

# New Mexico Quarterly

---

Volume 22 | Issue 3

Article 8

---

1952

## The Symptoms

John A. Lynch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Lynch, John A.. "The Symptoms." *New Mexico Quarterly* 22, 3 (1952). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol22/iss3/8>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

*John A. Lynch*

## THE SYMPTOMS

**M**R. GIRARD began correcting his papers at nine-thirty. Earlier, he had read awhile, something from a magazine which he could no longer remember, and for a short time a piece that Professor Moore had left with him. He sat at his desk now, shuffling the papers abstractedly, marking here and there. Before him stood a dozen books in a row, arranged by height and held at the ends by glass tumblers filled with pennies. He looked up from the papers and read aloud the titles of two of the books. Then he looked beyond the books, out the window, and, where the lights from other rooms shone, he could see misshapen figures on the elm trees.

His curtains were of monk's cloth. Girard had hung them the day he had moved in, three months ago, after Professor Holmes had died and they had cleared away his things and sent them on to his relatives in Ottawa. Holmes's room faced away from the university, out past the elms to open fields, and Girard had moved in right away, carrying his books in armfuls across the campus. Finally he brought the curtains. He had taken them down with one last apprehensive look at the view he had lived with for thirteen years, the campus grounds in their ring of yellow-brick facades, and between the buildings the pattern of white, crisscrossing sidewalks.

The sidewalks had obsessed Girard. At first he had thought them only an occupational hazard, something to be endured. That had been in his fifth year at the university, when he had already become too settled in his position and had lost the initiative to move on.

Another year, however, and he had begun to study the particular arrangement of the sidewalks, had found it almost impossible to stay away from his window. Concentrating, he had tried to

THE SYMPTOMS

305

think what it was the sidewalks resembled, what it was he had forgotten. He could think of nothing.

With pencil and paper, he had estimated the number of steps from one crosswalk to another, the number of feet, multiplied the numbers, added them, estimated the angles of intersection. But, as far as he could determine, aside from their functional pattern, the crisscrossing sidewalks stood for nothing at all.

He had considered himself in relation to others of his profession. Nothing again. He taught the same students, read the same books, ate the same food, and, for that matter, shared the same view as a dozen other teachers in the building, all of whom he knew quite well.

It was two years later that, irritated and for want of a better solution, he had bought the monk's cloth and drawn it completely across the window glass, to shut out the sidewalk pattern forever. Within six months, however, as if by some extraneous design, the pattern had begun to attach itself to other things. It was by no means constant, but from time to time, when he least expected it, the pattern had recurred. He saw it in the geometric figures of light and shadow in the hallway, in crossed pencils lying on a desk, in the angle of an open casement window.

Now, four years later, as he sat at the desk in Professor Holmes's room, Girard was seeing the pattern in the trees outside his window. Girard looked back at his papers and shuffled them loosely. He felt very tired. It was already ten-fifteen and he had hardly begun his work. He could see that only a few papers bore the marks of his pencil, and looking at the papers now he could not remember whose they were or what it was he might have marked.

Taking up his pencil, he drew a figure eight on one of the papers and shaded it in, holding his pencil at a low angle. He did it carefully, shading precisely to the limits of the figure. He made a broad elliptical figure and shaded it in also. He was about to make a third figure when he realized that someone was knocking at his door.

He laid the pencil down quickly and attempted to gather the papers into a neat pile, but he found his fingers moving clumsily. Then, suddenly aware of the figures he had drawn, he took up the pencil and tried to erase them. Instead, he succeeded only in making smudges on the paper.

Girard got up from his chair slowly, seeing the papers loosely piled on the desk, the row of books, and, beyond the curtain-framed windows, the elm trees. He moved to the door, half expecting anyone or anything, half expecting that there was no one there at all.

But a student was outside, and when Girard had opened the door, he remembered somewhat guiltily that the boy had asked that morning to see him.

"Hello, Mr. Girard," the boy said. "It isn't too late, is it?"

Girard stood still a minute, then said, "Not a bit." He closed the door and indicated a leather reclining chair for the boy; but the boy refused it momentarily and remained standing. Girard crossed the room to his desk and sat down, turning his chair around to face his visitor. "Not a bit," he repeated.

"May I smoke?" the boy asked, still standing.

"Of course." Girard himself did not smoke, but he kept an ash tray handy. He pointed toward his bookshelves and said, "You'll find an ash tray on top there, somewhere. Sit down."

The boy smoked in silence for a minute. Girard turned to his desk and collected the papers there. The one with the smudged figures he quickly slipped into the middle of the pile. Then, holding the papers in his lap, he began going through them.

"It's not about my work," the boy began.

"Oh?" Girard put the bundle of papers back on his desk. "I thought it might have to do with something here." He was beginning to feel cordial, even glad that the boy had come, just at this time.

"You haven't noticed, have you?" the boy said. "You haven't noticed anything?"

THE SYMPTOMS

307

Girard stared at him. "No, I must admit, I haven't." Then he reached to his desk and tipped the lamp so it showed full on the boy's face. Very slightly he said, "Nervousness, maybe."

The boy put out his cigarette and crossed one leg upon the other. He said nothing.

"Is this why you wanted to see me?" Girard asked.

"Yes, sir." The boy was lighting another cigarette now, holding the match in his fingers until it went out.

"Your work has been fine," Girard said.

"It isn't that," the boy said. "It's that sometimes I doubt if I'll be able to make the next paper, or the next class, or the next anything." He spoke suddenly, directly to Girard. "It's that everything seems to pile up inside me and I can't get loose and that something will have to give. I thought if I could talk with you, you might understand. It has nothing to do with my marks at all. Just that you might understand."

Girard didn't answer. He had let the lamp settle into its usual position, throwing a ring of light no farther than the desk and beyond that putting things in shadow. He got up and switched on the ceiling light. "I'm not sure that I do," he said.

The boy looked up at Girard. "Did you ever have something that kept coming back to you and bothering you? Something you really didn't want to think about?" He stopped and waited, but, Girard looked away from him. "It's hard even to write a letter sometimes," the boy said.

Girard walked to the bookshelves and began fingering the bindings along the top row of books. The top of the case bore a thin layer of dust, and he saw in it an octagonal spot where the ash tray had been. With his fingers he obliterated the edges of the design until it was no longer there.

"There were nine of us," the boy said, "and I never saw any of them again." Girard stopped, his hand on top the case; he turned slowly to look at the boy. But the boy was no longer looking at him, he was staring at the floor.

"We were all inside this barn at night and that's all I remember except that in the morning when I woke up they were gone and I was alone. No one ever saw them again. We never knew what happened to them. Not one of them."

Girard followed the bookshelves along the wall. He fingered the bindings with no intention of looking at the books, merely to be doing something. Below, outside his window, he saw a light go off suddenly.

"Did this actually happen?" he asked the boy.

"Yes, sir. In Germany."

"It still comes back?"

"Yes, sir."

"Often?"

"Yes, sir."

"You didn't just imagine it?"

"No, sir."

"It's a very definite thing then, isn't it?" Girard said, coming back to his desk.

"I'm all mixed up."

"I mean there's no doubt in your mind as to what bothers you. It's definite in that way. You really know what it is."

"I'm not sure. I've thought about it a lot, but I'm not sure. I know and then I don't know. Sometimes I get terribly depressed when I don't know."

Girard had sat down. He took the papers from his desk and turned them over, holding the thick bundle in his lap. With a pencil he began to draw a barn on the top sheet. The boy had said there was a barn. He drew a crude barn with a door in one end and no windows.

"I get depressed," the boy said. He was smoking his third cigarette now.

Girard drew a window in the barn.

"If I could find out what really happened to them," the boy said. "There doesn't seem to be any way, though."

THE SYMPTOMS

309

Beside the barn Girard drew the figure of a man. The boy was talking steadily now, and Girard looked up from time to time, trying to make the face on the paper resemble that of the boy. But he could not draw well and it looked like no one in particular.

"I suppose that's the crux of the thing," Girard said, answering the boy. "The *why*, that must be the crux." He continued drawing on the paper. Above the barn he drew a cloud, for no reason at all. Then he drew a star, for the boy had said it was night.

"I expect something to happen," the boy said. "I don't know what. But it's waiting for something, perhaps waiting to see them again, or to know what really happened to them. But I don't suppose I'll ever find out. And if I don't find out, I suppose I'll never be rid of this thing. I don't like to think of the time I'll spend waiting."

"It's a very definite thing, though," Girard said.

The boy did not answer, but went on puffing on his cigarette. Then he put it out and took the ash tray back to the top of the bookcase.

"The very fact that it is definite is in your favor," said Girard. "At least you have something you can put your teeth into. Imagine if you had nothing to go on."

Girard waited for a response but none came. "It's such a simple thing, really, isn't it?" Again he waited. Then with the pencil he began to shade in the cloud he had drawn. "You have a definite picture that keeps recurring. And you know that it recurs because it was quite a shock to you at the time. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I suppose," the boy said. "But knowing it can't make me forget it. Even if I knew all about it, I don't think I could forget."

Girard looked up from his papers. "But you know something. What if you knew nothing? What if you *didn't* know what was at the bottom of it? What if you had the symptoms, but had nothing at all to go on?"

The boy was silent for a while, then, as if he had not heard Girard, he said, "You're older. I thought you might understand."

Girard said nothing, but he returned the papers to his desk. He handled them for some time, straightening the edges.

"It's after twelve," the boy said. "I ought to go." Girard heard the leather chair squeak, and when he turned around, the boy was standing.

Girard stood up too. "I wish I could do something for you," he said. "If at any time in your work. . . ."

"No," the boy said, "I don't want to ask that."

They went to the door, and Girard stood there listening to the boy's footsteps as he walked down the corridor. He heard him approach the stairway and start down, but when the boy reached the floor below, Girard could no longer distinguish his steps.

Girard closed the door. He tried to think of the boy and of what the boy had told him, but his thoughts wandered. He recollected instead that he had been in Holmes's room three months now. He stood still in the room, listening, and he could hear his own breathing. Outside it was darker now, with most of the lights turned off. Only his own seemed to be shining. Girard walked toward the window, hearing his every step plainly.

As he stepped in front of the glass, his shadow fell hugely on the trees outside. Girard moved away, and the huge shadow moved with him. Reaching up, he drew the curtains together quickly, cutting off the shadow and the trees. Then he stood a minute, waiting, listening for a sound from somewhere that never came.

His papers lay in a neat pile on the desk, but when he returned to correct them he could not think of what he was doing. On the top paper he saw the barn he had drawn, and with his pencil he traced over its outline, the peak, the door, the window. He traced the cloud he had drawn above the barn, he traced the star. He traced over the figure of the boy he had drawn. And then, because he really couldn't help himself, he began to draw, further down, running to the edges of the paper, a pattern of dark, crisscrossing lines.