The Externalist

A Journal of Perspectives

Featuring

Padraig
fiction by Michael McNichols

On the March
nonfiction by T.R. Healy

and poetry by

Jeanpaul Ferro
Margaret A. Robinson
Patrick T. Randolph

Issue 1, April 2007

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Editor

Larina Warnock

Assistant Editor

Gary Charles Wilkens

A Note from the Editor

When Gary and I decided to go forward with *The Externalist*, I confess that I had my reservations. I wasn't worried about the idea of externalism, but about the challenges of launching a literary journal, online or otherwise. My foremost concern was whether we would have enough quality submissions to publish on time. I was pleasantly surprised.

We received submissions from all over the world and from all walks of life. We heard from the academic community and from those outside the university. We heard from beginning writers and poets, as well as prize winners and nominees. We heard from professional writers and casual writers. Of the many submissions that crossed our desks, we chose only fifteen poems, two short stories, and three pieces of creative nonfiction. These works represent the growing population of poets and authors who believe that literature can, and should, be both well-crafted and still speak to a world that is constantly in transition and lately, in turmoil.

A variety of themes appeared in our selections. T.R. Healy remembers combat training in *On the March*, while Jeanpaul Ferro poignantly describes the indescribable feeling of September 11th in *The hours happened*. G. David Schwartz comments on racism in *Roger's Story* while Kenneth Pobo subtly approaches a different kind of prejudice in his poem *While the Roofer*. Mike Marks, Gary Beck, and Stephen Bunch all approach the rural life in different shapes and forms. Michael McNichols presents a fascinating story about historical clashes and the loss of a culture in *Padraig* while Christine Klocek-Lim vividly displays a different, contemporary loss in *Hiking Blue Mountain*.

While the themes vary, these works share a commonality that cannot be denied. They all present us with enjoyable reading that means something. They present us with writing that moves us and inspires us to think about those things which make us uniquely human, those things that shape us and the world we live in. Far from being without self, this is a literature that brings the self into context with the earth, with society, and with the choices we make—or the choices we don't make.

We're pleased to bring you this first issue of *The Externalist* and hope to bring you many more. Thank you for reading!

L.

Editors' Choice

The rainmaker's dance

by Siovahn A. Walker

a wrong step in the last act
something unkind & pure & cold & clammy
a hand on the shoulder after hours of jumping
the sounds of hooves beating
(but ain't no horses around)
some time in the last scene of the last act
the rainmaker faltered
and look what he called down

the Indians say Cortez came in ships,
but some old colored man's legend
some old colored man living in the Congo
says that white men dropped from the sky
like some primordial ooze
that ain't finished oozing
...even yet, ain't finished oozing
the roar at the end of an eon of waiting
for which there was no equivalent thunder
in the stormy beforetime

oh, but how we forget the rainmaker's dance!

the rainmaker's dance took half the night
through the wind, the kind of wind
that shakes rainless nights
the rainmaker was tired,
the rainmaker was cold
maybe the rainmaker had stolen the job
from some other rainmaker
perhaps it was primordial affirmative action
& the rainmaker should never
have been rainmaker anyhow

oh lord, I don't know for sure
but I think the rainmaker faltered:
jumped left instead of right
when he should have stood still
the rainmaker faltered, dear God,
and look what he called down!

Editor's Appreciation, by Gary Charles Wilkens

I like Walker's *The rainmaker's dance* because of its distracted, faltering narrator, so overcome by the enormity of what she is describing to stay paying attention to the rainmaker of the title. The white man invades the Indian and African worlds, and even the calm of our narrator, who whips back to the rainmaker long enough to wittily ponder his qualifications and at last despair over what he has wrought. The poem's tone is one of barely controlled dread and hopelessness, yet leaves open the possibility that the rainmaker can jump the other way next time and change things.

Editor's Appreciation, by Larina Warnock

Siovahn Walker's poem The rainmaker's dance speaks to me on many levels. Without getting into any kind of rant about imperialism, it approaches the subject with a mix of child-like awe and subtle, mature criticism. The role of cultural perception shapes the poem and carefully placed punctuation pushes the reader through in a fast-paced near-chant. The structure of the poem emphasizes the overall theme. The most captivating aspect of this poem is the underlying assumption of hope: what has been changed can be changed again, perhaps this time, in a better way.

Two Poems by Steve Klepetar

All the Awful News

"...the unconscious, with its speed
of light, picks up all the awful news
and hurries back down inside ourselves
... like a dwarf
hiding a treasure of poison."

Carol Bly

1.

News leaks like oil into the quiet bays
where we hide our lives. Instantly
all the metal-
bright fish inside us die.

More slowly, birds
grow ill, feasting on deadly
soup. Insects
batten and live in black ooze.

Regardless, it rains
today. Water runs off
our roofs, sky
descends through thick air.

We walk like sovereigns
over wet ground. Mud
sticks to our shoes, our wide
foreheads collect a fine mist.

2.

Someone drunk has backed
over a small child, a woman
has been brick-smashed
by boys, raped and left

for dead. In the subways
clowns beg
for quarters, tattered
bag ladies, scab-crusted, debate

demons in the torn
and empty seats.

3.

At night we meet these demons in our dreams.
They greet us like awful children
dressed in rags, their faces
forced into idiot grins.

Their horrid noses drip, they clutch
with slimy fingers at our hands.
They smell like death and need
baths, but the tubs
run oil and dead fish.

4.

We are plagued, we who live
where October basswoods shed
and lakes lie, cool and ancient

on the earth. We are plagued
with flies
and blood, with cattle
death and drought.

We are plagued with ugliness
and rape, the garbage
piling
on rusting hulks,

with nightwalkers
on the city streets, dark
deals, demons, oil
and all the awful news.

Leaning In a Doorway

Leaning in a doorway, cold and lame,
The witness lit a cigarette and said
"Angels should weep to see this world in flame."

Weary angels sickened by the game
Bend low and spill their pity on the dead.
They lean in Heaven's doorway cold and lame.

This century's a tank to crush and maim;
We watch it roll with eyes grown wild with dread.
Do angels weep to see this world in flame?

My mother showed me photos without frames
Of relatives who to the gas were led
Struggling in the doorway, cold and lame.

My father never spoke of this. No name
Could pass his lips that suffered, starved and bled.
But surely angels weep to see this world in flame.

Prayer or curse or silence -- all the same.
It seems the gentle from their homes have fled;
They lean in foreign doorways, cold and lame.
Will angels weep to see this world in flame?

Roger's Story

by G. David Schwartz

It was a two 'wow' day. Both the story Roger told me and the scene on the highway while driving home caused me to shake my head in wonder. Wow. Unbelievable.

There really was no neat, well planned strategy to the story Roger told. After all, he was responding to my curiosity. He had neither prepared a speech, nor rehearsed an eloquent rhetoric. Nevertheless, in retrospect, his orderly, scientific mind built a series of stories which stretched from my follow up question to his off-handed remark to his eliciting a head-shaking, incomprehensible, 'wow.'

It all started, I suppose, when at lunch Roger, Chuck and I were sharing stories from our youth. Although different ages, and having grown up in different parts of the city, the stories we shared had a remarkable similarity. We were discussing the times when boys would gather on street corners and play baseball until driven off to a field. We shared memories of neighbors who, rather than enjoy the game at their footsteps, got angry and worried about broken windows. Each of us told about new experiences: fun going rocks with a new wooden bat, getting out first waffle ball, seeing our first real baseball game.

Then, almost in passing, Roger mentioned some boys in his neighborhood who were not allowed to play with him. His remarks were offered in passing, almost as if reporting an insignificant event. Yet I noticed that his speech slowed as he told us about those other children, and his eyes did not twinkle with his usual mischievousness. His face was downcast, literally staring at the table. It was a moment in time; the briefest moment. And then we were riding Schwinn bicycles again,

His remarks were offered in passing, almost as if reporting an insignificant event.

and trotting off to the five and dime, and nailing wicker baskets to telephone poles to play basketball.

Yet for a brief second in time, it seemed as if a memory had snuck up on Roger, on his blind side, heading for home. It was almost as if the intrusion of the memory could not be allowed in, yet could not be let go.

Nor did I like the way Roger dismissed the memory. "My father would always tell me," Roger said as he waved it away, "that some people are like that. That's just the way some people are. Don't let them get to you. Ignore them. If they don't want to associate with you, that's their loss. Don't lower yourself to their level."

It was right after World War II. Roger's father had come to the United States in the early 1900's. Eventually, he owned his own business. He was a member of the Civic Community. "Yet some fathers," Roger speculated, "returning from the war, did not permit their sons to play with me anymore. That's just the way some people are."

Later, Roger would tell me that the story had a "happy ending" (his words) because "those kids just didn't listen to their fathers. We went off to the field and played baseball anyway!"

In spite of his happy ending, when I questioned him about his father's response to racism, he told the following series of

unhappy tales. "It hurt," he said at several junctures. "It hurts."

"I had always hoped things would change," he told me several times.

Roger had a lot of friends in school. I can believe it. He is an amiable character. He was popular in school because he was intelligent, "and everybody wanted to cheat off me." He was also a star baseball player on the high school team.

"But puberty hit. And there were certain girls who I couldn't date. Not that I didn't want to," he said with a gleam in his eye. Suddenly the memory reminded him it was there. "They wouldn't date me."

A sixty year old man was standing in front of me feeling the pain and frustration of his fifteen year old self.

Maybe that is what annoyed me at first: the close relationship between "that's just the way some people are" and the speculation that you cannot change ideas and events.

"I had always hoped things would change," he said. "Perhaps with the new generation we were raising. My kids. They're great. Not a prejudice bone in their body. If they dislike someone, they don't dislike them because of their entire race. They have a specific reason for disliking them."

One day, he told me, his son came home from school and asked at the dinner table, "Dad, what is a 'chink.'"

I cannot image.

"But we raised our kids the way my father raised me. We told them, 'That's just the way some people are. You aren't going to change their minds. Why bother reacting to it? Just go on with your life.'"

Maybe that is what annoyed me at first: the close relationship between "that's just the way some people are" and the speculation that you cannot change ideas and events. We should not abide the idea, however subtle, that things will always be one way rather than another, forever.

If that were true, the very idea of personal growth and development would be foolish. The idea of repentance would be an illusion. Keeping faith and confidence in anything beyond the typical would not be a motivating factor but a serious delusion. Go on with your life? Yes; but what is at stake is quality of life.

It seemed apparent that Roger wanted to talk about these not-quite-dormant feelings. They hurt. Nor did it seem to be the case that the frustration was primarily identifiable with recent experiences, although he talked about them as well, nor with the experiences of his children, which he barely touched upon. He spent a good deal of our discussion talking about his father. And he proved to me that his father was a good man, worthy of the discussion.

But the motivating factor was childhood memories and the fact that I was willing to question him about his suggestion at lunch in its proper terms. What was at issue was not "some boys," nor even their father's war-weary misconceptions. What we were discussing was racism.

You may say: But that's the way children are. Children are always cruel. I disagree. Only parents and their prejudices can spoil a good baseball game.

It seemed apparent that the advice received and given, "just go on with your life," was being compromised. I wondered why. Is it because human beings, no matter how strong their mythologies, cannot go it alone? Is it because people, in spite of all the powers and authorities telling us that the typical and the expected are one and the same, need to see and make beneficial changes?

His mother, Roger told me, was a Caucasian. He speculated whether that might have something to do with the animosity shown his family. But there was senseless hatred within his family as well.

A white uncle who had worked a job for fifteen years was suddenly unemployed. He was living in poverty. Roger's father packed a cooler of choice meats and drove to the uncle's house.

"I hear this with my very own ears. This 'uncle' looked my father in the eye and said, 'You can take that damn meat and shove it up your ass, 'cause I ain't accepting nothing from a chink.'"

"Why, did you know, when my mother went to visit her folks, my father was not even allowed in the house."

How very deeply wounded must a person be to refuse needed food simply because they do not want to say 'thank you' to someone they perceive as different than themselves. There is no doubt in my mind that Roger's father was different. He was compassionate beyond himself. Roger did not say, but surely it must be understood, that Roger's father suffered from racism. Surely Roger's father knew this uncle was a bigot. Yet he looked beyond racial attitude and did what a human being would do. A human being puts aside pettiness.

"And that's not the worst of it," Roger said.

The worst is not a hatred which costs the fool a meal? The worst is not this evidence of failure to mature? The worst is not carrying an attitude which afflicts the subject as his 'object' of hatred?

Roger paused. Perhaps he was making an effort to repress the memory. Noticeably, he changed the course of conversation as if to fool the memory into leaving him alone. He did not want to immediately discuss the worst, but to leap beyond it, to his job with the company after college.

"Even here. Oh, they don't necessarily come right out and say they hate you, or call you names. But certain behaviors are dead give always. They just treat you different. They 'forget' to invite you to lunch. Little things. They smile more at one another, even when you joke as well as the next guy.

"You can't dwell on these things. It's no use wondering why so-and-so over here always gets his promotions whereas I do three times the work. No use wondering why they make $5000 a year more than you do.

"But how can I complain? What good does it do? My own family treated my father like that."

The worst memory was returning. The worst memory always returns. Imagine a time when we are concerned to plant only good memories in one another. Imagine the world we would harvest when we do.

"Why, did you know, when my mother went to visit her folks, my father was not even allowed in the house. Not even allowed in the house! They'd drive down to Kentucky to visit her folks and my mother would jaw with her relatives for four, five, six hours, and my father would have to wait out in the car."

Wow.

"My father would be sitting in the car outside

on the road waiting for my mother. He didn't care, though. He'd just be sitting out there in the hot sun, windows down, playing his radio, and enjoying the view."

Unfathomable. I cannot imagine treating someone, or being treated, with such disrespect.

"But what can you do? That's just the way some people are."

I am a reasonably intelligent fellow. It boggles the mind. It is difficult enough to respond to such wicked behavior in terms the abuser can comprehend. Surely the idea of repentance, of God, means nothing. But how very disheartening when we are being told there is nothing that can be done.

Driving home, Roger's words clogged their forlorn sound. What can be done in the face of such resurgent misery? How can we adequately respond to the idea that things are such, and will always be? Why is this issue, which every victim regrets and relives in anguish, apparently so elusive and abiding?

Not normally a sensationalist seeker, I slowed when the traffic slowed. It was a matter of necessity. A good mile before the accident in the eastbound lanes was slowing traffic in my westbound direction, gawkers were looking to the car which had somehow perched its front tires over the side of the three foot tall concrete embankment. Even I slowed to look.

Wow.

The only way I could possibly imagine that car to have wound up in such a position was to think that an extremely fast team of people had run between traffic, laid a small ramp in from of her car hurling at 55 miles an hour, and each of the people placing the ramp either impressed themselves into the ground, or leaped away so quickly as not to get run over. The entire front third of her suspension system was exposed on our side of the highway.

It was surprising the car had not broken in half. It was surprising that there was not a fire or an explosion. It was surprising the driver was standing next to the police officer pointing excuses in several directions.

Some people are lucky, I thought. Some people find themselves in positions in which I would never want to find myself. Some people...

We have been too accustomed to saying of some people: that's just the way they are So it shall ever be.

We must practice saying: Some people are surely in positions in which I never want to find myself.

We need more brave people, nay, more human beings saying: racists of any and every style do not represent me. Racists of any persuasion are in a position in which we never want to find ourselves.

We need more stories which indicate the folly of a negative concentration on races. We need to lay aside our easy dismissal and consequential mistreatment of people. We need to put the nobility of endeavor above penurious and uninformed attitude. We need to think, and live, and work for the quality of life we would prefer surrounded us. The quality of life will only surround us in relationships we have with people who already surround us. We need to cease thinking in our siege mentalities of being surrounded, and think of being encompassed in the loving arms of care and tenderness offered to adherents of each culture.

by Christine Klocek-Lim

Hiking Blue Mountain

(at the Palmerton zinc pile, PA)

It's a leap we take, to go on,
unsure about the availability of water,
uncertain how this side of Blue Mountain died.
We contemplate the contamination
of our boots as we walk.

At night we linger
beside a ravine naked as sleep.
We talk of how knowledge is spent
like easy money,
how our lives follow us,
how everything is clear
on this moonscape terrain
where limbs of rock lie scattered
among branches bone-dry and white as dust.

We burn petrified wood near trees
smothered by cadmium, lead, and zinc.
The fire smolders while we sleep,
while we dream on a mountain
littered with cairns, scarred
by the passing of solitary hikers
intent on escape.

Blue Mountain
photo courtesy of Christine Klocek-Lim

by Patrick T. Randolph

Rice Mountain, Japan

Odd mid January warmth in the air,
December's snow is gone, rain falls.

For this old monk and these western
Mountains near the sea, it is odd

Indeed. No cold winds, no icy paths,
Only silent mist coating the trees.

This morning he prepares the ink—
Mixing charcoal powder with fresh

Mountain stream water, then he
Prays to his favorite horse hair brush,

And listens to the voices of trees.
His fingers start to write a tanka

About a young woman's face he saw
Last autumn on the mountain path.

Would she return again next year?
Would he see that hidden smile?

His brush stops, he dips it again into
The ink and draws a picture instead—

Snow falling on a calm carp pond.
In his mind, each snowflake

Is grinning as this old monk grins—
Thinking about autumn, or— the girl?

On the March

Late Summer 1968

by T.R. Healy

We assembled to his cry and stood before him neat and erect like headstones in a graveyard, then we snapped to the left and marched out. Alone and away, in a voiceless place in my mind, I thought of him as a god. He screamed and cursed and we said nothing, then he shouted and we shouted back.

Give my your left!
---Left!
Your left, your left; your left, right
---Left!
Your left, your left; your left, right ...
---Left!
Sound off
---Sound off ...

More than a hundred of us were now under the complete control of a single man, a Drill Sergeant, whose duty it was to escort us to our new training site, guiding us there like a father walking his son to school. And, like a father to his child, the DI held a position of supreme power and authority over us, demanding respect and obedience from us as if we actually were ignorant little children. As soon as he stepped in front of us and started the march, we literally became his possessions, totally submissive to his wishes and commands, instinctively responsive to his screams and songs. In an instant, in one precise unforgettable instant, our civilian privileges of choice, deliberation, refusal, and dissent vanished, as if they had been set on fire and destroyed in a warm brilliant blaze.

In an instant, in one precise unforgettable instant, our civilian privileges of choice, deliberation, refusal, and dissent vanished, as if they had been set on fire and destroyed in a warm brilliant blaze.

All we could do now was follow him, willingly and without complaint. It was part of our new obligation. This march, in fact, was our initial soldiering experience; here, we learned our role as docile children, learned the powerful position of the DI, and learned how to obey and to respond rotely to any and all demands made by our declared superiors. The way we felt and moved and shouted and acted provided the first true glimpse at what it meant to become a soldier. It was as much of a lesson as anything we could be taught in a classroom or on a training field.

"Come on, you dickheads!" the DI screamed. "Get in step and look sharp!" His voice pricked the air like a shiny blade.

When he shouted, which was more often than not, and which was always in a voice of extreme agitation, his entire body shook and his face exploded in the rampant. dynamism of a hastily conceived Expressionist painting, with bright fiery red skin that was twisted and wrinkled and wet with glowing sweat.

"Now sound off like soldiers, TRAINEES!" he yelled, and so we screamed louder and looked meaner and stamped our boots

We knew them as mean and merciless creatures with ferocious tempers and superhuman abilities.

harder. It was all part of the required identity game, and as of now each of us played it strenuously and passionately.

At the Reception Station DIs occasionally shuffled through the grounds, and whenever I saw one I instinctively cringed and made every possible effort to avoid him. Nearly all of us had the same response; indeed, I sometimes imagined, it was as if we were the followers of Odysseus who, on entering a hollow black cave, confronted for the first time the dark, ugly eye of Polyphemus. We were shaken and timid and unsure, our foreheads sprinkled beads of sweat and our pulses beat faster than usual, all because of the rumors we had each heard and believed about the omnipotent DIs. We knew them as mean and merciless creatures with ferocious tempers and superhuman abilities. We had been taught to see them as images of terror, as objects who, without reason and on any given occasion, would indiscriminately attack us and try to break down any gesture of resistance to what they demanded and expected. Seeing one of them was comparable to seeing all of them, for each was alike, each manifested a quality of implacable strength, of contained power that at any moment could break out and do considerable harm. They had the neatness of a tucked-in shirt, their fatigues were always immaculate and crisp and painted with starch, their arms heavy, strong, veined, and instantly ready to snap into a salute or plunge a sharp bayonet into the pit of an adversary's chest; they wore the common sinister scowl of tough, brawny, arrogant men and even the youngest of DIs had a harsh, ossified countenance that was as straight and firm and humorless as a piece of gray slate. It would be unseemly for such men to even tire or wince or cry or complain or show any emotion that was not officially proclaimed, I felt, for they were the superior produces of the Machine. They were the paragons, the ones whose function it was to provide the image that was designed to express most vividly the sturdiest and best of soldiering qualities.

On top of their round shaved heads they proudly wore the principal identity symbol of all DIs: the firmly starched, perfectly creased old style campaign hats that had been worn by soldiers at the time of Pershing's expedition into Mexico and, more recently, by Smokey the Bear on thousands of fire prevention posters. The very sight of these peculiar hats, whether sitting on a head or held in a hand or lying on a table, were guaranteed to stir the blood and cause a feeling of utmost caution in any new recruit. In a way, I thought, it produced the same sort of response that the rattle of a poisonous snake did: for you observed the hat and its owner discreetly, making sure not to antagonize him and, at the same time, hoping he would not bother you and would pass on by. Pinned to the front of each hat was a sparkling brass badge and on it was printed the saying "This We'll Defend," which announced, among other things, the strength and dedication of these men and made clear their determination to fulfill any assignment given them. Their central purpose, of course, was to transform us, as young civilians, into soldiers with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes of fighting infantrymen. They had to expunge our habits of the past and mold us into something vastly different from what we were, into, it seemed, near imitations of themselves.

"Let me hear you girls sound off!" the DI screamed, as we strode militantly down a long, broiling, vacant road that wound through the glassy sand like a piece of lost string.

Sucking in the hot air deeply, with lines of conviction visibly straining across our faces and necks, we shouted:

> One ... Two ... Three ... Four!
> One ... Two ... Three ... Four!
> One Two Three Four!
> One Two Three Four!

"I can't hear you, TRAINEES," he hollered back, and so we sounded off once more. Then again, then again and again. The feeling of disbelief shot through my mind. I was here, I was marching in a military formation through the heat and desolation of western Louisiana, yelling and screaming like a maniac, yet still I found it incredible. I knew it but I did not believe it. It was one of those odd, bewildering moments when the chill and thrust of perceived experience penetrated too deeply, plunging far into the mind to the point where it could only be translated as something out of the imagination. Like a nightmare. I was sure that I should not, indeed could not, be here; instead, I should be home near the streams and mountains I knew, swimming and riding the rapids, drifting with the wind, letting the cold rain rinse across my skin. Anywhere but here, I thought silently.

The march was pummeling; it was a Mad Walk that quickly pushed introspection. Soon my brain was full of many distracting thoughts. I thought first of all of the last book I had finished reading before I left for Polk and basic training, it was a book of biographical reflections dealing with the theme of personal success, and in particular I thought of the chapter that dealt with the author's experiences in military training, an ordeal he referred to contemptuously as "subhuman servitude." Knowing that shortly I was to enter the same kind of existence, I read his remarks closely, searching for information and counsel that might better prepare me for my own experience in military training. And later, while I was at the Reception Station, I compared his view with the one sketched in The Soldier's Handbook, a small manual given to us to read and study, in which basic training was defined as a hard and serious challenge that was good for one's character and, if passed, would develop a boy into a grown man. This was familiar rhetoric, of course, for the military was often portrayed as a challenging life that was the touchstone of manhood, the essential test that determined the virtue and worth and masculinity of a young male. But, in contrast to this, there was a passage in the book I had read at home that said something about the purpose of military training that seemed more likely to be true than anything the Handbook had to say: Its real function, the author said, was not to instruct young men in the basic skills of war, but rather to make civilians into soldiers, into creatures responsive to the needs and demands of the military community and, at the same time, no longer constrained by their natural instincts so that, if ordered to do so, they could and would put themselves into a dangerous situation and risk injury or possibly death.

As I marched and listened to the insanely screaming Drill Sergeant, my brain still full of many distracting and rapidly disintegrating thoughts, I recalled the author's explanation of how such a transformation would take place---the classical reward-punishment conditioning process, he said. The conversion from civilian to soldier is, I realized, a major and extremely drastic change in almost any person's life. It cannot be gradual and partial but must be sudden and total, as overwhelming as an angry storm. And in order to effect such a change the military---through, in large part, the Drill Sergeants---must wage a full and constant psychological assault on the new recruits by demanding military actions and discouraging civilian ones. The sergeants must kill the initiatives,

motives, and feelings we were accustomed to, but, even if they were not able to do that, they must at least succeed in making us check those impulses for the sake of the ambitions that have been set up for us to have and to meet. By means of a varied assortment of rewards, then, so I later discovered, like post privileges or positions of leadership or special commendations, proper military behavior is promoted and enforced; similarly, a wide range of punishments is used to eliminate those actions that are considered unacceptable for the man in uniform. So, as the author made clear, the new recruit is actually the human equivalent of a salivating dog and the DI the commanding Pavlov, for the ambition of the training is for the individual soldier to be shaped into a creature that learns how to behave without reasoning, and only by doing this does he become acceptable.

Behave ... Behave ... Behave, cried the giant beat of our boot heels as they pounded hard against the flat yellow ground.

However obnoxious, demeaning, and restrictive such a human habit is to free and separate men, it is, I supposed, the only really suitable pattern of action for a soldier engaged in combat, since on the battlefield a man cannot take the time to reason and argue and question, but must instinctively respond to a declared order with speed, force, and efficiency. Unlike those soldiers, say, in the early French Revolutionary Army who debated whether or not to fight while in the midst of combat, the responsible soldier must accept the orders he is given---unless, of course, they are inhumane and illegal, and then a man must make his own ethical decision---and respond effectively. It is the safe and successful course, yet it is also unfree and irrational and, indeed, may be reprehensible at times. But, whether he likes it or not, the common soldier must accept the choices of others, especially in situations of combat, for this is the only way a military group can operate with the unity, strength, and competency that can insure success.

Behave ... Behave ...

So, even before I took a step into my training unit and started the program that was to make me into a soldier, I felt I at least partly understood the procedures involved in creating soldiers and the ambitions that these procedures hoped to fulfill. From my readings, from conversations I had at the Reception Station, from the DI who was now marching us, from the strange and regimented walk itself,

...unless, of course, they are inhumane and illegal, and then a man must make his own ethical decision...

I had gained, I thought, some insight into what lay ahead. This private, self-learned knowledge comforted me as I marched now, it made me feel relaxed and gave me a fresh sense of confidence in my abilities to deal with this new situation. Curiously I wondered if my own experience in training would affirm or deny these opinions I had now come to believe in, but for that I would just have to wait and see.

"Look sharp, you clowns," he screamed, as we swerved around a fence corner, leaving the gravelly path for a moment and touching the smooth black surface of the two-lane highway. "Look sharp! Keep in step and dress to your right." This dark, dark soul, who shouted an endless stream of words, numbers, commands, and lyrics, never seemed to lose his step or to slacken his pace; he had the invincibility and precision of a well-tuned machine. His black shoes were still as shiny as glass, completely unaffected by the swirls of dust our marching created, his hat was straight and firm and spotless on top of his milk pail-

shaped head, his brass belt buckle gleamed brightly, matching the tone of the noon light. "Don't look down at the ground, TRAINEES! Keep your heads up and your eyes straight," he continued to shout. "And sound off so I can hear ya."

"Echo. Echo. Echo, all the way!"

"You sound like little girls," he screamed. "Now you ain't home no more. Mama ain't gonna take care of you and nurse you with her big milky teats and tell you how good you are. You're in the United States Army now. So sound off like you got a pair."

"ECHO! ECHO! ECHO! ALL THE WAY!"

"Do you like this, TRAINEES?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

"Are you happy, TRAINEES?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

"Are you glad you're here?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

"Then sound like it."

"Graah! Graah!" we roared. "Graaahhhhhh!"

"Can't hear you, TRAINEES."

We roared again.

"Louder!"

"Graaahhhhhh!"

"What?" he shouted back, cupping a hand behind one of his ears.

"Jesus!" someone said in exasperation.

"What's he expect from us?"

"Everything," said another voice.

"Do you like me, TRAINEES?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

"Do you like me, TRAINEES?"

"YES, DRILL SERGEANT."

"Well, I don't like you."

Impossible. Suddenly I wanted to scream with laughter. Was he serious? I asked myself. Was he really and truly serious? I stole a glance and, for a moment, just fastened my eyes on him as he strutted alongside of us, his lungs screaming, his veins throbbing, his stiff olive-skinned arms threshing back and forth like mighty iron blades. He looked like a huge ball of muscle, like the most perfect personification of strength and power ever imagined, yet his language was that of a child's, full of the simplistic threats and challenges made by gangs of angry little boys. It cracked his image, if only for the moment, and made him an object of laughter.

"Can't hear you, TRAINEES," he hollered again and again.

I opened my mouth and tried to ignore him. High above us, there came a series of long, beautiful screams. Curious, I broke my Rushmore pose and looked up at the pale blue sky. A line of large, dark birds flew overhead, going east.

"They're the smart ones," a voice in back of me whispered. "They're leaving this place."

"You ain't wrong," whispered another.

The air was heavy and damp. The body sweat soaked deep into my fatigues, making the cloth feel as heavy as burlap, and my hat ban felt like a vise and seemed to become tighter with each step, but I could not remove it or even shift its pressure for that would disturb my immaculate pose of arms swinging, heels crunching, eyes front, back stiff, head straight. I was a walking mannequin, a robot, not a person of individual expression any longer. However, though carefully and rigidly manipulated by the DI in our movement, our language, our manners, there were still a few ways of asserting ourselves demonstrating defiance of the order being imposed on us. Some in the march whispered their complaints and made signals with their hands that conveyed special meanings of dissent; some broke the rhythm of the march by not swinging their arms at the same speed or in the same direction as the majority did; some did not look straight ahead but made glinting, sidelong glances or wore odd facial masks that stamped them as different and unique; some clicked their fingers or whistled or yawned instead of singing; some became mute and refused to say a thing, mouthing the songs and shouts with their lips. Even mannequins, it seemed, had the capacity to identify themselves and to make known their feelings and thoughts.

The sun had cursed this place, I thought to myself, had scoured it of everything that was alive and attractive.

We came to an intersection, turned, and then sang some more.

You get a line and I'll get a pole
---Honey, honey
You get a line and I'll get a pole
---Babe, babe
You get a line and I'll get a pole
And we'll all go fishin' down at
the Old Crawdad Hole
---Honey, oh, baby, mine.
Give me your left, your right, your left.
Give me your left, your right, your left.

The land was ugly; it was flat, baked, and yellow like pie crust, as desolate and scorched as any desert. A smooth, winding black strip of highway cut through it, otherwise there was nothing but the sane, the dust, and the scattered brown shrubbery, plus a few pine trees that were stripped and bare like winter skeletons of life. And, of course, there was us. Regardless of the waste and heat and isolation, we screamed and stomped our heels as if we were marching down main streets, U.S.A., in front of a thousand cheering spectators. After a while I did begin to notice a few signals of life in this enormous void of dust. There were some traffic directional signs, saying Stop and Troop Crossing, and several tall shiny fences and, in the distance, I could see the faint horizon of tarred roof lines and pointed wooden pediments. But for the most part the ground we marched through was a vast stretch of empty, desiccated plains, flat and clean and dead. The sun had cursed this place, I thought to myself, had scoured it of everything that was alive and attractive.

"Standin' tall and lookin' good," the DI shouted.

"Ought to march in Hollywood," we shouted back.

For a while we seemed to be continually walking up a small incline then all of a sudden the land flattened permanently, and we were there. Not with excitement or flourish, not even with the feeling of surprise; just there. Then the DI really started screaming at us to look sharp and to sound off, to cover down, to dress to our

right, to keep our heads straight and our eyes to the front, for it was all important that we make an outstanding first impression on those awaiting us at our training unit, Echo Company. In fact, as I quickly learned, to make a good impression was perhaps the highest military law. For always, it seemed, the image of something was considered much more important than its content.

"Company," hollered the DI. "Count cadence delayed cadence count cadence COUNT!"

I awoke from my thoughts and joined the screams, fecklessly.

One ... Two ... Three ... Four!
One ... Two ... Three ... Four!
One Two Three Four!
One Two Three Four!

We marched a few more steps then the DI shouted, "Company, HAWLT!" I held my breath and stood perfectly still. He had directed us onto a large, empty street that was blocked off by a long plank of lightly stained wood set across two huge oil drums, and there we stood in close formation before a reviewing stand that was situated on a steep grassy bank just in front of one of the barracks. Several soldiers, many of whom were wearing drill hats, stood together on the lawn, with their arms spread across their broad chests like heavy swords and with lit cigarettes stuck in between their fingers, anxiously and curiously they examined us as we stood before them like serfs before knights. No one said a word, each of us just stared ahead, burying one another with cold, dark scowls.

Pacing back and forth in front of us like a caged panther, with his hands clasped behind his back, the DI continued to ramble on about our slackness and our need for stern discipline and training, then all of a sudden he stopped and bellowed angrily, "What are you smiling about, TRAINEE?"

I knew I couldn't have smiled even if I had wanted to.

His question crashed into the stillness like a peal of thunder. He was no longer addressing a faceless group of subhuman trainees, but was speaking directly to a single man. An individual. I cringed at the thought of what that person had now brought upon himself. My arms and legs felt stiff, my shirt stuck to my back, my forehead was warm and perspiring. I draw a breath, secretly, and stared at the DI in horror. He now appeared, if it were at all possible, even grimmer than before. Intensely and belligerently he glowered at us, his large, morose eyes threatening us like knives.

He continued to stare at us penetratingly, obviously delighting in his power to tremble us, then in his rough, New Jersey-sounding accent he screeched, "Come here, boy!"

Strangely, he seemed to be looking at the file I was in and even in my general direction, but I was safe. I knew I couldn't have smiled even if I had wanted to. So, I decided, he must be talking to someone next to me. I made hesitant glances to my side but saw that everyone was just as tense and stoic as I was. Who was it then? I asked hurriedly.

Then, quickly, impulsively, stupidly, I pointed at myself with guilt and asked in a voice as weak and feeble as any infant's, "Who, me?" Immediately it sounded to my ears like the voice of another person, it was so alien and insane, so comically absurd that, for a split moment, I felt like laughing. I could hardly believe that I had said anything.

"Get up here, TRAINEE!" he snarled commandingly.

As fast as I could I ran out of the formation, shot halfway up the bank, and assumed a fragile position of attention in front of him. The DI said nothing; he just scowled at me, drooling his fiendishness like brown tobacco juice.
Hello, Polyphemus!

I felt helpless standing there and, for perhaps the first time, I really understood what it meant to lose personal control and to become a figure of manipulation. I had to be here, I kept thinking to myself angrily. I was forced to go through with this charade. I wanted to run, but all I could do was wait. It was his move, not mine. Finally, after what seemed like an unduly long time, the quiet ended and the creature bellowed, "Do you think this is funny, TRAINEE?" With his rough, snarling, viscous accent he had the keen ability to draw out the word trainee and make it sound like the vilest epithet imaginable.

"No, Drill Sergeant," I answered quickly. "I wasn't smiling about anything." My mind blanked and all I saw were those large, wildly bent nostrils waving in front of my face like two enormous torches.

"I said you were smiling, boy. Are you calling me a liar?"

"No, Drill Sergeant."

His face reddened and I watched the thick arteries along his neck pulsate with a hard, wrenching force. He stepped closer toward me, coming within inches of my face, stopped, and stared ominously. Then, in an action that happened too fast to remember anything but the result, he pulled on my hat and brought it down hard across my forehead, bent down swiftly like a hungry, quick-moving lizard, pressed his colossal nose against my ear, and growled coldly, "I'm gonna knock your goddamn motherfuckin' teeth out, TRAINEE!"

Masterfully gloating and savoring the joys of his performance with pure self-delight, the DI behaved, I thought, like some splendid, magnificent dancing mammal intensely alive and terribly eager to sprout its power and affirm its achievement in active public celebration, a self-indulgent creature full of confidence and the brilliance of silver blood. For several long moments he was perfectly still, his arrogance and pride radiating like hot rays of light, then, at exactly the correct moment, just before the inanity of his effort became too recognizable, just before his shield of omnipotence dissolved and became laughable, he broke his exulting silence and, for all to hear, hollered out, "If I look at you any longer, TRAINEE, I'm gonna get sick. And I don't want to get sick. Do you want me to get sick, TRAINEE?"

"No, Drill Sergeant," I answered.

"Now get outta my sight, TRAINEE, before I get sick all over you!"

Eagerly I ran back to my place in the formation, back to the comforting anonymity of being just another recruit, and as I ran I tried desperately to rip off the tight-fitting cap so I could see where I was going, but it was stuck and difficult to budge. Stumbling and struggling to remove the blinder, looking like a buffoon and feeling crazed, I saw myself as a juggernaut of total absurdity. A clown, really, Something to be manipulated for others' benefit and amusement. Unforgettably, I thought to myself, I had learned now that a trainee was to be the slenderest of reeds, conditionally susceptible to the slightest wavering force. All I had to do was prevent myself from trying to resist what I was told to do, and if I did this I would be a success. A real authentic thorough-going success.

by Mike Marks

Humming a Mail Pouch barn poem

Humming a mail pouch barn poem
on middle ground between galaxies and molecules
in the unsalted margarine Midwest Plain,
slapping pigment upon rotted wood
with my brush of foreign mammal hair,
I ferment Mahler into Mailer
under the mashed potato sky.
I am addicted to sadness today
pondering the chemical reaction
of transience, the missing Burma Shave
sign in grass rising from the ashes;
I am Pinocchio strung to spirit.
Will I renew the expiring leases
of my wisdom and my wisdom teeth?

Wrong Name, Wrong Face, Wrong Place

by Stephen Bunch

Ness City, Kansas, is "out west," where the population thins, the elevation rises gradually but steadily to the front range of the Rockies, and the water level in the Oglallah aquifer, also steadily but not so gradually, declines.

Ness City is the county seat of Ness County, population 3454. The town and the county were named after Noah Van Buren Ness, a soldier in the Union army, who died in battle in 1864. He had moved from Ohio to southeast Kansas in the mid-1800s. He never set foot in what is now Ness County. In fact, he was probably never closer than 200 miles to the place that, for reasons that are unclear, bears his name.

Or what the namers thought was his name, anyway. Newly discovered records, including a document with his signature, reveal that Noah's name was spelled Kness. The town and county's spelling probably came from 1860 census records, probably from a phonetic spelling.

Several years ago, before this recent discovery, the citizens of Ness County raised $50,000 to erect a bronze statue to their nonfounding father namesake. The statue of course bears the now-known-to-be-incorrect spelling. Further, the artist who designed the statue had no old photographs or other likenesses to work from, only military records, which gave such physical details as height and weight, maybe hat and boot size. Now, probably not surprisingly, a photograph has also turned up, and the statue bears no resemblance at all to Noah.

Noah Van Buren Kness--a man immortalized by a town and county of which he knew nothing, his name misspelled, with a likeness not at all like Kness.

Varner's Dilemma

by Gary Beck

this story originally appeared at www.Laurahird.com

Henry Varner had reached the point where he had two complaints; he was born, and he didn't have the courage to kill himself. Every calamity paled after he accepted these facts. His subsiding into apathy from frustration with his unsatisfactory life was easily welcomed.

His parents were grey slabs of people from St. Louis, who performed their roles in complete obscurity. His father's drug store, harbor for his secret shame, yet birthplace to his visions, was the only demand on his time when he reached high school. Grammar school had passed in a mist with no commendations, no criticisms, no fights and no fumbling in the cloakroom with budding maidens. But high school was different.

In Henry's sophomore year, his father installed a soda fountain in the drug store, and stationed Henry behind the soda fountain. Suddenly Henry was in the public eye. He wilted under the eyes of his classmates, when formerly he passed in a translucent haze.

The immediate assaults of pleaders for credit, blossoming socialites who needed recognition, idle young ladies practicing both flirtations and sneers at his white cap and jacket nearly overwhelmed him, until he discovered the secret dream.

The seeds of the secret dream were planted at age twelve, when Henry began to live on the planet fantasy. He peopled a heroic world with imperious tarzans, regal gunfighters and dashing hussars, who practiced a fumbling sexuality of kisses and rubbing bodies with exquisite young beauties. At sixteen, firmly established behind the soda fountain, the planet fantasy had become more complex. Gone were the poetic imaginings of Africa, the wild west and the courts and battlefields of Europe. In their place melodrama was born. Henry drew his cast from the young people who patronized him at the soda fountain. He used the boys he envied as enemies to always be defeated, and the girls he hopelessly coveted as beauties to be saved, then scorned, when they gratefully offered themselves.

Henry drew his cast from the young people who patronized him at the soda fountain.

Henry managed to build a shallow wall of superiority from his fantasies that enabled him to face his day to day life with a minimum of terror, since his foes were so easily vanquished. But growing sieges battered great chunks from his defensive wall, as his grey ineptness became more obvious in his fumblings with the high school damsels. So in his desperate search for a bulwark and some relief from the guilt of midnight masturbations, he discovered Miss Claymore.

Julia Claymore was the pride of a large clan of Missouri Claymores. All ignorant, uneducated farming people, they lavished their admiration for 'eddecatin' on this

prodigy who had actually studied for a year at the Art Institute, in Chicago.

Rapidly realizing that she was just one of the vast horde of Midwestern artists who yearly assailed Chicago, she realistically evaluated herself as a star of lesser magnitude, then accepted the first decent teaching post that she was offered. She invaded the small St. Louis high school like Grandma Moses returning with her shield. By the end of her fifth year in the school she convinced herself that she had renounced a career of greatness to illuminate the path for promising youth.

Julia Claymore devoted herself to the discovery of talent. She actually knew little about art, but being decisive in her role as illuminator, she became as glib as a salesman. Any student who could draw a straight line was promised the ultimate fame of Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Renoir (she had thick books about Da Vinci and Michelangelo, and there was rumored to be a Renoir somewhere in St. Louis), if they would only obey her directions.

She invaded the small St. Louis high school like Grandma Moses returning with her shield.

Each term she managed to tempt one or two innocents into becoming famed artists, never giving up her dream to launch some genius and bask in reflected glory. She never discovered what happened to her protégés after they left the nest, because by the time their hopes were defeated, there was not even the shaft of venom left to hurl at that fool teacher who led them to disaster. So Julia Claymore worked on and waited for her pupils to find the light.

Henry had developed the habit of drawing costumes for the characters in his fantasies during Miss Claymore's art classes. He kept his sketches in a loose leaf notebook that he always carried with him. One day he was summoned to his grade advisor's office during his art class and he left the notebook on his desk. Miss Claymore, peering at the work her students were doing, paused at Henry's desk and idly flipped open his notebook. On seeing a sketch of an elaborate evening gown she curiously turned a few pages, uncovering more attempts at costume design. She immediately decided that the hitherto unnoticed hunk of protoplasm, Henry Varner, a vague reference in her record book, would become an eminent fashion designer.

Henry returned to class, unaware of the revolution that had taken place in his life. He timidly said:

"Yes, Miss Claymore," when he was requested to see her after class. The sudden sign of recognition made Henry apprehensive, since he had always avoided contact with his teachers.

After class, Miss Claymore, beaming at her newest discovery, asked Henry why he never showed her his attempts at design. Henry, thrown into complete panic and confusion, tried to deny this onslaught into his fantasies. But Miss Claymore insisted that his light must illuminate the world, so he helplessly placed himself in her hands. Miss Claymore's hands decided that Henry's future development would be a secret nurtured between them, until his glorious abilities captured the attention of the civilized world.

Henry went to work that afternoon at the soda fountain in a trance. During that day he forever closed the dream of melodrama and tasted the first fruits of creative ambition. The watchword of Henry's life became. 'When.' When I am famous….When I am.

recognized….When I am rich….When I am loved….New power came to Henry. He looked at the boys and girls who clustered around the fountain with disdain, vowing that they would all realize someday that they could have been his friends, if they had only been smart enough to recognize his genius.

Every spare moment in the daytime Henry was in the library, reading everything he could find about fashion design. He walked the streets with pad and pencil, maniacally sketching every helpless female he passed. Many stared in resentment at his rude interest. One woman complained to a policeman that a crazy young man was drawing dirty pictures of her. But even this degradation was survived by the passion of burning creativity. At night, after Henry's parents retired to their room, he filled notebook after notebook with styles looted from a thousand magazines, and from women that he saw in the street.

Henry's next two years in high school passed with a routine sameness: school, working at the soda fountain, sketching constantly and secret confabulations with Miss Claymore, who dangled fame and fortune like a carrot before a donkey. So the time passed, and Henry worked and Miss Claymore schemed and gloated about Henry's glories to come.
One month before graduation, Miss Claymore realized that another disciple was about to leave her and enter the incommunicable world that had devoured all her previously launched pupils. She decided that she had suffered enough ingratitude and that just once her heroic efforts for her 'bringers of the new renaissance' should be appreciated. After many hours of threatening, pleading and offering tantalizing hints of recognition, Henry was convinced that he must allow her to sponsor a school showing of his designs. Students were conscripted from the art class and under Miss Claymore's artistic direction, plastered the entire school with Henry's sketches. Parents, faculty and students were cordially invited to attend the premier that would launch a great man's career. And here began the real tragedy of Henry Varner. Not one person who attended the exhibit had the faintest idea if Henry's work was good or bad. So for reasons such as the school had never had a true genius, no one wanted to appear ignorant before his peers, and certainly no one wanted to hurt Henry's feelings, Henry was hailed as the greatest innovation since brassieres.

Henry's salvation of retiring to the obscurity of the soda fountain and his melodramas was completely demolished by the wine of praise. He confronted his parents under the influence of fame's first embrace and declared that he was going to New York, to make himself available to the finest shops, destitute without his wondrous talents. His parents, utterly routed by this ferocious onslaught on their grey lives, suggested that he remain in the security of the drug store. When Henry's face changed from white to red to dangerous purple, they surrendered and gave him train fare to New York.

Many of Henry's classmates gathered at the railroad station to bid farewell to the brave genius who would conquer the world. While Henry was getting on the train, ticket in hand and cardboard valise in the other, Miss Claymore sat in her tiny office in the art department, rubbing her hands in delight at the swollen prestige her departing pupil had brought her.

Henry's trip to New York was uneventful. Although it was his first trip away from home, he was oblivious to the wonders of the unknown land that the train passed.

All his waking moments were spent

His envious friends in St. Louis had written to all the good designers in New York, warning them that he was coming.

listening to the secret whispers of the wheels, promising fame, fame, fame….When the train arrived at Grand Central Station, in New York City, Henry, carried by his blind belief in destiny, didn't experience the fear and confusion that assailed most adventurers on reaching the fabled city. He passed through the station as if he arrived in New York every day, got into a taxi, and ordered the driver to take him to a cheap hotel. The cab passed towering buildings, dazzling theater marquees, and crowds of scurrying people, but Henry sat, swollen and pompous, ignoring the tantalizing glimpses of the city.

The driver took him to Broadway in the seventies and left him at a hotel fallen on decayed gentility. He drove off mumbling, when Henry, ending his first taxi ride, neglected to tip him. He entered the hotel, registered for seventy dollars a week, was led to a tiny cubicle that contained one green, pock-marked, iron bed, one green, pock-marked, iron dresser, one straight-backed wooden chair, one porcelain sink spattered with rust and a tiny metal closet, painted the same bile green as the walls and ceiling. The room, a suitable crypt for Edgar Allen Poe, was viewed with delight as Henry's first place of his own.

His room at home had been three times larger, light and airy, but that was forgotten in his enchantment at being in the city. The valise was left unpacked on the bed, while he looked up the addresses of the foremost fashion houses and shops in the phone book. He knew that they were just waiting for his wondrous talents to appear. Then he went downstairs to a nearby restaurant.

Dinner passed in a mystic haze, as Henry devoured the poetry of the names and addresses of the fabled shops, so long a vision, now about to become a reality. He returned to the hotel, acknowledged the salute of the desk clerk with the aplomb of a jaded magnate, entered his room, quickly unpacked and went to bed.

Henry awakened at 8:00 A.M., soaped his hands, rinsed his face, squeezed two or three prominent blackheads, cleaned his teeth with hot water and his right index finger, combed his straight black hair, dressed in his good blue suit, then went out into the new world. By 3:00 P.M., having had his services rejected by a dozen shops, frequently with scorn and derision, he began to wonder if he was going about things properly. Henry walked uptown along Central Park West, completely immersed in a fantasy. His envious friends in St. Louis had written to all the good designers in New York, warning them that he was coming. Fearing to be eclipsed, they decided not to give him the opportunity to show his ability.

He had dinner in the same restaurant as the night before, a small, steamy Chinese dungeon, crammed with shabby diners and hurrying waiters in grimy grey jackets, who were short, muscular and looked like Tong hatchetmen. With about the same knowledge of life in New York as life on Venus, Henry accepted everything he saw with complete equanimity, only disturbed by the day's rejections.

The next day, Henry tried the leading fashion houses with the same results, though perhaps he was treated with more contempt. But at the last stop, a sympathetic receptionist suggested that he try to get a position as a stock boy or shipping clerk, until he became experienced. Henry, still

believing the myth of immediate fame, spun far from the battlefield in the security of a St. Louis high school, dismissed this advice without a moment's hesitation. He vowed that he would find some way to present his sketches to the leaders of the fashion industry, who were kept in ignorance of his existence by jealous competitors.

One week passed in a desperate, futile pilgrimage to every known fashion house and shop, without success.

Henry had the first glimmers of realization that New York might not be immediately conquerable. His money was beginning to run out, so he decided to take a job as a stock boy, or anything else that he could find in the fashion industry. Another week passed without his finding a job, but he overheard a conversation about employment agencies, and decided to go to some. The first agency he tried found him a position as an assistant buyer trainee in a resident buying office, at $125.00 a week.

The first week of work was excruciating torment. Henry had grown up a victim of the myth of the sweetness of women, with the exception of a few pert girls, who would certainly mellow with time. His new office was nothing like that. The women warriors of Hembel & Drang, Inc., occupant of three floors on west 36th street, were born for conflict. Even more profane and aggressive then men, they had no hesitation in screaming, cursing and abusing anyone who appeared on the horizon. He walked timid and fearful through the howling jungle of berserk women.

He reached the heights of terror and shame when the merchandising manager, Miss Gorter, an angelic looking old lady, who reminded him of his paternal grandmother, came charging out of her office like an insane fury, yelling: "Doris, you dirty bitch, where are you?" over and over, until Doris, one of her assistants, was discovered cowering in the ladies' bathroom. Henry returned to his hotel that evening in a comatose shock, stunned by the revelations of woman's character. Yet that night he managed to write an arrogant, boasting letter to his parents.

Dear Mom and Dad,
New York's sure a swell place. I've made all kinds of slick friends, who really like me, even a few girls. I've been looking around trying to decide where I want to work, but I haven't made up my mind yet. Everybody's really been swell to me, taking me to parties and all sorts of places where I've met a lot of famous people. How's everyone at home? Say hello to everyone for me, and tell them that I'm really making out fine. Please write to me.

Your son,
Henry

Then to bed and a night of dreamless sleep, bewildered awakening, weekend spent alone, walking, eating, staring at the forbidding face of the city.

Henry's life in the great city became a dreary routine; work, eat, sleep. He lost all interest in his sketches, lost forever the myth of fame and lost the fanatical determination to succeed. His job lasted exactly three weeks. On a Friday, that turned out to be his last day, they fired him. They told him that he just didn't have enough drive and he couldn't succeed as a buyer with such a mopey attitude. He left, paycheck in hand, wondering what to do next. He knew that after his proud departure he could not return to St. Louis, but no other options seemed clear.

Henry went home to the tawdry hotel and the desk clerk reminded him that the rent

was overdue. He went up to his room feeling trapped and alone. He sat by the window that looked out on an airshaft opposite a room as seedy as his. Despair rolled over him like a languid wave, breaking on a crumbling shore. He couldn't go back, yet he didn't see how he could stay.

Henry determined to decide his fate in the morning. As he drifted off to sleep, vague images of home floated through the mind. The last thing he remembered was reaching towards the soda fountain, to mix a drink, but he never got there.

by Kenneth Pobo

WHILE THE ROOFER

tears off old shingles
you do laundry and I
water plants, the sun
bling-shiny. Yesterday's

dreary drizzle has stopped.
When I go out to get the paper,
I smell fresh grapes, odd
in November--I come in

to jam up my toast. Today
is our anniversary, kind of,
we don't have an actual day,
marriage is banned, so we

choose one that seems close
to when we first made love
14 years ago. We'll take a train
to the city, free

from our nervous suburb,
hold hands in a gay restaurant.
Pound, pound, pound
hammering overhead,

the washer humming downstairs,
a Meyer lemon in bloom,
autumn rich as grapes
just plucked from a vine.

by David Thornbrugh

This far from Fallujah

This far from Fallujah,
the dragonflies have black wings
and gun turret eyes.
History is people killed in wars
far from where we sleep on scented pillows.
Greek fire is videotape
that continues recording underwater.
This far from Fallujah,
the women's voices counting butterflies
over the ribbon of water
blend to a feminine hum.
This far from Fallujah,
on the line dividing burning
to death in the air from
burning to death underwater,
the sheep graze with no idea
of why they're being fattened.

by Larry Blazek

YOU OPEN YOUR SHAVING KIT

Instead of your razor
is a large sharp knife.
A hand grenade replaces
your shaving cream.
A pistol replaces your cologne.
Extra magazines your brush
And bullets your comb.

by Thomas Fitzgerald

1981

As black flags ruffled,
And mothers prayed,
One hundred candles were lit.
With his life he paid,
Don't let another one die,
My son is not a criminal,
A prisoner of war.
Their life's all terminal,
Two countries of ownership,
Both religions unstable.
Hundreds have died now,
The people incapable,
Their walls full of blood.
Slop out those dirt pans,
The prison couldn't care less,
God bless sweet Bobby Sands.

by Jéanpaul Ferro

The hours happened (9/11)

We drove out of Vendian and out into Ordovician,
The air moist and warm blowing through our hair,
New York City rising in gray vaults off on the horizon,
Abandoned dreams behind us in our rear view mirror,
We stepped all through the hot ash after reaching ground zero,
Leaving only our footprints to prove that we were there,
A part of me couldn't grasp what had just happened,
You looked at me and said: "Can you describe all of this?"
I looked over at you and I said: "I don't think I ever can."

Padraig

by Michael McNichols

On the ramparts of the Fort of Kings on the Hill of Tara, Laoghaire, High King of Ireland, watched a bonfire blaze from across the valley on the Hill of Slane. From this height, even at night, he saw deep into the countryside.

Laoghaire remembered being proclaimed high king here, just as his father, Niall of the Nine Hostages, had been before him.

The River Boyne snuck past the valley on one side, and on the other, the sea waded softly off the coast. All the villages scattered across the valley between waited in darkness.

Each year, they extinguished all fires until a bonfire roared on the Hill of Tara, the place of the Stone of Destiny. This marked Beltaine, the coming of spring. All the nobility of Ireland, the minor princes and kings, had gathered to watch as people lit torches from the bonfire and went to relight every home throughout the land.

The bonfire on the Hill of Slane had begun before Laoghaire could light the Beltaine one. He knew only Padraig, the Christian, dared defy him and the gods like this.

He climbed down from the ramparts and ordered his soldiers to march.

***

While he had sent part of his army ahead to Slane, Laoghaire knew it'd take most of the remaining night to mobilize everyone, especially the visiting nobility. As high king, he'd have to wait for them, so he lit the Beltaine bonfire outside the Fort of Kings and climbed higher up the hill past the fort to the Stone of Destiny.

Like a thick, dirty-white finger, it stuck up out of the earth.

Laoghaire remembered being proclaimed high king here, just as his father, Niall of the Nine Hostages, had been before him. He longed for his dead father's advice in dealing with these Christians, many of who were still actually his people.

He wore jeweled garments, mostly to impress his nobles. Otherwise, he preferred simple clothing. Despite Beltaine marking spring's arrival, a cold wind snapped at him, making him thankful he'd worn a heavy cloak.

Gray streaked through his long, gritty, black hair. A tall and heady warrior in his youth, his stomach now sagged over his waistline and his bones ached at night.

He seated himself back against the Stone of Destiny as he always did when he wanted to be alone and think. However, even with the loud bustle of his soldiers arming themselves back down in the fort, he nodded off.

His druids woke him as the sun crept up into a gray sky. After first alerting him to the Christian's fire across the valley, they had retreated to the nearby sacred grove to listen to the trees and read the stars.

With their help, Laoghaire struggled up to his feet. He never let anyone other than his druids see him like this. Like a weak, old man. He'd known Lochru and Lucetmael since they were

boys, before they joined the Order of the Wise. Their hair tonsured, white hooded cloaks hung off both. Lucetmael bore his heavy extra weight as gracefully as he could, but Lochru, strong though skeleton-thin, always helped him up if he stumbled.

Able to taste it on the air, Laoghaire said, "It's going to rain."

"It won't put out the Christian's fire," Lochru said. "Nothing ever will now. His god is younger and stronger than the other Roman gods that still plague our land. And arrogant enough to claim the whole world for himself."

"And our dreams say he'll take it," Lucetmael added. "I've seen every Irish road lined with Christian temples that have druids crucified on their roofs. We're not fighting a man or god, but the end of our ways. Of Ireland."

If years of slavery hadn't stripped away his fears, then complete faith in his god would have.

"And our dreams say he'll take it," Lucetmael added. "I've seen every Irish road lined with Christian temples that have druids crucified on their roofs. We're not fighting a man or god, but the end of our ways. Of Ireland."

Laoghaire nodded. The Romans had sent other Christians to Ireland, but none as resourceful as Padraig. Druids across the land tracked his movements, and through them, so did Laoghaire. Within days of landing on Irish shores, Padraig had converted a local prince. He then rode through the land, increasing his numbers at every turn of the road, challenging druidic beliefs, something not even a high king dared.

Yet, Laoghaire had heard of Padraig before most of his druids ever had. In his later years, his father came to think that the centuries-old practice of slavery had made Ireland a poorer land. He often spoke of the young British slave who had escaped from his favorite noble.

As high king, Laoghaire had outlawed slavery, and upon hearing of Padraig's return to Ireland, felt his family owed him a debt. But he couldn't pay it, not as long as Padraig seemed to be gathering an army.

In recent months, Padraig had vanished into the mountains, but Laoghaire cursed himself for not realizing the Christian would confront him during Beltaine. The Irish nobility he'd converted wouldn't, but Laoghaire knew Padraig wasn't a coward. If years of slavery hadn't stripped away his fears, then complete faith in his god would have.

"Our people are Ireland and they'll never die out," Laoghaire told his druids. "Not as long they have men like us to protect them and we have our gods to guide us. Now, to Slane."

***

Morning turned to afternoon and storm clouds blackened the sky. Rain fell on and off, adding a few hours to the day's march across the valley.

Having donned his dark green armor and helmet, Laoghaire grasped a spear as he drove his war chariot along with his remaining army through the muck. Commanding their own bands of men, his nobility took up honored positions across the march, but Lucetmael rode next to the high king on horseback.

With a delegation of druids, Lochru had ridden ahead, meeting up with Laoghaire's foot soldiers to confront the Christians. While the nobles among the Christian converts likely stayed home, Laoghaire knew the common people would follow Padraig anywhere as long

as he promised a better life for them. Unless they gathered in extremely large numbers though, they'd collapse in the face of druids and trained soldiers.

White smoke curled up from the extinguished bonfire on the Hill of Slane in the distance. Laoghaire reminded Lucetmael that Lochru had said it'd never stop burning.

"And it hasn't," Lucetmael said. "Like the Beltaine bonfire, that fire has lit other fires deep in our people's hearts. The Christian god promises paradise when they die, and that appeals to those afraid they'll be trapped in the Otherworld forever, or do not want to be reborn to again face all the hardships of life."

"My father died fearlessly knowing he'd meet the gods in the Otherworld before being reborn," Laoghaire said. "How can our people believe in a Roman god when our gods will someday return to create a better world than any Roman has ever dreamed?"

"This Christian god cleverly dons the clothing of the gods of whatever land he invades. Hesus, the oak spirit, watches over us, so the Christian god calls himself 'Jesus' and claims he was born of a virgin mother, crucified, and then rose from the dead. As Hesus did."

"I've heard Christians claim they worship the one true god, but their prayers always mention a father, a son, and a spirit." Laoghaire shook his head. "Confusing. Still, doesn't the Source of All Things act through their god as it does all others? The Christians did drive out the Crom Cruiach when the druids couldn't."

"The Crom Cruiach perverted all our beliefs!" Lucetmael said. "They made human sacrifices and wrote spell books! They worshiped a demon they called 'The Serpent.' But their magic was still too similar to any druid's for us to affect them, so the Christians cast their spells to defeat them. The Source of All Things may have acted through their god then to save Ireland, but surely it is acting through us now!"

"How do we know the Source of All Things isn't acting through their god now?" Laoghaire asked. "Perhaps it's giving Ireland over to him and wants our gods to move on."

"Sometimes, I dream that our gods have already left us," Lucetmael said, "but some dreams are only dreams."

Silently, they rode on. After a few hours, the rain let up. Then a haggard band of warriors intercepted the front of the army and word shouted back down from them.

"Lochru is dead!"

***

Pressing his army forward faster and faster, Laoghaire pieced together all the stories that were being shouted from soldier to soldier. Those he had sent ahead the night before had met a Christian band on the banks of the Boyne. Lochru and his druid delegation had walked between the two armies as they did at any battle, spitting and cursing at the Christians.

The Christians then attacked them, their spears driving the druids into the river. They tried fighting back, even loudly proclaiming that their gods wouldn't let them drown, but none were warriors.

Laoghaire's soldiers charged. Battle erupted all around the river. As Laoghaire had thought, his men quickly routed the Christians, though a small group of them escaped, carrying Lochru, wounded and bleeding, off

with them. Up the road, Laoghaire's soldiers found the druid hanging naked from a tree, his own robe tied into a noose.

Rage fueled Laoghaire's flight and his horsemen desperately tried to keep up with his chariot. Christians had killed druids before, but mostly in self-defense, which Laoghaire understood.

But an unprovoked attack on the high king's druid meant they had struck against both Ireland's spiritual and royal authority. However, that didn't anger Laoghaire the most.

While he had had wives and children and mistresses, he had known Lochru and Lucetmael longer than any of them. As high king, he took no advice as seriously as his druids'.

His face shadowed by his hood, Lucetmael kicked furiously at his horse to ride alongside Laoghaire's chariot. Laoghaire couldn't even guess at the bloody revenge Lucetmael was thinking of, but felt like letting him skin every Christian in Ireland alive.

His mind instantly cleared when messengers appeared in his path, saying that Padraig had surrendered himself, asking only to be allowed to speak with the high king.

***

The wind howled and the sky remained black, but it didn't rain again. Laoghaire, with Lucetmael at his side, stopped at a small, abandoned village shrouded by trees.

A small segment of the army followed him in, but the rest fanned out, encircling the area in case the Christians attacked again.

On his orders, the nobles had strayed over to the Boyne to catch any roving bands of Christians. Laoghaire didn't want them around to shout bad advice at him or try to kill Padraig prematurely for the glory. They'd see enough of the Christian once he was captured and taken back to the Fort of Kings.

Frightened by the sounds, a family of deer rushed out of the trees and darted away from the large gathering of men.

Shouts rang out. Laoghaire watched the woods ahead as his horsemen escorted Padraig and eight of his followers into the village. They rode on white horses, with two soldiers on either side of them.

The last rider, a young, dirt-speckled lad with brown hair, carried a sack of books over his shoulder. As they came, the Christians cried a haunting prayer to their God above to protect them. Frightened by the sounds, a family of deer rushed out of the trees and darted away from the large gathering of men.

Though he had never seen him before, Laoghaire recognized Padraig as the first of the riders.

"Dressed like a druid," Lucetmael muttered when he caught sight of him.

Padraig wore a white robe with the hood thrown back, and had his wild, reddish-brown hair tonsured. From a string around his neck, a wooden cross dangled down. In his left hand, he held a long staff with a curved top.

Hesitantly, Laoghaire lifted off his helmet. Though he ached to hurl it at Padraig, he set his spear down and climbed off his chariot. After dismounting his horse, Padraig wandered past a row of dusty, old huts toward him. The other Christian remained grouped together

near their horses, obviously afraid of the soldiers.

Laoghaire's men watched with their spears ready from all sides, but none dared throw one without the high king's command. After jumping off his horse, Lucetmael stood still as stone, eying the Christians, probably calling a plague down upon them, Laoghaire thought.

Throwing his staff down, Padraig dropped to his knees before the high king and grabbed his hands.

"Forgive me!" he said. "I never wanted bloodshed! My Lord cannot forgive me, but maybe you can!"

Hating to see anyone grovel, Laoghaire pulled Padraig up to his feet.

"Be a man and say this to my face!" he snarled.

Tears barreling down his cheeks, Padraig shook his head. "There are no words for what happened, but don't blame all of my people! Most of them are good and just!"

Striding forward, Lucetmael threw back his hood. His thick, pale face twisted like a demon's as he hissed.

"I knew a good and just man once. Now he's hanging from a tree because of your people! How dare you strike at druid! The chosen of the gods!"

Laoghaire held his druid back with a cautious hand. He didn't want anyone killing Padraig yet. It might provoke all the Christians, even the peaceful ones, into attacking. No one else had to die, not today.

Holding his cross to his heart, Padraig said, "I swear to you on our Lord I never meant to harm a druid or anyone else in this land. I've fought in my own defense, yes, but I preach love! Not slaughter!"

"Yet it follows your heathen religion everywhere!" Lucetmael stabbed his finger at Padraig. "You say it all started with your god nailed to a cross and all that did was teach his followers how to kill!"

"No!" Padraig cried. "He died for us all! So our sins could be forgiven!"

Stepping in-between the Christian and the druid, Laoghaire looked Padraig in the eye. "You were a slave here before. Now you've returned, preaching a violent religion and gathering an army of followers. You lit a fire that blasphemed Beltaine! Yet, you claim peace is your intention?"

"It was a Paschal Fire!" Padraig pleaded. "For Easter! The day our Lord rose from the dead! But I knew it'd draw you to me! I needed to talk with you, high king! I told my people to stay together and not to resist your army when you came!"

Laoghaire nodded. He had expected to hate this Christian, but found himself relating. Too many times he had told one of his nobles to stay out of another's land, and yet they went and raided.

"I'd like to see if you and your followers can rise from the dead," Lucetmael said, rolling his eyes in the back of his head.

"You cannot mock the Resurrection!" a young voice shouted. The lad with the sack of books dropped down from his horse and hurried over to the druid.

"Your worship is foul and bloody! You profane the name of God to call upon unspeakable things!"

"I speak to the gods of our land, boy," Lucetmael said.

"Demons! All of them!" the boy shrieked. "There is only one true God! The God of Padraig!"

"Benignus!" Padraig snapped. "Stay out of this!"

"They must give themselves over to Christ!" Benignus said.

"Child," Laoghaire said sternly, "you've had your say. Now go back to your horse."

Shaking, Benignus shrugged off his sack of books and bent down on one knee. "Y-Yes, high king."

One of his books spilled out onto the ground and opened. Laoghaire glanced down at it, but couldn't read its writing. His druid, however, could.

"*Blessed are the meek; they shall inherit the earth."*

Lucetmael looked up at Padraig.

"As if any Irish king would give up his kingdom! And your god thinks he will rule here?"

"My dreams have told me He will," Padraig said.

Lucetmael stared at him, gap-mouthed, and Laoghaire swore he had never seen him tremble before.

"Even now His power grows in Ireland!" Benignus shouted, shoving the book back into his sack. "I challenge you, druid! Take your spell books and we shall place it with these holy texts in a fire! They will remain unscathed as your books burn!"

"True druids write nothing down," Laoghaire said. "They are not the Crom Cruiach. They have no spell books."

"But I accept your challenge, Christian!" Lucetmael said. "However, I will not wager any book, but my own life!" He glanced at the nearby huts. "There!"

"I will spare his life and yours so you can preach of your god's failure!"

He strode toward a small house at the back of the village. He stepped through its door less entrance and knocked on the floor. "Greenwood! Blessed by the gods! Place your books inside, child, and we'll light our fire here!"

Benignus started forward, but Padraig grasped him by the shoulders. "This is madness!"

"Let him come!" Lucetmael yelled from the house. "I will spare his life and yours so you can preach of your god's failure!"

Soldiers separated Padraig and Benignus and restrained the other Christians back near their horses. Padraig looked to Laoghaire, his eyes pleading for him to stop this, but the high king only sighed sadly. He couldn't countermand a druid in spiritual matters.

After Benignus opened his sack onto the floor at Lucetmael's feet inside the house, the druid spat on the books. He ordered a few soldiers to gather firewood, and then he struck together two stones to spark the fire himself.

Within minutes, red flames leaped up around Lucetmael and the books and spread. Fire engulfed the entire greenwood house as Laoghaire, his soldiers, and the Christians watched in horror and awe.

Part of the ceiling tumbled down and struck

"All the gods have gone," he said and died.

Lucetmael. He fell to the floor on top of the books and fire snaked across his white robe. Screaming in pain, he forbade anyone to come in and save him.

A curtain of flame then blocked him from view. Shoving his men aside, Laoghaire grabbed Padraig and shook him.

"Your god gives you powers! Make it rain!"

"I can't!" Padraig cried.

"Make it rain or he'll die!"

"To command nature is the will of God! I am just a man!"

"Do something! Anything!"

Laoghaire let him go, and Padraig fell to his knees. He spread his arms wide and looked toward the black-clouded sky. Benignus and the other Christians followed suit. Laoghaire and his soldiers stared at them as they called on their heavenly father.

The high king was about to slap Padraig and force him to cast a spell when he felt a raindrop slip across his cheek. He looked up as a burst of rain splattered down. The Christians remained on their knees, praying, as though they couldn't feel it. However, his soldiers trekked up muck as they rushed toward the smoking, but still standing, greenwood house.

Laoghaire pushed his way to the front of them, but stopped as Lucetmael stumbled out of the house over the fire-blackened books.

His robe in burned tatters, his skin ruined by hot blotches, he collapsed into the high king's arms. He looked up at Laoghaire with ash-ringed eyes.

"All the gods have gone," he said and died.

***

By dusk, the rain had stopped. Laoghaire stood on the wet ramparts of the Fort of Kings, Padraig's staff in his hands. He had taken it with him back to Tara as Padraig and his Christians had been escorted back. Even now, his men were still rounding up Padraig's followers, but, eventually, those they couldn't find would flee.

His nobles waited back in the great hall for him to climb up to the Royal Seat and make a ruling on Padraig. Laoghaire had decided to make them wait, maybe even until the next morning.

He had changed out of his armor and into a simple tunic and trousers. Then he ordered that Padraig be brought to him on the ramparts. His two guards handled the Christian roughly as they threw down in front of their high king.

"Help him up," Laoghaire said. When his guards hesitated, he beat the staff against the ramparts. "Help him up!"

Once they did, he allowed Padraig to gaze admiringly all about the countryside. Mountains peaked in the distance, grassy hills tumbled up and down, and the sky and the nearby sea melted together into the coming night.

Next, Laoghaire ordered his guards to leave them alone, but they eyed Padraig warily from their stations elsewhere on the ramparts. Nervously, Padraig looked back at them.

"How is it that you claim to have one god, yet pray to a father, a son, and a spirit?" Laoghaire then asked.

Padraig plucked a shamrock up from where he had apparently hidden it in his sleeve. “

As three clovers are each a clover, yet one shamrock,” he said, “the Holy Trinity are the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost, and together are the one true God.”

The wind came and swept the shamrock out of Padraig’s hands and his eyes wandered after it.

“Do you feel that the Source of All Things acts through your god, as it does through all others?” Laoghaire asked.

“Our Lord is the Source of All Things,” Padraig replied, “but men have built up false idols and pantheons around Him.”

“Perhaps.” Laoghaire paused. “When you first returned to Ireland, you converted Prince Dichu. I heard he even gave you a barn as a refuge.”

Padraig nodded. “He didn’t come to Slane with me.”

“He knows he can’t buy justice anywhere near Tara and I’d have him arrested,” Laoghaire said. “He burned Prince Milchu alive in his own home with all his possessions because he wouldn’t convert to your faith. Did you ask him to do that?”

Shaking his head softly, Padraig said, “No, I wanted to save Milchu, as I want to save all Irishmen.”

“When you were a slave here,” Laoghaire said, “Milchu was your master. I imagine you learned much of our ways from his druids, but your life under him couldn’t have been easy. You never desired revenge?”

“Of course not!” Padraig shouted. The echo startled the guards on the ramparts, but Laoghaire calmed them with a wave of his hand.

Padraig sighed. “I tell myself if I had known of the deaths and violence I’d bring to these shores I wouldn’t have come back, but that’s a lie. My Lord called me here to do His work. And I needed to speak with you to do that. If you open your heart to Christ, all your people will!”

Laoghaire shook his head. “My gods are the gods of my ancestors and I cannot betray them. However, other foreign gods are worshiped in my country. I don’t root out their followers so long as they keep the peace. Therefore, I’m willing to offer you a truce.”

He handed the staff back to Padraig, who took it warily.

“The Christians who have murdered will be executed. I have no choice in this. But the others will be exiled with you from Tara and Slane. You will also be banned from all places sacred to druids. However, you are free to preach elsewhere. I will order all my people to give you your safety.”

Grinning wryly, Padraig said, “Miles away from here, your orders can be ignored.”

“Then you’ll have to defend yourself as you’ve done before,” Laoghaire said, “but you won’t be punished, though I will punish those that offer you harm.”

Running his hand along the curved top of his staff, Padraig asked, “Why are you just letting me go? Those deaths today were at least partially my fault. I deserve imprisonment, if not worse.”

“Then you could not teach your Christians to be better,” Laoghaire said, “to love those who are not Christian. Most of the Christians are my people too. I need you to help me lessen

the bloodshed on both sides. And my family owes you a debt."

"You owe the Lord then, high king," Padraig said.

"Not him, you." Laoghaire looked away. "When you were a boy and taken as a slave, it was my father who ordered that raid and many others. He was young then, and died regretting it. But he always asked the gods to bless the shepherd boy who got away."

Smiling, Padraig suddenly kissed Laoghaire's forehead.

"The Lord, the Source of All Things, acted through your father then, and through you now. I dreamed of the angels of the Lord and first truly heard His Word when I shepherded here as a slave. That's when my true life began, and because of what you have done tonight, maybe Ireland's true life can begin as well."

After his guards led Padraig away, Laoghaire peered out across his land. Night fell like a shadow, but fires from homes spotted the valley below. He wondered how many came from the Beltaine bonfire and how many came from Padraig's Paschal Fire.

Then he went to change into his jeweled garments and address the nobility.

by Matthew Putnam

Propulsion

Boeing 717 slipping into a Rothco
Primary colors split in the sky.
Popping incandescence below,
Not Yet Starry at 7.
Serine and solitaire.

What mirrors or miles.
Streaming sunsets underneath.
A sign or song.
Sung of sinusoidal flickering flux.

Reaching me from a future
Not destroyed or reconstructed.
Only light beaming in,
A frequency of sublime propulsion.

by Stephen Bunch

Blues for an Identity Thief

Your mother didn't know you when you returned.
The dog snapped at you. The bur oak
by the driveway turned into a hedgerow
while you were gone.
Without the map in the glovebox
you never would have found
your hometown
or the right street.
Even now you can't name your old school
or your sister's husband.
In another city, on a different map,
your wife sleeps in a house
you can't describe. You can barely
imagine her face or remember
the children, their birthdays, their voices.

Your wallet is filled with pictures of strangers
but when you stopped for the siren,
the officer noted the likeness
in your driver's license photo
and wrote you a ticket in another man's name.
Fines, he said, can be paid by phone
with a valid credit card
and a contrite heart.
One out of two isn't bad, you heard
yourself say, then put the citation away.
When your cell phone chattered,
someone else answered before sitting
down to your dinner.

by Margaret A. Robinson

Wish I Had a Cool Name Like "The Gipper"

Don't like to talk. Like riding my bike and listening
to God speak inside my head. Don't like to read, just
said that stuff about Camus for the press. Hate the press.
Like wearing a letter sweater and spotless white bucks.

Like megaphones, banners, and orange flight suits.
Like really long zippers. Wish I could yank one
and clean up I-rak. It's all Dick's fault - said we'd
be done in six months. Like hiding out at the ranch.

Poppy doesn't speak a word, just looks like there's a burr
up his butt. Mommy says, "You've blown it, Bud." I get
fed up with Laura's sappy face, would love to get wasted
with my kids. Wish I had a cool name like "The Gipper."

Condi's legs are too thin, and her words way too big.
Even Putin's turned ugly. He used to like me. Fudge.

by Joel Solonche

MADONNA AND CHILD

(A SATURDAY EVENING POST CHRISTMAS COVER FROM THE 1940s)

See Mother.
Mother has blonde hair.
Mother has blue eyes.
Mother has rosy cheeks and dimples.
Mother has cherry lips.
Mother looks like Betty Grable.
Mother looks like a pin-up.

See Baby Jesus.
Baby Jesus has blonde hair.
Baby Jesus has blue eyes.
Baby Jesus has rosy cheeks and dimples.
Baby Jesus has cherry lips.
Baby Jesus looks like Mother.
Isn't that strange?
Mother was a virgin when she had him.
Don't worry.
That's a miracle.

See Father.
Oh, where is Father?
Father is not here.
Don't worry.
Father is in Italy.
Father is in a foxhole.
Italy is far away.
Father has a rifle.
Father is shooting a German.
The German has blonde hair.
The German has blue eyes.
The German has rosy cheeks.
The German does not have dimples.
The German has a handgrenade.
Uh-oh.

See Spot.
Oh, where is Spot?
Spot is not here.
Don't worry.
Spot is somewhere.
Spot is off somewhere skipping like a ram.

The Externalist: A Journal of Perspectives

From "veriest trash" to "racist trash"—*Huckleberry Finn* and how a boy's adventures spawned decades of controversy

by Gary Charles Wilkens

A curious mixture of the highest praise and the sharpest criticism raged about *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* upon its publication, a storm which has continued unabated into the present day. However, critics have not always agreed as to *why* this "American classic" is so awful. In March 1885 the Concord Public Library committee characterized the novel as "rough, coarse and inelegant, dealing with a series of experiences not elevating, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people." (Boston 308). But by 1957 black groups had succeeded in getting the book banned from New York City public schools explicitly for its use of the word "nigger" (Wallace 309). By 1976 Huckleberry Finn had been removed from schools in Florida, Illinois and many other states principally because it created an "emotional block for black students which inhibit[ed] learning." (Wallace 310). The vulgarity and low style which had disturbed its earliest readers had been forgotten, to be replaced by fury over its use of racial epithets or its stereotyping and neglect of its main black character, the runaway slave Jim. Between those early newspaper articles and the movement to ban the book for being a racist screed, Huckleberry Finn had not changed. But the surrounding society had undergone a massive change: America had encountered the Civil Rights Movement, came face-to-face with its slave-holding past and its racist present, and begun attempts to make peace with that ugly history and its distasteful legacy. *Huckleberry Finn*, with its flawed yet gripping account of its day and age, was a ripe target for race-related turmoil. In language and characterization it both embodies and condemns racism, making it the one novel about race on which everyone must take a stand. This essay will explore how *Huckleberry Finn* became the right novel in the wrong place, arguing that the long-lasting racial controversy surrounding it stems from the fact that it takes a piece of the nineteenth century into the present, confronting us with beautiful, embarrassing truth.

In 1885 the Civil War was fading into history, Reconstruction was winding down, and the nation was rapidly expanding west. But it was still a society of the Victorian era, one in which moral propriety and religious rectitude were the loudest voices in the common culture. It was a society which would have had more sympathy for the "dismal regular and decent" (Twain 13) widow Douglas than for the mischievous young boy she had taken as her ward with such commendable Christian charity. When Huckleberry flees the lessons about Moses and his sessions with the spelling book, sneaking off to start a band of robbers with the irascible Tom Sawyer, the stage is set for a book of low comedy and lower adventures, which was sure to cause the morals of its readers to "go to rack and ruin now." (Letter 309). Many reviews of the day recognized Mark Twain as a "genuine and powerful humorist, with a bitter vein of satire on the weaknesses of humanity which is sometimes wholesome", but felt that he too often "degenerate[ed] into a gross trifling with every fine feeling." (Springfield 308). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was a novel at once both famous and infamous, the product of a celebrated writer who was nevertheless too vulgar, too free with idea and moral, than the temper of his time could stand. To some critics and much of the common reading public, the book's chief fault was that it failed to adequately promote accepted moral truths and norms. The racial aspect had not yet surfaced in society in which blacks were still non-entities.

Time passed. Huckleberry Finn and Jim still floated leisurely down the 1840's Mississippi, having one un-uplifting adventure after another, while the society surrounding it went through one upheaval after another. The focus on morals and rectitude faded in the face of new and more serious ethical dilemmas, and new generations of readers grew up with new sensibilities and new concerns. African-Americans began to press for equality and justice and entered the educational system, encountering for the first time the canon of American literature into which *Huckleberry Finn* was being rapidly elevated (Smiley 355). Their increased self-awareness and resistance to racism caused the over two-hundred uses of the word "nigger" in the novel to fall very harshly upon their ears. Many whites were also so sensitive or wanted to be, and they conducted studies showing that "the assignment and reading aloud of *Huckleberry Finn* in our classrooms is humiliating and insulting to black students. It contributes to their feelings of low self-esteem and to the white students' disrespect for black people." (Wallace 310).

Such crusading moralism has been tempered by more sophisticated criticism from black critics like Toni Morrison, who found efforts to ban the book a "purist yet elementary kind of censorship designed to appease adults rather than educate children." (386). According to Morrison, the use of the word "nigger" was not the source of novel's mix of danger and joy, but rather its "ability to transform its contradictions into fruitful complexities and to seem to be deliberately cooperating in the controversy it has excited. The brilliance of *Huckleberry Finn* is that it is the argument it raises." (386). *Huckleberry Finn* forces readers to struggle with it, challenges them to reconcile its picture of American society and race relations with the developments of their own day. Due to its undeniable literary quality the novel has lasted long enough in popular esteem and critical opinion to bring its picture of a young boy's struggle with the deepest issues to succeeding generations. Whether Huck is using "nigger" nonchalantly or making his dramatic decision to go to hell for the sake of friendship, struggling with his own social sensitivities all the way (Twain 223), we cannot but face our own demons as we read, asking ourselves how much we could stand and what we would do in his place.

Huckleberry Finn has raised racial issues so repeatedly and intensely because those are the issues which rest in the souls of modern readers, issues which were dormant at the time of its publication but which have been central to American society for decades. Thus the novel's reception has always depended on what was going on in the background of its readers, whether that was a Victorian unease with the now innocent-seeming mischievousness of its hero, or the struggle for civil rights in the 1950s. Like all great works of fiction, Huckleberry Finn does not state its meaning clearly once and for all, but leaves itself open to each reader's interpretation, and interpretation never takes place outside of the reader's social context. The novel has drifted down through the decades on the Mississippi of it own artistic merits, stirred by the dark currents of each generation's obsessions and struggles. For most of the twentieth century it has spun in eddies of racial turmoil, again and again becoming an outlet for the anxieties of both whites and blacks as they strained to keep their heads above water in the one of the formative debates of our national conscience. *Huckleberry Finn* is a great novel about race in a culture of deep racial divides and a matching drive to span those divides- there was no way that it could not have been so provocative for so long.

By eloquently preserving a piece of American culture which is at once deeply attractive and deeply offensive, *Huckleberry Finn* guaranteed that it would become a magnet for controversy as

social mores shifted around it. Maybe one day it will be praised and/or pilloried for its treatment of poor whites, or its neglect of environmental issues. The only unlikely thing is that it will be forgotten.

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Contributor's Notes

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