



permafrost



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a literary journal







**permafrost**

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Submissions of poetry, fiction, essays, reviews and black and white graphics are welcome. Please include SASE. We *lean* toward innovative, exploratory material in which the artist is stretching the conventional boundaries of his or her art. Quality, however, is the prime consideration and we welcome traditional forms as well. Reply time: 2 to 8 weeks; longer, of course, in summer. Payment is in contributor's copies. All correspondence should be addressed to:

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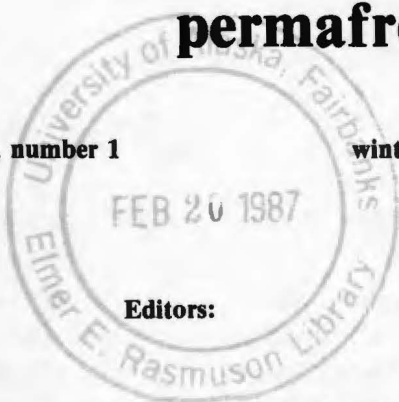
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# **permafrost**

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*This is our mythic image, the sign of our time:  
bison rotting on cave walls from too much  
human moisture, crane walking on artificial legs along the Gulf,  
heart beating after death explains itself to it,*

*-Diane Reynolds*



**poetry**



## From A Child's Book of Colors and Shapes

---

*Michael D. Riley*

The elegance of this purple square  
Depends, I suspect.  
But it makes Erin Beth declare  
It a grape gripped  
By her teeth, spun by her tongue,  
Another spot of wine on her father's page,  
A purple Prowler from her marble bag,  
A divorced violet sulking in our yard.  
But it's not, she swears.  
And it's not (though it gleams like) glass.  
It just sits right up there  
With nothing on for clothes  
But purple and a size.  
Yet I feel him stir, she says  
(Touching squarely in his heart),  
Just there.

Again her eye pulls the neat edge  
From the cresting sea-coast page,  
Absorbs the gloss  
In waves of light,  
Notices to ignore  
The printer's trick: the tiny dots  
Equidistant, counted out  
(Science extending her widow's mite).  
She smiles,  
Content to pleasure  
In the blur  
The plum of color gives.





## **The Contradictions of Heaven**

---

*Jan Jarrett*

Shattering stars the sea has killed giving birth  
To marred and flawless stones and bones of derelict  
Palaces and mirth, and I knew that years ago, on the sand  
Under lazy light by the strand of surfs that  
Wrote for children of other children or other years.  
For mountains and glaciers and cactii were raindrops  
And would foam into the bow-waves of schooners and  
Rage at iron to spawn the living and the halfliving  
Of its consorts. Could dolphins be souls then, I stood  
On hells beach and reached for Gabriel the arctic tern  
Whilst ghoulds sunned and droze. You and I  
Never chose to laugh, but the fern wavered in wild gardens  
And coal seams and the child disappeared in a shaft  
Of sunlight that would one day be a shattering star  
In someones killing sea that was larger than me, but  
Might still have dolphins or flying fish and skeletons  
Of strange ships, with flights of immature dreams and laws  
Which children can flaw to the cynical grins of  
Drowned men.

## To Resolve a Dream

---

*Marcia Hurlow*

for Greg

Here you are in a boat,  
flat-bottom, unrustable silver,  
trailing folded silk.  
Beneath you is the dream:  
orange-eyed, saw-toothed  
water boas; they roil and bite,  
fierce in their own sour fluids.  
You dare not dip even an oar  
into their midst and drift  
toward the ground fog that has poured  
over the lake, its threads of clouds  
churning like the snakes.  
The mist dampens your hair.  
You stand into the fog  
and the snakes rise from the water  
as geese, the scales falling  
from their long pale necks,  
wings shredding the ancient coils.

## Copper Painting the Fin

---

*Stewart Wright*

Under the hull of the Little Fin  
(A Bristol Bay hull built in the days  
Of tide and wind; low and open  
In the stern for hauling nets by hand  
With holes in the deck where giant oarlocks  
Had been; now fitted like a grandfather  
In his son's second best suit  
With hydraulics and a gas engine)  
My father, brother and I  
Roller on thick rust colored paint  
Standing on the beams of the grid  
With tide mud below and paint  
Dripping from the hull; as we finish  
Jellyfish are floating by on the flood.  
This job should be done twice a year  
Against rot, but on the Fin  
(Metal cabin leaking rust  
Through three coats of white paint  
And sealer, cabin littered with binoculars,  
Twine, old magazines, oilskins  
And gear; fish and ice stored  
In half a dozen odd awkward bins  
Only the hull still miraculously sound)  
We copper paint once. In the spring.

## Jealousy

---

*Kathryn Kysar*

I've seen  
those blonde girls  
come to you on the street  
their eyes like fishing lures  
kneeling when you leave  
hurriedly scribbling your prophetic words  
on the sidewalk in chalk.  
They dance with tight bellies,  
bells dangling from their small chests,  
their mantra, your name,  
their small asses in thin cotton swaying.

You are no shepherd, no carpenter.  
You are a fisher,  
nets large enough to catch ten porpoises,  
twenty women, weighed with lead coins for luck.  
You catch nothing and dejected,  
expect me to pull in the aged boat,  
bail the water, gather the nets.  
The flies are thick in this small room.  
You talk of a red haired man  
who once came to the market  
with small inscribed dishes.  
I cook fish over the sputtering fire.  
We have no wood and cook with moss, grass  
that smokes the thin ocean air.  
You say I don't appreciate your fine fingers,  
that love means no golden ring, no silver chain.  
I count the fish, placing them in waxed brown pots  
from Syria. I traded no daughter.  
I have small tools I saw skins with,  
my cold fingers dim in this light.

## Blind Love

---

*James Sutherland-Smith*

A breeze rattles the scaffolding. A woodsaw  
Lies on the table like a torn envelope.  
He stares at four kittens hardly a week old  
Sightlessly crawling over strips of sheet.

Between whiskies he feeds their mother  
From fingertips coated with beaten egg.  
But his tenderness is distraction only.  
He cannot bear the home improvements

So stumbles from the house into an evening  
Surlly with mist which gropes over thorn  
Transforming everything. It must contain  
The element of complete trust which he lacks.

He reads her letter over and over  
After he settles in the pub. As her words  
Separate into nonsense someone says  
"I had two bunches of grapes on either side

But I couldn't hold them." He waits for tears,  
For madness, for anything to happen;  
Sips whiskey, flips coins into a fruit machine.  
"Star" it keeps on insisting, "And star and star."

Indeed when he returns the night is lucid.  
Out in that life there is a hooded wisdom,  
An emptiness of instinct and feather,  
Mooning over pasture, spitting cubes of bone.

It requires terrain as smooth as linen.  
Its cries launder the night with terror.

## Inside Our Conch

---

*Melinda Kahn*

As if in blankets  
by the bed  
two eyelids small

as bees lie dreaming  
the secret  
reminiscences

of blood:  
my dark screams  
your wet hand

distant as the  
Caspian Sea  
and close

behind that  
bangle of bone  
still turning,

you and I move  
quietly among  
each other

confident as if  
we have built  
something live

mouths take hold  
believing our huge torn nights  
are sealed with milk.

## Apulia

---

*David Chorlton*

Across the south the sky is bleached  
with heat reflected  
from the oldest walls,  
white regardless  
of the colour of the age.  
In green years

the walls are swollen and the women's arms  
grow long to carry  
their baskets home.  
The black years hide

behind the faces and the wine  
the men forget them with.  
The black years are counted in the folds  
of mourning scarves,  
in the chiselled names  
that weather rubs into a stone.  
In their empty beds

the blue years sleep beside the wives  
whose men go north  
to the rain and money.  
Their time is the colour of steel  
and their eyes in red

remember coals at dusk  
when in the paling streets  
in brass the evening fires  
are lit to warm the hands  
their mothers press toward them,



wings over ash,  
blood over waning light  
and fingers stirring heat  
to draw a missing face  
in metal years.

When sons return, they kiss  
their old doors through a film of grease.

## The Streetcars of Vesuvius

---

*Larry Laraby*

She was old and bent and brown. Her face was creased with the lines of endless turnings of the seasons. Her back was humped and rose off her shoulders like a great whale blowing off the coast of British Columbia. She smelled of woodsmoke and age. She smelled of the earth she worked in, the land that was her life.

In the spring the apple trees would bloom overnight it seemed. In the morning it would look as if there had been a sudden snowsquall, but only covering those trees. She had planted them many years before. They were the only trees in Iron County. That is what I thought when I was young. Those three trees, in a row, that was the forest of my youth.

To the north the earth ran flat and dry and hungry, to the tracks that carried the iron-ore from the mines, from the interior. The tracks ran east, the tracks ran straight and steel. An endless vision of iron and steel. The slag heaps growing daily, hourly, the measure of men's lives in slag and iron and tonage. The earth ran red under the weight of the steel. The earth was iron, rust, and the dusty red smell was everywhere.

Only in the spring would I be saved from that smell of ore dust. Only with the spring rains, with the swelling of the apple buds would I find myself open in that land. In my dreams the tracks ran on forever, the ore cars never stopped. When it rained the rails of my dreams became blood, the rock and earth became blood, all of Iron County became an immensity of brooding red ore. Then I could see her, a younger woman, stooped in the heat of an early spring, her long black hair braided and coiled on her head, the taste of ore dust in her mouth, planting apple trees.



## The Harp in the Earth

---

*Rolf Jacobsen*

Isn't winter a large harp stowed away  
with all its strings under earth, silent  
where it lies with its thousand  
tone-patterns sleeping.

Soon it shall be lifted up again and someone  
will brush the darkness from its strings  
and thus move them. Who shall touch them first?  
Not the moon.

It darkens deep in the earth now, with all its sounds inside,  
but so much song still vibrates in its strings  
that hoarfrost turns to white lilies, and birches  
are given leaves hammered from silver.

See these embroideries in snow. There's still a hum in the G  
and a grumble in the deep A —it carves runes in the crust  
like a kind of dream from down there. And northern light  
high above this harp in the earth,  
that lies and thinks of all the splendour that can hide in bronze.

*translated by Olav Grinde*

## **The Fact, The Wonder**

---

*Gary David*

*One night after the "eaters  
of raw flesh", the Eskimos'  
houses stopped moving  
thru the air, they burned  
snow for blubber, it is told  
without so much grasping after  
the fact, the wonder.*

-1-

*the fact*

Upernavik, 72°N. latitude: runes

Northern Greenland    ice bridges    North America

79°N. latitude: longest of longhouses, Dorset Inuit, 33 centuries  
around Smith Sound, Sverdrup Pass, Ellesmere Island, Flagler Bay

hunting seals thru breathing holes  
in the ice offshore in winter

The Dorset, who died out, c. A.D. 1000, or moved on "...may have lost  
their competitive edge during a gradual *warming* period that began  
about

this time." The Thule Inuit, Skraeling Island, ruins of the farthest prehistoric settlement north, scent of thawing whale blubber, 7 centuries old, pottery & harpoon heads resembling those used by the Bering Sea

Inuit   Ice   Bridges   Viking

chain mail, iron, longboat rivets, barrel bottoms, box piece (oak), wool cloth

the weave resembling those of settlement founded, 986, in S. Greenland by

Eric the Red, found on this Thule outpost, Ellesmere Island, a mere

800 miles from the Pole

True North: the goal

By 1700 the Thule Inuit had moved south off their outpost to Greenland

Nothing left there either of  
the Norse save

                  bones & iron, shifting  
restlessly, the Pole's precession, obsession  
retreating under  
                  the pressure of  
                          the invading icepack.

-2-

*the wonder*

*(After Some Eskimo Songs Collected By Rassmussen  
& Translated From The Danish By Lowenstein)*

★

The summer night, the sun follows  
its old footsteps, round & round.  
Nothing's new. I am warm.

The winter night, the moon follows  
its old footsteps, new  
then full, round & round. Cold.

★

Of Odin's bird  
alone the Eskimo wonders:  
"Does it have teeth?"

The dead never answer  
clearly from their shadow-land.

★

"For I'm just an ordinary hunter  
who never inherited singing  
from the bird-song of the sky."

Caribou, musk oxen, reindeer  
but never the heart  
of the dragon in this curved belly  
of arctic air stretching  
above me, a blue hide.

★

Follow the raven  
with an arrow.  
Watch it flutter  
& fall. Over it  
in fear & pain  
open one's mind.  
Learn its death  
song by heart.

★

the taboo: break no bones  
eat no brain  
nor marrow nor tongue



"The greatest peril in life  
lies in the fact that human  
food consists entirely of souls."

The first task of a shaman  
consists of learning how to see one's self  
as a skeleton. Name every bone in the language  
of the spirits. Repeat the magic songs  
as long as one needs to eat.

★

Never in this life  
to get beyond  
the tracks I make  
in the snow, the Northern Lights

dance across the skies,  
dance within my eyes.  
Dance! Dance!

## When all else fails, the bees

---

*Frank Lehner*

When it gets too hot  
when nerves tighten  
when the beads of sweat  
trickle down my back  
and my undershirt sticks  
I think of the silk columbine  
taped to my word processor.  
How the same bee has come  
for the last three days.  
He refuses to believe  
that the yellow stamens  
with the damp red tips  
nestled in the violet petals  
do not somehow unlock  
the sweet mystery that he  
loves to nuzzle his shoulder into.  
Out the window there is a plenty  
of blossoms he might glide to  
take home their joy to the hive.  
But my bee is mystified with beauty;  
determined to unlock the lone secret.  
He has not called for the drones  
not signalled the hive where one might know.  
My bee is a renegade and continues to buzz  
and burrow. Finally he goes.  
I can not help but lean over  
into the sweetness, into belief.

## Do You Feel?

---

*Frank Lehner*

It's March and it's cold.  
The blue sky a tease and  
small sparrow sitting on  
my sill is laughing. Yes  
since last night I have  
been struggling with existence  
and my love for the barrel  
stomach and babuska.

Do you  
return home half drunk  
and lie in your bed,  
then remember a gentle summer  
lounging with your father  
or uncle or brother? Do you  
feel the breath of someone  
gone by? Do you kiss your arm;  
pull the long cool sheets  
nearer to your chin? Is the  
smell of your mother's kitchen  
huddled between the sheets  
and your precious skin?  
The clomp of father's work boots  
up the stairs and down the hall?  
Yes?

**Alone** the clouds push overhead  
**while a piece of fat**  
**flung** from an old red chevy  
rests near the curb. Sparrow  
lifts his scarab wings and drifts  
like the soft spray of time down,  
down and lifts his morsel up,  
along, and through the branch shadowed air  
where each leave will rise from bud  
and fall nearly untouched.

## The Need to Dwell

---

*Diane Reynolds*

The sparrows force the doves out by their numbers.  
It's nothing that they mean, they've no idea  
how plentiful they are or how  
monotonous they sound.

All day I've heard of you from the weatherman,  
your city kneedeep in something I can't feel.  
All the way from last March that unlikely silence travels:  
midtown, midafternoon, a hole filling with snow.

A deep hole and something soft, filling  
with melting snow: your eyes are dark as that,  
and shine. I think how the lost thing's always  
in the last place that we look.

This is our mythic image, the sign of our time:  
bison rotting on cave walls from too much  
human moisture, crane walking on artificial legs along the Gulf,  
heart beating after death explains itself to it,

a childless mother rocking long after dark.  
Someone we both love told me  
I didn't need to say everything, and gave me  
an idea of what could be left out:

I know one word that does  
the work of two: hello  
(fare well).  
A cricket has kept

itself all winter behind the books;  
the cat sits on the sofa like a panda, cleaning her clean stomach,  
seeming not to hear that lovesick creak, that energetic  
useless hinge.

This year I have the *OED*, I find *clutch*, a word  
of "difficult history," and learn that from Alfred's time  
*to dwell* went variously unrecommended, meaning  
*stun* or *hinder*, *lead astray*,

at best, *to pause*. All day  
I inhabit the world's things. At night I find  
ways out: door, eraser, air. My dreams  
are architects of folly and of choice.

In the magnifying glass that fits in the little drawer  
our tiny garden shows up, a small distorted bubble,  
a diagram of arteries with our world stamped on it, small.  
A bird flies in and out of this reflection,

in and out, with something in its beak.

## Afternoon

---

*William Virgil Davis*

Afternoon delphinium, and we ran, hand  
in hand, as if we had time to ourselves.  
Huge cumulus clouds moved slowly across blue skies,  
everything in the same slow motion, so that we  
wouldn't notice. Even now, naming this to make it true,  
I almost miss the meaning. The fields filled  
with light. We spoke and ran and laughed.

## Raccoons

---

*Peter Wild*

Now the raccoons sit on the hill  
watching you board up the cabins  
waiting to get in, the resigned horses  
trailing off to their winter pasture.

Finished, you take your rod and  
in a wilderness the size of Delaware  
up the river you go, laying your flies  
onto the swelling oracles of pools  
for the golden fish you dreamed of

And wearing that honor you kept secret  
all summer, your cordon bleu  
on your shoulder, a bluebird, reminder  
that today you belong to the sky  
wry Thoreau might have pointed out, as you  
step over rocks through the turning foliage,  
as if today,  
all of it, were one immense girlfriend.



Meanwhile as you go, they have already broken in of course,  
tipping over coffee cans, rummaging through your letters.  
Some, dazed with it, sit in your easy chair and smoke,  
while others, puzzled, stare at their black  
veined hands grasping and ungrasping utensils,  
while by now, late in the day,  
the mountains themselves taking on another life  
stop their turning and turning around you,

And miles away, far enough, you stop,  
take what you've caught down to the river,  
crouch for a moment washing your food  
before stretching out on the cobbles  
to see what the night is all about.

## Cowboys

---

*Peter Wild*

Intelligent reading gives us confidence  
that the world really did begin,  
for here we are leaping famished out of bed  
to sit in our bath robes beside  
steaming cups of tea with those things  
in our hands that tell us who we are.

But what is that thing, a mauve  
pie loose in its pan tumbling  
on the horizon as the stars jerk before it  
and flee into their crevices, bragging  
over his new Pacific? No, just the cowboys  
in their leather gloves big as the maps  
of countries they've never seen calling up  
the mules one by one to carry the flour sacks  
of gold back up to their mines.

Then we don't even need the light on.  
And by the end of the day when  
all things are done, again confirmed in their places,

we are up on our tiptoes, even without  
a glass of wine sailing around the kitchen,  
making the pot of lentil soup from the beans  
the peasants brought us, that bring us good luck.

And so to bed well before midnight  
when everything is concreted out there,  
so blessed, carrying it all in our heads,  
like a cabinetmaker who loves his work  
all night figuring it out, and then  
in the morning wakes, rises, his eyes  
shining, following his hands  
to do what all night he thought he could.

## Coyote Regret

---

*Philip St. Clair*

A long night is coming. Soon  
My Brothers will run in the desert, each  
Aiming the throat at the stars,  
Calling out in the high voice  
As gophers curl to sleep and the air  
Cools down.

Old and crippled,  
I cannot go out. My lungs  
Cough up bright blood. One ear  
Drones to the other through my skull.  
My paws cramp and knot. My pelt  
Is a threadbare blanket.

My wife and son watch me  
And wait for me to die. At dawn  
They leave, trotting side by side,  
Talking and laughing. When they come back  
they carry mice between their jaws  
For me. They lay them in the dirt

And say nothing. When I talk to them  
They do not answer . The eyes in my boy  
Are cruel and wide. The heart of my wife  
Has been driven away. Then I think  
On all my hard words and a ghost  
Walks through me.

Now

They go outside. I hear their voices  
Rise, pause, tremble, fall. They cry  
At the rabbit who sits on the moon:  
My boy would rip it just for his pleasure  
And my wife does not care.



## Barrington's Crater

---

A. McA. Miller

[Arizona, 1902]

“Three weeks of water sewn into goat-skins, still  
a dry hike south from the Canyon: two burros died  
under sun as I slept all day, and the third  
gone lame from cactus reamed through the patten;  
it dragged three-footed, trailing sand.

Lomaki was the last. Though her father cursed  
me by the thousand Hopi doll-gods, gaudy  
they were, more painted than Mexican saints,  
I took her—to pull the bridles as we tracked  
all night, to cool me with her brown damp hands.  
She did. In slanted shades of rock we slept  
the sun away. I took her in shadow; our sweat  
flashed easy into air: my brown seamed chest  
a lace of salt, her Hopi smoothness dusted  
fine as any woman's powder. *Sinagua*,  
they called her people, yet her waters cooled.

“Two weeks from Tall House, their Wupatki,  
we ran dry. Sand ribbed brown as the burrows  
dead and shrunk like leather, dried before they'd  
rot. Two burros lost, the third gone lame,  
the goat-skin bottles sagging—then his doll-gods  
found us. Kocinas danced on dust-motes down  
the sun; wolf-owl and vulture-deer, they circled in  
my bare brown skull. She wouldn't drink—Lomaki;  
her gift, she motioned, her thirst for my life.  
All night she stumbled as the burro trailed.

“Easy it was to let her have her way,  
as that first night in Tall House slim she’d found  
me, plied her fringe of beads and leathers back,  
and let me quiet wive her. Easy it seemed  
as the clear green pool that drifted before us  
on sands—just short of the next dune, just over  
each dry river-bed, just under south  
horizon’s sullen curve. I took her signs as:  
‘Water makes no problem’—the lilt of her fingers  
running *water*, the quick chop of negation:  
*none*. Or did she prophesy? or name  
her tribe, *Sinagua*? Still she wouldn’t sip  
the brackish last from that third burro, even  
when it died, nor ever drink as she lugged  
those goat-skins over both brown shoulders.

“Sixteen days out, the shatter-cone reared up;  
as I’d foretold, nothing was lost by erosion:  
four thousand feet from rim to rim, six hundred  
deep, three miles around—rough as my instruments  
could tell, the Sky’s Great Rock fell here.  
As she was no geologist, I left her  
at the rim, and circled my slow way down its sides;  
my proof would be the rarities of impact  
coesite and stishovite—minerals  
few men had touched. Five days I filtered sand,  
and staked my tent on the crater’s floor. All true,  
it was as sure as Africa’s Vredevort Ring!

“Some god had plumbed this dirt with rock  
massive as an island falls. Here,  
in these hands, I held the proof. I cried my name  
from the crater floor; echoes called this marvel  
mine. Now, back on this rim I have one  
water-bag, two weeks to trek,  
no burro with three legs, and something  
still to bury. Her sun rises now.  
Kocinas gather. Will they guard  
my passing back this desert, will  
they guard my passing to that Tall  
House on her people’s holy slope?”



The first part of the paper discusses the importance of the study of the history of the United States. It is argued that the study of the history of the United States is essential for a full understanding of the country and its people. The second part of the paper discusses the importance of the study of the history of the world. It is argued that the study of the history of the world is essential for a full understanding of the world and its people. The third part of the paper discusses the importance of the study of the history of the United States and the world. It is argued that the study of the history of the United States and the world is essential for a full understanding of the United States and the world.



**fiction**



# Uncle Billy

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*Forrest Johnson*

Yes, he has been around lately, and then the other day he too asked me where I buried them. So that is it, I said. So that is it. You leave me those letters from Iowa I will never read and then just like that you go visit every house down the street. Don't start on me, Mr. Jesus, I said. I will not be pandered. Listen. I got scars that go way back before everybody was dead. I was once run over by a tractor I suppose you know and was shot in the foot in 1917 by a german so hopelessly tangled in barbed wire that I then shot him to put him out of his misery. That was in the war of course, near the ardennes in france, or what was left of france since there weren't but a few trees still standing and no birds whatsoever. It was well before I buried any of them you have asked about.

*It was a war. I can't be blamed for that. Most of the frenchmen I saw had lost their rifles so they were left behind with the horses to sort and bury the dead. It was their land so torn and dying about them and I tried to tell them with my hands of the little planes chasing each other in the red skies above as they piled the frenches over here and the british over there and the yugoslavs with holes in some of them as big as your goddamn fist and no blood left like moonmen. Some of them I kicked at. It was no use. Even the frenchmen refused to call it france anymore.*

*I'm not the kind to talk but I shot some russians I wasn't supposed to and it wasn't a good time to be shooting russians. They were recovered from a trench and left in the mud near an abandoned tent, very stiff and bent at odd angles from lying in a cart in the rain. One of them had his eyes open and looked as though*

*he was trying to lace his boots. I figured he must have banged his face on a rock when he fell since all his teeth were busted out too. No bullet would have done that. A bullet would have torn his whole face right off. Bent halfway to the ground with that truly dead look of concern on his face, I somehow sensed it to be less trouble than it otherwise could have been. He could have been run over by a tank for that matter. Or had a bomb dropped onto his head from an aeroplane. I only wished he could have gotten those boots laced up before he was shot. That other russian was quite large and holding his arms to his sides as though he had a stomach ache or a bad kidney or was just trying to stop himself from leaking. He might have been whistling when he was shot. From my perspective they looked awfully old and gray and to tell the truth I wasn't quite sure if those two were the ones I'd shot since I never forget a face. I felt I might bring that point up when I was questioned but as it turned out it didn't much matter because a few days earlier Lenin had called off the war so those bolsheviks had plenty of dead ones to go around for everybody.*

*I was placed in the center of a tent and the dead russians were propped up against a wooden desk near the doorway. General Blackjack Pershing himself was there and you know he was so small I failed to recognize him at first, though I could tell he was a farmer from his hands. It had been raining for nearly a year in that france and the tent began to sag and Blackjack by golly sat right there like the rest of us. He had his legs crossed and was holding a pan in his lap. I saw a drop of water fall and hit his cheek. He looked up and then moved the pan ever so slightly with the tips of his fingers. I was near eighteen years old and the supreme commander of the american expeditionary forces later shook my hand and told me yes he was a farmer from kansas. He touched me on the shoulder. To hell with these bolsheviks he said. frenches and germans too. Bastard europeans. He then left me a note that is kept in the top drawer of my dresser beneath the ashes of my wife. Anybody can read it. I don't hide it. One line I do remember:*

*We have been snared in the inevitability of mankind.*

*Well Mr. Jesus said ok ok I won't ask where you buried them*

*he knew there were others out there too* which suprised me since I thought it was my brother who sent him at my door to ask. He straightened rather abruptly and his blue eyes went sad. *I will not speak of it again he said. We will discuss it no further.* He shrugged his little blue shoulders and found me another letter in his satchel and was gone. He is much smaller than I thought, frail, really, much like the flamingos that live in my small gray yard.

So that is what I tell. The point being I buried them as they wanted or would have wanted depending on which man it is you speak of. Yes there are many out there but you must understand it had all started with my father. He wanted to be buried in a rightful manner. I remember how one day during the second war a taxi cab pulled into the yard. There was a large wooden box roped to the roof and a sign on the door of the cab said Packages Delivered. The driver, an Indian, got out and identified himself as Abraham, saying the man in the box was his uncle. Six or seven others were in the cab and they were all his cousins. They had borrowed the cab and driven up from the city to bury the dead man across the lake. *It was then my father seemed to recall from territorial days a man named Abraham, an earless Indian, a Mdewankanton Santee, from up near Kanabec who had spoken no english. If it was the man in the box he would have been over one hundred years old my father said. But none of the men had ever seen their uncle alive. He had apparently come to live with them already in that box and had simply been forgotten and left in a far corner of the dirt cellar. A crowbar might have told us who was in there but I wasn't one to go defacing the dead, especially in front of relatives of the deceased. From the weight of the box I guess I knew the man had been dead so long that he wasn't much more than bones anyway, ears or not. My father said the man Abraham lost his ears to a french trapper in a fight and that for some time after the incident the Indian had worn his face in yellow and black as a measure preventing him to be seen by frenchmen. It must have worked well because after that he was rarely even sighted by the swede farmers and let me tell you those people could spot where an Indian blew his nose the day before a hailstorm. Why even in my day, if you were to*

*go up to a swede and tell him you once knew an Indian who could fool a wolf right out of its skin, you could more than likely set that man's shoes on fire and still not get his mind off that Indian. For all the now dead swedes knew, that old Abraham had just sprouted wings and soared up from the berry fields into the sifting autumn sky and was gone. I swear, Indians and bears could keep a swede busy for days on end.*

We buried the remains of the man on a hillside amongst the small mounds we assumed to be his relatives. Well that was it. My father nodded at me and said if that was what the old Indian wanted, that was what he wanted too. Only with a tree, he said. A small hole beneath a tree and could I please provide for him in that way. I said fine. You just tell me when. And under what tree. So he soon began to sit and lay himself down beneath trees. He stood back and eyed them with his thumb. He watched how clouds and birds traded shadows over them. Little did I know it would be less than four years later when he handed me a scrap of folded newspaper with the directions to his tree written inside. And in february to top all. February. Yes it was just like my father that he decided to die in february which was most inconvenient and goddammit I told him so. It is the story of my family to be inconvenient.

*I'll keep he said, his eyes like on carp fish. I'll keep.*

He just sat there knowing full well the frost was down four feet in spots but when he looked up at my face and then back at his hands I could see in his bleeding white eyes a life running into himself much faster than his heart and lungs could pump back out. He was suffocating of himself, of his age, which was eighty-seven or thereabouts, old enough yes to have the mind to let himself out.

So I kept him buried in a snowbank to be out of sight but some foxes got to him during a warm spell and chewed up one of his feet. I suppose that was about when my sisters were wondering where he was and then the sheriff so I moved him about a half mile down the road and into a culvert. Sure enough a deputy came by and got me one day and I did my time since that was 1947 and there was a law that said a person can't go around burying the dead wherever and whenever, though I wasn't too

familiar on the wording of that particular ordinance. It was no bother to me. Besides, it was still winter and folks would come who knew me and get me drunk. *My own wife died before I told her so I said nothing to nobody in town but while I was in that jail I kept making it sound like I might.*

Wouldn't you know it turned cold again during the weeks of my incarceration so when I went to retrieve my old man from that culvert he was froze solid. *I should say I told that Mr. Jesus right then about the trials and tribulations of the dead. I tell you he just shook his head when I told him of those people such as my brother who hover at my edges like ravens to find out where I buried them. I understand well enough they are willing to kill me, to follow where I won't know any longer the earth ends and I begin. Away will go my brand new shoes to the salvation army. My horsehide comfort chair too. The bastards.*

Well I got a rope like any son would and crawled in that culvert but the best I could do was get a loop around one arm. I figured since it was only march I couldn't see the sense in breaking my father to pieces so that's right where I left him like it or not. It was the middle of may before the ice on the lake turned black and broke and I'd guess it was near the fourth of july when I got him across to where the old Indians kept themselves and the thick remembering earth swallowed him up. What with all the rain that year and twenty more head of cows I didn't really have time to build him a proper box so a feed bag had to do. It was inconvenient, yes, admittedly so, but that's what he wanted and when he said *I'll keep* I knew he had it in his mind to defy death and water and frozen ground if I didn't lay him down where he wanted *and me too goddammit, right soon but as I told that Jesus there is now absolutely nobody left, nobody to trust with the duty of my secret, so I'll have to take matters into my own hands. Maybe I'll place an ad in the paper. Or else just time it correctly and get my dying done out there. Yes I like that. I don't need anyone else. I'll make sure no one follows me and get it done out there.*

But the fact of the matter is my brother. So I asked that Mr. Jesus if he knew my brother had been in prison for killing those



pigs and drinking their blood and making lampshades out of the hides. HAD been in prison I said because the bastard was just then sitting in a tree right across the street waiting for me to show myself. Through the rain I pointed him out, his black legs hanging down from a branch as though to decoy his intent. He had been up there for nearly a week.

At first I thought it was a bird over there, a raven hunched up like that black with no shoulders as birds by design don't have shoulders they have wings and zygodactyl feet. But then I saw those shoes on that bird. Shoes like no bird would ever wear. And a hat, a child's hat like the one he always wanted; *his tongue thick as wood moaning over and over and over can I aff at...can I aff at...*

*Tie them goddamm shoes first. Lace them up and tie them.*

He never learned to tie his own shoes until he was thirteen years old and weighed nearly two hundred pounds and now he must have got out of that prison and swam across the river or stole a motorcycle or maybe killed someone more than likely and then set fire to their house thinking all the while I'd tell him where I buried our father. That boy was born all wrong. He nearly split our mother he was so big. Had a head on him like a hubbard squash. As a child he sat for I don't know how many years near an open window, his white hair furling, and studied the birds. He liked little birds best because he could put them in the pockets of his sweaters.

*We kept him in a room in the cellar.*

Yes I understand it may have been the fault of electricity. But was it the fault of a cloud to have spit itself onto the head of a twelve year old boy huddled beneath a tree? We found him with his shoes burned off and his dirty eyes boiled. I say it only provoked what was already there in him like a bad seed. Two years later he killed my horse with a baseball bat. My old horse. I tell you he just walked up and proceeded to club him between the eyes. One swing was all. That about turned my patience on end. Then he went and lost his mind with my .22 and shot some chickens and my car and my boat. But when he killed my radio, walked right up to it shaking his precambrian head saying no no and threw it out the goddamn window, well, I'll tell you I'd

had enough. So I broke his feet. Plain and simple. Yes, I fooled him into playing his bugle, the one my wife got to keep him from masturbating, and then I snuck up behind and let him have it with the very same bat he killed my horse with. I told my wife I would kill him but she was always one to feel sorry for a person, regardless of his being an idiot or not. She always believed it was the electricity so she asked Doc Fleeks if electricity could do that but I told her it would not leave him like gout or the goddamn flu. It wasn't a virus but a damn malfunction. He was simply incorrect. And now he is in a tree across the goddamn street.

Well, I am a man of moral understanding but I am no savior. I told Mr. Jesus I will shoot my brother from that tree to keep him from following me. It will be another scar I have to bear. Those were my exact words.

You just got to study primary needs is what I think. I tried to tell that to my wife, of course, but she came from a different state where the sun shines from a different sky though I cannot explain quite how that occurs. Our skies here hold no distance and the birds talk at us much like the old women do. Her people raise corn and soybeans and play the accordian and when you talk to them they watch you; they watch your mouth, your teeth and tongue. It's like they're going to crawl right in there to see what it is you are talking about. There is a vacant neanderthal look in their eyes that I have also seen in the eyes of cows. It is as though a part of them has been bred out in their exhaustion with the land.

My wife was a good woman evolved out of those people and is now in a brass urn on top of my dresser. I don't hide it. She's up there right now though I must remember to dispose of her soon down in that Iowa she came from since that was her will. I suppose I should have done it years ago but that's an awful long drive and even to this day I don't believe her people like me too well. I remember once a cousin of hers challenged me to a fistfight. We were sitting in a pasture. His name was Oldfield and he was tall like a pipestem, up on his toes, fists high, feinting this way and that. An obvious easterner. I couldn't see such nonsense so I ended it quickly with a folding chair. There were a

couple of her brothers there and another cousin or two and at that moment I just don't believe they would have taken my honest word for it that I condemn violence as a means to a solution. I could see it by the way they began to move at me. But, fool as I am, I jumped the four of them. I guess in such a situation you just have to know when to take the initiative. As they were all larger than me it was to my advantage in using the element of surprise because two of them went down immediately. Using superior foot speed I kicked at their heads and keeping the advantage I broke across the field for my car and wouldn't you know my wife was sitting right on the front seat with the motor running. You have to marry a woman like that.

*Her daddy was a preacher with a shriveled arm. When he spoke or chewed his Jesus his cold face cracked like old paste, yet I believe he was the only one who liked me. He was always pulling that numb arm up and around and thunking it down on a table or the arm of a chair. Thunk and my eyes would set upon it just sitting there. He was such a pale man, such a white man, I swear you could have held him up to a light and seen right through him. Except for that arm of course which was solid like wood and cold to the touch. It was something you couldn't avoid in him, as if it were some strange animal, maybe a marsupial, coming down off his small shoulder. When they buried him in that box he made himself and lined with newspaper he looked suddenly warm and soft and somewhat pliable—more so than he'd been in the chill of his living years—and I couldn't help myself but to squeeze his cheek when nobody was looking and by god if he wasn't lukewarm to say the least. Except for that arm of course. And I knew from the very way in which he lay there with that look of flight on his flat face that he was one of those people to whom death suited fine.*

As I said before everybody is dead. Everybody I ever knew has died and you can't tell me I haven't seen that pain as the wilted breath goes out and pulls back in so slow and hard you have to get behind it with your shoulder. I remember how my wife lay panting there for weeks and weeks and folks would come and lean over her skeleton saying *It'll be all right, Alice, it'll be all right* and right then and there as I watched those words wash up

on her I knew it wasn't all right. There were times in her eyes I saw only the swirlings of sand and mud. Dead is dead. You don't just snap your fingers and jump out of your skin. *When she died her eyes floated up off the sides of her head and on into my closet though nobody else claims to have witnessed this. Those eyes have for years visited me as I lay awake in the darkness under my blanket, head on my pillow. I don't hide them. They are there. At times we simply stare at each other. What the hell can I say to a pair of oblique white eyes, or can they say to me for that matter? As I said, it's only eyes and no mouth. She is dead. Absolutely dead. Her ashes are up there on my dresser no different than the ashes of a tree.* She was a good woman with cloudy red hair that floated like milkweed in my face and she died before I told her where I buried my people. Actually, she never asked me of this, though our sons tried to wine me up to get me to talk. Over the years she preferred not to talk if at all possible and how for the life of me I can't remember her voice. It is lost. Though at times I can still hear that small whistle of hers as if she were right out back cleaning fish or chickens.

She died trying to whistle something to me and her fingers kind of fluttered out and her eyes stared to move like how a bat flies when it gets caught in a light. I held her hand still and I could feel something moving around in there. Not just in her hands I mean, but all around, and then it got quiet and everybody in the room was breathing all at the same time but she wasn't anymore. *In a sudden swelling urge that pulled my breath clean out those protruding and burning eyes let go and I moved aside from them and their immense beckoning silence. But it wasn't until somebody pulled me from the closet back into the room and there was her body in that bed no more animate than a piece of cheese did I fully realize it was too late to tell her. She was the only one I ever trusted.* My sister was there and her big face swam at me but I avoided it and swinging my arms I found an open window where I saw out in the yard my brother-in-law Elmer sitting behind the wheel of the Plymouth, his head leaned back in the sun. He was either whistling or sleeping. Arnie Ooka I believe it was had a hold of my feet but even a man of his girth couldn't keep me from drifting up into that open window and up

past those trees that leaned so deeply over Elmer. *I could then clearly see he was indeed sleeping. Above all the empty and broken land were clouds curled like waves and other people too so I knew I wasn't the dead one. Her dead is over and soon it will my turn as I understand. I'm all used up and he will soon be here at my door blue as always and hand me a letter he will never sign his name to.*

She didn't was to be buried like the rest of them which was fine with me. I in no way enjoyed lugging them about in their boxes, though I'll bet she didn't weigh but eighty or ninety pounds when she died so it wouldn't have been much of a haul. But let me tell you, when that mortician handed me her remains in that tiny box she weighed no more than an egg. I tossed it up in the air it was so light and it was so small she fit right in the glove compartment under the road maps. Yes, she was so small I just plain forgot her and she sat in the glove compartment right up until I sold that car to Raymond Quill. It was a most beautiful car, a 1950 Ford. A year or two later one of her brothers wrote me concerning her remains and when I finally remembered where she was I found the car down in the creek at the edge of Raymond's farm. Water swirled over the floorboards but sure enough, there she was right where I left her. I held her up near my ear and gave a good shake and she sounded as dry as could be. Raymond had followed me down and he stood on the bank and flapped his arms and sputtered in circles, clucking like a goose. He was upset that I'd left my dead wife in his glove compartment. I never should have sold my car to him. Anybody but him could have gotten more miles out of it. But she is now on my dresser and I believe I will just mail her down to her Iowa and be done with it.

I say it was no pleasure in burying them so. Just imagine Carl S. Barbo. He must have been two-three hundred pounds when I got him and packed in an oaken box spanning at least three feet by seven. Lordy. Now I'm the last one to go defacing the dead but one look at Carl told me right off I wasn't going to drag him in one piece down through the fields and load him into my boat weighing like he did. I had never seen the occasion to use a wheelbarrow until Carl came along. As I said, it was no pleasure

but more a sense of duty I felt was owed to all those attended over the years. As for Carl, it was his pigs my brother had killed.

So you are now here for my confession and I will confess this much. I never did get Wymie Holman buried, though he being an old navy man I believe he was satisfied. I felt bad at first but the more I thought about it the more I realized Wymie had always done exactly what he wanted, even in death. He'd come without a box of his own so I set him in the front of the boat, arms draped over the gunwales, just like we were going fishing. It was a pretty stiff wind that day so I was rowing to quarter when all of a sudden about halfway across the lake the wind shifts and we dropped, plummeted is more like it, into a wave that must have been chest high. I heard a muffled groan and turned just in time to see Wymie shoot right out of his seat, arms stuck over his head. It was a beautiful dive for a dead man and he sank without a trace. I suppose I should have tied him down in such a wind but whenever I think back to that look of sublime duress on his face, compelling him so easily past the mere bounds of my boat, well, I just don't believe a rope is what he wanted.

So that is what I have to tell. It is all Bateman has to tell. And Fishface. And Benny Munson and Judge Parker and Leonard G. Mendola. Oh I suppose there are more. Luther Cook and Oscar Hampson and Snub Putty to name a few. Harold Wahl. No, it wasn't the whole town for crying out loud and I would be pleased if you could keep that tidy white cap that sits like a spiny fin atop your brown folded hair from out of my face. Also, it bothers me the way you breathe through your nose like a horse and I hear in the way you gurgle my name...*Uncle Billy...Uncle Billy...*and see it in your pale soviet features and uneven teeth that you were sent all the way from Wabasha by my sister to harass me. My sister is dead, I'm sure of it. But knowing her she figured it was worth a try. I tell you my own wife died before I told her so you can just float on down from that ceiling where it seems you are now stuck and without even flapping your wings, which puzzles me yes, as if you were simply a cloud or a moon.

Now I won't go and say clouds or moons are simple. No, I won't say that. I can imagine the difficulty of having to explain to a child of clouds and moons.

It's just that it is now so quiet. So much more quiet than clouds or moons or people, even dead people. Like those flamingos out there in my cold gray yard that don't seem to mind the rain so much, what with the way they think like birds.

But I myself would think those flamingos might just fly away and hide in trees like all the rest of them who are so quiet from me so I would then have to look closely for them, as if it were an old picture of people I hardly knew I was looking at, their faces blooming past the fact that they are all now dead. Yes, this all puzzles me, as does that faint tapping, slow and bothersome and diminishing, coming, as near as I can determine, from the hollow of my chest. Yet as I listen closer it may just be a clock hidden behind a door, a clock behind a very narrow and precarious door indeed, a door behind which I may have to step in order to avoid the next awesome wave of your godawful seismic breathing which is now flattening me so acutely into myself. I know full well that you could break me in half if we struggled so if you would only return to the floor I believe we could discuss this amicably. Or I will simply join you up there, away from this impending dampness of latitude. It makes no matter. That Jesus will be here soon enough and then we can all go over and see my brother and put an end to this following business. I tell you I'll kill him. He's in that tree right across the street. You can see those shoes on him no bird would ever wear. *That tree right there behind that rain...*

## Kowtow Tattoo

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*Clifton Bates*

An old wooden paddle fan imperceptibly droned overhead. Its faint stirring of the air was futile in the nearly unbearable heat. In this hottest month and at three in the afternoon, I watched the ice cubes disappear into my drink. Surely the drink was saving me and not the fan.

I was concerned about the water the ice cubes were made of, thinking of the fan and the heat and my drink, comparing this extreme heat with the extreme cold I had experienced in the past and I reflected on a book while I held this bizarre conversation in a Far Eastern bar.

No doubt it would have been a bizarre conversation even if we did speak the same language. He wasn't exactly a prime example of his countrymen. He knew about two dozen English words and I knew a handfull and a pocketfull and sometimes a small briefcase-full of sounds that were meaningful to him. It was his personality, not language, along with the heat I guess, that were getting to me. He had this flippant, superior attitude and mannerisms that smelled of American movies.

My eyes seemed to be melting as I consciously controlled myself from not tapping my foot or playing with some object. I took a deep breath, though, before I knew it as I told myself for the umpteenth time to relax and enjoy myself. I shook myself internally and remembered that there was no need for me to feel the burden of the conversation.

From somewhere came a slight whiff of cool air and I very briefly got the impression things were looking up. At this time, instead of uttering a basic, sure sound that was communicable, I just gave my foreign company a nod and tipped my glass his



way, took a solid sip and became determined to not let the heat get the best of me.

I am not going to kowtow I told myself. I had kowtowed too much all my life. Kowtowing was a continual cause for self-deprecation. I felt glad and reassured when I remembered to not kowtow. A film of perspiration covered my upper body and it felt like one was sliding over my face and eyes. The ridiculous question crossed my mind considering the word kowtow relating to the word cower and I immediately thought of the spelling and felt irritated while at the same time I considered the possibility of having malaria since I felt so odd. My mind was behaving in a way that I could watch it so very easily and a feeling came over me as if I were in a Camus novel. Yes, too much inner dialogue: self-absorption with half of me studying the other half and this character across from me, a mere catalyst.

I grasped back onto the idea of feeling good about remembering not to kowtow when my friend, perceiving a shift in the circumstances, tried to ask me a question for the first time. I understood his question perfectly but I replied with a phrase in his language that meant the equivalent of "never mind, I don't know and it doesn't matter." I grinned inwardly at giving him a taste of his own medicine.

We were sitting in an open place with a dirt floor and, in back, behind where a motorcycle was in a stage of repair, I heard the woman tell her daughter to see if we wanted another drink. A little girl of about eight bounced out to us and capably took care of things and returned very lady-like with two full glasses.

A cat walked across another table where some wrapped noodles and sauces were setting. A couple of dogs moseyed nearby. Their diseased and bloated genitals hung ridiculously out of proportion.

My friend, with an open face and large grin of good teeth, tried to share some laughter with me when one dog snapped at the other over a scrap they had found on the floor. The thought entered my mind that, for the first time, he was feeling a bit uncomfortable. I chuckled that maybe I had held out long enough for the shoe to be on the other foot. I even considered putting

my elbows on the table and talking to him on some kind of normal plane. Let him do some listening for a change. Hell, I'd been listening to him for the past few days. I put my elbows on the table and took a sip of my drink instead. I looked at him firmly in the face and thought to myself "I'm all right."

This kowtowing business. With the heat and the drink, I knew I wasn't going to slip into it then or the rest of the day or that evening. All I had to do was remember the next day, the next day and the next day.

When I was about nineteen, I swore to some friends that if I ever made it to Shanghai, I'd get a tattoo. Shanghai was a goal that stood for a lot. As I tossed down the end of my drink, I quickly came to one of those conclusions that rings up like the total does on a cash register. Since a tattoo is a constant reminder, I knew exactly what kind to get when I got to Shanghai.

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## In the Cave

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*Myron Taube*

for three years, those many years ago. It was after I fought in the war, and Alcibiades helped me home. I thought he would travel faster alone, and told him I would stay in the witch woman's cave until I healed. He did not want to leave me, fearful of what the witch woman might do; but I told him that the loneliness of the cave would give me time to think. I never expected to stay that long. The wound was not deep, not severe, and was more a nuisance than a pain. But the old witch woman who kept the cave wove magic spells and made me her toy. She was old, withered like a broken olive branch left out in the sun, and she moved with a stoop, her bare feet kicking up little puffs of dust. Her face was creased, and she muttered to herself as she chewed her toothless gums. She was related to the gods, but her ways were those of the woman. She fed me regularly and helped me regain my strength. First she gave me bowls of broth. Then, crouching beside the fire, she ripped chunks off the roasted meat and held them to my mouth. But she never forgot the gods: first, she made her libation, and she saved fat for Zeus. Then, as I lay wrapped in my blanket next to the dying fire, she crumbled dry leaves into the bronze brazier in the tripod and set them to burning. She bent low over the brazier, her arms outstretched, and she chanted words I had never heard before, secret words of the old tongue, words of the barbarians.

When I was stronger, I asked her, "O Princess of Darkness, what magic do you weave with your spells?"

"I seek questions, O wise one," she said.

"Questions?"

She threw her face back from the smoking brazier and looked up to the cave roof. "I have the answers, O wise one, and now I seek the proper questions for them."

I could not fathom her meaning. "You do not know me, O mistress of mysteries. Why do you call me Wise One?"

"You are certainly not called handsome, are you?"

"No," I said sadly. "It is true that Alcibiades sometimes calls me a satyr and sometimes pelican."

She breathed the smoke deeply. "But you are neither satyr nor pelican."

"No?"

"No."

"Yet Alcibiades would not lie," I said.

"He does not lie."

"No?"

"No."

"Oh. But how can that be, if he calls me either a satyr or a pelican, that I can be neither, and he not lie?"

"Do you think, O Wise Man, that what is not fair must be foul?"

"Not always."

"Or that what is not a satyr must be a pelican?"

"Assuredly not."

"Then there is a mean between satyr and pelican, which we might call your usual self?"

"Yes."

"Then we would not insist that you are either a satyr or a pelican, but sometimes a satyr and sometimes a pelican, but usually your usual self."

"Certainly."

"Do not worry, then, O Wise Man, for you will know great truths and you will speak them."

"But how?" I asked, somewhat puzzled.

"Come, O Wise Man," she said, drawing me closer to the brazier. "Breathe deeply of the magic smoke and see truths."

For a moment I was afraid to take part in her witch's magic, and stood back. "I see truths already," I said, edging away from her.

"But not what I see, O Wise Man."

"I see what I see, O Witch Woman, and I know what I know."

"Of course," she smiled. "But you do not see what I see, or know what I know, and that makes all the difference."

I thought about that for a moment. "What do you see and know, O Witch Woman?"

She cackled, her old face pinching together like a wrinkled fist. "What I see, O Wise Man, you cannot see, and what I know, you cannot know."

I scratched my head. "But can you tell me?"

"Oh, yes."

"Will you?"

"I will tell you just a part."

"Why not tell me all?"

"You ask for too much," she cackled again. "First find out if you want to know any more. Sometimes the truth cannot be told or even understood in its entirety. Are you ready for even the smallest part?"

I thought for a moment. Though she spoke in riddles, I was not afraid of even the smallest bit of truth. "What do you see and know, O Witch Woman?"

"That you are the wisest of men, O great philosopher."

I burst out laughing. "Me, a philosopher? I am just a poor soldier trying to heal his wound and go back to Athens. No philosopher I, Witch Woman."

"Your wound will never heal, O Socrates."

"What?"

"There are different wounds, O Socrates, those of the body and those of the soul, and you have been touched where there can be no healing."

I would have laughed again, but her voice had an ominous quality. I did not understand her talk of different wounds of body and soul, and I thought she might be mad. I scanned her face, looking for a sign of hysteria, an indication of madness, but her eyes, like ripened olives, only reflected my own lightly bearded face, and I shivered. Was it my imagination, or had her face changed? Had she suddenly grown younger? Did I see in

her eyes more than just myself reflected? I wanted answers.

"Why do you call me wise, O Witch Woman?"

"That," she said, suddenly throwing her head back and looking to the top of the cave, "that is for you to find."

"But tell me," I began, but she stared up at the ceiling of the cave, and truly I never felt so helpless and alone. If she told the truth, then I had become a mystery to myself, for I knew nothing of my own wisdom. I knew only what I had learned, and that was not very much. O, I could recite a chorus from Aeschylus or a stasimon of Sophocles, but that was not wisdom. Nor was my knowledge of the discus or the spear wisdom. Among the young men of Athens, a man could be called great if he did one thing well. He could be a great orator or sculptor. But where was wisdom? Surely, not in the knowledge of what little I knew. "Tell me, Old Woman," I said, "of my wisdom, so that I may know what my virtue is."

"Nay, Socrates," she said as she put a bowl of grapes before me. "What you know, you will know, and I will not tell you."

"But you do know, do you not, old lady?"

"Oh, Socrates," she chuckled, and grinned her toothless grin. "This you may believe: this truth, like other truths, I do know."

"But you will not tell me?"

She grinned.

"Here, old lady," I said, and gave her a cluster of grapes. "Take these, by Bacchus, share with me these fruits, and then share with me your knowledge."

She plucked a grape with her claw-like hand and cackled: "No, no, O subtle Socrates. You think with your wiles to win from me my secret, but you, O Socrates, who are far wiser than other men, know that I will not give you my secret for a grape."

"But if not for a grape, O Woman of Secrets, then for what?"

She smiled.

The cave had grown dark and musty with the sacred smoke of the witch woman's fire. I coughed as I breathed in and felt its magic. I could not believe what I saw: the witch woman *had* changed. It may have been only an illusion, but the wrinkled

face with the scraggly hair suddenly appeared youthful and wanton, and I felt a moment's desire. How strange. The darkness and smoke that bitterly caught at my throat and brought tears to my eyes had so fooled my mind that image and reality had become confused. Could it be, I wondered, that this woman is not just a woman in this cave, but a revelation of something else? Who is she, and what does she reveal? The surprise of the moment was past, and I pressed on. "Oh, Diotima," I begged, "tell me who you are and what you mean."

Her eyes half closed, and her mouth spoke without moving. "You will learn."

"Yes, yes," I said eagerly. "But when?"

"Soon," she said, swaying slightly on her haunches. "Soon."

How soon is soon? For weeks I watched as the change went on, and I wondered, what can all this mean? What did her changing mean?—for she *was* changing. Vaguely, I understood that she meant more than she said. But what? Each evening as we first poured our libations and then she fed me and then we breathed in the smoke from the sacred flame, she changed, she grew younger, and I wondered, what more could she be than what I saw? She must stand for something that was forever changing, ever inconstant. Each day surprised me with a newness I had not experienced before. The more I contemplated her, the more she changed, and the more uncertain became the idea behind her, and the more unsure was I.

I knew I had to be careful. O, Diotima, I thought to myself, your spell has come over me. Like the men of Odysseus in the court of Circe, I have been changed into a pig. My appetites were those of a pig: she appealed to me. Her age had disappeared. Gone was the wrinkled face, the deep-sunk shadowed eyes. The fingers that teased and curled my hair had lost their claw-like boniness, and the withered dugs that had hung like leather flaps against her scrawny chest filled with liquid and stood out in ripeness against her body. I felt a weakness. What madness had she filled me with as she fed me grapes, one at a time, stroking my thigh where my wound still remained to heal?



I was on the edge of great discovery. Whatever her secret, it worked in wondrous ways to affect my mind and heart, and I knew I had to be on constant alert. To fall into the power of such a witch, who controlled such forces, could mean a man's destruction. I had to find out her great secret...and then to discover the amorphous, ever-changing idea that lay behind her reality.

And yet, whatever I thought of her, I wanted to be near her and to keep her close to me. When she left the cave to pick berries, I wanted to go with her. I had strange visions of something happening to her and of my coming to save her from a desperate fate. I told her that I worried about her, and she laughed.

"You're being foolish, O Socrates."

"But I want to be with you. I don't like your leaving and going off—I know not where."

"I will return," she said.

"But I want to go with you."

"I am going nowhere."

"But you're leaving the cave..."

"I often leave the cave."

"But you're leaving me."

She smiled. "Wait in the cave, O wisest of men, and see how your patience will be rewarded."

I waited in the cave. Alone, I brooded. What, I thought, if we all lived in caves, each man, alone, and each cave was the ultimate reality of one's life. What if outside the cave was mere chaos, dangerous to know, threatening to life and happiness; then one would be a fool to leave the cave. A clean, well-lighted cave, warm with fire and made joyous with the sounds of a witch woman. I smiled to myself. If this was what everyone wished, knowingly or unknowingly...if this was the ultimate truth behind everybody's action...

I threw another branch on the fire until she returned. I crumpled some of the magic leaves in the great bronze brazier and lit them, and breathed in the magic smoke of the witch

woman. Then I lay down under the blanket, musing to myself. What would she tell me when she returned? Would I listen? Did I even care what lay out there in that dark madness of a world? Give me my cave and my witch woman. Who needed more? And then the thought came to me: what if the world outside was an illusion which we had to pierce in order to get to an ultimate truth—which was ourselves? It seemed a daring thought, and I moved closer to the warmth of the fire, knowing that I should think some more of the cave and the fire and the ultimate truth, and I fell asleep.

I woke to the sounds of morning. She lay on the other side of the fire, her hair thrown over her bare chest, her face quiet in the dim morning light. I stared at that face and knew that what I had thought to be true was true. It was no illusion. She had changed. Her prune-lined mouth had become a smooth plum, waiting to be bitten into. Her breasts were like soaking sponges. Was this the same withered crone I had seen just a few weeks before? Or had I been taken with a madness that I knew nothing of? I had read nothing like it in Homer or Sappho or Pindar. Was this a madness sent by the gods? If so, what evil had I done that I did not know? Assuredly, the gods do not pay back good with evil. But I had done no harm, and so I did not understand why I should be punished. The gods were not so inscrutable as to do such a job.

Later, after she had awakened and we had performed our libations, I spoke to her about the strangeness that had passed over her in the last few days.

"No, Socrates," she said, "I am not any more strange now than I have ever been."

"I know nothing of that, O Diotima," I said, "for what you were I know only by others' words."

"And what are they, O Socrates?"

"I...I know not that I should say it, O Diotima."

"Tell me, O Socrates."

"You are..."

"Yes?"

"...strange..."

"Oh?"

"...and powerful in your magic."

"Oh."

"And old beyond memory."

She grunted. "Do you believe what others have said?"

"I cannot believe others when my own senses tell me what is true."

She smiled. "And what is truth, O Socrates?" she asked quietly.

"The truth, O Diotima, is that you are strange, and your strangeness lies in that you have not remained what you once were, but have changed."

She shook her head. "Not so, O Socrates."

"But you are changing, O Diotima," I said.

She smiled. "Not I, Socrates. I remain the same, unchanging."

"But I see..."

"No, not me. What you see is changing. Not I, but what is seen, not I, but what you see."

"But why, O Diotima?"

"It is the time of changes, Socrates."

"What changes?"

"Oh, Socrates, it is too long to tell standing on one leg. Come, lie here beside the fire, let us hold each other and I'll tell you."

"Yes, Diotima," I said.

We held each other that long day and lay together that long night. She told me many truths that I had not thought of. My mind went dizzy with the thoughts she whispered to me. Of how life was forever changing, and with these changes went our views of things; that certainty was forever beyond us, that certitude would be found only in death, and that the life of man was forever brief—too brief—and that we could never expect only roses or thorns in life, but both, for they went together. "Count no man happy, O Socrates, till his days have been numbered."

"Yes, O Diotima."

"But remember, O Socrates, there is still much to be enjoyed. Do not think that the end of man is only misery."

"I know there must be more, O wise woman."

"Indeed. There is beauty, Socrates, and there is love," she said as she held me in the flickering light of the fire. "For it is love that eventually leads one to contemplate not the beauty of the one but the beauty that is found in the many, in the varied forms and varieties of life. And then one sees that whatever truth there is in the world or outside the world becomes the truth that is in each person."

"But what does that mean, O Diotima?"

"It means, O Socrates, that we must never confuse parts with wholes, people with things. And it means that the sense of his own personal worth may lead the lover to the contemplation of that personal worth and beauty that is in everyone."

This talk of love and beauty made me warm, but my wound still prevented strenuous actions in the service of Eros. It would have been best for me to turn away and let her sleep, but I felt myself on the edge of a great mystery. "Tell me, O Diotima," I said, resting my head on my bent arm and looking into her dark eyes in which danced the reflected flame of the fire before us. "To what end does this contemplation lead?"

"O, Socrates, to him who has seen the beauty in due order and succession will, when he comes to the end, suddenly see a nature of wondrous beauty, the final cause of all our former toils, which in itself is everlasting, not growing and decaying, or waxing and waning..."

"But Diotima, I felt the opposite, that what I perceived was forever changing, forever waxing and waning..."

"No, no, Socrates," she said, touching my hand. "What you see as forever changing is the process, is itself forever one, a principle that infuses all things and in whose power are all things. O, Socrates, to have perceived such truth, to have viewed such beauty, to have caught in one's mind the very principle of

the world—then one can bring forth not images of beauty and truth, but realities, for what has one seen if not the reality of beauty itself?"

"But how would one do that, O Diotima?"

"With the words of your heart and the images of your soul, O Socrates."

I thought for a moment, resting my chin upon my cupped hands as I stared into the fire. "What you say may be so, O Diotima."

"Not may be, O Socrates," she said, stroking my arm.

"Even so, O Diotima, but you have not told me how it all comes to be."

"How?" She turned her body to look at me more fully. In the flickering light of the now dying fire, she had become ageless and forever young. Her face was smooth and worry free. "I will teach you, O Socrates."

"Please do," I said.

"Yes," she smiled. "I will have to."

She paused for a moment. Then she said, "There is a certain age at which human nature is desirous of procreation; and this procreation must be in beauty and not in deformity. And this is the mystery of man and woman, and is divine, for conception and generation are principles of immortality..."

"Like the gods?" I asked.

"For human beings who are not gods, but who wish to survive like the gods," she said, patting my wrist.

"I see."

"Yes. Beauty for mortals, O Socrates, is the fullness of love and the powers of conception. And when the fullness of conception arrives, and teeming nature is full, there is such a flutter and ecstasy about beauty, whose alleviation..."

"Yes," I broke in, excitedly, "what of the alleviation?"

She stroked my thigh.

"For love, O Socrates, is not, as you imagine, the love of the beautiful only."

"What then?" I asked, surprised at the turn she had taken.

"The love of generation and birth in beauty."

"Yes," I said.

"Yes, indeed," she replied, and under the softness of her stroking hand, I felt the pain in my wound disappear.

That night she taught me the mystery of beauty and love, and promised that if I stayed a few more months with her, she would teach me even greater secrets of life and the mysteries of the gods...

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## contributors

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**GARY CLOUD** lives in the Black Hills of South Dakota and is working in the Artist-in-the-Schools Program there. His work will appear in *Horizons: The South Dakota Writers' Anthology* to be published in January, 1984 by Lame Johnny Press.

**WILLIAM VIRGIL DAVIS** has published two collections of poetry. The first, *One Way to Reconstruct the Scene*, won the Yale Series of Younger poets prize. His second, *The Dark Hours*, was published in the summer of 1983. For the year of 1984 Davis will be living in Wales (writing) and Denmark (teaching at the University of Copenhagen on a Fulbright). P.S. John says "Hi."

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**ROLF JACOBSEN**, born in 1907, is credited with introducing modern poetry into the Norwegian Literature. His first book, *Earth and Iron*, came out in 1933. His poems have been translated into over twenty languages. His latest collection was published in the fall of 1983. He is seventy-six years old and lives with his wife Petra in Hamar, Norway.

**OLAV GRINDE** holds University degrees in Art and Mathematics. His translations of Jacobsen's poetry have been published in a number of newspapers, magazines and anthologies. He now lives in Bergen, Norway, where he makes ceramic and wood sculptures, and continues translating Norwegian Literature. He is twenty-five.



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**MICHAEL D. RILEY** has had publications in the *Southern Humanities Review*, *Yearbook of American Poetry*, *The Laurel Review*, and several dozen others. He is an Assistant Professor of English at the Berks Campus of The Pennsylvania State University.

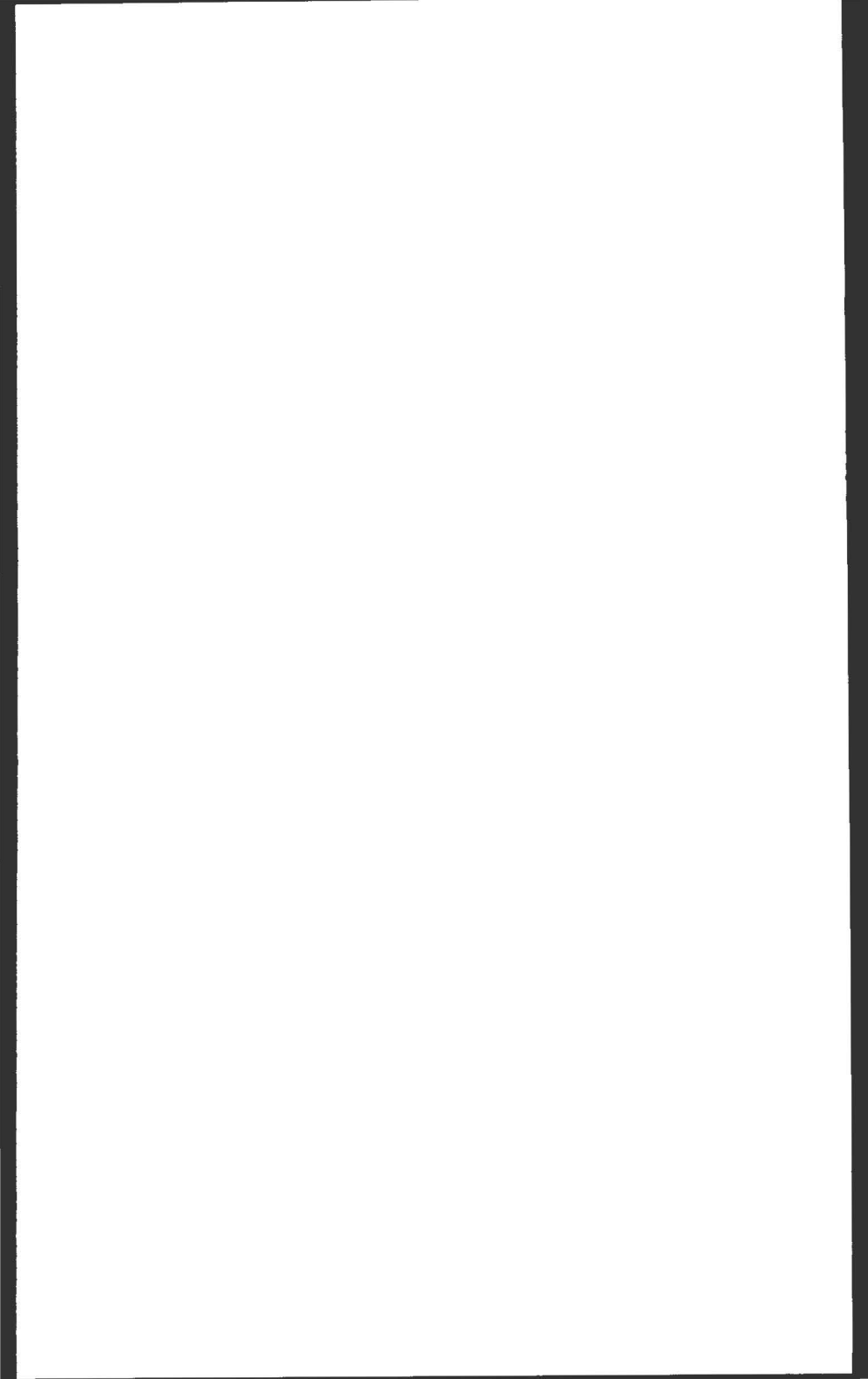
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**JAMES SUTHERLAND-SMITH** was born in 1948. He has published two complete collections; *A Singer from Sabiya*, Many Press 1979, and *Naming of the Arrow*, Salamander Imprint 1981. He was one of five poets in the Gollancz compendium *A Poetry Quintet*, 1976 and has been included in various P.E.N. and British Arts Council anthologies. He is the winner of several poetry contests: Eric Gregory award (1978), Cheltenham Festival Competition and the National Poetry Competition of Great Britain. He also is an English teacher.

**MYRON TAUBE** is a writer and Creative Writing Professor at the University of Pittsburgh. His work has appeared in numerous magazines and small presses. He is currently working on a novel which he has been currently working on for 30 years. One of the editors of *permafrost* once picked up his son hitchhiking and another once caught a squirrel in a trash can during Dr. T's class.

**PETER WILD** recently co-edited an anthology with Frank Graziano entitled *New Poetry of the American West*, published in 1982 by Logbridge-Rhoses. He lives in Tucson, Arizona.

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## **Magazines Received:**

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**Beatniks from Space**  
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**Chariton Review**  
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316 North Jordan Avenue  
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916 Middle Street  
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**Mississippi Review**  
Southern Station  
Box 5144  
Hattiesburg, Mississippi 39406

**New CollAge Magazine**  
5700 North Tamiami Trail  
Sarasota, Florida 33580

**Silverfish Review**  
P.O. Box 3541  
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**Swallow's Tale Magazine**  
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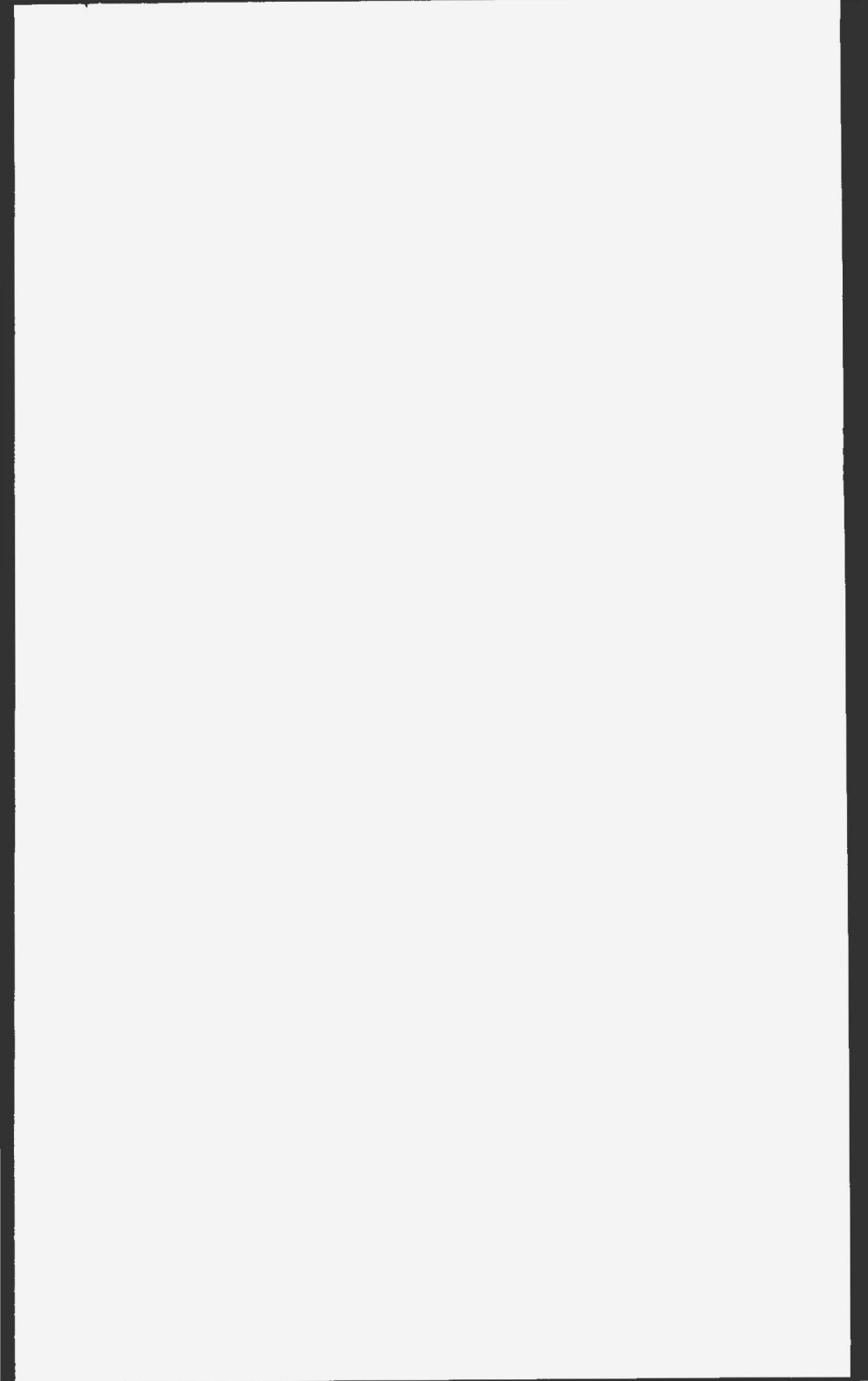
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