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A TIME TO SOW, A TIME TO WEEP,  
A TIME TO BE CRAZY

It was 1963 and I was crazy. But then I was supposed to be crazy. It was that period of life when my hormone levels were so high that I had to blow my nose frequently to relieve the pressure. I guess the teenage time of insanity is bounded by different events for different people. My psychosis lasted from that morning when I awoke and realized that tits were God's most beautiful creation, until, after suffering through a number of late and missed periods with Cagney, I developed enough maturity to take an extra thirty seconds to put on the rubber, which I'd been carrying in my wallet from the time I'd mustered the nerve to put the quarter in the machine at Joe's gas station. From the time in the shower when I noticed these little black hairs around my crotch (leprosy?, terminal jock itch?, a really dirty crotch?), until several years later when I'd wrecked enough cars to realize that a 4,000 lb. auto couldn't go from 100 MPH to zero in ten feet or make a 25 MPH curve at eighty. Maybe the real finish line of the teenage crazies came when I knew without a doubt that Beach Party and Annette Funicello really didn't deserve an Academy Award.

I certainly didn't foresee the end of that crazy, happy, suicidal period of life. One day I just saw someone different in the mirror, and from that point on, there was no going back. It was gone, finis, kaput. Sort of like trying to get a firm grip on a wet watermelon seed. I tried to pretend--went to rock concerts, the high school football games,
Alexander

cruised the main drag with the rest of the guys, but it was never quite the same. Drag racing on the highway late at night seemed sort of stupid, and groping a feel at the drive-in became childish. There wasn't any warning. I think that invincible indestructible state of mind must leave your body while you're sleeping. Perhaps it floats over to some thirteen year old who has just discovered that Playboy beats the hell out of Marvel comic books.

But then, I wasn't alone. I knew for sure that Charlie and Steve were in the same boat; although I was also sure that pretty girls didn't. The last time I heard, Steve was still a candidate for the world's longest sustained period of teenageism.

We were semi-hillbillies. Hillbillies because we were farm boys in the Ozarks of Arkansas. Semi because we had enough sense and desire to get our butts to college and away from that area of white lightning, inbreeding, and having kids to increase the welfare check. However, the light bulbs didn't come on overnight, and while we were still full fledged children of the hills, our lives were not unlike three ball bearings in a clothes dryer.

Today Steve would be called laid back. Back in the sixties we just thought he was brain damaged. He had a way with the girls though. Yes, ol' Steve was the first of the gang to lose his cherry, but he probably searched a week for it before he figured out it was missing. I guess he didn't have enough sense to know that nice girls didn't. Another word that fit Steve was lazy, in all aspects of his life except one. He was our shot-puter and discus man on the track team. Now, Steve was my size, 5'8", about 160 lbs., which tells you something about
our track-team. But Steve had a knack for throwing things. Anything--rocks, footballs, drunks--you name it. And he was damn good with-the discus, in spite of his size, but once his right arm began to-grow larger than his left, he fell in love with the idea. He absolutely refused to do any exercises with the left, considering it an appendage for comparison purposes only. The right just kept getting bigger and bigger and lumpier and lumpier. I think he slept with a bag of fertilizer wrapped around the misshapen thing. It didn't thought he had terminal polio or muscular dystrophy. His Popeye right arm made him stand out from the crowd, and that was also part of the insanity. We had to conform to what our peers were wearing, saying, eating, even the correct manner of farting, but at the same time we all wanted to be different. Being a poor farm kid was more than enough difference for me. I wore jeans back when it was a sign of poverty, before Jordache and Calvin Klein became household words.

When I pray to my goldfish bowl and give thanks for still drawing breath, I always remember that night we beat Marshall in basketball. Marshall is forty miles from Harrison, over some of the curviest roads the Ozarks have to offer. I'd gone to the game with Steve, in his Dad's car.

"Hey, Jim boy, I never thought we'd beat those assholes. Our guys really played over their heads tonight. Why didn't you tell me Dave could dunk the ball?"

"He can't. I can jump higher than that flounder, but the cheerleaders promised them a good time on the bus ride home if they won. I guess his hormones just sort of uplifted him."
They never did that for us when we won a track meet."
"We've never won a track meet, stupid. Come on, let's get home."
"Ah, the ride home. I feel great. Let's play double."
Each group of teenagers has its own set of "in" phrases; hip, cool and far out were still biggies back then, but somehow Steve owned another set unto himself.
"Double?"
"Sure. Each time we see a curve, we double the speed on the sign. No sweat."
"You really are brain damaged. That road back to Harrison is one of the worst in the state, and you want to take those 35 MPH hairpins at seventy?"
"Don't ever let anyone tell you you're slow, Jim. You catch right on, and don't forget the fifty MPH babies. We do those at a century."
"Steve, you need to have your tubes tied or something. You'll kill us. Forget about seeing the next century. We'll never live to see Cagney's and Jannie's boobs reach their full potential."
"Piece of cake. Have a little faith. Didn't I fix you up with that sure lay last week?"
"You toad. Some day I'll get you for that. The Cyclops. God, half the guys in school have gotten the clap from that one-eyed bitch, including you. If Randy hadn't told me where she lived, I would've gone right up to her door. God, I'm glad I recognized the house in time. I've heard that she's supposed to meet you somewhere, because her Dad knows that guys don't date his one-eyed daughter for her beauty, and he'll beat the crap out of you.
Alexander

Yeh, thanks a bunch."

Steve had to own the only set of parents in the world still naive enough to believe you could get gonorrhea from a toilet seat. And their naivete didn't stop with medicine. His Dad's 57 Ford had a pretty decent engine, but Steve managed to scrounge some credit at the local speed shop and had them drop in a full race cam and some other goodies, and the old fart never noticed--God, what a dunce. The hood of the car shook so much while idling that it was hard to drink a milk shake without looking like Pigpen. It reminded me of one of those paint shakers at Sears.

But that was Steve. We did play "double" on the way home, and I thought we'd never survive to capture Cagney's cherry, but yet we live. Randy's father summed it up for Steve when he said, "Steve would be deaf and dumb, except he can hear a little."

Charlie is easier to describe. He was three years younger and my brother, in other words, just a dumb kid, but he did show a little smarts when it came to gasoline and things flammable. He was the one that suggested we stop putting sugar in the gas tanks of the Highway Department vehicles, left overnight on the side of the road, and start siphoning the fuel for our own use. Now the two most important things to a high school boy are nooky and gas money, with gas money probably being priority number one, so Charlie got an A+ for that bit of wisdom, which was more than he ever received from any of his teachers. We lived near the town of Pyatt, population 107, and somehow always managed to get into most of our trouble when we visited that
great metropolis.

There was the night when the local rednecks were chasing us, something to do with our number two priority. We were in Dad's pickup, and they were driving something red that made a lot of noise and smoked a bunch. We had about a half a mile lead and were nearing the Pyatt bridge.

"Really bright, Steve," Charlie said. "Didn't you know better than to try and date the Starky girl?"

"Why didn't anyone tell me she had three brothers who ate rocks for breakfast and worked out lifting 57 Fords?"

"Yeh, and they eat discus throwers for lunch. Why the hell did you put that pack of rubbers in her candy?"

"I just wanted to find out if she had the same thing in mind as I did."

"If they catch us, they'll put you inside one of those rubbers and throw your dumb ass over the bridge. Hey, Jim, slow down. I've got an idea."

"Hell, they're about to catch us."

"Just slow down so I can climb in back."

"Why?"

"That drum of diesel fuel. It has a pump on it. I'm going to cover the bridge with the stuff as we go over."

"What good will that do? You think the smell will kill 'em?"

"Not if Steve still has any matches?"

Boy, what a sight, better than watching films of the Hiroshima bomb. It sure stopped those yea-hoos behind us.

Another night we ran out of gas in that same pickup, and Charlie just filled her up with diesel fuel
from the tank. Dad worked on the truck for a week, trying to get the engine sounding right again. Charlie suggested that maybe the station we'd stopped at had pumped some bad gas.

That was Charlie, and other than having a little intuition for things that burned in cars, there's not much to say. Except for his hurdling. I almost forgot another night in Pyatt. We were stealing watermelons when the shotgun opened up on us. Steve, Randy, and I dropped our green prizes. Not Charlie. I'll never forget him leaping that barb wire fence with a watermelon under each arm. The next year he became our hurdler on the track team. He was pretty good too, but I still think he could have made All-State if they'd just let him carry a couple of melons and had started the race with a shotgun.

Why do I tell you about three average high school kids? Because we almost saved a very important life. Almost, but not quite. But then what happened later wasn't our fault.

We only played "dead kid on the road" once. It was enough. We were about half a mile from my house, just past a gentle curve on highway 62. We took turns. One brave soul would lie on the highway, awaiting a car, while the other two hid in the bushes. If we'd thought of it, I'm sure we would have brought rating cards. "Great, Charlie! A 9.7." But the idea was to play dead as a car approached, scaring the hell out of the driver. No one ever stopped before reaching us, always swerving, then screeching to a halt about a hundred yards down the blacktop. By then we were nowhere to be found.

It was Steve's turn, and as the car approached, it didn't seem to change course. Still right on
target for Steve’s massive right biceps. At first, I thought Steve was going for a perfect ten, but then I remembered how well he could relax. Once at the State Fair in Little Rock, he fell asleep on the roll-a-coaster. The car was doing at least seventy and wasn’t making any effort to miss our star discus man. Charlie and I yelled at the same time, and Steve jumped up looking like last year’s scarecrow. That caused the guy to swerve; then he lost it.

The car came to rest as a clump of twisted metal trying to become one with the side of an Ozark hill. It’s a wonder it didn’t explode. Our local country-store/gas station was a quarter mile down the road, and Charlie, remember he was the hurdler, went for help. The guy was dead. Naturally we didn’t relate the exact circumstances of the accident.

The State Police were summoned and surprise-surprise! The car was full of guns and quite a few threatening letters to President Kennedy. That led to the FBI, who seemed to know this bozo, having had a four-state manhunt in place for a week. The main event in our lives at that time was trying to get our girlfriend’s bra off, and we weren’t aware that the President was due that weekend in Arkansas to dedicate the new Greer’s Ferry Dam. The FBI felt sure that the dedication was where our desperado was heading, so in a way, I guess we helped save the President. Unfortunately, three weeks later, he went to Dallas. Maybe if there’d been some crazy horny teenagers doing their thing that day--well who knows.
PECOS AUTUMN

Exploring roads I've never been down
past villages invented by artists
fall trees loom largely yellow, red leaves
embrace stone walls and rail fences
built by early settlers and modern pioneers
October blue highlights the river
crossed by cowboys in a thousand films
the braves who chased them gone, retired
to civilization, gas pump jockeys
and engineers in the fields
yearling pintos taste the wind
small boys shoot rubber tipped arrows
deer foraging by the riverbed no longer flee.
long shadows creep across the room
through the unoiled creak of her rocker.
her cold, gray eyes stare passively
at faded photos on the wall.
each residing on the hilltop cemetery,
their places are still set at her table
until her memory flickers, sun peering
through clouds. plates fly in anger
before she breaks down and scolds
her guests for breaking her china again.
Tell me my fortune, Cookie --
will tonight be any
different from any
different night
or will I go home
holding my arm
and not yours,
grasping at straws
but not sipping anything --
will I be, as usual,
the odd man in --
in by eleven, that is.

I broke open the biscuit,
unraveled the paper --
it says...
'T and misery
equals mystery'...
I drink the tea
but don't find any
clues.

Tell me my fortune, Cookie --
will you say you love
me and similar talk
or will I be left
alone in the restaurant
out of sweet and sour sauce
and holding the pork.
Fritz Hamilton

ESCAPE OF A MAD BABBLER!

Dictionary
    filled with every
    word packed

tightly in a few
thousand pages in
a stiff hard cover

&
I open it to
find

Webster's mad house filled
with babblers &
before I can slam

the cover shut one
mad babbler escapes to
sit between my

ears rattling
off definitions &
I
race out to the
street to
escape

but
look into the
sun which
Hamilton

burns an awareness into
me that "sun" is
but a word &

that brilliant
thing up there that
warms & lights us is

only "sun" for my
convenience & not the
3-letter word "sun" at all

which
soothes mad babbler to
sleep with

Webster's symbols
humbled in
perspective
ROLLIN’ HOME FROM OLD NEW ENGLAND

Singing their final songs
from cans of dogfood
and gourmet plates
they’re processed
from life to lipstick
in 30 minutes
so long on the planet
so quickly subtracted
in our brief hobby
sailing on whale watch boats
to wave goodbye.
The last time I saw my brother, three years ago, he was on his way to an appointment with Senator Janoski, to write his views into a bill on fair housing for the elderly. He treated me to lunch at the Bellevue where there are marble pillars between tables and hamburgers cost six-fifty. Over his scotch and my perrier he told me that he had just gotten back from Egypt, a hush-hush trip for the State Department.

"Parasites in the food," he said. "I got diarrhea."
I told him I had enrolled in a film making course and was learning camera technique.
"Interesting. But what can you do with it?"
I added some salt to my hamburger and looked down at the sandwich.
"Well, nothing. At the moment."
"If you want to take a course, you should go to law school and become economically independent."
"I can't leave the kids."
"Don't think like that. The kids don't need you there to make their beds and make-up their minds. Floss has always worked."
"I'm not going to."
"There's a big world out there. Did I tell you Floss and I moved to a condo in Manhattan?"
"No."
"Six months ago. Carrie started medical school last September at Duke, Amy's living with an art student in Florence, and Seth is away at Clark University. Flossie always wanted to live in the
Mannino

city."
"Do you like it?"
"I had to sell my sailboat, and there's no place
to work on cabinetry in the apartment. However
weekends we go to the theatre."
"This could be a cultural experience."
He looked at his watch.
"I hate to rush you, but I've got to be in
Washington."
I'm sitting on an orange vinyl couch in the
intensive care unit in a New York City Hospital,
waiting for the five minutes every hour when they
allow one member of the immediate family to visit
the patient. The patient is my brother and he is
dying.
I hate coffee, but for something to do, I get a
cup from the machine in the corner. I look around
at the other waiters and notice a man a frayed man
in a referee uniform. He is telling the nurse that
his son was hit by a car while he, himself, was
judging a high school basketball tournament. He
wants to see his son. He says they have no right to
make him wait. He says he's going to sue the
hospital. The nurse says she is sorry but she has
to abide by the policy. She smiles and then she
leaves. He bangs his fist on the coffee table.
Magazines slide to the floor. The ashtray vomits
butts onto the carpet. I feel embarrassed. Like a
voyeur I have gotten too close to a stranger.
On the phone Flossie told me that Joe's heart
problem has been developing slowly over the last five
years. But for me it is as shocking as the hit-and-
run. My fault, I think. I could have driven to New-
York anytime, arrived at his apartment with two
tickets for a concert.
    I drink some of my coffee. It needs sugar.
    His fault too. He could have invited me up for a weekend and taken me sailing.
    A woman in curlers and a Mets jacket races into the room. She sees the man in the referee uniform and starts to cry. He put his arm around her shoulder and tells her what a rotten hospital this is.
    I am a phony sister, visiting a dying man whose cigarette brand I don’t even know. I get up and walk into the corridor. There are no windows so it is impossible to tell whether it is noon or midnight. I start to pace.
    I know it’s not the sixty year old stranger I’ve come to see. It is someone else, someone with curly brown hair who smells like cough drops and shoe polish.
    I am sitting underneath his desk tugging at his pants.
    "Tell me a story."
    "Can’t Mush."
    I poke at the toe of his brown loafer.
    "The one about the man who wanted the fountain of youth and got Florida instead."
    "I’ve got a test."
    I tickle the fuzzy brown hairs growing above his socks.
    I hear the book snap shut and the pen tap against the porcelain pencil holder. He slides his chair back so he can see my face. He offers me a cough drop from the box of cherry-flavored Ludens he keeps next to the ash tray. I take two and settle down for my story.
"When I was in China, I had to hide from the Japs in caves or in monasteries. Once the enemies were so close that I saw the white edges of their fingernails. I never got caught."

He takes a cigarette from the pack in the pocket of his shirt and lights it by striking a match on the sole of his shoe, a trick I love. Then he takes a long drag and blows two smoke rings. I reach my hand up, trying to catch one.

I, the adult in the waiting room, want to fade-in for a close up of the smoke rings breaking up around the child's fingers and then dissolving in the air.

"Tonight, Mush, I'm going to hide you, and Mom can look for you. Want to do it?"
"Yes," I say, climbing out from under the desk and hopping around the room on one foot.
"Where? In the sugar bowl?"
"Too easy."
"Behind the books?"
"Easier still."
"I know. Under the rug."
"Now that you're four, you won't fit."
"Then where?"
"Some place so obvious that it is unique, so logical she will never look."

I want to overcrank. Capture him in slow motion against the background of that cramped bedroom. I see the faded blue-striped wall paper, the white bedspread, the ugly navy blue rug with its floral design. His foot is planted in the center of a huge pink rose. I pan slowly up his leg. His trousers have a perfect crease, his blue oxford cloth shirt is unbuttoned at the collar and his sleeves are..."
Mannino

rolled up. His thin body is tilted to the left and his right arm is raised. The blond hairs on his arm glisten in the key light of the ceiling fixture like tinsel. I focus on his eyes which have the energy of a carrousel creating fantasy out of the ordinary.

"Mush, are you afraid of anything?"

"Nope."

"Not even the dark?"

I pause, because darkness is a giant snake that eats up the dresser, the windows, the walls every night. I am so afraid that it will swallow me up too, that I always sleep with the light on, but I want to play this new game. I cross my fingers behind my back.

"Not even the dark."

"Follow me."

We sneak into the living room. I can hear water running in the kitchen, and I know that my mother is still washing the dinner dishes.

Joe opens the closet. Standing on a stool, he rearranges some boxes on the top shelf.

"You are going up there."

He points to a space beside a box of hats and scarves.

I look up. The top shelf of that closet is higher than my brother’s head, higher than the refrigerator. I will be on eye-level with the glass lamp that hangs over the dining-room table.

What I say next isn’t true, but I wish it were and that seems the same.

"I’m not scared at all."

I raise my hands above my head.

He lifts me up, above the couches and chairs, the radio, the bookshelves. The wooden shelf creaks
under my weight and totters a little as I fold my legs and squirm into position between the boxes. I look down.

I zoom in for a close-up of his face. His skin is as fresh as paper towels and his grin is as confident as a flashlight.

Closing the door, Joe whispers, "Don't giggle."

I smell wet umbrellas and moth balls. It is dark but not completely. A slender pencil of light pokes through the keyhole. I want to get down, forget the whole thing, and let my mother read me a story. I'm sorry I played his game. I close my eyes and pretend it's not really dark. It is me making the darkness. I wait.

The nurse walks into the waiting room. Thinking perhaps she has some news for me, I follow her.

Two Amish women in grey dresses are sitting on the orange couch. One is reading a religious pamphlet and the other is sitting with her hands folded and her legs crossed at the ankle. I sit in a yellow chair. Three more people and the nurse are standing around the referee and the woman in the Mets jacket. "I want him transferred to Children's Hospital," the referee says. "They're not amputating Mark's leg until I know there is no other choice."

His voice doesn't sound as confident as his words.

The nurse says she'll bring him some papers to sign. Then she says we can follow her to the intensive care unit for our visit.

"There is to be no smoking because of the oxygen."

I think I should have come on Saturday and
gone in with my sister-in-law, but then I would have had to miss Paul's little league game. I move along with the others.

Inside the unit the air is starched like the faces of the nurses. I ask for Joe Aiello.

"Cubicle 3."

The nurse waves her hand toward the back wall. I see then referee and a nurse move toward a curtained bed. I glimpse a little boy's red face and unruly black hair. I think about my Tony and wonder if he is up from his nap. The Amish woman stops by the bed of an old woman who is sleeping. I hope Joe will be asleep too, so I can rearrange my face until it masks my sudden feeling that if he dies a certain part of me dies too.

I hear the beeping of the heart monitor, that ominous reminder that the patient is alive, but that at any minute he may not be. The reflection from the screen illuminates his face. His skin is a criss-cross of wrinkles, deep gorges in yellow flesh. He is so thin that the bones of his cheeks stand out like scars. His eyes are closed. I look at the chart at the bottom of the bed to check his name. I don't recognize him.

A nurse comes in to monitor the fluid in the IV. He moves his head and opens his eyes. He looks frightened.

"It's alright Mr. Aiello. You are in the hospital."

She tucks his arm under the cover. She motions me to come closer to the head of the bed.

"You have a pretty young visitor," she says. Then adds, "Are you his daughter?"

Joe looks at me in confusion.
"That woman isn't Carrie."
"I'm his sister, Angie."
"Angie?" he says, puzzling over the name.
I come closer.
"Your sister from Philadelphia."
There is a long pause. I flashback to the top of the closet and the brown haired boy who flung open the door, sat me on his shoulders and carried me down the hall to my bed.
"You did it, Mush. You weren't afraid of the dark."
As we travel I reach my hands over my head and run my fingers across the ceiling.
He takes his hand from the covers, grabs mine and pulls me closer.
"All this medicine makes me forget things. Are you still taking courses?" he asks.
I laugh, but I can feel tears running down my cheeks.
"I enrolled in the MBA program. I can do it part-time at Temple."
His swallowed snicker sounds like a balloon losing air.
"My throat gets really dry from this oxygen. Could you hand me a cough drop from the night table?"
There by his bed is a box of cherry-flavored Ludens. All of a sudden the hospital smells like cough drops and shoe polish overlaid with cigarette smoke.
"Remember that time you hid me on top of the living-room closet?"
"When was that?"
"You were in college and I used to bug you to
Mannino

tell me a story all the time and that one night you hid me in the dark."

He shakes his head.  
"I don't remember anything like that at all. You used to bug me, but nobody else ever thought I was as perfect as you did then. You made me feel real good."

The nurse touches my arm. 
"Your time is up."

I don't want to go. I feel like I want to say something else.

"Take a cough drop, Angie."

I reach for the box and take two.

"Thank you. I mean, thank you for everything."

Suddenly I lean over and kiss his cheek.

"Good-bye, Mush"

"Good-bye."

The nurse leads me passed the referee and his son toward the door. The Amish woman offers me a Kleenex.

From the door I look back and see the white hairs on Joe's arm glisten in the light from the heart monitor.
Walter McDonald

THE DEVOTION OF CATTLE

The grass cows eat
gets up and walks away.
Wherever it goes,
slow cows are sure to follow,

patient, heads down
and grazing. They leave
green fields behind them,
tracking their one true

lane of blades rippling away
before them. The wind id always
at their backs. Cows
are faithful to grass

even at fences,
Penelopes of meadows,
straining wide-eyes and horns
between barbed wires.
McDonald

AT TIMBERLINE

The world is trying to turn crystal.
Clear ice sheens the trees like glass.

Each crystal branch is like a dome
encasing all that breathes and feed on ice.

The buds are cabins far apart at timberline,
the dark wood underneath so silent

wolves lick their fur, waiting,
curled in snowdrifts soft as wool.

A drop of rain slides down the glaze
and disappears, like a white gyrfalcon

gliding along the dome of heaven.
Clipping the moon, the falcons dip,

dives down to a tree of crystal.
Now even the wolves are silent.
Sheryl L. Nelms

ice work
snow doilies
dance
down

sculpt muskrat mounds
into igloos

full of furred
faces

hibernating
I still bite the burnt cork
and under the waxed lipstick
-- with my teeth still peel
from this candy bar
its baggy wig, its Harrison Street
Godwin Street -- I know their names
why can’t they remember mine.

They mistake me for the kid
whose breath left water-marks
whose floppy shoe was never found
though month under month
as every new calendar is searched.

I begin each year unwrapping.
October waiting inside
even in the rain -- nine pages
crumpled: Spring and Summer, what’s left
from Winter and Fall -- October

still sweetened, bathed
in almonds and crinkling paper: the mask
hugged till I become that oversized moon
swollen from fruit and house to house
that kid behind each door
as every month after
will be worth holding, will pass

from stranger to stranger
ringing and remembered.
Walt Phillips

2:22 A.M. CONJECTURES

the earthquake
woke all three of us
and my son hollered up the stairs
that's a big one
do you think
we should get out into the street
and my wife said no
there wouldn't be any more tremors
and i lay next to her
thinking up witticisms
for a range of eventualities
and wondering if
and how it is
a woman really does know what's
coming or not coming
next
Phillips

TODAY I NEED A SYLVAN SETTING

i don’t like noise anymore
if i ever did
motorcycles in the street
loud announcers
crashed pans
raucous voices on the telephone
i may be wrong
but it seems to me
noise never led to anything
worth a dam
i may be wrong
i have been wrong
i will be wrong
you can tell me so
but please do it
as quietly as possible
REGRETS

I regret the times
I stayed indoors
while the rain
washed against my window
in the night.

I regret the times
I've cursed it,
refused
to step outside,
let the drops
run down my cheek
dampen my hair,
drip off my beard.

I'm sorry for pulling
my cap down over my ears,
and spreading my umbrella
like a black halo
over my shameless head,
while watching the child
clad in yellow,
jumping over one puddle,
another

and another.
THE CLIFFS OF PARSON'S CREEK

The smell of coffee was soon to become the smell of cedar as I ripped the cedar planks into their proper lengths. That was the manner in which my every morning began for nearly twenty years: coffee at Laurie's Restaurant and planning my day as I turned the pages of the morning newspaper.

I loved being a carpenter and everything that went along with it: the smell of fresh cut lumber, driving nails hard into pine framing, the scream of my circular saw as it ripped through a plank, the feeling of accomplishment when finished with a job, and the knowledge that each joint and every angle was precise in its every aspect.

I set a dollar bill on the counter and left the restaurant, stepping into the brisk autumn air. It was chilly and I noticed steam leaking from a manhole cover near my Ford pick-up truck. I was forced to walk through the steam which was surrounding my truck and I couldn’t help but notice the odd aroma of it. Its smell was strange, but I was sure that I had experienced it before. But where? I thought. I was only steam, but it had such a weird smell.

Soon I was out of town and in Perry Humphrey’s den sorting out the straight cedar planks from the warped ones. This was done by scrutinizing the edge of each board searching for errant curves. There were ten warped planks out of fifty but most of them could be crosscut into smaller pieces and used above or below the windows. Humphrey wanted his den to be of three cedar sides
and one brick side. The mason had already done his work so the rest was left to me. After separating the two piles of boards and setting up my saw horses, I began to take the measurements of the first wall on its north end. Ten feet high by sixteen and a half feet long; nice size den I thought. Now to measure the other two. That steam. Goddammit where the hell do I know that steam from. Forget it and measure the other walls. Let's see; eight feet one inch high on the south end. Not a bad slope for an old house. That steam again. Where the hell do I remember it from. Jesus this is driving me crazy.

Then, like the quickness of a finish nail being driven underneath the face of a board with a nail-set, I remembered. Good Lord, did I recall that queer smell. And with that thought, sitting on my saw horse in Perry Humphrey's den, I was fifteen years old again walking with Mike Stone, Danny Pierce, and Arny Addison up the path that paralleled Parson's Creek to the clay cliffs that rose high above our swimming hole.

"Mike, what are you going to do with the pole?" I asked him.
"Gonna shove it up Arny's ass," he replied, laughing slightly and than looking at Arny.
"Come on," I said.
"Gonna catch suckers."

Mike's right hand held the broken tip of an old fishing pole. It was about five feet long with a five foot piece of monofilament line tied to the end. The opposite line showed a weighted treble hook dangling near the ground.

"Why do you want to catch suckers?" Arny
asked. "You can't eat them. There's too many bones in 'em."

"I ain't gonna eat 'em. I'm just gonna catch 'em." Mike replied.

Mike and Arny and I had known each other since we were small children and Danny had moved into the neighborhood when he was twelve. We all lived on the same dead-end road and that was the foundation of our relationship.

Mike Stone was a muscular boy who was extremely talented both musically and athletically. But even at the age of seventeen it showed that he would never amount to anything. Mike was constantly in trouble, either in school or with the police. He was seventeen years old, had been arrested twice, could throw a hardball eighty-seven miles an hour, played both the piano and guitar exceptionally well, and didn't give a damn about anyone or anything except himself.

I knew why Mike was a delinquent, but the understanding didn't change the person he was, at least not for me, no matter how hard I tried. Mike's stepfather used to beat him regularly. It was a common scene at their house, and on one particular occasion, he had to be taken to the hospital for a broken jaw. I sympathized with Mike and his life, but the way he treated Arny always left me feeling as though he got everything that he deserved at home. Mike was nothing more than a bully.

Mike cares as much for Arny as the lion does for the gazelle. Arny's benevolence and simple personality were constantly the prey of Mike's derision. I suppose that this was the only fun that
Skill

Mike ever had, besides beating people up, but it was always at Arny's expense. And for this reason I could never feel sorry for Mike, but always for Arny.

Again I looked the weighted treble hook which hung from the tip of Mike's pole and then at Mike. "You're gonna have a hell of a time getting that hook out of a sucker's mouth," I said.

"No I won't." he answered.

Soon we were at our swimming hole and Danny was saying how cold the water was. I told him that the water couldn't be that cold in July and that we'd get used to it anyway.

The swimming hole was about ten yards in diameter. It was easily the largest and deepest hole in Parson's Creek. But the main reason we chose that hole wasn't because of the size of the hole, but because of the clay cliffs that rose high above the hole and sloped sharply into it.

The cliffs were about forty feet high and covered with slick, gray clay. At the top of the cliffs was Higgen's cow pasture. We had left a couple of water buckets at the hole to moisten the clay so we could slide down it easier into the hole. One of the cliffs was being eroded slightly so that the top of it was almost hanging over the swimming hole. Every once in a while one of us would stand on the overhang and pretend to jump off into the hole. But no one ever did. It was a little too high and we knew there was a large rock in the pool directly beneath it so you would have to jump out quite a distance to be safe.

Danny and I began to wet the cliffs with the buckets of water while Arny watched Mike trying to snag suckers. "I bet you ten dollars Mike won't be
able to get that hook out of a sucker’s mouth.” I said.

“You’re probably right.” Danny replied.

Mike was wading in the stream up to his thighs holding the pole directly in front of him as he looked for the suckers that lay at the bottom of the pool. They were ugly, striped fish with round lipped mouths. They were bigger than any trout in the stream and I thought the would put up a good fight.

Mike looked like a turkey vulture the way he was peering into the water. "Got one!" he shouted.

His pole arched sharply and pointed to the water.

"Pull him in Mike," Arny cried, "pull him in."

Mike yelled, "Shut up Arny."

He pulled the fish in to the shore and Danny and I stopped filling our buckets to see if he could remove the hook which was buried in the fish’s mouth.

"Goddammit I can’t get this hook out." Mike screamed.

"Told you." I said.

"Shut up before I beat the shit out of you." He answered. I knew he would do it so I said nothing more.

The fish was breathing helplessly on the rocky shore of the stream. It flopped back into the water until Mike yanked out onto the shore.

"Well," Mike said, "this will work." He stepped on the side of the fish right behind its head with his dripping wet sneaker, wrapped the monofilament line around his hand several times, and with a quick, dexterous movement, ripped the treble hook from the fish’s mouth.
Blood began leaking from the fish's mouth and the circular lip which once outlined it was still hanging on the treble hook.

"That fish will never live." Arny cried. "It'll bleed to death and how's it gonna eat."

"So what," Mike said, "it's only a fish."

"Well," Danny said, "what are you going to do with it?"

Mike picked up his pole, peeled the sucker's lip from the hook and headed toward the stream. "Leave it there," he said.

The fish was suffering and I could see that it was upsetting Arny tremendously. I picked up a large rock and threw it down hard on the sucker's head killing it instantly.

"Why did you do that?" Arny hollered.

"It was suffering."

"Come on Arny, Let's go swimming." Danny said.

We were sliding down the cliffs by the time Mike caught his second sucker. Again he couldn't remove the hook and again he ripped from the fish's mouth as indifferently as before. This was a large sucker, about eighteen inches long, and it had broken Mike's pole during the fight so Mike killed it himself.

"Rotten bastard. Now I can't catch no more." he said. "Guess I'll just swim."

"Hey you guys. This time I'm gonna do it." Arny shouted. He stood near the top of the overhang where everyone said they would jump from but never did. "This time I'm gonna do it." he repeated. Then he ran to the edge but stopped just before he was to jump.

"Man that sure is a long way down." he said as
he looked over the edge. He turned to walk away.

Then I saw it as clear as I could see the suckers laying on the bottom of the stream: Mike reached down into the water, grabbed a rock, and threw it hard and fast at Arny.

It was a good size rock and it hit Arny squarely on the side of the head sending him staggering over the edge and into the pool where he knew the big rock was.

Arny slowly floated to the surface.

Danny was already in the water and he swam over and pulled Arny to the shore. I ran over and Mike followed.

Arny's head was resting on Danny's lap and thick, dark blood was oozing slowly from a long cut on his forehead.

I looked at Mike, His face pale and eyes wide
"I didn't mean..." he said.
"No, you didn't mean to hurt him." Danny said.

I looked at Danny in disbelief and then at Mike. "No, but you meant to hit him you son-of-a-bitch," I said, "I saw you throw it. You threw it when Arny wasn't looking."

"I-I," Mike stuttered, and with those words was running down the path toward our dead-end road.

"We've got to get him home now," Danny said, "he's bleeding bad."

When we picked up Arny I couldn't help but notice a peculiar smell. I hated myself for thinking about anything but Arny. But that Smell. It wasn't strong, but it was so odd. It almost seemed to dry the inside of my nose; it made me want to breathe harder and then I realized it was the clay the cliffs
Skill
drying in the heat of the sun on my body. I thought of the smell and then of Arny.
Arny was still unconscious when the ambulance took him to the hospital where, later that night, he died from a fractured skull.
I had blocked the death of Arny Addison from my mind, as effectively as a dovetail joint seals the corners of a log cabin, for over fifteen years. But the smell of the clay was something that I could never forget and I hated the steam that surrounded my truck. And I found myself crying as easily as I did the night Arny died, alone in Perry Humphrey's den.
Nick Zemaiduk

PLUMB

It seemed of great importance
when we bought the house:
the walls were straight,
floors didn’t sag, the pitch would be
sufficient to keep water
out.
You emphasized the fact that things
most likely to survive were plumb;
an even keel warded off
the always detrimental stress.

I have to laugh  the couple who
came yesterday to look were much
like you and I concerned that all
was level, had integrity.
‘More likely to survive,’ she said;
I had to look the other way,
a vain attempt to right myself,
restore the balances and find
an explanation, how, in being
true  the world is near collapse.
Staff Section
Melissa Peo

DAN'S WORDS

They are coming
to you faster
now.
At first they
came slowly, like
the notes of a scale
played by a child
afraid of mistakes.
They drip steadily
now,
a leaky faucet.
Like a woman
searching for a pair
of earrings in a junk box,
you are making
connections,
making people understand,
delight ing yourself,
feeding hungrily
on the salted peanuts
of words.

EARLY DECEMBER

Days as cold and crisp
as dry cereal in fresh milk.
Leaves hunched in gutters
like forgotten dirty laundry.
Sunshine skates on puddles.
Pink cheeks multiply
like caged rabbits.
And snow falls,
fattening the landscape.
Today, you were
a Norman Rockwell
*Saturday Evening Post* cover
come to life--

an 11 year old boy
delivering newspapers
in the cold November rain--
the soggy newsprint washed
gray as the day

The rain does not cleanse--
It irritates, makes clumsy
and heavy this already
bulky job.

Driving by in my warm car,
I watch you
drop your papers.
They lie on the splattered
grainy sidewalk,
the news soaking up
the wet grayness.

I think how glad I am,
for once,
to be outside looking in.
You think about
the warmth of home.
FACE

On a remote sidewalk
A face and two feet
Plod between cracks.
Step always on shadows
Of feet. Watch the long
Face in dark reflection,
As it bobs forward, eclipsed.

Along the deserted path,
Face meets another
And,
As if the complete
Distance of lives until now,
Remains--

Only the shadows of Face
Merge in sweeping handshake
On the flat, stone ground.
Martovich

OCEAN

Always an ocean
to cross before morning.

I wake in the sweat
of a new sun, body scarred,
lines of creased sheets --
Map of my dreams:
Each road leads through
lands in my sleep.
I travel the world
in a moments silent thought,
each starving child
touches my hair,
feeds on the will of my speed.
Until, against the Nile’s surge
I am pushed back,
washed to an ocean and
swallowed in its enormous darkness.

Awake at the surface,
buoyant on wet blankets
I try to recall where I've been.
To trace the grooves
across my ribs,
to that center of my back
behind the heart,
where I cannot reach.
Contributor's Notes

James Alexander is an associate Professor of Radiology at the University of Arkansas Medical Center in Little Rock.
Hillary Bartholomew writes from an unpronouncable street in Santa Fe, New Mexico.
Charles Bigelow lives in West Milford, New Jersey.
John Grey gets his mail right up the road from us in Providence, Rhode Island.
Fritz Hamilton has appeared in Aldebaran before, several times. He lives in San Francisco.
Joan Payne Kincaid paints beautiful Christmas cards with non-toxic paint. She lives near West Egg on Long Island.
Mary Ann Mannino has recently published two stories in Il Caffe. She lives in Philadelphia.
Walter McDonald has just published a sleep poem in Calliope, the other RWC lit-mag. He has been in Aldebaran before.
Simon Perchik has written a long series of poems in East Hampton, New York.
Walt Phillips has been on the cover of Aldebaran.
Michael Sisco is a junior in the Creative Writing Program at RWC. He goes for walks in the dark.
Patrick Skill, originally from Warsaw, New York, is now a senior at RWC. This is his first published story.
Nick Zemaiduk writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.

Cindy Capozzolo is a senior Art and Graphics student at RWC. This is her first magazine cover.