get out of here. One last check of the mirror and my bag. I'm ready for my travels: hairbrush, bible, stockings, underwear, and a change of clothes. Yes, everything's here. That fool Haddie even fell asleep and left the door open. She will be surprised to see me go. On second thought, she would probably dance a dance and shout Hallelujah. Goodbye all, I'm on my way to the life I left behind. Lord please guide my steps.

Lola, are you up yet? Lola, you hear me calling you. I must have slept straight through dinner here on this couch. These old folks get me so tired I don't know whether it's day or night. I better get up and check on things. Lola, time for bed. Lola must know she gets on my last nerve with her blank stares and her stupid grin. Every since the first day the policeman brought her here she's been nothing but trouble. Something just ain't right about her. Sometimes I wonder if she thinks she's a princess in a palace or even a queen. Always carrying that bible as if she's Jesus himself. Instead of walking on water, she should try to walk her way to the nearest tub and wash her backside. One day I'm just gonna leave this place and find me a good man to take care of me and retire. But before I decide to leave I'm gonna give that Lola a piece of my mind. Lola where the hell are you? I know you are here somewhere. I bet she has found her way to her room. I better check and see for sure.

II

No one here; where could she be; the room is clean. Someone left a note on the bed addressed to me; this should explain everything. Maybe the other staff took her for a walk or something. Let's see what this is all about:

Dear Haddie,

Just wanted to thank you for the worst years of my life. If I wasn't a good Christian woman, I would be standing over you and beating you silly. You have made my life a living hell. And I hope you find some God to forgive you for your sins. You are the worst excuse for a woman that I have ever met. In closing, have a nice life, and don't forget to cut off the light when you leave.

Ms. Lola Princess Goodfellow

Oh my word, she's gone. I have to go out and find her; she shouldn't be too far. That old hag could cost me my job. Wait till I find her; I knew she had something up her sleeves from the way she grinned at me. I will just drive out to find her and bring her back where she belongs.

The road is so dark; she couldn't have gotten far. I just have to keep my high beams on and my eyes peeled. I'm sure I will be able to find her with no problem; I just have to keep calm. I'll just stay on this road; she can't be too far in all this darkness. I can barely see through the window but I must keep driving. My job depends on it.

III

Lord, I knew I should have waited until morning. What's an old woman doing out on a night like this? I rather die out here in the dark close to my God than be in that old place of suffering. I bet Haddie is still asleep on the couch. I've made up my mind and I'm not turning back. Now if I can only find the highway. It's getting foggy and I'm getting colder by the minute. I know the road is out here somewhere. I should have packed my warm coat. Just a few more feet, I know I can make it. I see the highway and the headlights of an approaching automobile. If I can only make it to the middle of the road I know the driver will

see me and give me a ride. Just a few more feet, I think I can make it. I have to make it. I'm here. See me! Slow down! Slow down. My arms are getting tired. I feel the sweat building on my face. A sharp pain shoots through my body. Please stop. My body gives way, and the ground comes up to meet me. Please stop. You are going too fast. Please stop.

I hear a voice. Am I dead? Is that you, Haddie? Lola, I'm sorry I didn't see you in the road. I didn't mean to hit you. The road was foggy; I just couldn't see you. Please forgive me. Get up, Lola. Please get up. It's okay, Haddie. I'm home; I'm finally free and going to a better place. God bless you, Haddie. I'm tired and hurt bad. Just let me sleep; I just want to sleep. Don't cry; I'm a good Christian woman, Haddie, and I forgive you.

Baccalaureate

LAURA CARMEN

I

SHIT," I GROANED ALOUD and flicked my cigarette to the floor. I used my boot to grind it into the ground as I rubbed my head in frustration. Four hours. Four of the freaking longest hours of my life I had been standing here trying to blend in and now I'd lost the stupid SOB. I lit a fresh smoke and pulled out my cell phone. Within minutes I was on foot, moving quickly down the street, my head filled with thoughts of my new plan of attack. The phone call had been short and sweet, a check-in really. My employer had to know the status of things, especially when they took longer than normal. My employer—how 'bout we call him Arthur?—was a nice enough guy, when you rubbed him the right way. When you didn't, you found yourself on the other end of a gun. Or sometimes a garrote. Depended on his mood, I guess you could say. He was a good employer, just not one to mess with. To date, I hadn't messed with him. I was paid well to do my job. Damn well, considering. A few times a month my phone might ring or a letter might arrive from a distant city. The computerized voice on the phone or the letter would only give a few instructions, a name and a city. The rest was up to me. I feel lucky to have this job, luckier than most of the jerks I see wandering to and from their boxy offices every day. I was pretty much free to come and go as I pleased, except when on an assignment. Then I got in, got the job over with and got out. Money deposited in my account. A fake W-2 at the end of the year. I sucked a lungful of smoke as I brought the latest

letter and its instructions to my mind's eye. It was concise and unyielding:

Harold Smith.452 Gray St. Cleveland OH. Option #1

Option #1 meant painful and drawn out. Not exactly my favorite, but not the worst option either. My cigarette was down to the filter and I flicked it into a gutter. My feet were beginning to feel like lead in my loafers. I should have worn the boots. Who the hell thought this would take so freaking long? I reached my hotel and made my way to my suite. My pockets were stuffed with garbage that I had been collecting all day. Gum wrappers, empty smoke packs. I dumped it all out and then disposed of it properly. My gun slid easily out of its holster; I love the sound of metal on leather. I poured a Scotch and water and sat down to think this plan through some more.

II

The dawning of a beautiful new day brought a renewed calm and peace to me. I had worked out the plan and slept like a baby. I was ready to get this job over with.

Decked out in a splendid suit that I had just bought, I tucked my gun back into its holster and made my way back downtown. The hustle and bustle of the morning rush was over, traffic not so heavy on the sidewalks anymore. I smiled at the people I passed and even tipped an imaginary hat to a few good lookers along the way. My spirit soared at the thought of getting the job over and getting home to my quiet apartment in San Fran.

The briefcase I carried was heavy and felt awkward in my hand. I switched it from hand to hand as I walked, trying to get used to the feel of it. I entered the restaurant at exactly 11:48 and was seated almost immediately. My lunch was superb; the taste lingered in my mouth and made me want to order again. At 12:45 on the dot, and right on schedule, Mr. Smith was shown to his seat in the back. I paid my check and left a hefty tip for my waiter. True to form, Mr. Smith excused himself from his colleagues and headed for the loo. My briefcase and I were close behind. He held the door for me and gave me a quick nod before heading to a stall. I lingered around the trough biding my time. Shortly he emerged and gave me a sideways glance as he washed his hands.

"You okay?" he asked. I smiled and nodded as I pulled out my gun. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped. "Here. Take it all." He started to remove his watch and wallet before I shook my head.

"Out. Now," I said quietly, and motioned for the door with my gun.

He gulped—I actually saw his Adam's apple bob—and pleaded in a nasally voice, "Just take what you want and let me go."

I smiled—it's so nice to be friendly—and shook my head again. My gun never wavered from his head as I gestured yet again to the door. He gave a small squeak and slowly walked around me. When he got to the door I held his arm and jammed the gun into his ribs. "Walk slowly and carefully. We are going to go out the back door nicely and friendly like or I'm going to kill you. Understand?" He nodded once, uncertainty filling his eyes. "Oh yeah," I said, "and smile." A stupid half smile, half scowl appeared on his face as we walked out arm in arm. No one stopped us or seemed to notice us strolling out the back door.

III

His white, pasty, naked body seemed to be swallowed whole by the hotel bed. We were, at present occupying a room at another hotel not far from my own. I had rented this room yesterday from a desk clerk who sneered when I said I actually wanted to rent the room for a few days, not hours. I was reasonably certain that no one would come running if they heard strange noises coming from our room. My briefcase was open on the scarred fake wood table. I turned the lights out one by one until only a faint glow came from the bathroom and the television. I wouldn't need much light to get this job done. Mr. Smith seemed comfortable enough. I had taken great efforts to bind his arms and legs snugly, but not too snugly. His mouth gag was soft and hopefully non-chafing. His eyes darted around the room and he whimpered a few times. I sat next to him and stroked his head a few times. His breath caught in his throat and he tried to pull away. Time to get to work.

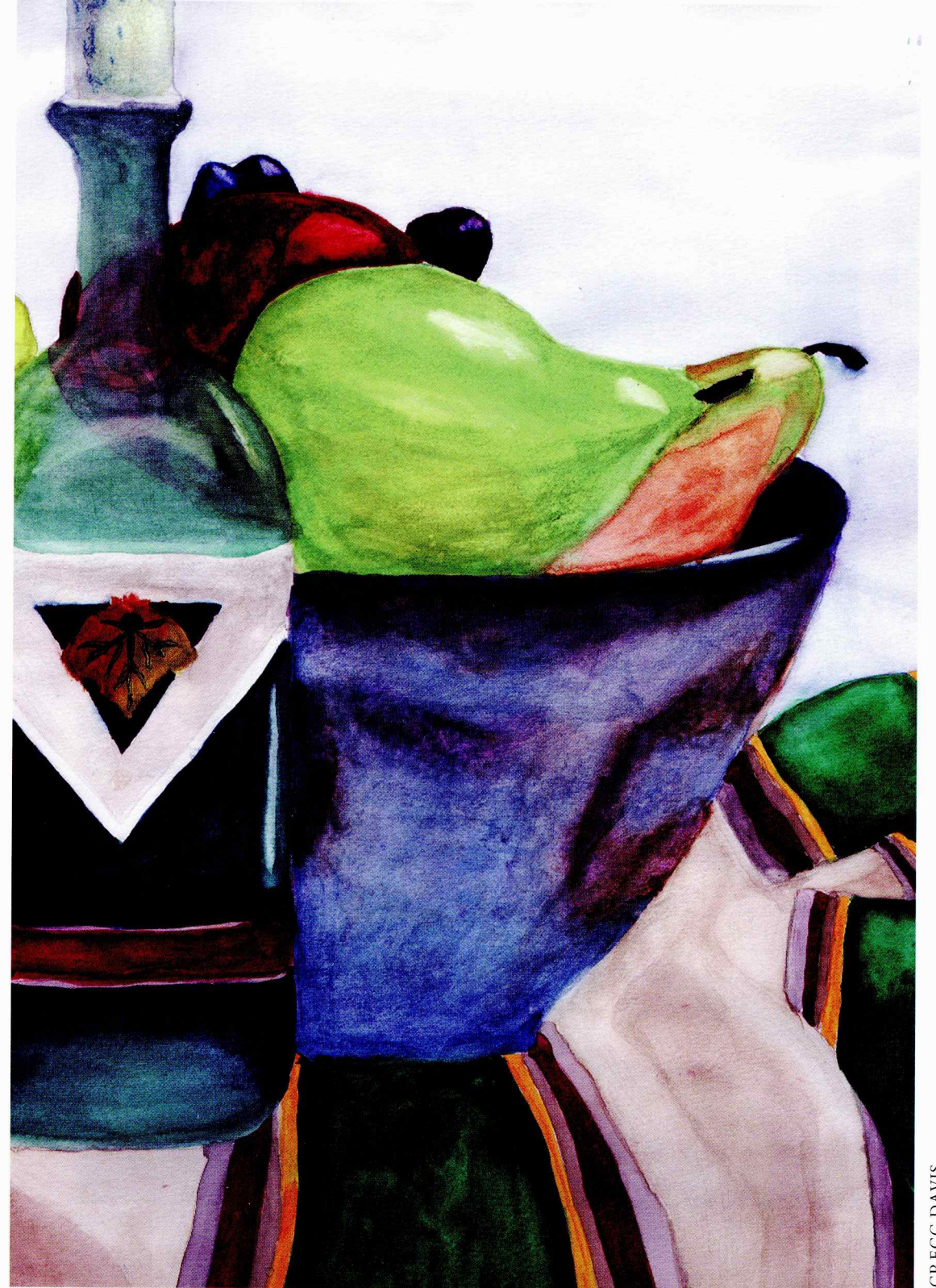
As you might have noticed, I am not a very moral person. I'm not even sure what society considers a moral person these days. I am a college graduate. Even did a few semesters towards my master's. I consider myself a learned man. A man with a full understanding of the world and how it works. The one thing I don't

know is why these people are chosen to become corpses at my hands. Not that it matters. They die anyway. Sometimes though, as they are about to fade from this world, they inquire as to why. *Damn if I know* is my standard answer. More often than not they ask. Sometimes I think that it might help them pass easier if they knew why. My education provided me with a diploma, a degree in literature to be precise. I was so damn proud of that piece of paper and even more proud when I walked back onto campus the next year to start the master's. My puffed up ego deflated quickly when jobs were nowhere to be found. Personnel managers stared at me from behind their desks, their fat asses glued to their chairs. So sorry they would say and shake their heads. You have no work experience. Your degree won't help you here. Finally, my shredded resume in hand, I took odd jobs for minimum wage. I dropped out of the Master's Program soon after. The road to Arthur and his dream job was a fluke. An ad in a mercenary magazine that a customer happened to leave in his booth. It's been ten years and I'm a millionaire several times over. My life has never been the same. It gets better every year. My diploma was the first thing to be murdered, shredded by my able hands and flushed to oblivion with the rest of my born identity. Morality and ethics? We choose our own path. Mine is paved in gold.

IV

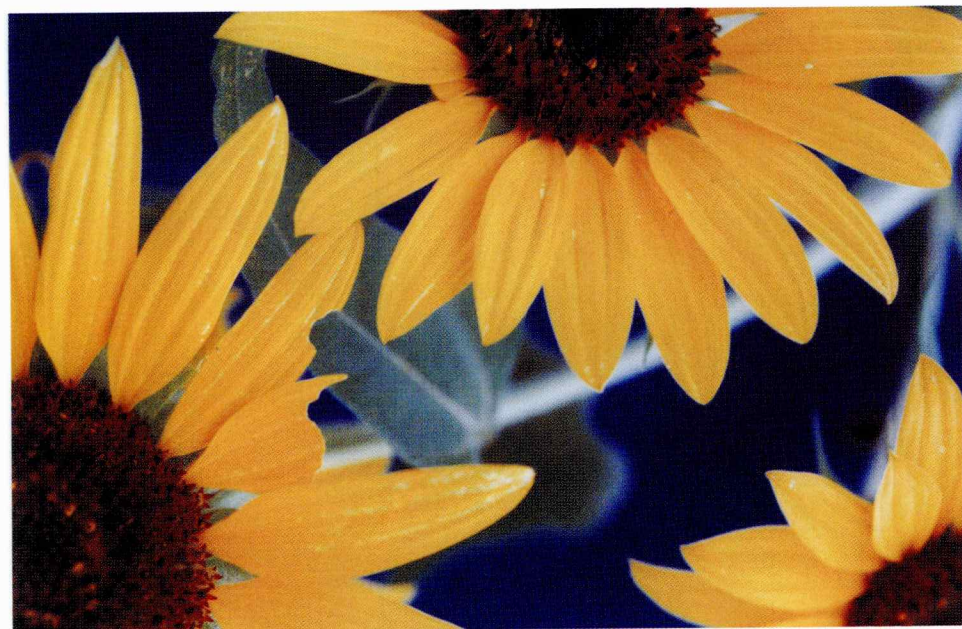
Mr. Smith screams behind his gag as I make his departure from this earth slow and painful. His eyes are as glazed as those of the many personnel managers that I sat across from so many years ago. I smile at those eyes. Smile at their fat asses making fifty grand a year and loving it. I laugh out loud imagining their fat lazy wives that they go home to every night. These managers stuck in their own version of hell.

Mr. Smith has ceased screaming. I close his eyes carefully. He deserves at least that. I glance at the ID card that slipped from his wallet. Dr. Harold Smith it reads below his picture. English Literature Department Chair. I smile back at his picture and recall a favorite passage from John Keats: "Stop and consider! life is but a day; / a fragile dew-drop on its perilous way!"

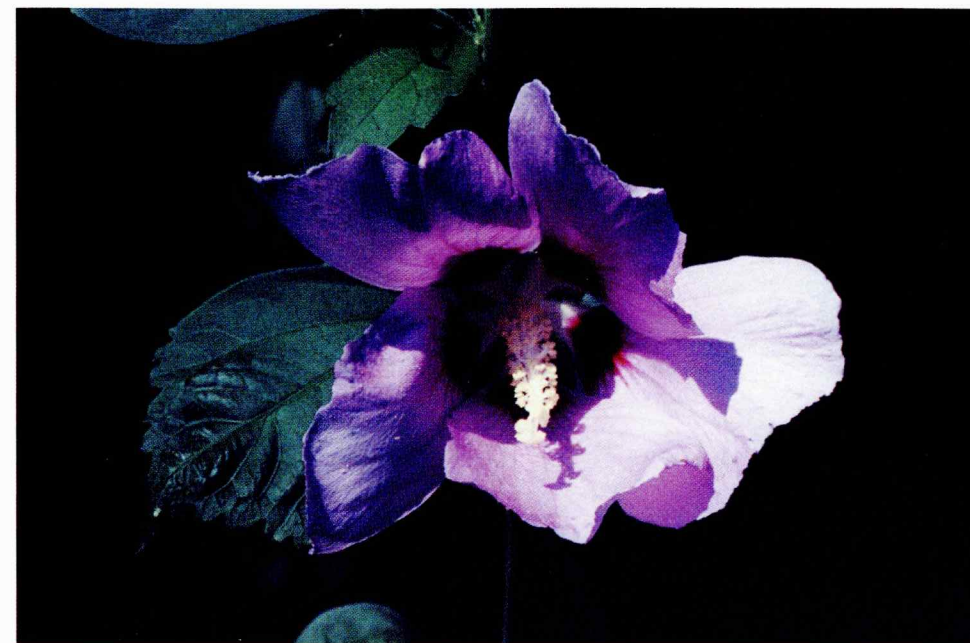




MARY L. STEVENSON



MARY L. STEVENSON



HENRY MARSHALL BROWN



MARY L. STEVENSON



Jesse Johnson III
2014





GABRIEL THOMPSON

Gem and I

JAMAR A. RUTLEDGE

THE ROOM IS DARK AND COLD, and you can smell death in here. I can feel the walls closing in like I'm in a trap. If I don't get out soon I think I'm going to snap.

"What's your problem, Ike?" What nerve Gem has to ask me such a question.

"This is the second time I've been locked up because of something you did. I did nothing wrong, but just being affiliated with you always seems to get me in trouble."

"Oh, so you did nothing this time either, Ike?"

"No Gem, I didn't do anything. If you think I did something, please tell me. What did I do?"

"You're crazy, Ike. You just don't have a clue. Take a good look at me, Ike. What do you see? You really need to check yourself."

This time Gem has gone too far. I have exams next week and I am sitting in a jail cell. Now he's talking in riddles and making me think I am crazy. He may be drunk, but I'm not.

We were leaving a football game and we had alcohol in our cups, when suddenly Gem decided to get smart with a traffic cop. It also did not help that we are both less than a year away from our twenty-first birthday.

"Well Ike, old buddy, we might as well sit back and do our time."

"Well I don't know about you but I can't afford to do that; I've to get out of here, tonight." I can sense my own anger and frustration coming out of my voice.

I really don't know why I continue to hang out with Gem when I know trouble is always around the corner. After everything, I think I feel his pain. My friend Gemaine moved to my high school about six years ago and the first time we met I know he was a good guy, just troubled. In my sophomore year in high school, I had just joined the varsity football team. Three seniors tried to pull a little hazing stunt by ripping my underwear and Gem saved my butt, literally. All he did was verbally threaten the guys, but he gave them the impression that he was a little off, and they didn't want to deal with that.

Gem seems to have some pent up anger and sometimes he really loses his cool. However, I can't blame him for the way he acts at times. He is an only child and always had to take care of himself, and I know sometimes he feels all alone. His dad left home and it was just him and his mom, and soon, she developed a drinking problem. Of anyone I know, she is the one who really pushes his buttons and can break him down with words that stick like hot darts. Gem's mom is hardly ever at home, so we hang out there. I know he gets lonely, because I feel that way living with just my dad. It's tough living with a single parent that is never at home. My dad doesn't say much about Gem, but I can tell he doesn't like him. He acts like he isn't even in the room. I think Gem and I use each other for our own means, and to provide balance for each other's lives, like the yin against the yang.

During our senior year, I finally convinced him to stay away from the principal and get on the football field. He claimed to have never liked the game, saying it was too restricted, with too many rules. However, he seemed to be free and at ease out there, like the troubles of the world were put behind him. During the season, Gem went from being the crazy, quiet kid, to the popular guy with attitude.

We began hanging out with all types of people, not only at our school, but at neighboring schools as well. Gem started dragging me to all types of parties and I could see the change coming over him. We would go out and he would get drunk, saying things that he normally would not say. He even tried to start a fight with me one night that drew the attention of everyone in attendance. As I approached Gem one night, I was surprised to find him holding a joint.

"Gem, what the hell are you doing?"

"Don't worry about it, just go get me another beer."

"Naw, you've had enough. Let's go home."

"Ike, you know what your problem is? You let people dictate what you do and control you. You have to be in control of your own destiny and master of your own domain."

"Come on man, you're talking crazy. Let's go home."

Suddenly Gem jumped up and took a swing at me to get separation.

"Get off of me! Don't put your hands on me! I'm a grown man, and I'll go home when I feel like it." Everything came to a screeching halt and all eyes were on us. Gem bolted out the door and I dragged out behind him. Up until graduation, things kind of went by monotonously. Gem kept up his late night escapades and I watched blindly as he continued his self-destructive path. I could not stop him from himself, I could only hope to contain him and keep him out of trouble.

Then there was prom night, a night where a lot of things changed for me. I went there with my date, Christina Richardson, a cheerleader who started noticing me after the football season. Gem didn't bother to show up, but he did manage to call me to come to this party afterwards. When I arrived, I noticed that Christina's ex-boy-friend, Will, was there. Will was a popular guy, but lacked character. He was the type of guy that would bump into you and keep walking like it never happened. He had bad blood for Gem and me, especially since I was dating Christina. I knew it would not be long before our paths would cross and he would come after me.

During the party Will kept his distance, but as we were getting ready to leave, I went to get Gem, and while I was gone, Will took his opportunity to speak to Christina. The next thing I heard was arguing and shouting. As I went to get her, two guys came up from behind me like they were trying to corner me.

"I see you don't know how to mind your business."

"So what, Will? You and your guys gonna jump on me?" I gave him a smile as if I were in control of the situation, but as I took inventory of the room, Gem wasn't anywhere to be found.

"Well, I see your girlfriend left you here all alone." At this point, I began to worry, so I grabbed Christina and headed out the door, with Will and his squad following.

Fear turned into relief, and relief turned into despair in one minute. As I

approached the car, I was happy to see Gem already outside and ready to go. Gem told me to get Christina into the car and out of the way. Then I thought, *where is he going?*

It turned out that Gem had a gun. Suddenly, shots were fired and everyone scattered like fire ants getting wet. So unfortunately, we both ended up in jail, but thankfully no one got hurt. I lost my part time job, my scholarship, and Christina, over that stunt.

The worst part was I did not have anything to do with the gun being there. After that, I didn't speak to Gem for a while, and I was just happy to be able to graduate and get into a smaller school.

For a couple of years, we have had our ups and downs. I have been able to deal with him enough to make it this far, but he always comes back. I just have that feeling that life just wouldn't be the same without Gem. He keeps me up at night, but he makes things interesting. However, I know this is no place for me and I don't need to be here. "Gem, this has got to stop. I can't go on like this. Going to jail, and now I have a police record, and for what? Nothing! I've got to get away from you. You're like a bad, addictive drug."

"Oh so you still don't think that you had anything to do with this? You didn't do anything, did you?"

"That's right. I didn't do anything."

"You're an idiot Ike, a crazy fool. You talk about getting away from me, but you are the one who calls for me to take you places you've never been."

"What the hell are you talking about now, because you're not making any sense."

"I'm talking about me and you; about me being you, Ike. Don't you understand? You can't get rid of me because you created me. You get tired of being lame and pushed around by people, that you call me out from the depths of your inner walls. You think mom has problems? Oh no, she has nothing on you, Ike. So face it. You are a nice, smart, talented, but crazy guy. Oh yeah, you are crazy. Crazy as can be and you are the only one who doesn't see it."

Gem's words burned my ears like hot matches. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I'm not crazy, just a simple guy from Jersey.

"Gem, that doesn't make any sense. What are you talking about?"

"Well, Ike, if you don't believe me, ask the doctor."

"Doctor? What doctor?" Suddenly two people stand before the cell. One of them is the security officer, and the other is—who is that?

"Hey son, Dr. Stevens would like to talk to you for a few minutes."

Reflections, Inc.

LAURA CARMEN

IT'S IN A STRIP MALL, sandwiched between a dollar mart and a pawnshop. Thirty-five people are waiting outside in forty-five degree weather for the great doors to open at eight a.m. It's intellectual factory work for individuals with a college degree. Oh, that great piece of paper.

Eight a.m. rolls around, the doors creak open, and the surge begins. We've got to get a good seat. There is a lot of conversation going on as though these folks have not seen each other in years. Truth be told, these people are their own breed and travel together in herds. They are never far from each other. And, they all saw each other on Friday. We spill in to the "big" room.

I sit at the end of long table and wait for the festivities to commence. I am lost in my thoughts when I hear, "Excuse me," squeaked behind me. I turn and see a huge, faux leather handbag staring at me. "Excuse me," it says again. This time I see the woman behind the bag and pull my seat in closer to the table. She has two bags and a lunchbox and tries to squeeze in behind me. She hits me in the head but manages, and flops, exhausted, into the chair next to me,

"I'm Joanna," she tells me. "Are you new?"

"Yes, my first day. How long have you been here?"

Joanna has begun to empty the contents of bag one. Paper clips, the colored and regular ones, pens, pencils, highlighters, post-its, and tissues tumble on to the table. "I've been here for seven years." She snorts some snot and begins to empty the other bag. A sweater, a pair of navy socks, mittens, a scarf, and lotion come tumbling out. Then she moves to the lunch box and produces a bag of pepper-

mint patties, a bag of fun size Snickers, Trident, antacid tablets, peanut-buttered saltines, a bottle of water, and a can of Pepsi. She organizes. She slowly pushes in to my space. There is no room for me. I wait for the show to begin.

Ride 'Em, Cowgirl

"Hello, testing..."

"Hello, testing, one, two, three..."

"Hello, can y'all hear me...?" A parrot screech sounds and then a Spock convention, enthusiastic, "Yes, Ma'am!"

"Okay, that's what we like to hear. So, how y'all this mornin'? It sure is cold... I went to milk the cows and couldn't get nothin' from those girls this mornin'." Laughter.

"Well, my name is Bobbie and welcome to Reflections, Inc." Bobbie is dressed in a gray leather mini skirt and has fish net stockings on. It is forty-five degrees out and she is about forty-seven. What's even better is her ample bosom adorned in a green, orange, and red-splotched leather shirt with strategically placed gray leather tassels.

Bobbie talks contracts, pay, and taxes. Then she clicks off to her office, a cow shaped mug in hand, and turns the floor over to Carol.

Hut One, Hut Two...

"Good mornin' all! I don't need this sissy microphone. I can reach y'all. Can ya hear me in the back?"

"Yes."

"Then say Good Mornin'!"

"Good Mornin'!"

"Oh, that's what I like to hear, babies, that's what Carol likes to hear." Carol is as big as a goddamn line backer. She could charge William "The Refrigerator" Perry in a second and win hands down. With one gnarled finger, she could push a Yugo with Rosanne and Tom Arnold, Rosie O'Donnell, and Rickie Lake confined inside.

"As y'all know, here at Reflections, Inc. we have the bottomless coffeepot. It's free to y'all, but now, y'all listen up." Carol pauses with a deep, throaty laugh. She sets up the plays. "Now, if y'all gotta have a Pepsi, well, now, they ain't free.

But we do got the machine and it's fifty- five cent. You get two fifteen-minute breaks and an hour for lunch. Any questions?" Carol has covered the playbook.

"Carol? Oh Carol... I got a question." A six foot black woman with big, twisted purple hair waves her hand.

"Okay baby, shoot."

"Now, do we get both breaks in the mornin'? 'Cause, honey, that shore don't make no sense to me... Does that make sense to you, honey?" She slaps the skinny white man to her right on his shoulder. He tumbles from his seat. "Oooh, honey, did I hurt ya?" She stands and begins to bob her head and suck on her three front top teeth—her only top teeth. "By the way, Carol, my name is LeCretia." She points a long curled and ragged yellow nail to her chest and then swings her daggers in the direction of the skinny white guy who has just gotten settled back in to his seat. He pulls back his head in the nick of time, "And this skinny white honey here," LeCreatia continues, "This here is Denver." I can tell Denver wants to crawl under a rock. "Oooh honey, now say hello to the group. We all gonna be here for some time. Hmmph."

Denver slowly waves.

The Familiar Flock

After Carol answers LeCretia's question (which, as it turned out, was not so stupid because others were confused too), Carol assigns us to our small teams of six and we all shuffle to our team spot. This process takes an hour. We get into our teams and I look around. Oh shit.

The Troop Leader

"Hi, I am Nancy." Nancy stresses the "a" in her name and has huge teeth. "And I am your team leader." She is freckled and orange like a cat, "Let's go around the table and introduce ourselves. Give the team your name and something unique about your self."

LeCretia's hand shoots up, "Unique?" she puzzles.

"Yes, something special about you," Nancy explains and then commences the exercise. "My name is Nancy and I'm a Girl Scout troop leader." She places her hands in a prayer position and nods to the man next to her.

My Country Tis of Thee

"Hello. My name is Martin." He says *Marten* not *Martin*. He has a slow but silky smooth Southern accent. "I have been with Reflections, Inc. for fifteen years." Martin is sporting the whole red, white, and blue patriotic look and has a red fedora to match. A Stars and Stripes bandana adorns his neck. "I like to read books about, huh, the Southwest, and, huh, you know, books about the Northeast, and, huh, well... not really books... more like novels..." Martin's introduction is growing and Nancy herds him along. He smacks his parched lips and sits.

The Holy Spirit

LeCretia stands.

"My name is LeCretia Jones and I love Jesus, our Lord and Savior. I go to the First Baptist Church down there on Staff Street and, oh child, we praise the Lord! Hum, do we praise the *Lawd!*" She lifts her arms to the heavens and cries, "Thank you, thank you, thank you my sweet Lord and Savior..." She chokes up and sits slowly, taking a tucked tissue from her sleeve and touching it to her snout.

Euclid

"Hello all. I'm Jim. I am working on a government subsidy and my mission is to solve the Rubik's Cube mystery through a series of mathematical variations and through logarithms." Jim draws a Rubik's Cube from his right pants pocket. "This Rubik's Cube I got at Wal-Mart." He places it delicately on the table. "This Rubik's Cube I got at K-Mart." He slides another from his right pocket, shows the team, and cautiously places it on the table next to the other one. "And this Rubik's Cube I got at Toys R Us." He whips this one from the pocket of his sweat jacket, holds it close to his face, sighs, and slowly turns it. "This is the tricky one." He sits.

Over Easy

"Well, I'm Denver." Denver does not bother to stand.

"Honey, I thought you were Skinny White Boy!" LeCretia laughs and slaps Denver on his hand. He slowly removes it from the table.

"I'm Denver and there is nothing special about me so..."

“Lawd, Skinny, there sure is.... Humph, just look at that little ass on you. The Lord gave you a nice little ass. Now me, LeCretia—the Lord, Jesus Christ, gave me a big ass. Just look at it now.” LeCretia stands and turns, her dagger nails pointing to her backside, “You could sit a drink on that ass.” She pats Denver on his head. He shrinks down in to his seat. “Now, Skinny, when you lose your Pepsi and you be lookin’ all around, look here at LeCretia’s ass and you’ll find it. It’s like a table. Humph.”

Office Depot

Joanna stands next, wrapping a sweater around her. She turns towards me and coughs a phlegm cough.

“I’m Joanna and I’ve been with Reflections, Inc. for seven years. Well, is it seven?” She thinks out loud to her self, “Is it seven or is it six? Let’s see... Anyway.” She shakes her head to clear the cobwebs, “The only thing I can say to all you new people is... well...” She pauses dramatically and surveys her office supplies. “Make sure you bring pens, pencils, post-its, warm clothes—I always bring an extra pair of socks because my feet get cold first.” She waves a pair of navy socks. “And a snack, you got to bring a snack. I like candy.” She holds up a mini Snickers and displays it to the team. She unwraps it as she sits and pops it in her mouth. She turns to me and breathes in my face, “It’s your turn.”

The Reflector

“I’m Jennifer and I collect porcupines.”

And I am so screwed. My college diploma burns a hole through my bag. I look at these freaks around me and wonder how I could sink so low to work here.

The Crapper Conundrum

We eventually break for lunch and then reconvene in our teams. Lovely Troop Leader Nancy leads us forward as we calmly study our training manuals:

Page 24: HOW TO BE CONCISE

We read,

Avoid drawn-out, rambling, wordy, protracted, extended, lengthy, and verbose development and movement and ...

Nancy elaborates, “How to be concise: Avoid drawn-out, rambling, wordy, protracted, extended, lengthy, and verbose development and movement and...”

“Speakin’ of movement, honey, get outta LeCretia’s way!” LeCretia jumps to her feet, stumbles over Denver, and trots to the toilet.

“Well,” Nancy laughs, “She won’t be long; we’ll wait.” We wait for twenty minutes while LeCretia shits. Finally, the vault to the porcelain pitch sweeps open.

“Seewanee,” LeCretia exclaims, waving her arms and flapping her purple leopard print blouse, “Whew,” she wipes her brow on the way to her seat, “That was some scary stuff comin’ outta LeCretia’s ass... Lawd, I seewanee.” She pauses at Denver, “Skinny, you ever got that comin’ outta your fine little ass?”

“No.”

“Oh, honey, ‘course not... Oh Lawd,” She addresses the team. “That was a big ole bucket of KFC... Shoot, child, can’t believe that old white colonel can make some damn fine fried chicken. Now I know I shouldn’t eat the whole bucket, but, humph, it’s some damn fine chicken.” She pauses to suck on her three teeth and laugh, “But LeCretia shore do suffer later... I seewanee, I think I found a bone.” She slaps Denver on the shoulder and sighs, “You shore, Skinny, you ain’t never got that KFC chicken come flyin’ out you ass?”

“Yes.”

It’s still in a strip mall, sandwiched between a dollar mart and a pawnshop. Thirty-five people are still waiting outside five years later in forty-five degree weather for the great doors to open at eight a.m. It’s still intellectual factory work for individuals with a college degree. Oh, that great piece of paper!

Eight a.m. rolls around, the doors creak open and the surge begins. We’ve got to get a good seat. There is a lot of conversation going on. Hey, we have not seen each other in days. We all got together on Friday to watch C-Span so we could see Jim give his Rubik’s Cube presentation to Congress.

We spill in to the “big” room and I take my usual seat. I start to sort my bags when a new face appears beside me.

“Are you new?” I ask.

“Yes, my first day... How long have you been here?” She asks me as I begin to empty the contents of bag one. Paper clips, the colored and regular ones, pens, pencils, highlighters, post-its, and tissues tumble on to the table.

"I've been here for five years." I begin to empty the other bag. A sweater, a pair of navy socks, mittens, a scarf, and lotion come tumbling out.

"Hello, testing... Hello, testing, one, two, three..."

"Hello, can y'all hear me?" A parrot screech sounds and then a Spock convention, enthusiastic. "Yes, Ma'am!" we all sound.

"Okay, that's what we like to hear. So, how y'all this mornin'? It sure is cold... I went to milk the cows and couldn't get nothin' from those girls this mornin'." Laughter.

"Well, my name is Bobbie and welcome to Reflections, Inc." Bobbie has changed her dressing style from all leather to all fur. Today, it's rabbit.

"Good mornin' all! I don't need this sissy microphone. I can reach y'all. Can ya hear me in the back?"

"Yes."

"Then say Good Mornin'!"

"Good Mornin'!"

"Oh, that's what I like to hear, babies. That's what Carol likes to hear." Carol is still as big as a goddamn line backer but now she's got the helmet hair and has recently learned how to ride a Harley.

"As y'all know, here at Reflections, Inc. we have the bottomless coffeepot. It's free to y'all, but now, y'all listen up." Carol pauses with a deep, throaty laugh. She still sets up the plays in her burly fashion. It's great. "Now, if y'all gotta have a Pepsi, well, now, they ain't free. But we do got the machine and it's fifty-five cent."

I lean over to the girl next to me and whisper, "I always bring my own snacks." I tell her as I move to my insulated lunch box and produce a bag of peppermint patties, a bag of fun size Snickers, Trident, antacid tablets, peanut-buttered saltines, a bottle of water, and a can of Pepsi.

I unwrap a mini Snickers and pop it in my mouth as I wrap my sweater around my shoulders. "I'm sorry," I say, breathing in her face, "I'm Jennifer and I collect porcupines." She stares. "That over there is Nancy; there's Martin and Jim; and over there... Do you see the skinny white boy and the large black woman?" I ask. She cranes her neck and nods, "That's Denver and LeCretia. They met right here five years ago. They just got married. He popped the question at KFC because that's when they said they fell in love: over a bucket of chicken."

Bernair

For a second

I imagined you there at the park

Stray, crippled dogs surrounded

As stale pieces of leftover bread

Fell from your hand

Waiting on a frail, splintering bench

Clothed in tattered, olive green shorts

And a Christmas red flannel

While rays of sunshine penetrate your

Handsome, balding head

You're speaking in Turkish

And answering in Dutch

Such an intense conversation

For one

Soon evening will approach the park

Laughter and music from the brothels

Will crowd the summer air

And you will leave the park

Walking past the women

Dancing in their windows

'Til you find your nested newspaper

And settle in for a warm, lonely evening

MICAH CURRIER

Snowed

I've been a fool
 all this time thinking
 that you could keep me
 warm like a down-filled
 patchwork quilt
 when you were only
 an electric blanket
 that had been
 forgotten to be
 plugged in.

MEG CLARK

Useful?

Random memories strewn
 strategically on all four walls

On the dresser there are beautiful pictures
 of a girl once known

One hundred movie titles
 and a silent television

A bed in the middle
 where he sits confused

A glass bowl
 holds a fish that doesn't know

BRETT MARTIN

UNder the FAIR
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 Or.

JASON R. GILLILAND

Of Hands

The skin pushes forward,
And then it comes back.
This goes unnoticed initially.

And then, without warning,
A burning sensation;
Needlelike within the skin-
As if the nerves themselves had been set on fire.

The curious person peels,
The weak at heart use a bandaid,
One of experience cuts a tiny hole.
The fluid released, but the skin still covered-
Pain is somewhat, but not entirely, avoided.

At times the skin will be removed already.
Some say use water, and others peroxide.
A brave man knows that alcohol will numb it-
Not without a fire, but the pain is short-lived.

The skin is red; it throbs.
Why must one forget of its existence,
And use it as normal?
Why is it so easy to forget?
The new skin upon any object
Quickly reminds me of its presence.

Some last only two days,
Others last seemingly two weeks.
It is a punishment indeed

To be without a hand-
for any period time.

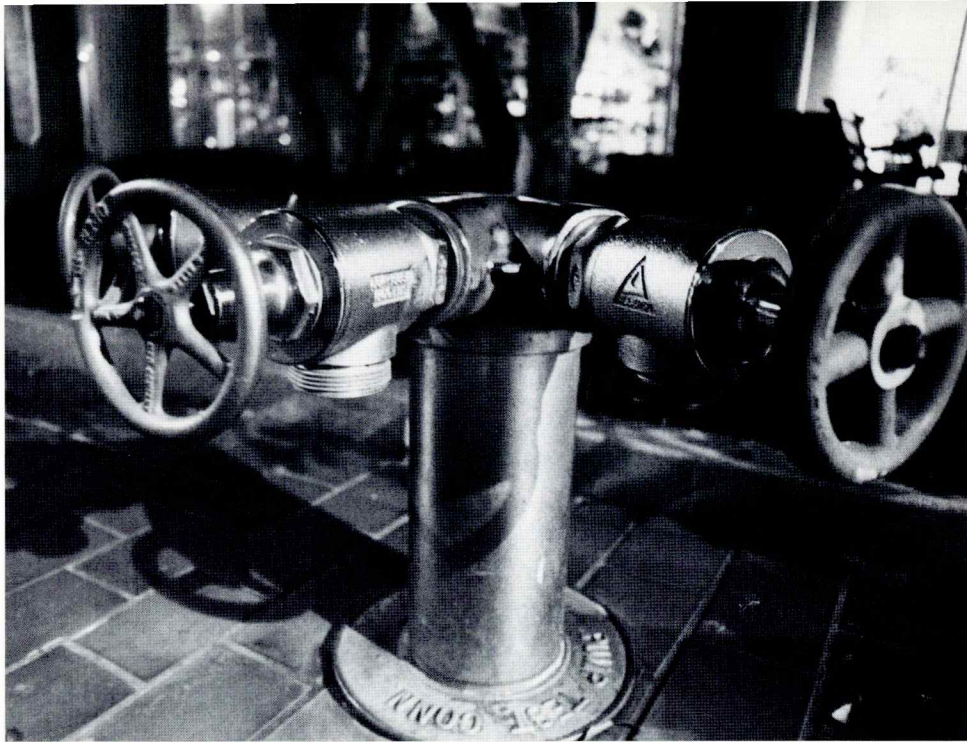
Even the thickest of calluses,
If left to grow soft,
Will be ruined eventually.

These silly sores are painful at times,
And I often wonder why I continue to cause them.
But there is much to be said
For hands that have worked.

Others use lotion,
And soaps;
Whatever makes their hands appear "refined."
Good for them.

I know that my hands
Have earned their marks.
It is a silly pride,
But a pride nonetheless.
For my hands have worked.

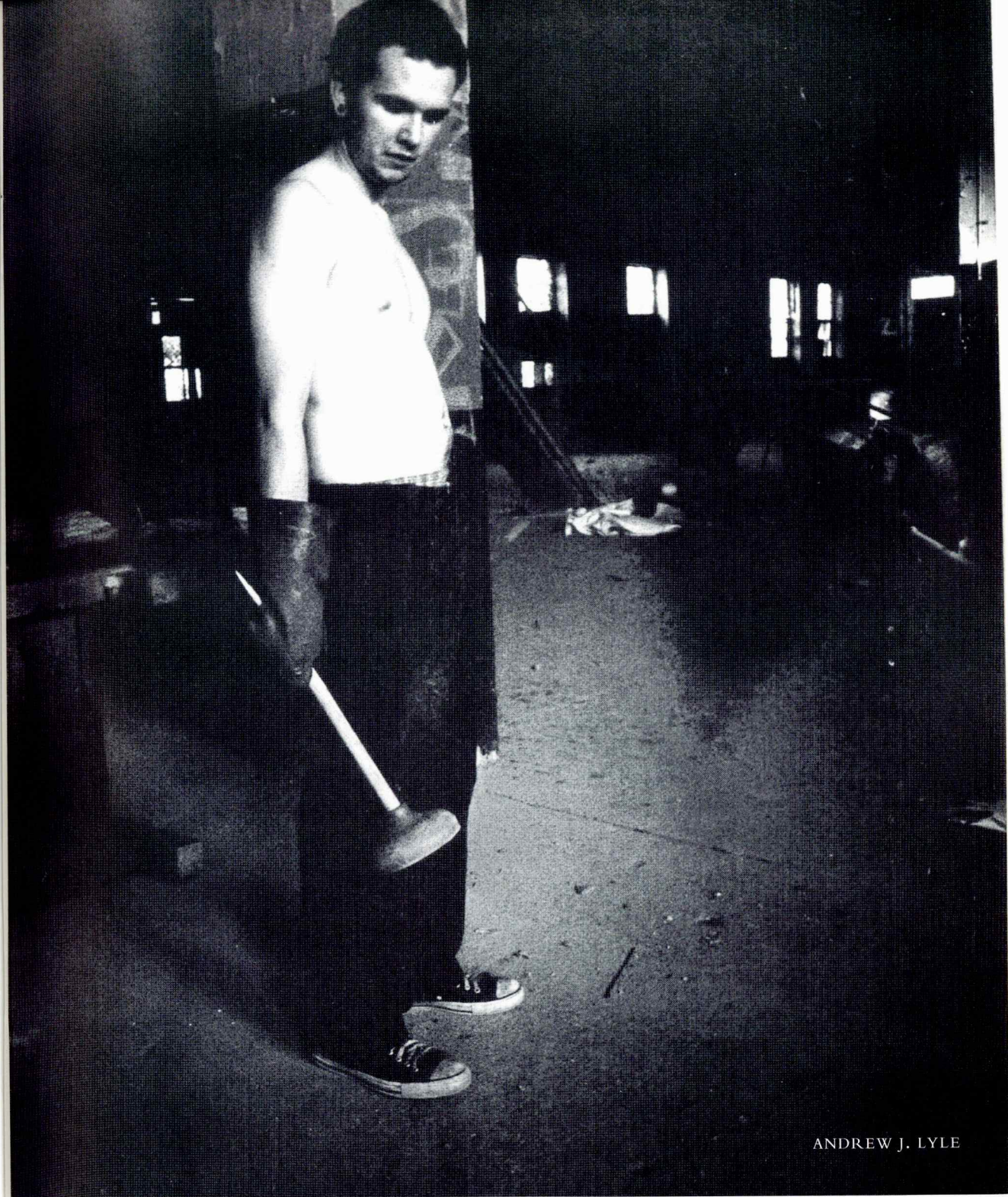
JASON R. GILLILAND



ANDREW J. LYLE



BONNIE WATSON



ANDREW J. LYLE

From Christianity to Witchcraft: A Spiritual Journey

LORRI SHANNON

I WAS RAISED in a liberal Christian home. We did not always go to church, and when we did, it was not always the same one, as my mother was constantly trying on different hats to see which one fit. She encouraged me to find my own way, and she never made me feel that hers was the right path for me. I ended up following the same road she did, however, going to various Christian churches, looking for the one that satisfied me. I have attended Baptist, Wesleyan, Methodist, and non-denominational churches, all the while searching for something that made sense.

My last experience with the church was one that was fundamentalist Christian. I originally began attending because my best friend did, and I was quickly sucked in by the non-traditional ways we prayed, the contemporary Christian songs we sang, and even by the fact that the church was in a warehouse. The fundamentalists thought that we are sinners and nothing we do will ever be good enough for the purity of God preyed upon my low self-esteem. As much as I became a “Bible-beating Christian,” however, I have always been an independent thinker, thanks in great part to my wonderful mother. Although it took me awhile, I eventually realized that something wasn’t right. The clincher was

watching a television program on cults and finding that my church qualified. I left and never looked back.

That experience soured me on religion for a long time, and when I was ready to begin my spiritual journey anew, I started fresh. I opened myself to everything, not just different denominations of Christianity. In reading, I stumbled upon something called Wicca, an Earth-based nature religion that proclaims itself to be the practice of modern day witchcraft.

Wicca is the fastest growing religion today. Followers of Wicca worship a God as well as a Goddess. Its practitioners revere the Earth as an extension of the Goddess herself and aspire to live in harmony with nature. Wiccans believe in reincarnation, but not as the Hindus believe. Wiccans believe that humans come back as humans.

Wiccans believe in magic. Chanting and meditation are used to achieve an alternate state of consciousness to better commune with the Goddess and the God. Spells are used in much the same way a prayer is, with one great difference: whereas a prayer is most often a linguistic appeal to a higher power to grant a request, in a spell the practitioner uses visualization to direct unseen energy to achieve the desired effect.

There are eight holidays that make up what is called the Wheel of the Year, and many customs from such holidays as Halloween, Christmas and Easter actually come from the pagan holidays of Samhain, Yule and Ostara. These holidays are often based on ancient harvest or fertility festivals celebrated in Britain, when the people lived close to the land. Apart from the Wheel of the Year are esbats, which are rituals that celebrate the different phases of the moon.

It was in learning about this Earth-based nature religion that I realized what had been missing to me: anything feminine and positive. As a woman, I felt left out of male-dominated Christianity, although I didn’t realize it at the time. I simply didn’t feel completely satisfied, never understanding why.

As much as this religion seemed to answer my questions, however, I was afraid to let go of Christianity. There was so much guilt and fear, as the idea of going to hell had been firmly ingrained in my mind through the years of attending church, even sporadically. There was also the very real fear of practicing a religion that most people—in the South, at least—equate with worshipping Satan. So I stopped looking into Wicca and instead dug deeper into the origins

of Christianity. I focused my search on finding the “real” Jesus and the “real” Christianity. I was certain that the truth could be found in there somewhere, and that it was nowhere near what is practiced in churches today.

I tried to bend and twist Christianity around to suit my own needs, so that I could still worship as I wanted to and feel safe within the net of Christianity. I found some interesting viewpoints, even coming across something called Christian Wicca. I also found that if you look hard enough, you’ll find someone who has an idea about Jesus that is close to what you are looking for him to be, whether that is the Son of God or an Egyptian priest or a Jewish mystic or even the first hippie!

The opinion I found myself most agreeing with, however, was that of the Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, who claims to see Jesus not as the literal Son of God but as a man who attained such a high level of spiritual transcendence that he became one with God. I also came to believe that the oral tradition corrupted the real story of Jesus before it was ever written down, and therefore the Bible cannot be taken as the literal truth. I sadly concluded that we will never know what “real” Christianity is or who the “real” Jesus was. Too many years have removed us from it and him.

Once I formed those conclusions and added them to my views on God (whom I by then saw as an entity both male and female) and reincarnation (as opposed to going straight to heaven or hell) and Satan (as a metaphor for the evil within man rather than an actual being), I found I could no longer call myself a Christian. I went back to Wicca, afraid but determined.

I had originally thought that Wicca was based on the ancient pagan practices of pre-Christian Europe, but as I dug deeper into the religion, I realized this was only half true. Wicca is also influenced heavily by the ceremonial magic practiced in occultist secret societies such as The Golden Dawn. I learned about Wicca’s founding father, Gerald Gardner, whose claim that he was initiated into a coven by a group of witches practicing the Old Ways, was dubious at best. In my reading, I discovered that Gardner’s true influence came from many sources, including mythology, Freemasonry, and secret ceremonial magic orders. He read books about folklore and magic and based his rituals on these sources. Basically, he took a little of this, a little of that, and called it Wicca.

Today the most widely practiced tradition of Wicca is called solitary Ecler-

tic Wicca and draws from many sources, including the more ceremonial Gardnerian tradition of Wicca, ancient Celtic beliefs and practices, Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, Taoist philosophy, and Native American shamanism. Solitary Eclectic Wicca is most popular in the United States and reflects the eclectic ancestry of its population. I practiced this form of Wicca for some time, all the while still reading, still learning. It was during this time that I began to realize that there was a difference between Wicca and witchcraft. I had heard the saying, “All Wiccans are witches, but not all witches are Wiccans.” However, I didn’t really understand what it meant.

I found that there is another type of witchcraft. It has many names: hereditary witchcraft, natural witchcraft, hedge witchcraft, green witchcraft, or kitchen witchcraft. Whatever name it goes by, it differs somewhat from Wicca in that it is actually closer to what pagans practiced long ago. It is not as structured or organized, there are fewer rituals and tools used, and it relies more on nature than ceremony. Whereas many Wiccans have indoor altars, the temples of natural witchcraft are sandy beaches, grassy meadows, flower-dotted pastures, and tree-filled forests.

I learned from reading more scholarly histories of paganism as opposed to books written by practitioners of Wicca that there has been no evidence found of unbroken lineages of witchcraft dating back to pre-Christian Europe. Wicca is simply based in part on these practices. However, this is not to say that all claims of hereditary witchcraft are fraudulent. It is a fact that even after the spread of Christianity throughout Europe, there were “village wise women” who used herbs and plants for medicinal purposes. Many of these home remedies have been passed down through the ages and are experiencing a resurgence today in the wake of rising health care costs and pharmaceutical drugs that seem to be losing their effectiveness. But most family traditions cannot trace their customs back farther than the 1700s, if that far.

This family tradition is what is usually called hereditary witchcraft, and although it is not actually inherited genetically, the practice has been passed down through generations. An example of this is the folk magic practiced in the hills of the Appalachian Mountains. The majority of the people who settled in this area came from Ireland and Scotland and brought these customs and superstitions with them. Yes, what we consider hillbillies are actually practitioners of

witchcraft, although they would never call it that, as over time it has been blended with Christianity.

Although family members have not passed down this natural witchcraft to me, it is what I now practice. Some will express doubt over what it is that drew me towards this type of witchcraft, but I will share it anyway. Simply put, I had a vision. I was meditating one evening, and I saw myself as a peasant girl in Ireland, learning the old ways of herbal medicine and folk magic from a family member. As my family is Irish in its roots, I took it as a sign. I cannot explain it, but I feel that at one time, these ways were practiced in my family but lost through the generations rather than passed down.

So that is the road I am now following, and because life is not traveled in straight lines, I am certain that detours will be taken along my journey. Until then, I continue to study and learn, for our true destination cannot be known until we are on the other side. However, after all the complex reasoning used in researching Wicca and witchcraft, I find it ironic that my true path was discovered and I found peace in my soul only when I trusted my heart and my intuition.

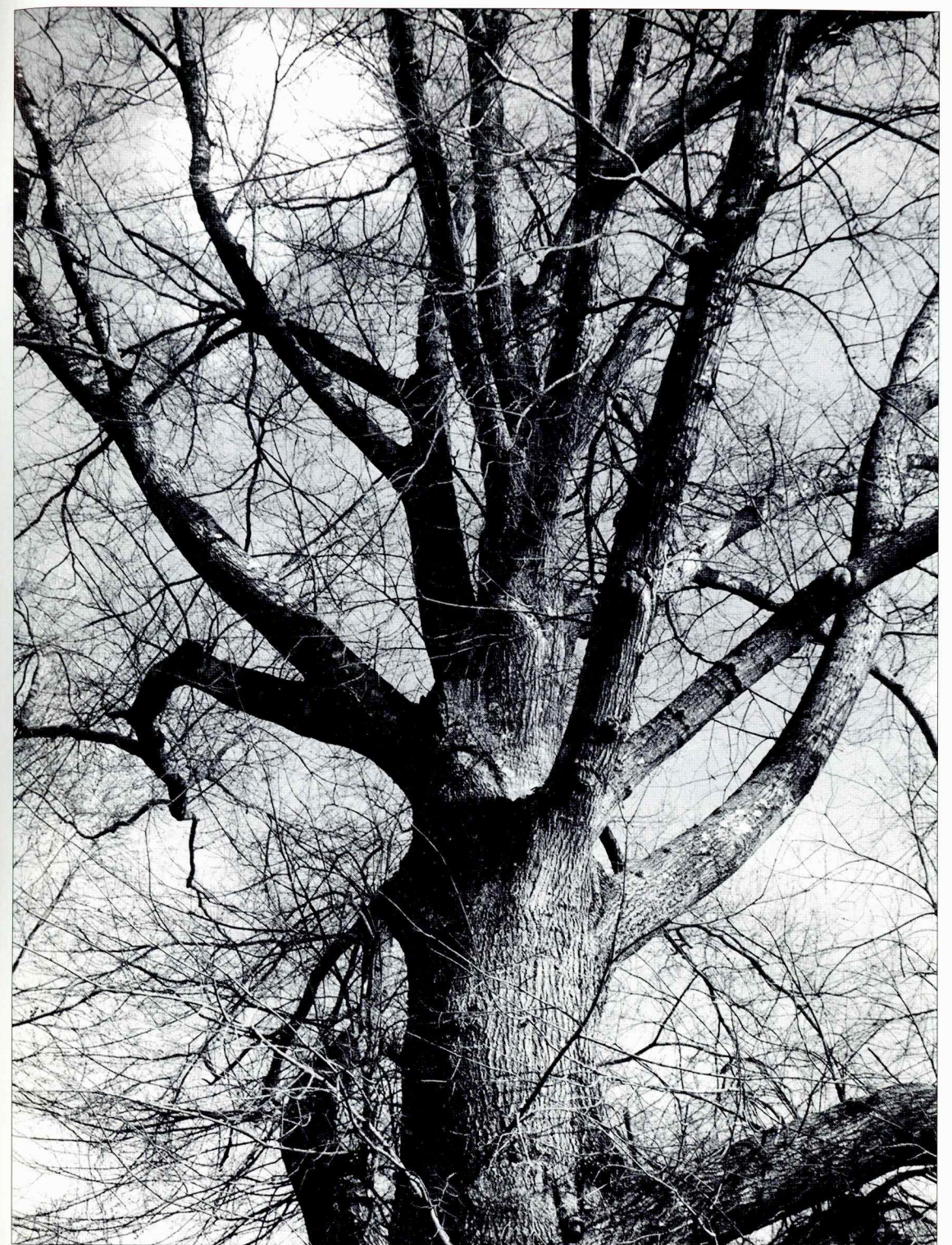




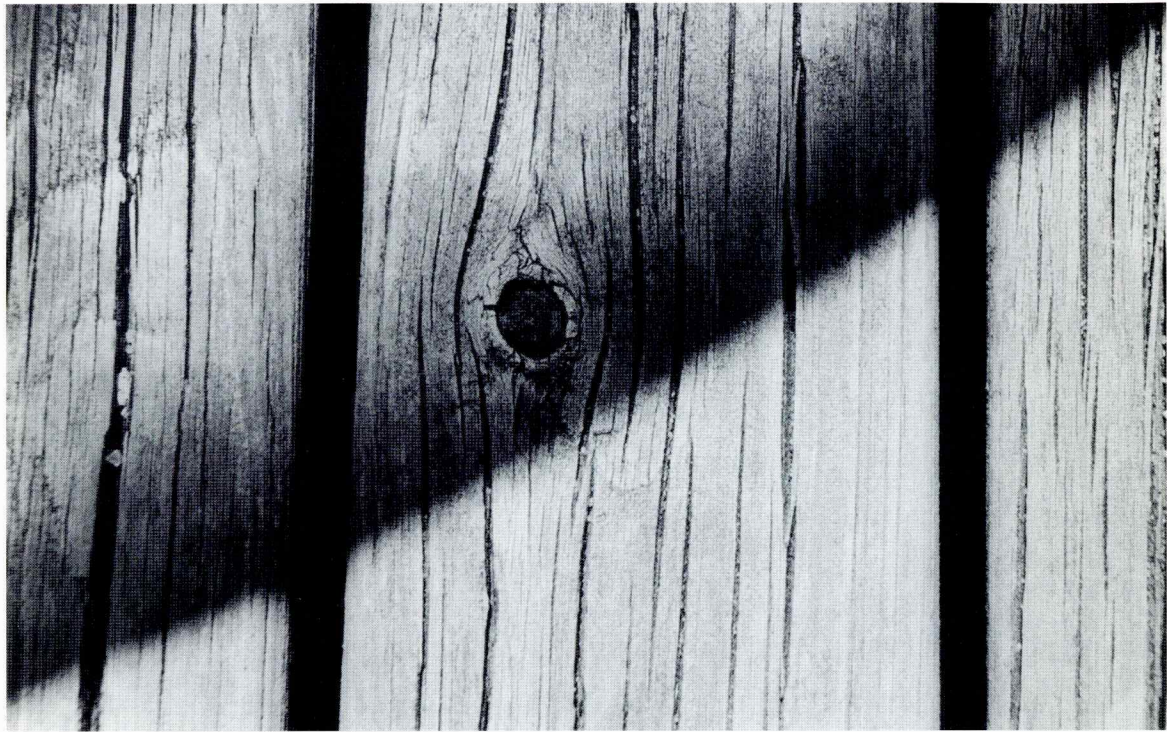
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