

# EARLY STORIES AND POEMS

by Richard Jewell, 1968-1999 (2-2023)

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**Fumes** (2022 revision)

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I am a poor but honest man. When I first brought my Holly and our kids to this place, we were driving on fumes. No money, no food. That old Ford, its windows were all broke out. Our Angel and Tommy were two and four, my wife's from a guy that hit her. I married her and lost my job when the company went down. I'm not Einstein but I'm not dumb. I am proud that I can find minimum wage in any small town. While I looked, nights were chilly. I hate welfare but kids should be safe. But the homeless place was filled up anyway when I called. So we needed to go to ground.

The Ford stalled by a bunch of worn-out buildings. "There Hank, look at that beat up shed," said Holly. "At the back of that big truck stop."

"It's just three walls of plywood and a tin roof leaning on a wall," I said. "And what if they see us?"

"We can make it airtight," Holly said. "We'll just sneak in at night. We'll be out of the wind."

I am an easy-going guy. "Okay," I said. That night we moved some boxes from the big wall and settled down. Holly she stuffed the cracks in the outside walls with her bag of rags she carries all over. And on the inside, from an old broke window high on the wall, covered with a gunny sack, was warm air coming in. We could hear big motors mutter and rumble all night, so we knew a garage for semis lay on the other side.

We all woke up with something like colds the next day, Holly, me, and the little ones. We went out early so no one could find us, walked to a park near the car, and the fresh air helped. We ate some, too, hamburger pieces I found. I am no thief. Dumpster trash at fast food joints is throwaway. You take from the top, it's cold all night, it's good. Our little Angel, two, I put each bite in her mouth. She eats real fast, starts to smile, pats her tummy, gives me a bear hug. Tommy, four, already acts so tough. Quiet and cool, he pretends that food is no big deal. He eats slow, a dining king. But when he's done he leans on me, relaxed and thankful, and I put my arm around him too. Sometimes you must eat to love.

Then I left and looked for work. I found it, too: loading boxes at more than minimum, not bad at all. I start tomorrow. Back at the park I tell Holly. There are tears in her eyes, knowing we'll eat right in a day or two, thinking we'll get a room. The kids can't figure what's going on but they jump up and down.

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We head for our shed after dark with the semis' growl and groan. We are hungry but we sleep well, knowing tomorrow we'll be fine. A good thing too since the night is so cold. The four of us hug real close.

At dawn I open my eyes. They're crusted and my head is wrapped in a band of metal, a ring of fire, worst headache I ever have known. My cold has got deeper, maybe it's pneumonia. I can't breathe, my plumbing is queasy. I pull myself out from the tangle of limbs. I'm first up.

I shake Holly. Do it again. "Wake up," I say. I call her name.

Angel and Tommy are limp with sleep. "Wake up!" I say. I am a patient man. "Wake up!"

Holly, Angel, Tommy, I touch them on the cheek. "Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!"

A trucker hears and sticks his shoulders in. "They're blue!" I say. He sees my face. "They won't wake up!" He looks at my clothes.

"You slept in here?"

"They won't wake up!"

He grabs my arm and pulls me out and down around the corner. In a door he shows me all the semis in a row. They growl and moan like thunder.

He shakes my arm. "That's my truck against your shed, running all night long. Right behind your wall. The stack blows in your window. You dumb fuck. You killed them all."

I am a good man, honest, and I'm proud. I climb that cab, stand on its edge, and start in breathing fumes. The trucker pulls my leg. I kick his face and breathe the fumes. I breathe and breathe and breathe until they pull me down.

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**Knocker** (23 vers.)

*Copyright 1995 by Richard Jewell*

Knock, knock. I knock on the door of our small home. The barn of the landlord next door sends its smell of manure my way. A cat circles my legs on the stoop as I wait in the dark, its tail hitting me. On either side, lilacs scent the still, moist air, and an orchestra of crickets surrounds me. Gently I have sped across the prairie, gone for weeks, a giver of words, a seller of insurance, returning again now to my family. I am an oak whose sheltering arms nurture my wife and children in wind, rain and sun, helping them grow in my love.

My angel, my six-year-old, Becky, comes to the door. The entry is old with latches and locks, two ancient and broken, three new and surprising. "Daddy," she says, through the panes of glass, "I can't open it. Mommy has the key."

"That's fine, Sweet," I say patiently. "Can you get it for me?"

Her footsteps as they leave then return are the patter of rain on wood. "She's sleeping, Daddy," says Becky. "I think she had a rough day."

Ah, the wisdom of six. "Don't wake her," I say. "I'll sit and wait." A man of many charms am I: my office is my new car. I sit in its leather seat, turn on the overhead light, drink coffee, and polish my speeches more. I have wrung the sweat from my brow and sold my body to the best of towns, all for my wife and children. I have driven and talked twenty-four hours a day to seas of strangers, shaking their flesh, enduring questions and doubts. I am the glad hander, smooth talker, fast driver. With these in mind I get out of the car and return to the door again. More cats have arrived. They crawl on the stoop, just concrete blocks. I'll fix it when I have the money.

Knock knock. This time it is Matthew who comes to the door. He is four and innocent. "Daddy, Daddy!" he calls when he sees me, jumping up and down. He lifts my heart.

"Is Mommy awake?" I ask. He races away, a driver and giver as intent as his father. He returns and skids to a stop.

"Daddy," he says through the scratched panes of glass as they rattle, "Mommy says she has to be alone. She feels sick."

I return to the car. My wife has her troubles, but don't misunderstand; as a woman she's fine, piercing-blue eyes and soft, dark curls. She has her own little craft shop in town. I sit in the car and remember the joy on her face, like dew in the sun, when I asked

her to marry, and her pain when she had our daughter and son. Women have moods. You adjust.

Our driveway is muddy; the moon is round. I slog through the mess as our old, peeling windows stare down. The cats have brought kittens that scamper all over. I push them aside.

Knock, knock, once more, and my wife, herself, finally comes. Her face is gorgeous. It's been many days.

I smile at her through the panes, make a silly face: kind clown. Darling, I think, I have been gone so long; months, years, a universe has wedged between us like a baby in bed between dad and mom.

She shakes her head. Her lips forms words, "Not tonight." A kitten climbs my thin dress pants, its tiny claws thorns. Oh Honey, I think, please. I clasp my hands. My jaw aches. I open my mouth.

"Not tonight," she calls again, louder. Her face disappears.

The kitten is at my thigh, ripping. I grab it and throw it down. It hits with a hollow thud. The moon goes behind the clouds. Now the stoop is slick and sticky underfoot, but maybe they won't see the blood. I take the body to my trunk. Stupid thing chose a bad time to hurt me.

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## MORRISON FROM THE SEA

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"Look!" said the youngest child when she first caught sight of him. She pointed, and all the other children exclaimed, "Look!"

In the gold light of the early April dawn, the twelve children who discovered him were awed, for they never had seen a person washed up almost naked on the shore. He was young and tall with thorny-looking strands of seaweed entwined in the crown of his long, red hair. His legs were straight and arms out, and below his flat stomach were the shredded remnants of coarse brown swim trunks. Apparently he had lain there a long time. The underside of his body had settled into the sand, just as a rock gradually will settle and be buried by the remorseless action of the tides and waves, entombing whatever small creature might be underneath patiently waiting, until its last breath, for the rock to roll away.

The youngest one held both of her hands to her mouth. "Is he sleeping?" she asked.

"Naw," said the oldest, whose name was Tom. Fiercely he frowned with his thick, twelve-year-old eyebrows. "He's dead."

"Let's wake him!" said another child.

"Yeah, poke him good, see if he'll rise," said another. And all the children except the oldest began to chant, "Wake him! Wake him!"

A brave young boy of seven slowly crept forward. The others gave him a stick that looked like a sword with a hilt. Gently he prodded the man on his upturned, outstretched palms, right in the softest center of his hand; then more vigorously against the man's ribs; then slowly the boy crept forward and touched the man's cheek. "He's warm!" he exclaimed. "He ain't dead!"

"Aw," the oldest boy, Tom, scowled. "The sand's still warm from last night. Look how he's buried in it."

The youngest girl tugged at Tom's arm. "Shouldn't we go get help?"

Tom pulled his arm away. "He's dead, I tell you! You want trouble? Some of you aren't supposed to be here alone. What will our parents say? The cops will arrest us!"

The children all shook their heads. "He'll wake up soon anyway," said the boy who had touched him. "I tell you he's warm."

"What's his name?" asked a thin, quiet girl.

"I'll bet it's Morrison," said another boy, second in age only to Tom.

"Why that?" asked a girl. "I think he's an angel."

And so the children argued for awhile about who and what he was and finally decided that since he now was of the earth, whatever once he had been, Morrison was as fine a name as he could have. Then they dressed him with what clothes they could spare, an old cap of white feathers one girl wore for play, two ill-fitting coats for pants, and a beach towel like a robe to cover his chest, for someone named Morrison, though already perfect, should not be half naked and shamed. And in the children's castaway clothes, his arms seemed to spread wider and his body grow taller until his embrace might take in all of them, and they loved the way he looked.

The sun rose, so that slowly the air became intense with warmth and laden with moisture as if tears were dissolved in its heat. And the children remained at their vigil as the rays beat down on them all. Then the braver ones began to touch him and say, "See how warm he is on his skin? He will wake up any time!"

They clustered around him ever closer, and the smaller ones began to play games with Morrison's long, slender fingers and lay them lovingly upon their heads. After that they put his hands together. Finally they entwined their own hands with his hands, their small fingers lost in his fingers, and the children without fathers began to think what a fine father he would make, and a handsome husband for their mothers, turning them into blushing brides once again, if Morrison just could be talked into coming home with them once he awoke. Others who had both fathers and mothers thought what a fine friend Morrison would make for their own fathers, a man to make other men stand tall and true, learn kindness and wisdom, stop drinking or staying out late, and make them become sports or war heroes as once they must have been.

The youngest child bent down and kissed Morrison's cheek.

"Is he hungry?" another one asked.

"Yes, he just said so," the youngest one said.

"He's hungry! He talked!" the children exclaimed.

"He can't talk!" said Tom, sitting ten feet away. "It's bubbles of gas."

"He whispered!" exclaimed the one who had kissed him. "'I want food' is what he said!"

"We must get him some!" cried an older girl. "How can he stand up if we don't feed

him?"

And so the children gathered their nickels and dimes and put them into the hand of a savvy ten-year-old who ran off in the hot sun and returned half an hour later, face beaded with sweat, carrying two boxes of saltine crackers in his hands. "I got all these!" he told them.

"Let's put them in his mouth!" the youngest one said.

Lovingly, carefully, piece by piece, the children fed the crackers to Morrison. They sat and stroked his red hair, made minute adjustments to his clothes as if he were a newborn baby, and occasionally pulled back his eyelids to see if he was finished with dreaming. The younger children would go off and play for a bit, then return, and one time when they came back, the older ones took what was left of the crackers and shared the saltines with them all. First one and then all of the younger ones put their crackers in Morrison's hands. Then gently they took them back again to eat. And as they ate them they said, "Look! These are Morrison's. He gave them to me!"

One enterprising young boy, a bit younger than Tom, had stolen a whole bottle of grape juice from his mother's cupboard. He put the bottle in Morrison's hands, then took it out and passed it around. The children drank and said to each other, "This is also Morrison's."

"I bet he's thirsty with all of those crackers!" exclaimed the boy who had brought the juice."

"Yeah, give him some!" said all of the children. And so slowly, carefully, helping him work his jaw to swallow the crackers and juice, they gave Morrison some of the crackers and juice that belonged to him.

As the sun set in a crowning blaze of red, the children began to be concerned.

He is getting cooler!" they exclaimed. "Now he will never wake up!" And so they hovered above him like flames above kindling, and they huddled close, lay beside him, sat on his limbs, and placed their heads in the crooks of his arms. In this way they kept him warm. From the distance occasionally they could hear voices calling as night deepened--"Marie!" "Jon!" "Marta!"--the voices of parents bleating with fear, calling for all their lost children. But Morrison and his gathering were in a lee of the rocks, in a small, sandy cove protected from the rest of the beach and the world, and so no one could see them.

"He will wake soon," they said. "He will open his eyes any moment now," they told



each other. "See how his body stays warm?"

And then the water began to come in, pushed by winds. A shroud of storm clouds covered the moon. In the great darkness that enveloped them all, thick and murky as a closed tomb, the waves touched Morrison's feet, then enveloped his legs, and all the children cried out in dread.

"It's better this way," said Tom to them all. "He came from out there. Now he'll return."

"But he's alive," the others cried. "He's just not awake! We love him. We need him at home!"

But they could not argue with the water, so as children do everywhere who must follow the course of nature, they accepted their fate and his. Soon Morrison had risen from where he had been half buried in the sand. As he began to slip away, the children gathered around him, holding onto his fingers and toes, holding his head, touching his sides and his head, and they escorted him slowly into the waters as the waves rose around him.

"Goodbye!" they cried, standing to their chests and necks in water. "We love you! Have a good journey! Come back and visit us again!" They waved and sobbed as Morrison, best of the best who had shared everything a person could give, began to float away. Some of the smaller children held onto him, floating with him, shrieking for him to stay. Others, even some of the older ones, were dashed this way and that by the increasing ferocity of the waves. The wind whipped away all sound and they could not see, so they swam the wrong way and, like the young ones who clung to Morrison, were nearly drowned.

The next morning all but one of the original gathering remained on the beach, most more dead than alive. The youngest one woke up first.

"Where's Morrison?" she asked, forgetting the night before.

"He's gone back home," said a boy who also awoke. The other children sat up. "He's gone back home," they all murmured.

"Where's Tom?" asked the youngest. She looked all around.

"Where's Tom?" asked the others. Then one by one they all put their hands to their mouths.

"He's gone with Morrison," the youngest child whispered.

"He pushed me back onto the beach last night!" said an older girl.

"Me too!" echoed many of the others.

"Morrison told him to save us," said the youngest. And all of the other ones nodded their heads.

"He shouldn't have done that," said one girl. Some of them cried and all of them shook their heads.

Then the children wandered back to their homes again where their parents fussed over them, questioned, and scolded. When Tom was found missing, the whole town arose with a cry. The children were questioned once more. They told their story of Morrison, the man who went back to the sea, and some parents thought that Tom had been kidnapped. Others were sure that he'd drowned. And after that, the children were never allowed to go down to the sea by themselves.

But as they grew older, each went anyway, always alone, to think about Morrison and Tom, and wonder if either would ever return.

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**Opposites Do Attract: Two Single Working Women** (2022 edition)

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Delrita and me, two women of a kind, stepped into the Planet Bar and Grill with its greasy hamburger smell at nine that night. We just got off from the meatpacking plant, she a canner and me a inspector, where we have worked since eighteen. "Angel," she says, "we been friends for some years now, when you going to get married?"

I hug her and say, "I lived with one. That was bad enough. You know, too, that permanent's twice the hell. My momma told me to have my fun like she did not. She said to me, 'When you get hitched, men have a ball and women get screwed.'" Delrita nodded and smiled. My momma, she died when I was sixteen. That's when I got close to my friend. Her and me, we grew up similar, she on the south side and me the north end. Both our daddies strip on the line, cutting the meat as it comes. They fight side by side in bars on the weekends, and Delrita and me moved out. The two of us now, we each live downtown, dancing and drinking as one. In the Planet Bar and Grill we sit down like always, clean and damp on stools at the counter, and order coffee and salads.

Real quick like her momma, both of them divorced, Delrita spies herself a man. He's out of town or we'd of seen him before. He's at a table right near us, tall and with Aqua Velva on, shaggy eyebrows and jeans jacket, just the type of big man you know is going to have a Johnny Cash voice, smooth and deep as river gravel. I nudge Delrita in the side sharp with my elbow, and she hitches me a cool look with those big, warm, brown eyes and ratted blonde hair, shrugs, and then giggles and winks. Delrita is a tall plank of a woman and used to play center on the girls' BB team. Me, I'm a dark-haired, skinny shrimp, but I got boobs and she doesn't. We knew each other to say hi to all through school, but not like we've gotten to now.

She eyeballs him and frowns. My momma taught me, before she died, that boys and girls are like magnets and all, opposite actions attract. Delrita, I think she was born knowing this. She tries again. She winks then turns away like he's dirt. He shakes his head and pretty soon is hooked. He gets up and comes to the counter.

He bends way over, low and tall, and asks us your usual dumb question. "You all aren't getting the Special, are you?" I can smell that Aqua Velva. Who.

We keep our eyes straight ahead. I am just trembling. Delrita then looks at me and says, "Oh, I'm gonna get me something special all right." We both giggle, except hers is more a laughing horse. Our hearts, just like normal, are pounding quick as an old ticking toaster.

He looks right at Delrita, winks and says, "That Special, I bet its got too much food for a couple shrimpy gals like you." Which is very nice for him to say cause Delrita's so big.

She looks right back and smiles real nice. "I ain't shrimpy!" she wails. She nudges me with that sharp knee of hers. I'm feeling all soft and gooey inside from starting to like him too.

He looks her up and down. "A little thing like you?" he says, then sits on the stool beside her, brushing against her arm.

I smile. "Hey," I say, "did we all invite you?"

Delrita sticks her tongue out at me. The guy just nods and says, "Kind of invited myself. Is that okay?" He lays his leg up against hers and motions to Maggie, the waitress. Maggie's a cute little honey getting old in the fang, but she's still far from seeing all the men's pants she can get into. She is way out ahead of Delrita and me. Maggie scowls at him, walks on down, and says real polite, "What'll it be?"

"That Special," he says.

While he's ordering, Delrita just pushes her knee right on back. "Just what does a big oaf like you think a little shrimp like me should eat?" she demands, looking away and winking at me.

He looks at me too, and gives me the old up and down. I positively melt to zero. He's so big, and I'm so little so I mostly get shorter boys. His eyes are brown and pupils so big and dark I can see my own face in them, small and narrow. I feel very silly with him giving me the old stare, me acting so serious and all, so I just raise one eyebrow and wink back.

He sticks his hand out across Delrita who frowns. His fingernails are clean. "I'm Wesley," he says.

I pretend surprise. "You actually have a name?" I'm being so forward I blush for real. My hand rises all on its own and then I'm shaking hands. "I'm Angel," I say, leaning against Delrita who sticks out her own hand while sticking her tongue out at me. "Wesley, I'm Delrita," she says. "Welcome to the Planet Bar and Grill, Angel lives down the street and I live upstairs right here. Where you from?"

"Texas," he says, "and spits on the floor. "Came to sell cattle to your plant." He sticks up his thumb and looks at the ceiling. "That where you live? Must be heaven up there."

Delrita chuckles. I can't stand spitters. I lean in closer and smell him. He's dusty and musky like his jeans jacket grew out of the earth, and those brown eyes are each a dark moon circling the sky. My palms start itching. My armpits are scratchy and my hands are cold and damp like ice.

He shows us the palms of his hands. His callouses are hard and deep. "Used to work ranches before I got my own. Got a big one now, I do it all, run and rope and sell them." I look between the open lapels of his jacket while he talks. His chest is broad and his stomach is flat. He asks, "What you little ladies do?"

"Women to you," I say, my nose in the air. Delrita snickers and I break down too, and we wiggle on our stools which are getting sticky on our seats, and give each other a oh-yeah look. Then we both stare him straight in the face. And smile. "What you want to know for?" Delrita says.

He smiles and gives us that once over again. His package is big in his pants. Delrita tosses her hair. "I help out at the plant here in town," she says. She points at me. "This one here, she's an inspector in the same place."

"Well you can inspect me," he says, his eyes flicking up and down.

"You wish," I say. "Okay, stick it out."

He goes to stand. "You dummy!" I say, "Your arm!"

He sits back down and pulls up his sleeve real high and makes his muscle. Typical man. I scowl at Delrita. His skin, tough and tanned, is soft on the surface. I prod it and poke it. He's damp and hot. I am opening down in my pants. I look at Delrita. "Afraid he's rotten."

They glance at each other. "Bet not," she says in a real low voice. She jiggles around on her seat. I know what that means for her, too. Maggie walks up with our food, giving us two a wink, and slams down his plate and our salads.

"Thank you, Ma'am," he says. He starts eating like nothing happened.

On the counter, Delrita puts her fist down. "Fuck the food," she growls. "Let's go upstairs and have a drink." I keep smiling, even though this doesn't mean me because she saw him first.

He looks down at his plate and up at us, swallows hard, and stands up. "Yes Ma'am." He pulls out his billfold which is falling apart and puts out the cost of all three meals and a pretty big tip. He looks right at our belts, then up at us both. He's smiling.

Delrita shakes her head slowly. "Just keep your ideas zipped," she growls at him. "Wipe that mustard off. Come on."

I grin cheerfully and grit my teeth, thinking about how I'll be home sleeping alone. "Be seeing you," I say. I may have the looks, but Delrita has the brass, so she gets the men.

Delrita grabs me. Her lilac perfume in my nose smells suddenly sharp.

Her face is stricken. "I need help!" she whispers. "He looks too strong!"

I eye her. She's so damn tall.

Real low I say, "You got to be kidding. What you want me for, to hold him down?"

She shrugs and her face gets red. "There's so much," she says, "and besides, haven't we always imagined this?"

My voice becomes ice. "That was just talk!" But I cannot deny the heat inside.

Delrita, she knows me. One look in my eye, she pulls on me gently. Fierce she whispers, "Come on!"

So there we are, two birds of a feather, walking up to her nest with a big male worm. Wesley's right behind, two steps down, telling jokes which we laugh at and just ignore, aware of our butts where his eyes are.

Delrita unlocks her door and we all walk in. It's dark as sin except for a bright light in the bathroom which Delrita says is for burglars to think someone's there. Her place is white walls, strawberry incense and old bacon grease, thick nylon carpet underfoot and, in a crystal bowl on the coffee table, old Christmas M & M's. She flips on the music and soft rock blares out. "Sit down on the couch, there, you two," she says. "What'll it be to drink?"

Wesley in the middle and I sink back onto her big old sofa with its rough cover and soft pillows. I say, "Beer for me," and Wesley asks, "You got any Johnny Walker?" She nods, she saves it for guys, and finds the stuff in the kitchen while he and I talk in low voices about nothing. She comes back carrying a tray with doubles of our drinks. "It's happy hour!" she says, and picks up her own, Brut in a water glass, and plumps herself down on the other side of him. Wesley looks fit to burst with pleasure, two women on either side, and with a sly grin he sips his Johnny.

We sit there awhile talking important shit, our bodies touching him on both his sides, the real jawing happening below. He keeps saying stuff like "You got a big bed in there" and "Are you girls old enough to be legal," cute lines like that. We don't act like we hear

him and just giggle. He gets up to pee, then it's Delrita's turn, then me. Heads whirling, squirming and sighing, we're on the end of our second set of doubles when old Wesley makes his big move. Finally.

He kisses Delrita on her earlobe. Talk about sweet. Most men, they grab your tit or thigh and see how you take it. Delrita pulls away gentle, says "Shucks" real low.

"I want to do you," ole Wesley says, sweet but gravel.

Delrita giggles. "Can't do me," she says, "cause Angel and me, we're creating ourselves."

His face looks dumb. "Huh?" he asks.

She gives me the eye. I arch my eyebrows in question. Then she picks up my hand and puts it on Wesley's chest and puts hers there too. "Nuff for us all," she growls.

Wesley, he just shakes his head and looks like heaven in his eyes. I shake my head an nod. We both unbutton his shirt and his hands starts rubbing us everywhere, not sure who to kiss, so we both stick our tongue in his ears. Together we undo his pants and pull it all off. I love being dressed in front of a naked man. All that hanging this and bare that, they're small hairy babies.

We three stand up and head for the bedroom. He falls back whole length on Delrita's scarlet bedcover and she opens the curtains and the window for air. Outside the full moon is rising over the back wall of Jackson's Lumber Yard and inside we have our own tall timber to saw down. She kisses Wesley, then grabs my cold damp hand and squeezes it and I feel hard and I am trembling all over. We get naked and climb on top, I think I accidentally mash my knee against his face and I say excuse me and can't remember his name and start giggling instead. He rubs his nose hard and smiles a lot. Delrita is frowning as we sink down and I groan.

We do it this way and then another with him up top, and I never realized that three could make a solid such beast. His Aqua Velva and Delrita's musk and all of our beer and champagne and whiskey are filling our noses. We switch once more and here's Delrita and me on top again in opposite positions, facing each other.

Wesley puts our hands on each other. It's like a current has jolted us both. Delrita shakes her head and I get red, but then she gets interested in my nipple. It's tit for tat so I give the same back. I'm flying away and can tell I'm going to her center. With Wesley beneath her she humps him so hard that his eyes get dazzled and forget everything that he's learned. He's going this way and that, and between Wesley and Delrita I'm getting

so close I think I should die. The three of us, we are one giant. Delrita raises her face and lets out a witch's cackle, loud and high.

She and me reach out some more and touch all over, our eyes glowing and watching the other. We both look down beneath us, hardly knowing what is there, and decide to make him see stars. He's a pretty man, starts grunting and hollering, and Delrita and me, we follow, our hands buried in each other's breast and crotch. And then it's the mountain and sky and over the top, squeaking and shaking, all that hard breathing. Finally we bend forward our heads on the other one's shoulder like sisters both in labor. When we finally look up, Delrita is crying and smiling, what a rodeo, I snap my fingers and yip.

Wesley beneath us flaps his arms and legs like they're fins. "You drowning, boy?" I ask. Delrita laughs. We give him air, and he looks half dead. Delrita leans down and licks him. He quivers once, his eyes still closed. "You sure taste salty!" she says. He smiles and nods weakly and grins, eyelids fluttering. I love the smell of the sea, and Delrita and me--this is the only way we can smell it. We've been swimming with a flapping fish, stroking the warm waters in the sun.

"Look at you all naked," says Delrita. "You big-boobed floozy."

I make a face. "You aren't so bad either, even though your tits are small."

We both get all red. Then she whoops to stop our slaphappy smiles. "And when you screamed! I almost fainted!"

"Hah!" I yell. "You smelly horse!"

"You calling me what?" she yowps. She reaches her long arms out and shoves me off the bed. I jump up and push her. Shrieking and screaming, we chase each other around the room while the fish we just landed lies flat, sleepy and drunk.

Delrita stops and looks down at him drifting off. "I got an idea," she says. "Let's get him dressed and out." So we put on our clothes and stuff his bare parts into pants and shirt and by this time he's waking up enough to ask for another drink. We give him the bottle of Johnny and help him toward the front entrance. "You girls going to clean me up?" he asks.

"Sure, darling," says Delrita. "Here's the bathroom."

"Step careful," I say. "Just go on through it and close it behind you. We'll be right there." He does what we say and we snap the lock shut behind him. We sit down and screech. He starts pounding weakly on the door.



I fall flat laughing. Delrita pulls me up. "The fire escape." We hurry to the kitchen. She grabs two beers and opens them. As we drink she unlatches the window and we climb out to the fire escape. Down past a open window of the Planet Bar and Grill, past all them drinkers and smoke, near to closing time we run, out to the park where its grass. There we sit, singing and laughing and sticking weed stems in our mouth. The moisture in the ground smells like old leaves and soil, and comes up through our pants. But we already are wet. We smell it all, too.

I say, "I never knew--."

We open our mouths, we gasp and giggle, and then we reach out and hold hands. Shy all of a sudden, she turns to me. "Maybe we shouldn't?" she asks.

"Don't worry," I tell her. I scoot real close. Tall and short. Like momma said, though she'd gasp in her grave, opposites do attract. Our daddies would holler if they saw us now and tan our hides. So what. I kiss her face. I say real low, "All this moon, sun, and romance shit with men, it sucks. Let's have us some real fun."

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## REINDEER: A Christmas Story

© 2006, 1985 by Richard Jewell (*Slight editing 1-'23*)

Snowflakes cut against our windshield. The setting sun long ago had left a smudge of wine against the black sky. Gabe, the kids and I were driving north from the city on Christmas Eve to stay with my husband's mother. She lived on her farm alone.

"Marian, are the kids okay back there?" asked Gabe as he drove. In the moonlight he looked like a soft golden bear. He was a teacher of insurance personnel for a large agency in the city, gone many Saturdays and evenings.

"They're okay now," I said. I turned around and checked them again. Their faces were pale, and frowns darkened their brows. Earlier they had been so ready for Grandma's that they had kept trying to burst out of their seats. "Buckle your belts," I had told them, over and over. "Buckle them."

I watched Jessie blow her nose. She was five, feverish, and impatient with the sharp tickle in her throat that wouldn't go away. I had taken her to the doctor several days earlier to check for strep throat.

"Just a persistent flu," he'd said. "Give her a few more days to get better, Marian."

Right during Christmas, I thought. Jessie loved Christmas--the angel lights, fudge melting on her warm tongue, even just the smells of Christmas, the pungent evergreens clearing her nose and making her eyes water, cinammon candles, wood smoke. She'd talk about them endlessly, pulling us here and there to smell and feel, her fingertips almost glowing as she touched things and held them out to us. Her sickness wasn't fair.

I'd stayed home from my shop with Jessie as much as I could. I sold floral arrangements in baskets and wall hangings from my small shop downtown in our suburb each day, loved creating new patterns of leaf, blossom and wicker, loved talking with so many people. But I loved my children more.

In the car, I looked at Jamie sitting straight up in his travel seat. He was three, just awakening this year like Rip Van Winkle in reverse to the full wonder and glory of the season. The most exciting event to him was Santa Claus--he had put two and two together and, so far,

was only getting three. Gabe and I were not about to disillusion him, not yet. Jessie still believed, and she was already five.

Jamie's mouth was almost a constant O as we passed through increasingly snowy fields and forests.

"Is this Santa's land?" he kept asking.

"Sort of," said Gabe, "only Santa lives where it's even more snowy."

"How snowy?"

"That snowy," said Gabe, holding his palm high over his head like a fisherman with a fish story, "and the trees are always green."

Jamie sat back again in his car seat, his mouth working once more into an O.

Jessie sniffled and looked hard out the window at the shifting snow in the moonlight. I looked, too: the road was a narrow aisle of shadowed carpet, with evergreens and pale birches--the elf trees of the North--pressing close to the ditches on either side.

Suddenly a large shape ran just beside and ahead of us in the glare of our headlights.

"Gabe!" I exclaimed.

"Sssh. It's a deer." He slowed down.

"Where?" asked Jessie. She and Jamie leaned forward, their necks arched like the deer's.

Suddenly Gabe braked hard. "No!" he exclaimed.

I grabbed the dash. The deer was in front of us, a tawny ballet dancer with antlers, leaping across our beams of light, its breath steaming from its nostrils. I was sure it had made it, I was sure. But a firm jolt made the car shudder once, and suddenly the arching leap of the deer turned cock-eyed. Its rear end kept flying higher through the air, and it curved up and over into the far ditch, landing on its shoulder in a great explosion of snow.

"No," said Gabe, pulling over to the side, jamming on the emergency brake and lights.

"Is it okay?" asked Jessie.

"I don't know, dear. Gabe?"

"I'll go look."

We sat and waited until finally Gabe came back and climbed in.

The emergency blinkers flashed under his face, giving his skin sharp, cold shadows. He shook his head.

"Is it hurt?" asked Jessie.

"Its neck is broken, Jess. It's dead."

"You mean it's killed?"

Gabe nodded. "I'm sorry, dear."

"Did you kill it?" asked Jamie.

"I couldn't help it," said Gabe. "It just ran across the road."

"Jessie, Jamie, be quiet a moment," I said. "What should we do, Gabe?"

"Leave it," he said. He flicked on the heater switch for the front panel, and he held his hands out to the warm flow as if it was a wood fire. "When we get to Mom's, I'll call the sheriff. He'll know what to do."

"How's the car?" I craned my neck to see the front of the car or even the deer, but neither were visible from my seat.

The front left fender is dented," he said. "We were very lucky. But I shouldn't have slowed down, Marian." He gave me that quick look of a light dimmed. "If I hadn't slowed down, it never would have come up in front of us."

"Don't feel guilty. You just didn't know," I said, and I touched his hand.

We finally arrived at Grandma's at seven p.m., and the farmhouse seemed an oasis of warmth among rolling hills of whispering snow and evergreens. Grandma had rented the farmland to nearby farmers after Grandpa had died. But she stayed in her home, loved it, travelled every day from it to town where she belonged to Women's League, Food Shelf, and everything else. "A woman can't stop moving," she once told me. "Even gray-haired and mean as an old cow like me, they can't stop moving, less they want to die."

We burst through her front door like quail, calling to her and

scattering. Christmas presents filled our arms as we ran into her kitchen.

"Well land's sakes!" she cried, throwing up her arms.

We hugged her mightily and smelled her sugar cookies.

"Kick off your boots," she told us. "Go dig your toes into that new carpet of mine."

While Gabe called the sheriff, the rest of us arranged the presents under her fat Christmas tree. It was a Spruce, blue-green, with needles that tickled rather than hurt. We drank eggnog and hot chocolate beside the tree, and we laughed.

The children hung their stockings on the mantel of Grandma's fireplace--in a real fireplace, you put them on the ends where they won't roast all night, rather than right in the middle like all the picture books show.

For some reason, Jamie refused to hang his. When it was his turn he shook his head.

"Want me to hang it for you?" Grandma asked.

"I'll do it," said Jessie, leaping toward the stocking.

Jamie nodded.

Grandma then held the kids on her lap while Gabe read "The Night Before Christmas," and all of us headed for the kitchen to put out some milk and cookies for Santa.

In the kitchen, Jamie suddenly tugged on the sleeve of Grandma's print dress.

"We don't need to leave cookies," he said. "Santa isn't coming."

"Why of course he is!" said Grandma.

"No." Jamie shook his head. "We ran over his deer. He won't come."

All of us paused. Grandma and I exchanged a glance.

"That's stupid," Jessie suddenly said, blinking quickly. "He'll come anyway. Won't he, Mom?"

"No he won't," said Gabe. "If you ran over Grandma, she wouldn't visit you."

"You're the one that should get run over!" Jessie said.

"Kids!" I exclaimed.

Gabe was standing beside Jessie, and he put his hand gently on her neck.

"Just a minute," said Grandma. She looked at both kids. "If I'm going to get run over, going to get run over, I want to say something about it first." The corners of her eyes crinkled.

The kids, their jaws hard, turned their eyes up to her.

"First off," said Grandma, "if you ran over me, I'd forgive you. It would be an accident. Isn't that right?"

Both of the kids nodded.

"Second," said Grandma, "I've got a little information for you."

She kneeled to the kids' level.

"That deer you hit," she said, "wasn't even one of Santa's."

"It wasn't?" asked Jamie.

"Was it flying?" asked Grandma.

Jamie shook his head vigorously. Jessie thought about it, then also nodded.

"And besides." Grandma waved her hand. "Why, Santa uses a different kind of deer. He uses reindeer."

"Rain deer?" asked Jamie.

"And you know what?" asked Grandma, looking at us all, almost winking at Gabe and me.

We all bent forward.

"Reindeer never die."

"You mean even if they get hit?" asked Jamie.

Grandma nodded.

"Wow," said Jessie, her eyebrows rising.

I let out my breath--another piece of magic, I thought, another web of fairy dust to weave into the story of Santa. And why not, for it was Christmas, a time for myths. This whole night had the feel of some fairy tale which might happen to others, not one's own family or oneself.

"Now you two," said Grandma, taking the kids' hands, "I want you to come in the living room here. I've got a book with pictures of reindeer in it, especially Santa's reindeer. I'll show you what they look like, and I just don't know how your mom and dad forgot to mention reindeer to you."

She looked back at us, and she did wink. "I guess anybody can forget," she told the kids, "just anybody."

The rest of our Christmas week at Grandma's was fine. But when we got ready to drive home on the last day of the year, it was dusk, and a blizzard was on its way. We loaded the car with toys, boxes of new clothes, and leftover candies and goose stuffing.

"You two drive careful," Grandma told us, giving Gabe and me big hugs. Then she bent down to Jamie and Jessie. "I'm going to miss you two," she said, a catch in her voice. "Come give Grandma a big kiss."

Both kids ran into her arms.

Then we were in the car, and we fell into the tightrope dance of driving in snow at night.

The children quickly dropped into a deep sleep while big gobs of snow continued to fall, floating and swirling around us. I curled against Gabe's side as he drank his coffee to stay alert.

I wanted some coffee, too, for my drowsiness. I imagined pulling over to the side to sleep; then I looked up at Gabe and noticed his eyes were watering. Suddenly, suddenly, very much, I felt like the snow was closing in on us.

"Slow down," I said to Gabe, thinking of Grandma. I grabbed Gabe's arm and repeated, "Slow down."

Nodding wearily and slowing, he asked, "How's that?"

"More," I said, "please?"

He lifted his foot off the gas until we seemed to be moving on snowshoes, and we kept driving.

It was then that we heard sirens behind us, whirling and moaning in the night, making Gabe pulled over. An ambulance and a police car hurried past us, their angry red beacons flashing. As we started driving again, the flashing lights paused and hovered somewhere ahead.

We had to stop again when we got to the accident--and accident it was. People in white and others in khaki and blue were running between

two disabled cars.

Our headlights shone brightly on a white station wagon which straddled our side of the road, a station wagon with its front door wide open, and a young woman with eyes closed sat in the driver's seat. She had a spider of blood on her forehead. Her breath steamed from her nostrils as the steering wheel pressed tightly against her chest.

I don't know, suddenly I was in the back seat, I was just there, taking off Jessie's seat belt, pulling my children to me, hugging them, turning their faces into my coat as they slept. I was gasping, wanting them back inside me where it was safe.

When we arrived home a short while later, Gabe and I carried the kids upstairs. While he unpacked the car, I gave them a drink of milk and took them to Jessie's room. She had a spare bed, and I put both kids in her room for this first night home in a week. I tucked them in, and their breath was warm on my hand.

Then I sat on the end of Jamie's bed in the dark, and I stayed as the minutes crept on.

Gabe finally came looking for me and poked his head in.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

Wiping my eyes, I said, "No."

"What is it?" he asked walking quietly to me.

I looked up.

"Oh Gabe," I said. My breath caught in my throat. "The kids. I wish they could be reindeer."

He paused, then sat on the bed. He touched my hair, my face. His hands were full of light. I tucked my head into the crook of his shoulder.

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## Stove: A Prose Poem

*Copyright 1984 by Richard Jewell*

Our house encircles us all, solid, easy, centering us within it. And the black, hard center of the house's spaces, the stove, grazes our flesh and speaks to me with its hidden fire.

Our house once belonged to Old Mr. Brown and after that to a family of alcoholics. Quietly it hid behind four tall evergreen trees (green protection for cool icicle barbs, frozen glances, and frigid blasts from outside). They installed a furnace and stopped lighting the stove, letting it fall into black, iron-jawed, snapped-shut dreams.

When the house became ours, its paint was peeling and its porch leaned around the edges of its World War I screens with holes where birds flew in. We fixed it up, slowly, carefully. We relit the stove. The wood sang. Now the house's secret elegance harbors carefully handwoven rag rugs, hand-lathed wood furniture, and new plaster on foursquare walls where photographs of three generations of us are suspended in perfect moments. At first we couldn't afford a kitchen range, so grains sizzled and their smells spread through the air--hot buttered toast, warm popcorn, oatmeal--all of them cooked on the the top of the old black stove.

Our stove is at the center of our house, and especially at night as everyone else sleeps it radiates words. I stand by it, holding out my hands, and if I listen carefully it crackles with words. "I heat your home," it says. "I soothe your souls. Can you feel my flushing, comforting waves of moonburst on your blazing cheeks? Can you feel my radiant flash that steals through your thick old pajamas and slippers? Hold your shaking hands to the dull glow of my metal. Let me warm you until the peachy light hairs on the backs of your hands curl, until we share the same heat in our bones."

"I am my house," I answer my stove. "I enclose my children, my family, my friends, we enclose each other, we melt into each other's spaces as your heat melts the cold walls and furniture and humans in this house. We are at each other's blazing, soothing centers.

"But too often," I explain to my stove, "we humans appear to each other as cold, icy walls, making each other shiver. Someone talks to me. I talk to him. We go no deeper than tall, stuccoed walls and winter's moisture-laden inner windows."

My stove crackles. "Then," it says, "all you will hear is each other's white blizzard winds curling against the outsides of your walls. I am your heart, your life. Go behind the windows and the walls. They mask me, your stove."

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A slightly different version of this appeared in the January 1995 *Optimistic Times* and was anthologized in the 1995 *Silver Quill*.

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## Valley

Nonfiction. Published in *Gray Matter*, the Anoka Ramsey Comm. College Literary Mag., 1996.

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When I was old enough to safely sit between my father's legs on our tractor, he showed me our pasture in the small valley on our land. On the edge of it, he pointed from the tractor and said, "See the creek down there? I used to go barefoot there. Now it's all covered with bushes." I nestled comfortably on the lap of this gentle, grizzled giant and nodded. "What's that?" I asked him, pointing here and there. "What's that?" We climbed down from the tractor, and he picked some clover. "Smell this," he said. He pulled a bunch of small, tubular tufts out of the heads of purple blossoms and held them out. "Suck on them," he said. "They're sweet." We climbed up again, and as we drove around this rift in the corner of our farm, this mote in God's eye, he kept pointing out parts of his heart, saying, "Look there, look there."

The valley was a long, lush triangle of pasture dotted with trees. It was split down the middle by the creek running from north to south. People never came here, only our cattle and these only in the warm months. Each side was distinct. The base of the triangle was the wide north end. The creek started there, bubbling out of the ground. North of its issue, thick, mysteriously stunted hedge-apple trees grew, their sickly-sweet perfume and torturous, rough limbs shouting silent groans and screams. I imagined these limbs reaching out and grabbing unsuspecting small creatures and children like me when no adults were around. The creek began from the midst of these yelling trees, flowing from the bottom of a three-foot concrete wall. From this concrete mouth, the little silver stream gurgled forth, having been gathered from the circulation system of miles of drainage tiles spread beneath the skin of the northern half of our farm.

On the east side of the creek was pastureland proper. It ran the length of the triangle to the very southern point where two fences met. Through this pasture the cattle walked, creating a deeply grooved dirt path which wandered sometimes near the fence and sometimes near the water. They ate the clover and grass, trimming it to a rough lawn, and swatted their tails at horseflies and at bees gathering honey. Here the valley smelled of dust, cattle dung, and clover. Often a meadowlark balanced itself on one of the fence poles, its orange breast pressed outward proudly, as it sang its sweet, high, song.

Across the creek was the west side of the valley. There wilder grasses grew and the cattle rarely foraged. Hidden in the tall grasses were foot-wrenching rocks and big,

round boulders taller than a small boy's head. Beyond the grass and boulders on the western edge of the triangle, a railroad bed rose like a great gravel and weed wall. If you squinted your eyes as the sun set behind it, the railroad looked like a distant plateau in mountainous country. At the south end, not quite to the final bottom point of the triangle, the creek dipped into a huge culvert with a great, dark mouth that swallowed every last bit of water, air, and greenery. If you stood just outside this mouth and peeked in, you could see, like Alice peering down into the looking glass, another world of strange sky and bushes at the other end. But this looking glass was no fairy tale, or rather the dark side of one. It was filled with green and black algae slime and unnamable creatures, the smells all of overripe greenness, decay, and stagnant mud.

When I was eight, my head was full of stories of Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone, and I was allowed to hike in the valley alone for the first time. My mom wanted to go with me, but I refused: great explorers leave mothers and fathers at home. Reluctantly she outfitted me with a canteen, a sandwich in case I got hungry, a St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap, and a pair of thick-bottomed shoes so nails would not pierce my feet. Feeling like a man, I set forth through the yard of our home, then the barnyard, and next two smaller pastures nearer to the house. Then I reached the beginning of the valley. First I stopped and carefully removed my shoes, my socks, and my canteen, and I hid them in deep grass just outside the gate where my mother wouldn't see them and the cows wouldn't try to eat them. Then, rolling up my pant legs like Tom Sawyer, bravely I stepped forward. The spring breeze grasped at the skin of my bare ankles. I walked carefully around cow pies, even the dry looking ones because their hard, outer crusts sometimes hid soft, slippery innards on which both I and my dad had slipped before. My ankles grew pale yellow from pollen as I waded toward the creek through early growths of bird's-foot trefoil blossoms, their light, wholesome scent rising around me.

The creek in most parts of the pasture ran between two thick walls of weeds and bushes. If you looked carefully, occasionally you could catch a peek of silver-blue glimmer, like mercury in a thermometer. I walked along the bank, not bothering to push through the weeds and into these deep, cold, muddy parts of the creek. Instead I headed for the bend. There the water was shallow and wide, and it barely covered my feet as I waded into the sandy channel. Behind me, right at the bend, the land rose in two cliff shelves, one brief and the other steep. I ran up the first shelf. Then I dared myself to climb to the top of the higher shelf and jump from above: would I break an ankle? Would my body go undiscovered for days? Would it be trampled and eaten by cattle and foxes?

I took several test jumps where the cliff was more shallow, off to the left and the

right. Then I stood again in the center at the highest point. And I jumped. First was a long fall. Heart in mouth, I hit the smaller shelf intact. But my momentum forced me down this smaller shelf, too, and I plopped right into the creek. Glorious!

I turned around and did it again. And again and again. Each time that I landed in the creek, water bugs fled from me like miniature ballerinas skating away on a jewelry box mirror, and the smell of clean mud and sand rose in the air. The cattle heard all this plopping and saw all this jumping and meandered over, wondering where I disappeared to each time I went over the lip of the cliff. Each time as I rose up again, I waved and yelled, startling them back, my arms and legs pumping with joy as I, master of heights and watery depths, prepared to jump again.

When I became eleven, new feelings began to course through me. My question, "What is it," needed more dangerous answers in my valley. Whenever I visited my valley, I began to stare at shadows and looked under crevices more carefully.

"You watch out for snappers," my dad told me once as we sat around the dinner table, discussing our day.

"What's that, a bug?" I asked.

"Snapping turtles. I heard of a kid once, got part of his finger bit off. One of those things gets hold of you with its mouth, it won't let go. Someone has to pry its jaws apart. You can kill it and it'll still hang on. And they've got claws, too. Long, sharp ones."

"You stay away from them if you see them," my mom warned. "I don't want a boy with nine fingers."

"How big do they get?" I asked, wondering if I dared ever go into the creek again. I still hadn't told my parents how I removed my shoes and jumped down the cliff into the water. I didn't think my dad would mind. But Mom would.

My dad held out his hands and made a bowl the size of a serving plate. "I've seen one this big, but that was when I was a boy."

The next time I visited my valley, I armed myself with a long, thick stick that could be mistaken for a lengthy finger and hunted for snappers. For months I carried gloves with me too, figuring I would need gloves to lift the turtle by its shell and withstand its long, sharp claws. I beat the bushes on both sides of the creek, wearing my gloves and leather shoes, but I found nothing. Months later, though, as I was coming into the valley, I saw a big, ugly bundle of mud begin moving. As I walked closer, suddenly it ran

through the dry, snapping weeds and into the creek like a sharp-nosed hermit seeking escape, leaving briefly behind it the scent of a ripe dankness which only a wet, living thing can have. I hunted it for many hours, stick ready for those powerful, secretive jaws, the ripping claws, the murderous intent to clamp onto an enemy and hurt him even in the throes of death. But I could not find the snapper again.

Then I discovered the crawfish, small creatures from some forgotten nightmare. I found them at the mouth of the stream. They lived in the hole in the vertical concrete wall from which the stream issued forth from its drainage tiles all over the northern half of our farm. The water flowed and spread out onto a concrete floor wider than my outstretched arms. Algae grew on the concrete where the water flowed, slippery and smelling of chlorophyll. The crawfish were tiny grey lobsters with big front claws, and they skittered back into their hole if I moved too quickly and scared them.

When I told my parents, my dad was surprised. "Haven't seen crawfish on the farm since I was little. Course I haven't looked for them, either."

"Don't let them pinch you," my mom said.

At first I was afraid of them--could they leap like spiders, sting or bite like bees? But soon I discovered that they were much more scared of me than I of them, and if I moved slowly, they wouldn't notice me.

Sometimes I found them far from home several feet out on the lip of the concrete floor, walking underwater. Then I would hulk like a great rock between them and their hole. They paused, undecided, and I nudged them with twigs, watching them arch menacingly and grab my twig with their claws. I terrorized them gently, having learned when I was younger in my backyard that there was no pleasure in wounding or killing ants. Even so, after several meetings with them, my experiments went awry. They, learning more perhaps than I, had discovered the great superiority of their foe. They stopped fighting back and simply froze. I, the predator, became prey to feeling like a bully. At night in bed, I started seeing crawfish skittering along the edges of my less pleasant dreams, as if they had entered my dreams through a little hole in my head so that they might get even. I stopped playing with them and discovered that they spent most of their time standing motionless like rattlesnakes lying in the sun, hardly moving for hours at a time.

One day my dad told me of something much more. "Got a fox up there," he said. He shook his head. "Saw it crossing through a hole in the north fence."

I thought of stories of Br'er Rabbit. "Don't you like foxes?" I asked.

"The neighbors don't like them. They steal chickens."

I searched for that fox long and hard when I was eight or nine, sitting in perfect stillness on a big, rounded boulder slightly higher than the grasses around it. I sat for ages, eternities, at least an hour. Nothing appeared. When I was a year or two older I chanced upon a hole. It was as deep and dark as the deadest part of my sleep and smelled like deep, damp earth. It curved beyond the long, flexible branch I poked into it fearfully, ready to jump back and run for my life if the angry, wild creature came roiling out, a red, nuclear fury exploding in my face. Again I waited patiently for an hour or two on several occasions, just as I had seen Marlin Perkins do on TV's Wild Kingdom, but no fox came or went.

As I got older, the valley became for me little more than a surface reflection on a creek, the depths of which, I thought, I had outgrown. The valley grew smaller and I began to explore much broader pastures--friends' farms, high school, new towns--where I encountered creatures more complex who, if not always wiser, were far more intelligent. Soon I rarely came to the valley except as a young farmhand, mowing grass and clover, bringing the cows in during fall, or driving by it on a tractor as my dad and I cultivated and harvested in nearby fields. At those times I recalled the hours I had spent there discovering life as a child, wandering in my wonder. And even as I raked or mowed with blackbirds fat on insects walking behind me like drunken sailors, I craned my neck to sight the mythical fox or have one more look at the snapping turtle.

Then one late afternoon, raking dried hay into thick, rolled swaths like the jet streams overhead, working in the hayfield north of the valley, I saw it. In the distance, through clouds of troubled insects, dust, and tiny bits of wind-strewn hay, I thought I saw a small dog or large cat. But then the sun caught its fur, a flash of red. Its body was liquid motion. It held its head high, its eyes watching for prey as it slipped through the fence and into the valley. Here was no night thief but rather a glorious child of forest and field, stepping confidently through a world in which its kind had existed long before we proud humans had come here hunting and breaking soil. It probably had watched the crawfish many more hours than I. It never would see some of the fields of the world that I would, but it would keep finding new creatures and hearing new bird songs until the day it died.

Later that year, bored on a summer evening, I walked down to my valley and there once again gazed at the gaping hole of culvert where the stream left the pasture and plunged beneath the railroad bed. I had never gone through this yawning culvert. When

I was younger, I had feared it. In my early teenage years I had held the dank, slippery slime and the silted mud in high distaste. Now I knew I had to go through it at least one time. As sparrows chirped in the copper evening sunlight, I removed my shoes and socks, rolled up my pants, ducked my head, and delved into the gloom. At first the metal walls of the culvert seemed to draw closer, making my breath shallow and quick and my chest tight. What if a train came and the culvert caved in? What if a rabid animal appeared at one of the openings and attacked me? What if there were crawfish here who had heard about me from upstream, waiting patiently, their lobster claws drawn to avenge their cousins? I shook off these childhood fears and carefully moved forward, waddling forward like a duck as I straddled the cold, slippery stream bed.

Finally the sun grew bright again, the cold clamminess fled before warm air, and I emerged at the other end. I imagined the strange trees and bushes before me could sense my presence, a tall, gangly creature they almost never did see upon an evening, and even rarely by day. In this pasture, too, the stream wandered between its grassy banks. But here the water seemed quieter, the grass and bushes more tame, and the trees shorter and more rounded. I didn't feel like going back through the purgatory of the culvert, so I put on my shoes and socks and walked through the rest of this pasture toward the road. No birds sang. Even the sunlight was thinner and more brittle. I imagined that the two pastures together were the two halves of a giant lying on the ground, and the railroad bed was his backbone. This new pasture was his right side and my valley was his left. And I hoped that whenever my future presented two very different sides of the same being to me, I would take the one filled with creatures and wild trees, still looking for that that turtle, that fox.

The summer before I left for college, I made one more trip to the valley. As the sun sank toward the railroad bed and the cool evening breeze blew on my bare arms, I descended to the creek. No snapping turtle appeared. But in the late summer madness of heat and moisture, the bushes grew riotously in one last, mad gasp of pleasure before they dwindled in fall and died in the winter.

One more time I walked to the mouth of the stream, where waters from miles of underground drainage tiles fed the summer flow. No crawfish danced on the edges of the water, waving their claws to the wind and the birds. But I took off my shoes and socks and went wading one more time on the concrete floor at the stream's mouth. In the breeze was the scent of fresh hay from north of the valley, of nearby purple and yellow clover, of cattle, dust, and grass. Around me spread the arena of the valley.

"What is it?" I asked in my head one more time. And looking for meaning, suddenly



I found it. My valley was a template for the rest of my life. My self was the creek that ran down the center, clear and invisible over its bed and through roots and weeds, shaping the soil and rocks, and what it shaped was my body and the teeming life around me. I would always be looking in shadows and holes, always jumping off cliffs that seemed so tall at first that they challenged the sky. I would always be walking barefoot in the water, only to be stopped momentarily, pierced by the joy of a meadowlark's song. And always inside me, at each step of my life, would be my father's voice, now mine, pointing at each leaf, each rock and flower, and saying, "Look there. Look there."

---

## My Breast

Fiction. Copyright ca. 1994 by R. Jewell

There is no other word so proper as "suckle" to describe what my baby does as she attaches herself to my breast. The S sounds the inhale and exhale of air from both of us as my breast nears. The short U, an "uh," is the sound of her mouth being filled. The K sounds the contact of my breast with the back of the tongue--a sudden stop. And L is removal--the wet, final loss--as the tip of her tongue wets the air, losing contact while sucking past hope.

As she seeks my nipple, which is oozing milk, my nipple swells like a short piece of hemp rope, untying its soft knots and rising out of my flesh to become rigid. Wetly she searches all over with her tongue; then she bumps the short protrusion, tastes it, pulls in the tip of this ridged skin--soft yet rough. Each time she starts, I think how she is seated at her first feasts, her Passover, and a Last Supper, an eternal communion she now receives and someday will give, beginning, middle, and end.

Next she presses her face into the fullness of my entire breast. Large when close, my breast engulfs her eyes, nose, mouth, and lips. Then her lips and throat take over, sucking by instinct--primordial, unconscious memory. In and out goes my nipple like breath, all in all, One. Joy leaps into me as my milk escapes; we two lovers sigh; her mouth dribbles and so, almost, does mine. Other parts of me run, too: ancient Hindu medical manuals claim a nerve runs directly from nipple to womb.

At my breast my baby first learns ecstasy: the slow, sensual triumph of surrender to pleasure leaping through every corner of her small, mortal vessel. Shameless sweet Knowledge pours forth from me into every last crack and hollow of her flesh. Behind the great fleshly hill of my breast, my heart is beating, and beating there on my neck, too, where her tiny fingers pause, curling and uncurling in pleasure. I am a warm giant, and in me a storm of emotions is turning. My child's heart is a second mouth, feeding from my storm--the fierceness of my love, the strength of my arms.

Someday I will push her from this nestling in flesh as she grows older. Full of Oedipal glances at me and at my forbidden parts, her glances stolen and even perhaps lusting, she must withdraw. Alone, angry, increasingly filled with the sour apple and the snake, she will leave love and leave home. My breast will become a symbol.

So she, as most of us do, will pursue Breast under many names: Sex, Cock, Ass, Man; Food, Money, Safety, Power, Pleasure. She will nibble at the edges of many such breasts, strong-voiced, tangy, covered with sweat, hair, or scent. But as she devours them, slowly

she will discover that Breast is not only a mountain or a toy but also a door. Behind it are gnashing emotions, screaming winds of feeling. Other voices wait there for her, too, infant feelings, deepest instincts for good. She will discover these within herself and then begin to share: two souls, two receivings, two thrustings; they will intermingle their fingers in desire for and fear of what they will find. In and out their tongues, nipples, and breath will go, yin and yang, lust and satiety, life and death, Adam and Eve, all in all, all in one.

In touching her husband with her Breast, she shall open herself and him to what is human. Both of them will find the fire in the other and learn to feed it so it grows brighter. Their intercourse will become, as did my husband's and mine in creating her, neither worship nor theft but instead a merging, tides rising and falling, moons waxing and waning, water and salt, moisture and leavening. And someday they shall have a child whom she will feed.

Now, though, my daughter still searches my own breast, cooing the ancient song we learn at our mother's nipple. My husband joins us, holding her in one arm and me in the other. Then all three of us sing as equals, suckling as three in one, into each other and out to the world, children of flesh and of ideas, all of us making love.

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## EARLY POEMS

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"Hero" published in *The Piper*, Monmouth College's Literary Journal, 1970, No. 1

### Hero

Overwhelmed by luxuriant warmth  
                    spreading,  
                    glowing throughout me,  
I come unto You.  
A near distance you are, on your rock,  
the wind whips your robe.  
Your beard is red fire,  
Violently its curly-cue hairs entwine  
As I come closer.  
Beside you now, I look into  
your still, pool-water eyes,  
their ancient depths.  
Touching you, I am overwhelmed by  
Your power.  
My legs quiver Not  
from fear but from joy My heart  
is pounding bursting apart in  
waves of warm energy.  
Such a long time I have waited  
for You.

Published in *Crosscurrents*, St. Cloud State University's Literary Journal, Spring 1985;  
and in *Thin Coyote*, Summer/Autumn 1994 (rights reverted to author)

### Too Late

My first BB gun  
was cool in the summer heat.  
I went toting for sparrows and pigeons  
with this man's farm tool in hand.  
I killed thirty-two sparrows:  
a nickel each.  
But a pigeon was harder--  
I climbed into the barn loft  
and shot her eye out  
off that top beam of wood  
and dropped my gun.

Years later my father said  
as a sergeant he'd shot over enemy heads.

---

Published in *The Piper*, Monmouth College's Literary Journal, 1970, No. 1

### Definitely Home

Letters to Amy  
dove white, head bound.  
Screams uttered quickly John  
is home. Let down by guns  
screaming fire, exploding nights.

Front door charades  
kisses of love  
happily she says  
John I've waited so long  
the child is two now want to see him?

New people, far from the day  
when young ones were chided  
before doing birth/battle.

Glory to those who half win.

Published in *The Piper*, Monmouth College's Literary Journal, 1970, No. 1 (revised 1-23)

### **An Afternoon Silence**

Peace of night, descending,  
of slumbering consciousness quietly awake;  
thoughts, images, feelings,  
these we must forsake  
for better things.  
China dolls are nice  
to look at, to play with,  
but they break  
into ten thousand tiny pieces,  
scattering, like our "I"  
at death.  
Eternal life—that awaits,  
but only after  
we have passed  
through the Night.

---

Published in *Crosscurrents*, St. Cloud State University's Literary Journal, Spring 1985

### **Teacher Laureate**

The cinnamon dresser, tie sidesaddle,  
seven senses blended behind tight lips--  
the flip side of which breathe craft  
--clutches chalk, dreaming of night  
when he writes what his days talk.

Instinctual yogi, star-knitter,  
buttering a flower, diving in a tear,  
marrying white lies in darkest pebbled moonlight--  
your seventh-to-the-seventh self explodes;  
shards of crystal flesh spin,  
then condense, black again, on white paper.

Yet you speak, dry, Right Guardish,  
as the polyester carpet sucks in the pirouetting feelings  
escaping from your fingertips where a fairytale dances,

and from those lips where the Word waits.

Pausing, uneasy,  
 you hesitate;  
 and we fall deep between your cracks with you.

---

Previously published in *ArtWord Quarterly* for one-time rights; revised and published in the Summer 2000 *River Images* for one-time rights.

### Song of the Thames

Like a willow  
 bouncing back,  
 consumed under fallen leaf vines,  
 watery,  
 where the lilies floated,  
 we were river time  
 and spring.

Team boats quickly wafted bubbles,  
 gently traveled, sundering the blue  
 along the tree-lined bank.  
 Oxfordonian afternoon.  
 And the nights  
 when our mirror-smooth fantasy  
 placed a waterfall  
 and an island in the middle  
 of the River.  
 We marveled, and behind us  
 the rushes waved from their field  
 of moonlit vibrations  
 as green as  
 the grass mat below.

That night on the River  
 in the old Babylonian tree,  
 we were monkeys  
 with our passed friendship peanuts,



and clinging to  
a level limb we  
bowed to each other,  
then gibbered  
and almost fell off  
in splendid wonder  
at our being.  
So we went to the dam.  
There sat I,  
Myself, and you.  
Strong night roar  
of the water,  
like a fox I felt it  
thrumming inside me, not thinking,  
just sensing life,  
ecstatic.  
Night of the arch bridge,  
its city street riding  
a strange scenery of lamplights  
mistakenly placed there for men.  
We were men. We didn't need them.  
All we had to do  
was walk a bit down the Thames  
and real river life began.

Award for Best Poem of the Year at Monmouth College, 1970

### Kingfisher's Song

The Word is god and god  
 is the world.  
 Crap! (Down in this gutter way)  
     I SING YOU such a  
 happy song.  
     Lackadaisy  
     lackadaisy  
 Four feet long  
 sings the prick  
 "Fuck me, John, oh"  
 I will \_\_\_\_ you, pretty lady.  
 Shit.  
 Pretty  
 whore song  
 dancin' through my head.  
 I wonder when it'll end  
 this end  
 of the world.

Giant step    take me  
 down to       the Nothing  
 gently weepin' your sorrows  
 not mine       till tomorrow  
 sees dawn.  
 Golden  
 Red  
 oh sing such a cactus-plant symphony  
 where  
 I'm healthy, maybe  
 sing me  
 a song  
     of the wild blue desert;  
 Dance, Man!!  
 sing me  
 your song  
     little notes

playing footsie  
 inspiration rag  
 gas man  
 sing me your  
 Never endin'  
     take it on-off  
 in the back road dark alley  
 red-light woman, Molly  
 goin' down  
 I wish me down  
 luck with 'er  
 she's  
 a whore an' she knows it god  
 when will it end?  
 Give me  
 a home  
 range burnin' carrots  
 an' TV dinners  
 at Stephano's, the local eatery  
 we'll own, Molly an' me, boys  
 when I marry the broad.  
 Rear end like a sack of flour,  
 white but not pure.  
 No one is, in this town.  
 Bell's a-ringin', time to go  
 nowhere to the Salvation Army  
 handout. Food. But first  
 gotta sing crappy songs and  
 listen to that crazy trumpet  
 player he can blow it up his  
 ass goddamned Food's what I want.  
 This town.

Tell me down where I'm going  
 hon  
 This bottle  
 is gettin' mighty heavy yet  
 I can't put it down.  
 Love is so much.  
 Won't part, he and me.

Thunderbird song.  
 Drink I'll be married  
 and drunk I'll stay  
 till the goddamned day  
 I die. Tomorrow.  
 Oh top o' the bottle  
 over you I see  
 Sargeant Shalarky of the 10th Precinct clowns--  
 I see him a-comin'  
 paddy wagon rumblin'  
 down  
 or is it up? draggin' me in,  
 can't stand this,  
 never could.  
 Hey! there's Joe in the tank  
 And the Fibber  
 and Sam Rubbletop  
 Hey King, they say.  
 Good company for  
 a drunk evenin'  
 on the town  
 A toast! Let's  
 sing our songs, friends, of  
 piss and (Jesus Christ,  
 what's he doin'?)  
 God!  
**DON'T CRAP ON ME YOU LOUSY BASTARD!**

Asshole. But  
 I'll be out tomorrow morn.  
 Gotta get straight.  
 Join the AAA.  
 Three years of this  
 (well what d'ya expect when there  
 Ain't No Jobs?)  
 me, I'm going, gone,  
 down. But I'll be up again  
 Someday.  
 Meanwhile,  
 Sing to me John.

(God, the bastard  
 heard me.)  
 Shuddup.  
 Over the head with my shoe.  
 Double whammy on you--it's  
 filled with piss.  
 Ha ha.  
 Oh I am the Kingfisher.  
 I always win,  
 hands  
 down.

---

### **A Night of Television**

I look away from the street woman,  
 her John Wayne swagger with her bottle and bleeding gums;  
 look away from the the doe-eyed wife in the store  
 with her black-and-blue face like dirty street ice;  
 away from the quiet little girl on the bus  
 whose shorts ride above the bruises on her thighs.

We watch their stories on TV,  
 drinking them in like an endless malt,  
 high on their pain.  
 If I were better, I would shout and complain,  
 a whirlwind lashing out through the kingdom.  
 But I, like the others, turn on my TV,  
 video, radio, newspaper, magazine, or book,  
 any dark and endlessly forgiving sea,  
 and sail away.

**Canoeing with You** *(last revised 2023)*

Over the years, canoeing with you,  
 we have learned to measure the width of a river  
 by the distance between the forests ahead,  
 the strength of its current  
 by the silence before whitewater,  
 the depth of the quiet pools  
 by the brightness of sunlight on the bottom.

Just so have we learned to measure our hearts  
 by the distance between their beats,  
 the currents of our conversation,  
 our comfortable silences;  
 and the heat of our nights  
 by the embers beneath the ashes  
 still warm at the beginning of each day.

---

**Death's Last Grasp**

Death is a lust which leaves our bed too soon,  
 whose lips and fingers woo us up the hill,  
 and brings us near the top, but then deserts  
 to drop us like a swollen, burning flower

a love who leaves us with a flowered lust,  
 unclosed, uncomforted, ashamed, in tears.  
 It turns our life into a wasted game,

as if love is a public spectacle,  
 a foolish letting off of steam, a fling,  
 that makes us dazed, embarrassed, and obscene.

Yet I would not leave life without romance,  
 a heady burst of laughter and of touch,  
 a rising tide that swamps all other thoughts  
 and leaves me gasping, mindless, full of joy.  
 These are the memories I'd take with me  
 to play again as I dream in my grave.

### Visit to my Retired Parents

The dry heat of summer in Las Vegas  
 madly dances in the back yard of my parents' home.  
 It bakes our skin and throats  
 and dizzies us until we move  
 like creatures on a broken carousel.  
 In downtown businesses and casinos  
 people are feverishly pitching nickels  
 and dreaming drunken dreams, their souls shadowed  
 as on Plato's cavern walls, by Hades' flames  
 as they utter single, uncommitted syllables,  
 "Hi, Can't, Buy," each word dry, calculated,  
 like a fire purposely set in desert brush,  
 to burn away all but the cactus.  
 At my parents' home we speak  
 like watches with each tick slowed,  
 each second drowned in drowsy wakefulness,  
 one eye on the thermometer  
 while we sip each other's thoughts,  
 in draughts slow, loving, and eternal.

---

### The Loon

The loon at night lifts its haunting cry,  
 a shivering laugh that reflects from the skies.  
 It makes the souls of strangers quake,  
 makes them shiver, old nightmares awake.  
 But we who know the voice of the loon  
 hear moon and stars in each of its songs.  
 It calls us through the wind and the rain  
 to the silvered lake at the moonlight's end.

### Pirouette

My daughter is leaving, last to go.  
 Tides sighing, wind heaving, I hug her goodbye.  
 She was a dancer for many years.  
 Now she pirouettes on lightning  
 and laughs at storms  
 as her eyes reach out to a horizon  
 beyond me.  
 We may never again have such a parting.  
 Unless she comes when life's last breath  
 escapes me, and we say goodbye and cry.  
 Or will I glide, unselfconscious,  
 to the mysteries of the other side  
 as she does now, and kisses me goodbye?

---

### Wings

It is 3 a.m. I cannot sleep.  
 My daughter is late again  
 (twenty-one and home for the summer,  
 she has her freedom; I still do not).  
 On my balcony, from my rise  
 the city spreads, a siren calls,  
 and I wonder what valley of ill will,  
 what briars of accident and greed,  
 might now be grasping at her wings,  
 stopping her long, flapping rise to the sun.  
 The night is still--how many others are awake?  
 And is this just how death will be?  
 Will I forever stand above, sleepless,  
 watching my children in the dangerous world?  
 Or will death be, dreamed or undreamed,  
 a final, darkened peace.



..

### My Oldest Best Friend

Death's last grasp, a cheating maw--  
into which my best friend falls,  
arms at her side, eyes closed, a rictus grin,  
ripping into darkest depths in darkest thoughts--  
taking mind and heart away  
that still could feel the sunset, stir when I  
draw near, grace me with her presence,  
shining face, and wit.  
I hate death,  
that ancient, bitter cheat,  
that fellow who snuck in at night  
to lie in her bed, copulate.  
Nearby I woke from mini-death  
to see the embrace  
shutting organs one by one,  
eating flesh,  
making of her skull  
the image of her hated paramour  
until with rattling breath  
she stuck forever in his yaw  
and I lost the one I know and know, and know,  
and know.

---