A Chapbook of Poetry and Prose

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A CHAPBOOK
OF
POETRY AND PROSE
by Robert Post

Honors Project
November 1977
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You echo into the 1944 fog. Normally you do everything in rows with the others -- shave, exercise, eat, sleep-- but even the Army can't force you to make love in rows, so tonight you walk alone to your rendezvous and listen for another air raid.

You dream of Betty Grable, whistle "Underneath the lamplight..." to the tune your father sang, and look from two blocks away for the lighted window. You know the window will be dark from the blackout curtain, but you look for a sliver of light at its least width, a sign that she is waiting. You remember her parting words: "Knock me up around eight." You'll do your best to comply. In a week, maybe two, you will be on the beaches of France, your memory erased from her mind by the night's wails. How quickly she forgot her fiancé, a flight captain who disappeared over Germany.

Tonight, you will forget your father's warnings. There are no diseases in England, and your father doesn't understand what leads a soldier to the streets or makes a chocolate bar her excuse.

Tomorrow, you will write home. Father forgets that there are no trenches in France, that Paris entertains the Nazis, and that this isn't his war.
A HOLE

I wake to find sunlight falling into a hole in the floor of my room. I watch carefully and see a sparrow, a hawk, and a private plane spiral down the hole like water draining down a sink. I put a throw-rug over it, but the center drops, revealing the hole, black like the pupil of an eye that would dominate a lover's soul. Staring into the dead center, I remember every experience, sensation, and detail I've ever encountered, things I thought had died in the cells of my brain -- the characters from "Leave It To Beaver," the WLS Big 89 for 1968, the phone number on the stall in the Civic Center. And I am freed, relieved of these memories as they drain away. Expecting to see my reflection in the iris-brown border, I move toward it. There is only the expanding, contracting hole that draws me close as a lover.
The Woodland Daisy

the roots
of a long-stemmed
woodland daisy
sort grains of sand
by colors—
   orange
   brown
   tan—
into striped patterns

the stripes are parallel
and the daisy is pleased
at what the roots have done
The Wrapper

the taste of the candy
is faint-

mostly memory
clinging to my finger tips

the wrapper
is useless
yet i pause

before crumpling it.
The Pebble

A pebble grinds at my foot. 
I didn't feel it at first.

From the edge, 
It has worked its way 
to the center of my sole.

I would look foolish 
Sitting in the snow 
Removing my boot, 
So, for now, I must endure it.

I should be able to endure 
Such a small thing.
Daffodil

1.
As a voice
talks of Whitman,
A girl's two fingers
cradle a daffodil.

2.
The paled daffodil
limps from a discarded styrofoam cup
that has been half-filled with water
by the janitor.
I can't read the billboards, 
can only see the crowned-seven 
or the blonde with the cigarette 
looming larger only to disappear, 
and think, 
'What if this door opened? 
would I cartwheel into the next lane 
or would science let me rest? 
Suppose the fat kid 
obody liked 
because he got good grades 
crossed up ahead, 
and in that second, 
I hit the wrong pedal, 
would the car leave 
the pavement and steer 
for that box of cornflakes'
"Go down the hall to the second room and give us a specimen," the nurse said. Her manner made him feel like saluting.

The moment of truth, Klamm thought. Two weeks ago a doctor on the other side of town had given him a physical for a night-watchman job. It had taken him almost half an hour to produce the specimen, and then all he had managed was a trickle. The whole time the doctor had paced the floor outside, footsteps echoing throughout the office complex. "Mr. Klamm, are we finished yet?" Obviously, he had not gotten the job because of his failure to pee on command. The crew cut man with the shoulder-holster had told him at the interview, "We at Burns expect quick-thinking men, men who can act on their feet."

After he had gotten home from that physical, he had met the stare of his father. "Didn't get the job, did ya? I suppose ya think I'm gonna support ya the rest of your life -- well, you got another think comin' You're gonna break your mother's heart when she gets home, ya know? Five interviews and no job! Christ, are you doin' this on purpose?" Klamm hadn't answered his father, and had waited in his room until his father had left for work, a second shift job as a janitor in one of the town's small factories. From his room, Klamm had heard his father rant about the cost of groceries, Klamm's inability to get a job, and his mother's housekeeping. After his father had left, he had eaten in silence with his mother. "Your father really loves you," she had said.

Today he was undergoing a physical paid for by a company that molded sheets of rubber for Detroit auto factories, and to insure against his failure this time, he had drunk glass after glass of water until he could drink no more. Unfortunately, the specimen wasn't first on the list. The nurse had questions to ask. Then he had to sit for twenty minutes, his legs rocking back and forth, trying to hold back the deluge, while the thermometer pointed out of his mouth. The nurse, bustling between the other patients and the jar of thermometers, remembered him only when he tried to show her that his temperature was normal. "Get that
back in there. Five minutes isn't over yet." She'd violently 
shake the thermometer, then hammer it back to the root of 
his tongue.

Klamm had expected a small room, barely big enough for a sink 
and a toilet, a row of calibrated bottles forming a semi-circle 
around the stool. Instead he found a large room — near the door, 
a sink and above the sink, a double-doored cabinet; across the 
room, a padded examination table, a pair of stirrups at one end 
and a strip of plastic across its middle. In the far corner stood 
a drab olive metal table holding several jars of tongue depressors. 
There were no calibrated bottles in sight, only a plastic shot-glass, 
a Nyquil cup, setting on a sink. His body shaking as he tried to 
keep from wetting his pants, he flung open the cabinet doors — 
a gallon jug of wood alcohol; a thermometer thick with rust at 
one end; two tongue depressors, one streaked brown with dried 
blood; a row of five white enameled skulls; two ends of an arrow 
joined by a half-circle of wire; and hanging on a rubber band, a 
plastic shrunken head, long strings of black hair dangling over 
its shriveled-apple face. There were no bottles. The shot glass 
would have to do. He burst into the Nyquil cup, then aimed for the 
center of the sink. Gargling echoed back.

Finished, he checked his fly and headed out the door. Directly 
across the hall was a small room containing toilet and sink. His 
eyes fell on a black plaque, lettered in white, "Rest Room." His 
face warmed as he looked down one end of the hall, then the other. 
The hall empty, he quickly slipped into the room.

Forty-five minutes later, he sat waiting on the examination 
table. Suppose, he thought, that shot-glass wasn't sterile. Either 
the shot-glass or the bottle I poured my specimen into could have 
dirtied my urine. Maybe there was a drop of liquid that I hadn't 
noticed in the bottom. Maybe, wood alcohol.

The urologist would find his urine to be 25 proof, and the 
doctor would report him to the company as an alcoholic. He could 
explain what happened, but he wouldn't get the job, and his father
would yell at him. A dumb-ass is worse than an alcoholic.

Finally, the door opened. "Sorry to keep ya waitin', son," said a tall, graying man clutching a clipboard to his white smock. "Sticky operation. Didn't want to do it in the first place. Just got in this morning from a medical convention and had put this on the door."

The doctor held up a sign that read: "THE PHYSICIAN IS IN, BUT IS HEALING HIMSELF. TAKE TWO ASPIRIN THEN SLIDE THEM UNDER THE DOOR."

The doctor laughed loudly. This guy, thought Klamm, is a real horse's ass. "But what can you do in an emergency? Anyway, complications set in. Might have been the rust on the scalpel. I don't know." He laughed again. Klamm forced a smile.

As the doctor busied himself in the cabinet, Klamm wondered if the urologist's report had come in yet. The doctor emerged, the arrow looking as if it had been shot through his head. He carried the rusty thermometer. At least, thought Klamm, he didn't bring out that headhunter's trophy. I don't think I could stand to look at that again.

"Did the nurse take your temperature?"

"Yeah. She did that before I gave the specimen." Maybe, Klamm thought, he'll tell me what the specimen showed.

"Before the specimen! Hell, she's supposed to do it during."

The doctor reached the thermometer into his back pocket and seemingly from nowhere brought out the shrunken head.

"Ya ever meet Harry? He used ta be an intern, but he objected to my brain transplant experiments." The head shot across the room from his raised arm, then snapped back like a yo-yo. Klamm gagged.

"Ya okay? We'll check your heart now. If you're normal, it should be pumpin' like a nymphomaniac. You been takin' care of yourself? Datin' what ya should, retirin' and risin' early, stayin' away from wild women, wine, and gamblin'?"

"Yeah."
"Sheeet. You're either a liar or you're retarded. You know who really knows how to live it up? We'll take your pulse now."

Klamm wished the doctor would mention the specimen.

"Those black folks. There are a lot of unjustified misconceptions about 'em. But I treat a lot of 'em here, and they're hard workin', fun lovin' folks just like you and me. They just know how to unwind on a Saturday night. They have their own bars, ya know, their own music, their own dance steps. One of my patients invited me out to one of those places. He said, 'Doc you're too much fun to be white. You spend an evening with us, an' you'll never hang back with your doctor friends.' So I took my wife out there. We kinda expected 'em to be rollin' dice and tap-dancing. No dice! Everyone, includin' the bartender, was out on the floor, steppin' high and shakin'. If ya wanted a drink, ya helped yourself and put the money on the bar. I'll be damned if I ain't give up Tuesday night poker and Thursday morning golf just to save energy for Saturday nights. Okay, drop your drawers. Don't be shy. Now turn your head and cough."

The door opened and the nurse appeared. Klamm's face reddened.

"I can come back later as you two are getting acquainted."

"What is it Miss Stonehedge? If this is a social call, pull up a chair. Turn your head, please, and cough."

"Your wife's on the phone."

"Tell her I will be going by the store on my way home, and get her message. Turn your head and cough."

"AUUUOOOOFFFFF. Hey, you wearin' a ring or somethin'?"

"Well aren't we touchy. Oh, I guess I did forget to take it off. Sorry. You can pull 'em back up -- ya got everything, ain't he Miss Stonehedge."

The door slammed.

"Battle-ax. Do her good to get out ta one of those bars I was tellin' ya about."

The doctor took an envelope from the clipboard.

"Well, you take these forms to the hospital. They'll set
you up for back x-rays. As far as I'm concerned, you're fit to work. Oh, I almost forgot. The lab technician knocked your specimen over into the sink, so you'll have to give us another sample."
Cornstalks

1.
Between the rows of last year's cornstalks waiting to be buried the north field looks like a rice paddy.
In the shade of the barn -- hoof-shaped puddles of matted leaves, the plow rusty yet waiting -- my father's greased fingers tune the John Deere. He can already taste sweet August corn -- warm and buttered -- can already hear October's thunder as quail lit by a bootstep explode through the cornstalks before the shotgun does. And realizing he's not alone, he tells me to water the horses.

2.
We kids went polliwogging among the poplars in the waters of December snow we called Sherman's Pond. We rolled up our pants, waded jars for days, and brought home quarts of frog dreams.

By the end of June, we divided to battle with cornstalk rifles and rotten apple grenades for that dried mud, the one spot in that jungle of poplars and mosquitoes clear of brambles.
Years later: dead limbs; cornstalk tinder;  
charred, uprooted stumps  
surrounded by the ashes of Sherman's March;  
one more field cleared.

3.
Slouched in rows  
the last regiment waits to return home,  
faces yellowed into uniforms,  
parched throats that barely manage a nightly campsong,  
an endless campaign story.

I hear sabers rattle  
between me and apple orchard.  
Like some wide-eyed water carrier,  
whose paled hands dare not spill  
for fear of the whip,  
I step back from the smoke of hooves crossing plowed ground.  
A Gatling gun's first couple of coughs:  
the tractor sounds my retreat.
Sunday

Bristling after two days home from the factory and the knowledge that tomorrow he must punch in at 6:58 or lose the farm, Father would sit in his corner chair to skim the classifieds and read out loud about three-point plows, auctions, and used tractors.

When he finished, he'd go out to the shed, re-set mouse traps, hone hoes, then walk between the garden's weedless rows until mother called, "Dinner!"

Sitting at the head of the table, he'd talk about the size of the green tomatoes, keep an eye out the window for that damned hawk that circled the chicken coop, and wish Sunday would never end.
I
The morning after the hay was cut, Grandpa would check to see if it was dry enough to bale. If there had been a heavy dew, he'd spend the morning raking the hay over, hoping it wouldn't mold before it could be baled. Sometimes several days passed before the hay could be baled. When the hay was dry, Grandpa began baling the spiral of cut hay. When the seven outer circles were replaced by bales, randomly dropped by the baler, my uncle would bring the other tractor which he and my dad would take turns driving -- the other loading the wagon. The tractor would take a path so there would be two rows of bales on each side, and my cousins and I -- the oldest and not quite twelve -- would roll bales toward the approaching wagon. Then we'd watch Grandpa across the field -- the bales inching along the baler chute until they fell -- until the wagon was almost past. My dad or uncle would load the wagon, the rows interlocking so the bales could be stacked high without falling.

II
Grandpa's tractor on the inner circle,
an hour's head start,
we roll the bales
until we must lift.
Our prickly-red arms
strain twine.
Uncle lays them neat,
brick rows.
Our bodies provide the only breeze.

When we feed the barn,
they land hard,
the wagon smaller.
Cats scurry through walls of hay.
Cows roll their eyes at flies.

We clink glasses,
mouths ice after the tea is gone.
The barn drifts
through the screen.
No one closes the inner door.
Twenty Years

For twenty years
he has watched dawn
and his curled wife
grow fat across the table.
His glowing eyes have steered him past
the orchards and hayfields of his father's time,
the Bangor Fruit Exchange,
the gray man
who can't spit past his tobacco-stained shoes,
the peeling paint and weedy lawns of ancient resort houses
to the graveled, potholed parking lot.

As the third shift squints to the door,
he marks time
then hoists and lowers
sheet after sheet of rubber
bound for Detroit,
his arms rubbery
black when he stops to squint and smoke at 9:15.

And after twenty years,
his kids in college
and his beer money halved,
his left ball twinges
at the sight of the new office girl,
carrying her clipboard against
a peach blossom blouse,
with a walk from his high school days
when skirts were longer.
He smiles
and forgets his belly,
bloated with beer.
As he wipes his sweat-filled eyes,
he dreams the scent of fresh coffee,
deep blue carpet,
and flowered walls,
and forgets the stench of vending brew,
concrete floors,
and gray chipped walls.
He scratches his chin's shadow,
and she smiles,
her taut blouse worn for him.
Pulling Back

POETRY AND PROSE

BY

ROBERT POST
Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Waldo-Sangren Scholarship Committee of Western Michigan University who made this book possible. Special thanks to my sponsor and critic, Dr. Nancy Cutbirth.

Additional thanks to Norm Kurilik, Ray Jaeger, Dan Ware, and the folks at the Writing Lab for helping in their various ways.
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WAITING FOR D-DAY

You echo into the 1944 fog. Normally you do everything in rows with the others — shave, exercise, eat, sleep — but even the Army can't force you to make love in rows, so tonight you walk alone to your rendezvous and listen for another air raid.

You dream of Betty Grable, whistle "Underneath the lamplight . . ." to the tune your father sang, and look from two blocks away for the lighted window. You know the window will be dark from the blackout curtain, but you look for a sliver of light at its least width, a sign that she is waiting. You remember her parting words: "Knock me up around eight". You'll do your best to comply. In a week, maybe two, you will be on the beaches of France, your memory erased from her mind by the night's wails. How quickly she forgot her fiancé, a flight captain who disappeared over Germany.

Tonight, you will forget your father's warnings. There are no diseases in England, and your father doesn't understand what leads a soldier to the streets or makes a chocolate bar her excuse.

Tomorrow, you will write home. Father forgets that there are no trenches in France, that Paris entertains the Nazis, and that this isn't his war.
A HOLE

I wake to find sunlight falling into a hole in the floor of my room. I watch carefully and see a sparrow, a hawk, and a private plane spiral down the hole like water draining down a sink. I put a throw-rug over it, but the center drops, revealing the hole, black like the pupil of an eye that would dominate a lover’s soul. Staring into the dead center, I remember every experience, sensation, and detail I’ve ever encountered, things I thought had died in the cells of my brain — the characters from “Leave It To Beaver”, the WLS Big 89 for 1968, the phone number on the stall in the Civic Center. And I am freed, relieved of these memories as they drain away. Expecting to see my reflection in the iris-brown border, I move toward it. There is only the expanding, contracting hole that draws me close as a lover.
HIBERNATION

In the deepest drift,
where the plow can’t reach,
my fingers dig
and pull back
in purple gloves
I burrow
as a mole,
my man-made nylon coat
at first stiff then
slicking to my skin
like down
to insulate.
As the snow walls
appear gray,
I forget the stories
of sled dogs
that froze
while digging
for a meal,
any small animal
drifting asleep
for winter.
When my fingers
bring back crescents
of frigid soil
and frosted grass,
I will rest
to awaken
with the earth.
THE WOODLAND DAISY

color —

orange
brown
tan —

into striped patterns

the stripes are parallel
and the daisy is pleased
at what the roots have done
THE WRAPPER

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I didn’t feel it at first.

From the edge,
It has worked its way
To the center of my sole.

I would look foolish
Sitting in the snow
Removing my boot,
So, for now, I must endure it.

I should be able to endure
Such a small thing.
DAFFODIL

1.
As a voice
talks of Whitman,
A girl’s two fingers
cradle a daffodil.

2.
The paled daffodil
limps from a discarded styrofoam cup
that has been half-filled with water
by the janitor.
LAUNDRY

It was eight o'clock on a Saturday morning. Two washing machines shook and whined, sounding almost like a duct fan over a factory spray booth. Overhead, a fly tried to buzz itself through the fluorescent light.

A man sat, legs stretched forward and back slumped, in a straight-backed wooden chair. His hands fingered a Downy bottle resting on his leg. As if watching a movie, he stared at the white cement-block wall.

Yesterday, he had come home from the factory as usual, late and smelling of lacquer, sweat, and beer. On the refrigerator, a magnetic plastic banana held a note that said a lawyer was working on the papers. She gave no reasons for leaving.

"Drink up, Jeremy," he heard himself saying. "No friend of mine's gonna die of thirst."

"I gotta get home, Roy. My wife will flog me for sure."

"You sound like one of them Brownies you're always talkin' about. You know as well as I do she won't hold another drink against you." Change hit the counter. " 'Sides the next round's already been paid for." They both laughed.

"Well, all right. But I'll pay for the next one."

"If it makes ya feel good, why not? Ya know, it's a man's right to relax after his eight hours in the shop, and a woman shouldn't have no complaints 'bout what her husband does providin' he puts meat and bread on the table."

"Yeah. My wife doesn't seem to understand that. She sees that check every Friday and thinks we should bank every cent for appliances that it'll take a year to buy."

"Mine too. But she's practical, wants a TV."

"Roy, you really think I'm a Brownie?"

"Course not. Your nose is as clean as mine. You go to all the union meetings, wouldn't give a foreman or a sub foreman the time of day. I won't be surprised if you were elected Steward next time."
“Well, you said . . . .”
“Hey, I just meant you were worrying about nothin’. If she don’t like your drinkin’ after work, she can lump it, take out the garbage and dump it.”
They laughed wildly.
“Hey, how 'bout two more beers over here.”

He found himself dialing the phone, his fingers slipping out before the digit was completed, so he’d have to start at the beginning again. Finally, the number was completed, and in the eternity between the rapid clicking of the dial and the last brrring inside the receiver, he remembered waking from after-supper naps he never intended to take and seeing her looking at him over the top of a novel. Then he’d always ask if she needed any help with the dishes. She’d always answer in a strange, faraway voice, “They’re done.” And she’d go back to her library book. After staring at the side of her face and comparing her to his memory of how she had looked in other situations, he’d go back to sleep.

When his mother-in-law answered, he demanded, “Where the hell’s my wife?”
“She’s not here, and even if she was, you’re the last person she’d speak to.”
“Where is she then? Everything seemed fine this . . . .”
The other end clicked silent, and all he could hear was his heart racing.

Every fight they had ever had became one, the dialogue becoming a monologue of her voice, soft at first, growing loud and shrill.

“I’m sorry, but we had meatloaf left over from last night. I married you ’cause I love you, not for the lousy money that factory pays you. Do I do anything that pleases you. With the amount you drink, if you gave up beer for a month, we could buy a TV.”

Why should she mind, he thought, my stopping by MacDuff’s Tavern? He didn’t throw his money away on bowling like some of the guys at work did, and he looked forward during the day to a
cold beer or two. Facing the three walls of the gray metal spray booth, the back of another booth behind him, he’d sit all day on a piano stool as the line creaked and wheezed one skid after another to him. He’d spray the cabinets in a four part motion — up, across, back, and down — the sounds of the shop around him: the overhead motors of fans, that kept the men from suffocating on the fumes of lacquer and acetone, and the heaters, that kept the summer humidity from turning the lacquer white; the signal bells that called a foreman or a subforeman to the office; and the hiss of compressors. As he waited the minute or so it took a skid to position itself in the booth, he watched the flys that threatened to stick to the freshly lacquered cabinets. When he spotted a fly, a whiff from his spray gun would catch it in flight. The fly would drop, and when it had recovered from the fall, blind and unable to fly, it would hobble in a circle until it died.

As he stirred the cold spaghetti and waited for the pot to heat up, he remembered the crunch of snow from their trudging feet returning from a movie, the thud-whisk-thud of windshield wipers, the sea sounds from passing cars on wet pavement. Snowflakes exploded into water on his glasses. She laughed at the droplets of sleet on his beard, took two skip-steps then arched her arms into a circle over her head as if she was a ballerina.

“You look just like the Ghost of Christmas Future.”

His cheeks flushed. “Who the hell’s that?”

“That was one of the characters in that movie we watched last week at Sears, remember? You kept pretending to look at appliances, so I could watch it, remember?”

“Honey, do ya have to bring that up? We’ll get a TV in time. I promise.”

“Silly, I’m not complaining. It was sweet of you to go to all that trouble.”

She laughed and moved closer, and he pulled her like a glass of beer to his mouth.
When the smell of spaghetti rose up in steam to his nose, he lifted the pot with his bare hands. He held it only a second before it dropped to the floor, sauce covered strands clinging to his flannel shirt and jeans. "Damn the Dagoes," he yelled as he rushed his hands to sink.

He didn't know just when the machines had stopped. He felt a dull pain in his upper chest and lower throat that felt like someone had been sitting on him.

I can live without her, he thought as he reached into the washer and pulled out a tangled mass of bluejeans and underwear that had never been blue before.
SOME NIGHTS

Some nights we stood
sharing shadows on a plank bridge,
watching goldfish by moonlight,
and counting stars reflected in the stream

Some nights I recall
winter’s first snowflakes,
stars in your hair.
We gave up our walks to the bridge
and lay watching
the red and blue stars
in the window evergreen
You’d pull me around you
like a blanket
or a snail’s shell.

Some nights sound like your breathing.
Thinking that you’ll return,
I throw back the blankets
and stare at the starless ceiling.
I have stumbled
past blocks of houses,
windows black as spent neon,
my head throbbing
to the rhythm of my steps.
My tongue,
thick as a crusty sock,
can’t remember the words
of the wine song.

Tonight every house
is lit
and I am light
on my feet,
a wisp of smoke
with no need
of a flame.
With every street lamp
a lovers’ moon,
I’m a drinking friend
for every stray
that rubs his
furry muzzle
in my face.
There are no words
for the wine song.
FREEWAY

I can’t read the billboards,
can only see the crowned-seven
or the blonde with the cigarette
looming larger only to disappear,
and think,
‘what if this door opened?
would I cartwheel into the next lane
or would science let me rest?
Suppose the fat kid
nobody liked
because he got good grades
crossed up ahead,
and in that second,
I hit the wrong pedal,
would the car leave
the pavement and steer
for that box of cornflakes?’
THE PHYSICAL

"Go down the hall to the second room and give us a specimen," the nurse said. Her manner made him feel like saluting.

The moment of truth, Klamm thought. Two weeks ago a doctor on the other side of town had given him a physical for a night watchman job. It had taken him almost half an hour to produce the specimen, and then all he had managed was a trickle. The whole time the doctor had paced the floor outside, footsteps echoing throughout the office complex. "Mr. Klamm, are we finished yet?" Obviously, he had not gotten the job because of his failure to pee on command. The crew cut man with the shoulder-holster had told him at the interview, "We at Burns expect quick-thinking men, men who can act on their feet."

After he had gotten home from that physical, he had met the stare of his father. "Didn't get the job, did ya? I suppose ya think I'm gonna support ya the rest of your life—well, you got another think comin'. You're gonna break your mother's heart when she gets home, ya know? Five interviews and no job! Christ, are you doin' this on purpose?" Klamm hadn't answered his father, and had waited in his room until his father left for work, a second shift job as a janitor in one of the town's small factories. From his room, Klamm had heard his father rant about the cost of groceries, Klamm's inability to get a job, and his mother's housekeeping. After his father had left, he had eaten in silence with his mother. "Your father really loves you," she had said.

Today he was undergoing a physical paid for by a company that molded sheets of rubber for Detroit auto factories, and to insure against his failure this time, he had drunk glass after glass of water until he could drink no more. Unfortunately, the specimen wasn't first on the list. The nurse had questions to ask. Then he had to sit for twenty minutes, his legs rocking back and forth, trying to hold back the deluge, while the thermometer pointed out of his mouth. The nurse, bustling between the other patients and the jar of thermometers, remembered him only when he tried to
show her that his temperature was normal. “Get that back in there. Five minutes isn’t over yet.” She’d violently shake the thermometer, then hammer it back to the root of his tongue.

Klamm had expected a small room, barely big enough for a sink and a toilet, a row of calibrated bottles forming a semi-circle around the stool. Instead he found a large room — near the door, a sink and above the sink, a double-doored cabinet; across the room, a padded examination table, a pair of stirrups at one end and a strip of plastic across its middle. In the far corner stood a drab olive metal table holding several jars of tongue depressors. There were no calibrated bottles in sight, only a plastic shot-glass, a Nyquil cup, sitting on a sink. His body shaking as he tried to keep from wetting his pants, he flung open the cabinet doors — a gallon jug of wood alcohol; a thermometer thick with rust at one end; two tongue depressors, one streaked brown with dried blood; a row of five white-enamed skulls; two ends of an arrow joined by a half-circle of wire; and hanging on a rubber band, a plastic shrunken head, long strings of black hair dangling over its shriveled-apple face. There were no bottles. The shot glass would have to do. He burst into the Nyquil cup, then aimed for the center of the sink. Gargling echoed back.

Finished, he checked his fly and headed out the door. Directly across the hall was a small room containing toilet and sink. His eyes fell on the black plaque lettered in white “Rest Room.” His face warmed as he looked down one end of the hall, then the other. The hall empty, he quickly slipped into the room.

Forty-five minutes later, he sat waiting on the examination table. Suppose, he thought, that shot-glass wasn’t sterile. Either the shot-glass or the bottle I poured my specimen into could have dirtied my urine. Maybe there was a drop of liquid that I hadn’t noticed in the bottom. Maybe, wood alcohol.

The urologist would find his urine to be 25 proof, and the doctor would report him to the company as an alcoholic. He could explain what happened, but he wouldn’t get the job, and his father would yell at him. A dumb-ass is worse than an alcoholic.
Finally, the door opened. “Sorry to keep ya waitin’, Son,” said a tall, graying man clutching a clipboard to his white smock. “Sticky operation. Didn’t want to do it in the first place. Just got in this morning from a medical convention and had put this on the door.”

The doctor held up a sign that read: “THE PHYSICIAN IS IN, BUT IS HEALING HIMSELF. TAKE TWO ASPIRIN, THEN SLIDE THEM UNDER THE DOOR.”

The doctor laughed loudly. This guy, thought Klamm, is a real horse’s ass. “But what can you do in an emergency? Anyway, complications set in. Might have been the rust on the scalpel. I don’t know.” He laughed again. Klamm forced a smile.

As the doctor busied himself in the cabinet, Klamm wondered if the urologist’s report had come in yet. The doctor emerged, the arrow looking as if it had been shot through his head. He carried the rusty thermometer. At least, thought Klamm, he didn’t bring out that headhunter’s trophy. I don’t think I could stand to look at that again.

“Did the nurse take your temperature?”

“Yeah. She did that before I gave the specimen.” Maybe, Klamm thought, he’ll tell me what the specimen showed.

“Before the specimen! Hell, she’s supposed to do it during.”

The doctor reached the thermometer into his back pocket and seemingly from nowhere brought out the shrunken head.

“Ya ever meet Harry? He used ta be an intern, but he objected to my brain transplant experiments.” The head shot across the room from his raised arm, then snapped back like a yo-yo. Klamm gagged.

“Ya okay? We’ll check your heart now. If you’re normal, it should be pumpin’ like a nymphomaniac. You been takin’ care of yourself? Eatin’ what ya should, retirin’ and risin’ early, stayin’ away from wild women, wine, and gamblin’?”

“Yeah.”

“Sheeet. You’re either a liar or you’re retarded. You know who really knows how to live it up? We’ll take your pulse now.”

Klamm wished the doctor would mention the specimen.
"Those black folks. There are a lot of unjustified misconceptions about 'em. But I treat a lot of 'em here, and they're hard workin', fun lovin' folks just like you and me. They just know how to unwind on a Saturday night. They have their own bars, ya know, their own music, their own dance steps. One of my patients invited me out to one of those places. He said, 'Doc, you're too much fun to be white. You spend an evening with us, an' you'll never hang back with your doctor friends. So I took my wife out there. We kinda expected 'em to be rollin' dice and tap-dancing. No dice! Everyone, includin' the bartender, was out on the floor, steppin' high and shakin'. If ya wanted a drink, ya helped yourself and put the money on the bar. I'll be damned if I ain't give up Tuesday night poker and Thursday morning golf just to save energy for Saturday nights. Okay, Drop your drawers. Don't be shy. Now turn your head and cough.'"

The door opened and the nurse appeared. Klamm's face reddened.

"I can come back later as long as you two are getting acquainted."

"What is it Miss Stonehedge? If this is a social call, pull up a chair. Turn your head, please, and cough."

"Your wife's on the phone."

"Tell her I will be going by the store on my way home, and get her message. Turn your head and cough."

"AUUUUOOOFFFFF. Hey, you wearing a ring or somethin'?"

"Well, aren't we touchy. Oh, I guess I did forget to take it off. Sorry, You can pull 'em back up — ya got everything, ain't he, Miss Stonehedge?"

The door slammed.

"Battle-ax. Do her good to get out to one of those bars I was tellin' ya about."

The doctor took an envelope from the clipboard.

"Well, you take these forms to the hospital. They'll set you up for back x-rays. As far as I'm concerned, you're fit to work. Oh, I almost forgot. The lab technician knocked your specimen over into the sink, so you'll have to give us another sample."
CORNSTALKS

1. Between the rows of last year's cornstalks waiting to be buried the north field looks like a rice paddy. In the shade of the barn — hoof-shaped puddles of matted leaves, the plow rusty yet waiting — my father's greased fingers tune the John Deere. He can already taste sweet August corn — warm and buttered — can already hear October's thunder as quail lit by a bootstep explode through the cornstalks before the shotgun does. And realizing he's not alone, he tells me to water the horses.

2. We kids went polliwogging among the poplars in the waters of December snow we called Sherman's Pond. We rolled up our pants, waded jars for days, and brought home quarts of frog dreams.

By the end of June, we divided to battle with cornstalk rifles and rotten apple grenades for that dried mud, the one spot in that jungle of poplars and mosquitoes clear of brambles.

19
Years Later: dead limbs; cornstalk tinder; charred, uprooted stumps surrounded by the ashes of Sherman’s March; one more field cleared

3
Slouched in rows the last regiment waits to return home, faces yellowed into uniforms, parched throats that barely manage a nightly campsong, an endless campaign story.

I hear sabers rattle between me and apple orchard Like some wide-eyed water carrier, whose paled hands dare not spill for fear of the whip, I step back from the smoke of hooves crossing plowed ground. A Gatling gun’s first couple of coughs: the tractor sounds my retreat.
Bristling after two days home from the factory
and the knowledge that tomorrow
he must punch in at 6:58
or lose the farm,
Father would sit in his corner chair
to skim the classifieds
and read out loud about three-point plows,
auctions, and used tractors.

When he finished,
he’d go out to the shed,
re-set mouse traps, hone hoes,
then walk between the garden’s weedless rows
until mother called, “Dinner!”

Sitting at the head of the table,
he’d talk about the size of the green tomatoes,
keep an eye out the window for that damned hawk
that circled the chicken coop,
and wish Sunday would never end.
HAYING

I
The morning after the hay was cut, Grandpa would check to see if it was dry enough to bale. If there had been a heavy dew, he'd spend the morning raking the hay over, hoping it wouldn't mold before it could be baled. Sometimes several days passed before the hay could be baled. When the hay was dry, Grandpa began baling the spiral of cut hay. When the seven outer circles were replaced by bales, randomly dropped by the baler, my uncle would bring the other tractor which he and my dad would take turns driving — the other loading the wagon. The tractor would take a path so there would be two rows of bales on each side, and my cousins and I — the oldest and not quite twelve — would roll bales toward the approaching wagon. Then we'd watch Grandpa across the field — the bales inching along the baler chute until they fell — until the wagon was almost past. My dad or uncle would load the wagon, the rows interlocking so the bales could be stacked high without falling.

II
Grandpa's tractor on the inner circle,
an hour's head start,
we roll the bales
until we must lift
Our prickly-red arms
strain twine.
Uncle lays them neat,
brick rows.
Our bodies provide the only breeze
When we feed the barn,
they land hard,
the wagon smaller.
Cats scurry through walls of hay.
Cows roll their eyes at flies.

We clink glasses,
mouthe ice after the tea is gone.
The barn drifts
through the screen.
No one closes the inner door.
FENCE BUILDING

Kids steal apples as easily as I
drive this post-hole digger
into the ground
and pull it back
Their hands pull back the reddest ones
that shine in the dew when the sky
rests like a chapped hand on a branch

So tamp that dirt tight
Pretend those apples are yours,
the saplings planted by your grandfather
as your father looked up at the twig tops
You have walked here before breakfast,
shotgun in hand to scare the blackbirds,
your pants dark to the knees with dew
You think: “Tomorrow I should bring the mower,
the weeds having grown tall between the trees’’
Your eyes follow one more startled Redwing
across the sky, and there in the tree top —
branches balanced beneath him —
his red woolen pockets bulging,
he reaches an inch beyond his grasp
and stares over a shoulder at you
before he drops like an apple,
to bruise darker

Stolen apples taste better than fallen —
tangier like cider stored over winter —
but limbs bend even under a ten-year old’s weight.
WATER FOR THE PONY

1
Grass blades shiver from boot-darkened snow,
a single path to the barn.

As the pail fills,
I breathe ice,
and the wind wildly pulls
at my hood
to novocain my face.

Beyond a row of frosted birches
bowed over their shadows,
alalfa waits
bedded in white,
a new bride;
the orchard
an army of bent dwarfs
carrying a carpet.

Gauze clouds bring a memory of the storm.

2
Inside the barn,
my breath as white as the pony’s,
I listen to the wind he takes for granted,
and as I scoop the spelts, I wonder:
Does a pony’s food get stale?

Numb fingers fumble to bolt the door
then clench the empty pail.
Swaying ahead,
the house is just beyond the wind.
TWENTY YEARS

For twenty years
he has watched dawn
and his curled wife
grow fat across the table
His glowing eyes have steered him past
the orchards and hayfields of his father's time,
the Bangor Fruit Exchange,
the gray man
who can't spit past his tobacco-stained shoes,
the peeling paint and weedy lawns of ancient resort houses
to the graveled, potholed parking lot.

As the third shift squints to the door,
he marks time
then hoists and lowers
sheet after sheet of rubber
bound for Detroit,
his arms rubbery
black when he stops to squint and smoke at 9:15

And after twenty years,
his kids in college
and his beer money halved,
his left ball twinges
at the sight of the new office girl,
carrying her clipboard against
a peach blossom blouse,
with a walk from his high school days
when skirts were longer.
He smiles
and forgets his belly,
bloated with beer.
As he wipes his sweat-filled eyes, 
he dreams the scent of fresh coffee, 
deep blue carpet, 
and flowered walls, 
and forgets the stench of vending brew, 
concrete floors, 
and gray chipped walls. 
He scratches his chin's shadow, 
and she smiles, 
her taut blouse worn for him.