

conatus

VOL. IX

Autumn 1962

No. 1

Published bi-annually by the students of
Danbury State College

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conatus

Editorial Comments

"A man's style is nearly as much a part of himself as his face, or figure, or the throbbing of his pulse; in short, as any part of his being which is subjected to the action of his will."

Fénelon

It is not enough for a literary magazine to include only those stories and poems which its editorial staff may 'like'. It must try to recognize literary expression even though sometimes it may appear offensive to an opinionated eye. A man's thoughts, and the style in which they flow on to the pure white of the paper beneath his fingers may be aimed to repel us. If the author succeeds in repelling us, it may be difficult to judge his merit in the blindness of our own opinions.

Man seeks to interpret the world in which he lives through his own unique art forms. It may be through poetry or prose, through art, music or sculpture; it may be, as in the insert which you will find in this issue, through the medium of photography.

CONATUS is fortunate to be able to continue last year's policy of providing inscribed copies of books by well-known authors to those whose work shows the greatest promise. The gracious cooperation of Mr. Louis Untermeyer enables us to present *Modern British and American Poetry* to Rosanne Griswold for *Untitled Poem*. Mr. William Swanberg has inscribed *Citizen Hearst* to Judith Beckett for *Bed 36* and *The Birthday*. Runners-up are John Roman III for *Messias* and Miranda Tufts for *The Future Generation In The Past Tense*.

Congratulations to those whose work is published in this issue. If your work was not published due to lack of space or for other reasons, you are urged to revise your material and re-submit it, or to submit new material. All correspondence should be addressed to:

The Editor, CONATUS, Box 247, D.S.C.

THE BIRTHDAY

They had propped Mrs. Polaski up in the bed and placed Margaret's faded bed jacket about her frail shoulders. Still, she shivered in the coolness of the morning.

Margaret stepped forward, pulled the jacket closer around her mother and whispered in her ear: "You look beautiful."

Mrs. Polaski only nodded.

Margaret smiled brightly, ignoring her mother's frown. "Well," she sighed happily, stepping back to view the woman from a different angle, "I guess you're ready now."

"Eddie!" she called.

A thin, tall boy slouched into the room and extended a brown paper package toward the bed.

"It's for you, Mama," he said.

"What is it?" Her voice was a disinterested whine.

"It's for you," he repeated.

"Give it to her," Margaret prompted, poking him with her bony elbow.

Little Stephen hopped into the room. "Open it, Mama," he begged. "Open it!"

The package was placed on Mrs. Polaski's lap, and Louise was called in to watch. The four stood about the bed, smiling and giggling.

Mrs. Polaski shrugged. "I need nothing," she sighed, but her twisted fingers plucked almost eagerly at the strings of the package, and for a moment the tiny bird-like eyes brightened.

At last the string was undone, and the package lay open upon the bed.

"I need nothing," she repeated, and Margaret stepped forward to take away the hideous orange nightgown.

"Do you want coffee, Mama?" Louise asked.

"Always I have coffee in the morning," came the tired reply. "Does a birthday make any difference?"

Stephen got her big, white cup from the shelf and filled it with black, steaming coffee.

"Happy birthday, Mama," he said, placing it gently in her twisted hands.

"You are a good baby," the woman told him. "My Stephen is a good boy," she told the others almost defensively. "Are you Mama's Baby?" she asked almost pleadingly, turning suddenly to the child.

He nodded, but his eyes were down. He did not look at her.

"So you see," she said; and that meant that she was right, and it was finished.

She took a small sip of the coffee. "It is not strong enough," she complained, handing the cup back to Stephen. "My legs are hurting. Oh, how stiff they are."

"Poor Mama," Margaret said, but without sympathy or pity.

"Poor Mama," Stephen agreed.

Eddie was almost to the door.

"Where are you going on your Mama's birthday?" Mrs. Polaski demanded loudly. "Would you leave me *today*?"

"Mama, it's a date I made a long time ago," he said gently. "This boy—"

"On my birthday," she whined. "My own boy!"

He stepped to the bed and pecked her lightly on the cheek.

"Happy birthday," he mumbled and backed away, stumbling on a chair and then turning to flee from the room.

"So you see?" she demanded when he was gone. "You see what kind of boy is my son?"

The three children did not reply.

"I — I can't stay either, Mama," Louise stammered, the words rushing from her mouth. "It's a play at school, a play. They asked me to help."

"I promised," she added weakly.

Mrs. Polaski closed her eyes and nodded.

"The school, yes, the school before the Mama," she whispered.

"And you, Margaret? What is it with you today? A circus? A ballet?"

"No, Mama," Margaret cried. "Today I am with you!"

"Ah," the mother said, "and my Stephen?"

"With you, Mama," he cried, placing his tiny hand lightly there, on the blanket that covered her.

Louise grabbed a red sweater from a chair beside the bed.

"Happy Birthday."

She bent to kiss the gray head. "Happy birthday," she said again.

"I will get you some more coffee," Margaret called gaily, when Louise was gone. "Would you like some more, **Mama?**"

"I have not finished what is here," Mrs. Polaski protested, but her daughter was off down the hall before she could stop her.

"Margaret?" she called after a moment.

Far in the front of the house, Margaret Polaski threw a sweater over her shoulders, opened the screen door and slipped quietly out on to the porch.

Always Mrs. Polaski knew all that went on in her house, though she had not left her bed for over a year.

"So, she is gone too, Stephen," she told her youngest child, her baby. "And you —"

She reached out her hand to touch his soft child's cheek. Suddenly she drew back. "You will leave me too!"

"No, Mama," he protested.

She nodded, sadly. "Oh, yes, yes," she said. "Give me the cup and go now."

He did not move; did not speak.

"Go!" she screamed. "Go!"

Slowly he pushed the cup toward her, and when she had grasped it, he turned and fled. He was crying.

"Happy birthday," he sobbed. "Happy birthday."

"Happy birthday," she repeated softly. But no one heard, for he, too, was gone now.

She sighed. "An old woman on her birthday wants only her children," she whispered, "and this old woman—". She pulled the orange nightgown from its wrappings.

"So, you see," she said, and that meant that she was right, and it was finished.

The white cup with the strong black coffee crashed to the floor.

Judith Beckett



OLD TREES

Old trees that know the gentle touch
of wind as the day dims;
saw snow, felt rain
and sleet on your limbs,
Why are you dying now?
Your great structures slightly bending,
rooted to the ground you knew
years ago; and in your rendering
of colored leaves all shapes and sizes,
that fall, straggling you behind,
you bend your tired form.
Your remains left for us to find
and often found in patches,
make you more barren.
You cannot hear above the wind
the busy birds always rarin'
to make a haven
or a short-sitting in you.
Old trees are ghosts that weary, fall
to sleep upon the earth you knew.

Marie Toscano

THE FUTURE GENERATION IN THE PAST TENSE

He felt joy as he crushed the leaves beneath his feet and walked briskly in the crisp autumn air. A little blond boy grabbed him around his knees. He tucked the boy under his arm and turned up the flagstone walk to his brass doorknob. She greeted him with a rose in her teeth and the delicate smell of roast beef. The child slowly slid from his arm.

"Hi, Sweetie Pie," she said, and smacked him on the cheek. Shaking the bottle she asked: "What shall it be, white or chocolate?"

"White tonight, dear, my skin's breaking out."

Sweetie Pie sank into the fat armchair and Dear sank into his lap. They read the paper together. The sweet odor of his pipe filled the room.

That night at supper, Sweetie Pie eyed the clock nervously. He helped Dear with the dishes in order to finish sooner. It was time for the babysitter to arrive. A fond milky glaze came over his eyes as he saw her coming up the walk. Mrs. Brice was so much like his mother.

"Bobby, you be nice to her tonight, do you hear me?" he said. "You be a good boy and you can stay up till nine."

Bobby thumbed his nose. Dear untied her apron and opened the door for Mrs. Brice. She was plump and white and soft and sweet. Bobby eyed her suspiciously and slid behind the couch. "I hope he won't be too much trouble," Dear said cheerfully, as Sweetie Pie slid her coat over her arms.

"Oh, I'm sure he'll get along fine. We're old friends," Mrs. Brice said as she smiled at Bobby.

After kissing Bobby goodbye, they left for the movies. It was the animal story again. They decided to bring Bobby the next week.

When they got home Mrs. Brice was knitting something baby blue and Bobby was asleep. His soft open mouth breathed angel breaths. Sweetie Pie took Mrs. Brice home and Dear went to bed.

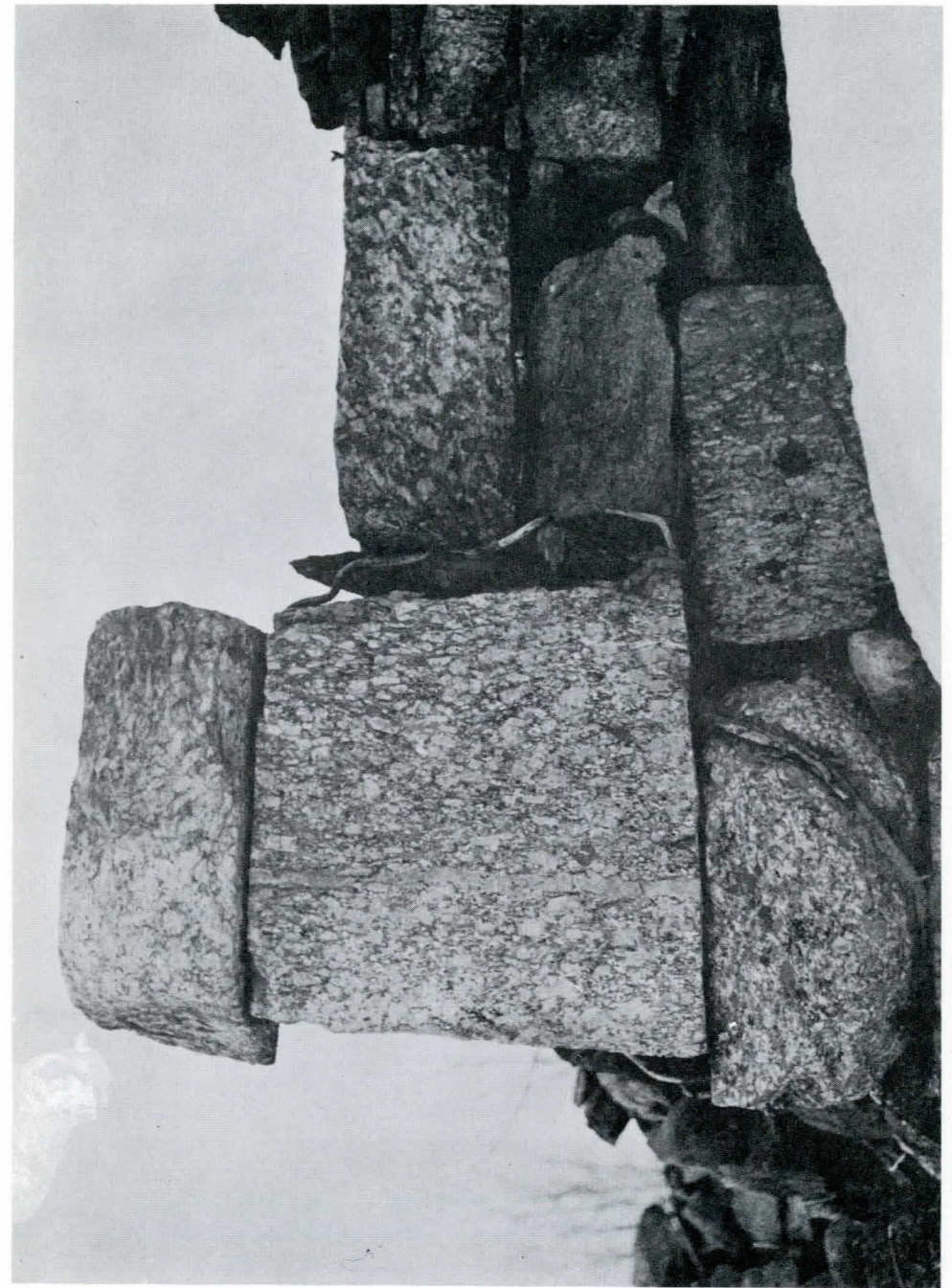
The next morning sunlight streamed through their fluffy white-curtained window. It was Sunday. Dear and Sweetie Pie sat up and reached for the keys at their bedside. They wound them into their stomachs and smiled and got out of bed. Another happy day was ahead.

Miranda Tufts



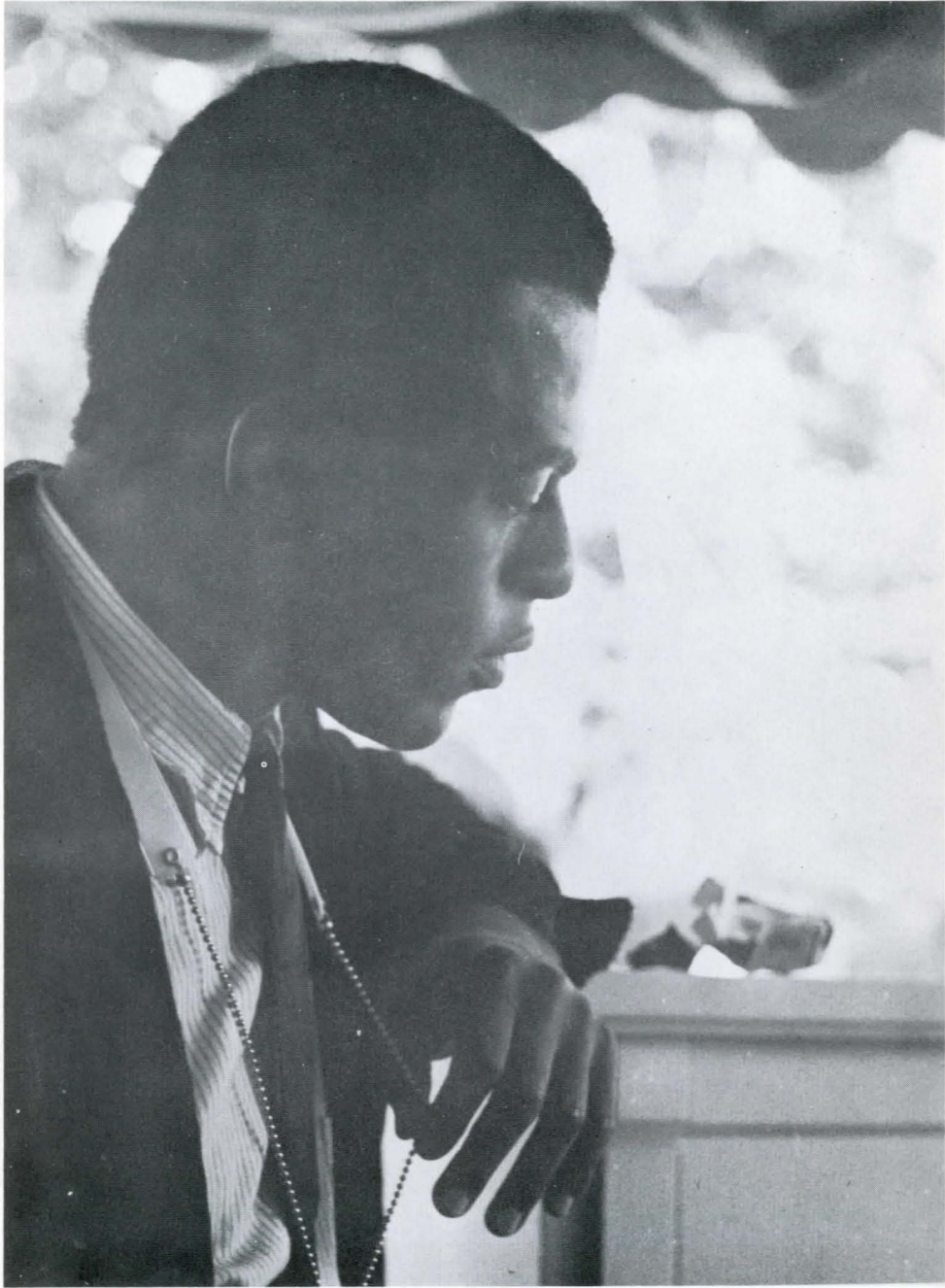
- XII Then He said, "Don't sweat it. I'll be on the scene."
- XIII Moe said, "I'll clue Your boys and they'll say, 'Are you serious? Who the hell are you anyway?'"
- XIV The Big One said to Moe, "I'm the Boss, see? That's what you'll clue the boys. Big Brother has sent you."
- XV B. O. said again to Moe, "Say this, man, 'The Dad of your pops, of old Honest Abe, of five-iron Ike, of cool Jake has sent me with the clue.'"
- XVI "Go, snare the boys of Israel, and give them the same pitch."
- XVII "And I have given you the clue as to the new frontier, their own turf."
- XVIII "And they'll dig your lipping, you'll go in with the old boys of Israel to old Phar and state your case."
- XIX "But I know that the old boy will not let you roam."
- XX "Like, I'll slap the whole scuddy kingdom with my hairy hand, with all My tricks, and I'll fake the scab-pickers out."
- XXI "And I'll heap loot on My boys, cart it with you."
- XXII "So every wench'll scrounge some silver off her co-habitant, and let the kids bring the stuff back for Me."
- XXIII And Moe said, "Go scratch, Old Man. Your beard's on fire."

John Roman III

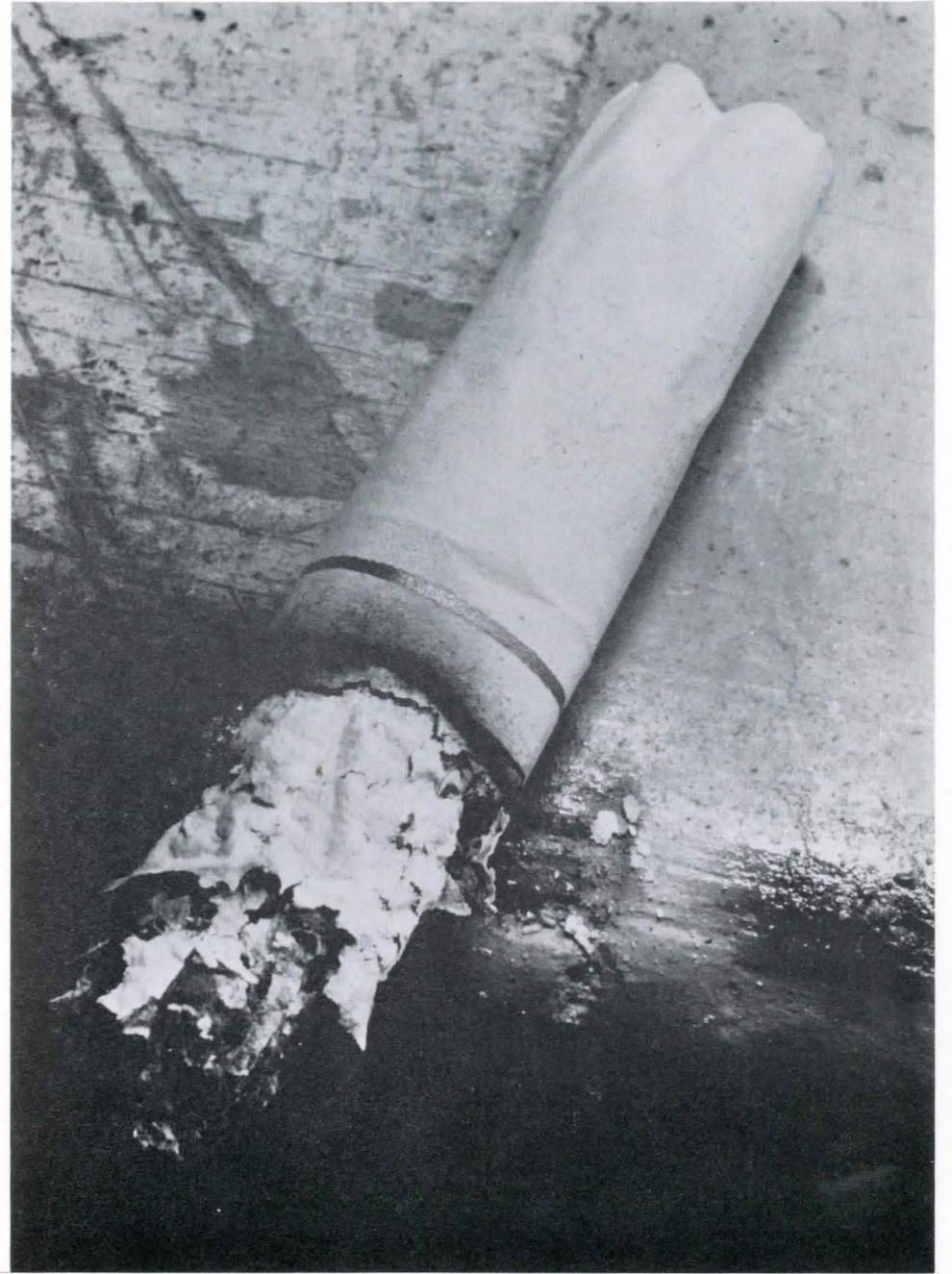


Perspectives

John Wood



12



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AGAIN

I saw an
old man sprawled in the gutter
in front of Mike's place,
drunk.
A gang of
punks ran up and
mercilessly kicked him,
laughing.
Then he
got up,
spat, and
staggered home.
I know
that he'll be there tomorrow,
they'll kick him again.
And I'll let them.

John Roman III

MESSIAS

They tell me that you want a savior;
someone to lead you out of the darkness,
a man who loves the people.
No man loves the people.
There is no savior, no
wizened patriarch who wants to feed you,
no good shepherd to lead you,
no samaritan to bind your wounds.
Old men are too wise
to play God,
young men are too foolish.

John Roman III

THE ROCK

The cries of gulls shattered the air, but Laura Adams, sitting on a rocky ledge overlooking the beach was oblivious to the shrill noise. Her slender fingers moved deftly as a sketch of a sunlit rock took shape on her yellowed canvas. A strong sea breeze whipped the tips of the waves into frothy foam and sent a salty spray over the rocks on shore. Laura pushed a long lock of hair from her eyes as she concentrated on capturing the sunlight playing on the wet, glistening surface of the rock before the late afternoon sun started to set.

Having finished the charcoal sketch, Laura put her pad down and made her way down the stony path to the water's edge. She filled her old mayonnaise jar with water and quickly returned. Dipping her brush into the water and then paint, she filled in the sketch with quick strokes of color. As she bent over the painting, her aching shoulders reminded her that she had been in the same position for four hours. Putting aside her paints, she stretched out her long, tanned legs and closed her eyes against the glare of the mid-summer sun. Suddenly, the feeling of being completely alone was too frightening and Laura sat upright again, gazing toward the horizon. A distant boat disappeared behind the rock she had been painting and sea gulls combed its surface for anything edible. The weathered hollows used for sitting places were invisible now as the surf smashed the tough granite.

Laura stared at the rock with misty eyes and thought of the summer before. It was hard to realize that it was just a year since she had raced gaily from the cottage down to the beach and into the surf. "Come on Rob," she had shouted, "race you to the rock!" Even though he gave her a head start, he always managed to clamber up the sides of the rock before she did. She remembered the way his eyelashes brushed his eyebrows as he squinted against the summer sun, and the way he laughed when she told him, after losing every race, that the next time she would beat

him. But there never was a next time. The war came; he went away and there was nothing left but the rock as a reminder of their summer.

The sun was resting momentarily on the horizon and Laura once more took her brush and attempted to place the finishing touches on her painting. Light and darkness no longer played on the rock on canvas; darkness had descended on every crevice and recess in the rock. The painted water developed an eerie, fluorescent quality while Laura disregarded the still sunlit rock. She dipped her brush and moonlight soon streamed down upon the rock like the tears that streamed down her cheeks and dripped off her chin onto her blouse. The painting was finished; the day was finished; but that past summer would never be finished.

Laura wiped her brushes off with a few jerks of a rag and stuffed them in the same box with her paints. Walking along the shore, she could hear a voice filled with love of life calling just as she had once called: "Come on Pete; race you to the rock!"

Wendy Turek



GENESIS II

In the distance the train-whistle blew, prophesying the white man's doom.

O'Toole turned to Vanderbilt. "There must be at least two hundred of us here," the Irishman said.

"Disgraceful," replied Vanderbilt.

"Look. Our black guards just went into the railroad shack. Do you want to run for it?"

"With these?" Vanderbilt muttered as he held up his chains. "Besides, where could we run to? There isn't anyone who can't tell the difference between black and white. We couldn't last the day."

"What difference does it make if we die today or tomorrow? You know where we're go . . ."

O'Toole's remarks had been interrupted by a commotion on the far side of the station platform where two prisoners had become engaged in a heated argument. The smaller of the two antagonists ended the argument by shattering the other's skull with his chains.

"Ironic, isn't it?" mused Vanderbilt. "The smaller man winning out, I mean."

O'Toole said nothing. He could no longer be surprised by the little man. Even the three months in the concentration camp had failed to weaken the initial shock. It had been a year since the Negro Revolution began, and yet he still could not believe it. Suddenly he blurted out, "Damn niggers! Don't they know we're better than they are?"

"Shut up. Here comes the train," said Vanderbilt.

As the train came to a halt in front of the station, two of the black soldiers emerged from the shack and herded the prisoners into the freight car. The car door was shut and locked, and the train pulled away, leaving the two soldiers on the platform.

"Poor white bastards. Will they burn in Little Rock?"

"I don't think so. I heard they was to get their gas in Birmingham."

"Is it right? Killing them like that I mean?"

"Course it's right. Why, they wanted to blow the world."

"They said they wanted peace."

"Oh, hell. Why do you suppose they kept on testing them big bombs? Any fool knows you can't make peace with somebody by threatening to kill 'em. Any fool knows that—even a black man. We had to take over. We have to kill 'em. They was goin' to blow up the world and ruin everything."

"Poor white bastards."

In the distance the train whistle blew, and the earth gave a sigh of relief.

John K. VanNostrand



UNTITLED POEM

Three flowers bloomed
Last week,
I think.
Last week
Everyone shouted
Good luck!
God bless you!
Now I am here
With my flowers.

God bless you!
As though
I had sneezed.
God bless you!
Gesundheit!
Oh, excuse me —
I didn't mean to live.

Last week
Is over
(Thank goodness)

Mon avenir
Mon avenir?
Mon —no
Merely relative
To today.
Why worry?
Why anticipate?
I worried
About last week
About yesterday
About today.
Last week
Yesterday
Passed

Are over.
And,
Today is here
And will also pass.
(Hi stupy cupy
Shut up dupy
What a piece of music?
The younger generation)
Ten after eight to
Ten after nine to
Ten after ten to
Ten after eleven to
Ten after twelve.
Five hours.

Take a walk
Watch the kids play
Hoe the flower bed.
Dirt.
American dirt
Especially American.
Russian dirt is hallowed,
Sacred.
French dirt is sophisticated
Risqué.
The English simply won't
have it,
Don't consider it
Dirt.

And me?

My flowers are wilted
Dying.
Weed-choked.
Dirt-choked.

Rosanne Griswold

BED 36

The two girls sat hunched on stools, crowded into the utility room amongst the shiny steel autoclaves, the bedpan flusher with its long-forgotten broken hinges, the bottles of cloudy urine, collected two hours ago and still waiting to be tested, the trays of contaminated syringes, the yards of rubber catheters, and miscellaneous paraphernalia which had been left there this morning, or last week, or last month, and forgotten or purposely ignored.

Janice Langlois took a sip of prune juice and then a hurried drag on her cigarette.

"I'm dead," she groaned.

Her friend laughed. "That expression is particularly apropos this morning!"

"You mean bed 36?" Janice asked, peering over her glass at Melanie.

Melanie nodded. "Two o'clock this morning. They got Dr. Schaum out of bed and everything."

Now Janice laughed. "No wonder he's such a grouch this morning. Every time he's on night call, some inconsiderate soul has the colossal nerve to croak!"

"Esophagial verices," Melanie said smugly. "What did I tell you. Haemorrhaged. I could have told them it would happen."

"Yes, doctor," Janice grinned, "She's been in nursing school eight months and already she thinks she's Dr. Kildare!"

Melanie shook her head.

"Nope. Kildare would say, 'What a shame! And she was such a nice old girl.' I don't even remember what she looked like."

"I — I can't either," Janice said slowly. She tried to think. She closed her eyes and pictured the huge, forty-bed ward. But there were no patients.

Bed one, she thought—colostomy. But one is not a patient, it's a colostomy. And two, bed two is a hernia. Three —"

"What's the frown for?" Melanie asked.

"I've got a lot to do," Janice said quietly, sliding suddenly off the stool. "C'mon. End of break."

With her free hand, Janice angrily snapped back the curtains around bed four. Suds sloshed wetly on the bedside table when she slammed the wash-basin down on it.

She had forgotten a towel. Her red curls bounced angrily all the way back to the utility room.

"A towel! A towel!" she mumbled, rummaging through the linen closet. "Where the hell are the towels?"

"What?" the head nurse asked, appearing suddenly around a pile of sheets. "What did you say?"

"The towels—There aren't any towels."

Mrs. Weiss glared at her and thrust a torn sheet towards the trembling student.

"Improvise!" she snapped. "This isn't the Hilton, Miss Langlois."

Janice marched back to the bed clutching the sheet. She pulled the curtains, enclosing the bed, and was immediately engulfed by the terrible feeling of loneliness she always experienced when she was left behind that curtain with a stranger who was completely dependent upon her.

"Mrs. Kaufman?" Janice called softly, stroking the patient's warm forehead. "It's time for your bath."

There was no answer. Janice stared at the woman in the bed. She had been a big woman, but now she hardly made a bump under the covers. Her eyes were open but staring blankly. Her mouth was open a little too, and the parted lips were cracked and dry.

"That's not fair," Janice thought suddenly. "She's in a coma. They didn't even tell me." Tears of self-pity smarted

in her eyes as she dabbed the dry lips with the damp washcloth.

Sniffing loudly, she tugged at the woman's nightgown.

"Sit up, Mrs. —" she began. "That's silly—of course she won't sit up—". She almost laughed as she struggled to get the un-cooperative arm out of the sleeve of the bed garment. The arm, finally exposed, and at which she gingerly dabbed the soapy washcloth, was bruised from frequent punctures by I.V. needles.

Janice's stomach growled. She'd miss lunch again for sure. She glanced at her watch. She'd never finish in time. She gave a final impatient swipe at the woman's arm and started on her legs.

The soles of the woman's feet were very dirty. How could anyone get so dirty in bed, Janice thought, scrubbing roughly.

The woman groaned. Janice barely tickled the other foot with the washcloth.

On the other side of the curtain, she could see a pair of dirty white bucks.

The washcloth paused and dabbed absent-mindedly as she watched.

"Dr. Schaum!" she thought happily.

She strained to hear what he was saying.

"Is someone with Mrs. Kaufman, Mrs. Weiss?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Has her family been notified?"

The washcloth suddenly stopped dabbing.

"They'll be here any minute."

Janice stared at the patient in disbelief. She closed her eyes and leaned against the cool wall behind her, fighting the feeling of nausea rising inside her. She's dying, she thought. They want me to wash her because she's dying

and they won't have time after she dies; because her family will be here. Her family—

Suddenly, her eyes flew open in disbelief.

This woman, this bed number four, this particular uterine carcinoma, had a family. This woman had married, had been loved, was still loved by someone who cared very much that his wife, or his mother, or daughter, was dying—and was dying alone; who cared that no one knew that this was Mrs. Kaufman, *the* Mrs. Kaufman, that no one really minded if she died, as long as they didn't have to get up in the middle of the night or miss their lunch.

She was in the utility room when they arrived—the tall man who was not embarrassed by his own tears, the elderly woman who leaned heavily on his arm, and the child—the bewildered, frightened child. She wanted to go to them, to tell them she had not been alone, that she had spoken with Janice and prayed with her.

She sat hunched on the stool, and she cried.

“Please,—don't cry,” Melanie begged. “For heaven's sake, Janice, you didn't even know the woman.”

Judith Beckett



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