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The Pilgrims

BY WILLIAM PEDEN

THEO awakened painfully, Penrod's tongue rough on his bare arm. His head ached from too many drinks and the sleeping pill Lee-Anna had given him a few hours before, and his nose and throat were dry. During the night he had slipped from his accustomed propped-up sleeping position, and the intricate maze of his sinuses seemed permanently blocked. He fumbled among the rumpled bedding for his decongestant nasal mist inhalant; after a moment of irritation he retrieved the oblong container and then gratefully inserted the tip into one nostril, and squeezed. A slow loosening, he knew, would soon take place. Grudgingly, reluctantly, the interior fretwork of canals and viaducts would expand, and he could breathe again.

Now Penrod was licking his face with fiercely affectionate sloshings, and Theo groaned and turned over on the sofa-bed and tried to hide his face. But the lemon-hued burlap—very big that spring, Lee-Anna had cried triumphantly while she was making the slipcover, very camp—scratched his cheeks, so he turned again and placed one shaky hand on Penrod's woolly, misshapen head. I feared that we might regret this act of kindness, he thought, recalling slowly the blurred events of the past evening. Such a dog! Horatio, an admirer of Somerset Maugham, had suggested that they name him Philip Carey, after they discovered that one of the dog's hind paws was deformed, but he and Lee-Anna had immediately scotched *that idea*. And the bantie? What had they finally decided to name it? Octavio Paz? James Baldwin? Roderick Random? No, that had been Horatio's idea, too. He and Lee-Anna had voted *that down*. And then compromised. Usher, that was it. Roderick Usher.

"Lee-Anna," he called softly. "Lee-Anna, Ray."

He lay very still and waited. The inhalant was beginning to take effect. Sunlight was slowly penetrating the dark caves in his skull. He explored the rough contours of Penrod's head, gently inserted a finger

into one hairy ear, traced the masses of corkscrew curls which fringed the bony eye sockets, and finally placed his hand into the friendly mouth.

He's ugly, Theo thought, but really rather sweet. So gentle and so happy last night when we rescued him from the Kiwanians. With difficulty he opened one eye but closed it quickly at the sight of the hobgoblin head a few inches from his own. What a monster, he thought, a ragtag and bobtail if there ever was one, a curly-haired, taffy-colored fleabag of beggar's lice, cockleburs, and milkweed seeds.

"What asses the Kiwanians were last night," he cried aloud. "Lee-Ann, Ray, the Kiwanians are asses!"

Delighted at the sound of life going on around him, Penrod sprang clumsily to the bed, and again Theo tried to bury his face in the covers. He's sweet but oh so *gauche*, he thought, and *country*, too; if a dog could have hayseed in his ears, Penrod would. Who but the Kiwanians would have the temerity to palm off such a dog as a door prize? Penrod and that scrawny little bantam rooster?

At the recollection he sat upright.

"Lee-Anna, Ray," he called. "Are you awake? Where is the bantie? Where, in the name of Heaven, is the young cock, Roderick?"

For several moments he lay motionless, listening for the familiar voices. Apart from the quiet ebb and flow of what seemed to be ditch-water between his ears, and the huff-chuff-huff of Penrod's breathing, the small house was quiet, uncomfortably so. Could they be dead, he mused, Lee-Anna and her poet-husband Horatio? Of ptomaine poisoning, perhaps? Quite possible. He played with the idea the way he sometimes entertained his Life and Literature students with explications of the Baconian theory, comments on Baudelaire's use of drugs, or analyses of the friendship between Beaumont and Fletcher. The salami, he recalled painfully, his stomach turning, had looked green at the time, and who but the Kiwanians would serve ham hocks at a buffet? We should never have gone to their party, he thought.

"It never pays for town and gown to fraternize," he announced loudly.

Penrod again placed his great paws on the edge of the sofa-bed and noisily began to lick Theo's forehead. The rough tongue has become a dentist's drill, Theo thought. Soon he will be tearing the skin. In a few minutes the scalp will be exposed. It will unpeel, like the layers of an onion, revealing all the terrible inner workings, all the pulsing pink—or are they gray?—lobes, and all the hideous hills and valleys.

"Lee-Anna," he called again, more feebly. Could she and Horatio have been murdered in their sleep? Ever since Capote's account of the Clutter murders in the *New Yorker*, one could never be sure of anything. And in a faculty housing compound particularly. Some surly physicist could easily run amok, enraged at Horatio's penchant for midnight guitar playing or Lee-Anna's fondness for tight stretchpants, staggeringly high heels, and exposed midriff. Or a marauding freshman from Remedial English, maddened at having recently received a mid-term deficiency. More than possible, Theo reflected. Indeed, quite as likely as not. But not a bad way to go, actually, when you come right down to it. Or perhaps Lee-Anna had simply died in her sleep. It would serve her right, in a way. After all, it was she who had insisted that they go to the buffet. Just because her employer was a Kiwanian. . . . She didn't have to accept the invitation to the bloody buffet. Or, having accepted, to insist that Horatio and he accompany her. And what a stupid, tacky thing to do. At midnight, to raffle off a dog. And a bantam rooster!

Again he opened his eyes and squinted painfully at the massive, curl-encrusted head. None of the Kiwanians, of course, would accept the dog, or the rooster either, for that matter. The bantie? Where was it? He had a confused recollection that Roderick had been perched upon his head when they finally left the hotel. A dour and bedraggled devil, but Lee-Anna had insisted. And how the bird stank! Like all the chickenhouses of Boone, Howard, and Calloway counties combined. Probably would give all of them histoplasmosis. But he had been cute, though, perched aloft that way.

A sentimentalist at heart, Lee-Anna had insisted that they take the unwanted pair home with them. We simply must, she had exclaimed when none of the Kiwanians would accept them as doorprizes. We simply must, she had repeated in a whiskey-high voice, we simply must! And so they had finally staggered out of the Daniel Boone Hotel, Lee-Anna and Horatio supporting the half-fainting Penrod and he, Theo, with Roderick Usher precariously clinging to his head.

I can still feel those toenails, Theo thought. And that *smell!* It was cute, though, the way he took to me. But where, in the name of Heaven, is he?

He explored the end of the bed with his toes, and searched beneath the flimsy blanket with which Lee-Anna had tucked him in—you must not go back to your apartment tonight, Theo, she had said, must he, lamb-a-baum?—and finally pushed Penrod away and leaned over the

bed to examine the floor. The effort was costly. His head felt like an overripe melon and he was gagging in the sudden rise of bile to his throat.

"Lee-Anna!" he called again. "Horatio! Water, for the love of God, water!"

In the silence he waited with growing impatience.

"They flee from me that sometime did me seek."

He spoke the words testily. They must be dead or ill, he thought, and reached over and ran his hand over Penrod's touseled head. Ah, well, I have the dog. He will not desert me. And Roderick Usher, too, I trust. They, my friends of the air and the land, will stay by me, even though my human companions have defected. I was fond of Ray and Lee-Anna, too. But I can do without them. I would have gone through fire and water for Lee-Anna, though.

"Preferably water, however," he announced aloud, and straightened out his bony legs. I shall die here myself in all likelihood, he reflected. Here in Hell's Half Acre, in this miserable crackerbox of a house for instructors-without-tenure. Exhausted at the idea, he closed his eyes and crossed his hands upon his chest, and listened to Penrod's labored pantings beneath the bed. Images of Landseer paintings of great faithful dogs keeping midnight vigil at their masters' graves flitted through his mind, and a crooked smile briefly illuminated his somber features. What a truly great dog Penrod is, he thought. So full of affection, so grateful to have found a home at last. He reached again for the mass of curls beneath the bed. If I too must die, what better way to go? No more freshman themes to grade, no more seminars to take, no language requirements, no doctoral dissertation to write. I shall die here with my friends. Here with commitment. Commitment and love. I shall close my eyes and await the end. . . .

A groan from the bedroom on the other side of the thin wall interrupted his reveries. He struggled painfully to a sitting position while Penrod, alarmed, squirmed from beneath the daybed.

"Lee-Anna," he whispered. "Ray. Is it really you?"

A second groan followed by a paroxysm of coughing confirmed his hopes.

"Oh, praise God, they are both alive. You have survived. Bless you, bless you both!"

He gazed fondly at Penrod. The dog had turned over on his back, hind legs sprawled apart, front paws wildly waving as though stirring an imaginary bowl of egg whites.

"Up, boy, up!" Theo grasped one shaggy paw and squeezed it. "Up, I say! All's well with the world, sir. All's well with the world!"

"WHAT A CURSE," Theo lamented two hours and three Bloody Marys later. "To have a chicken fall in love with you. Really! Don't misunderstand me," he added to Lee-Anna who lay on the rumpled bed, her blonde, short-cropped head in his lap. "I appreciate Roderick's judgment and discrimination."

He gestured with his thumb at the bantam who was perched on his shoulder, its moulting body against Theo's neck, its ravaged head close to his cheek. Gingerly Theo touched the rooster's spongy, drooping comb with his forefinger, and the cock immediately rose on saffron-colored toes, flapped one scrawny wing, threw back its head and uttered a strange and terrible cry.

"You see?" Theo sighed and reached for the Bloody Mary which was precariously balanced on Lee-Anna's naked midriff. "That banshee cry. It's getting me down, baby. If only he'd be quiet for a few minutes. Like Penrod." He pointed to the deformed hind foot protruding from beneath the day-bed.

"I'm not sure that I can stand it much longer. And that hot barnyard smell!" Theo shuddered, and took a long swallow of the highly seasoned tomato juice and vodka. "To say nothing of that piercing, ancient-mariner-type eye. It's really beginning to bug me."

He reached down and patted Lee-Anna's head, running his fingers lightly through her soft, dry curls. She was proud of her hair, and spent a lot of money on it, coming up each season with a different colored rinse, and on expensive wigs which Horatio could not afford; they change my personality, she would say, just as Gumbrell, Jr., changed his personality when he donned his beaver. She was a great admirer of the early Huxley novels; there has been no comic spirit in English fiction since Huxley finished *Point Counterpoint*, she would insist after she had had a few drinks and the conversation had become literary.

"How is old Ray making out?" Theo glanced in the direction of the bathroom.

"He's still violently ill, I'm afraid. He's been vomiting every few minutes." Lee-Anna arched her carefully plucked eyebrows and looked at Roderick who had fallen asleep on Theo's shoulder. "Ever since he had to clean out the back seat of the car. Really, Theo, you should not have left him there all night. It really was awful. Smelly feathers



everywhere. And all the, uh," she grimaced and patted her lips with her long, tapering fingers, "you know. I never realized chickens could make such a mess. It was really awful. Ray was as white as a sheet when he came in."

"Mess!" Theo cried, putting down his empty glass with such vehemence that Penrod retreated further beneath the daybed. "Who knows about that better than I? You have to expect that, with chickens. The folks had chickens, back in West Plains. I hated chickens. Besides, honey babe," his voice became less heated, "as I recall, it was your idea to bring him home with us."

Gently he untied the bow at the nape of Lee-Anna's neck and slipped the mauve and cinnamon halter from her plump shoulders.

"You'd be surprised how much a chicken eats and evacuates," he explained. "Back home we had a colored man to take care of them, but even with that I could do without them. Greedy things," he chuckled at the dozing bantam, at the same time making a clucking noise with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. The rooster awakened and gazed fondly at Theo before rising on prehensile yellow toes and throwing back his head; again the room reverberated with the hideous cry.

"It's not really the mess, though," he continued, idly watching his fingers in their dainty exploration of Lee-Anna's slightly rounded belly. "Or even the smell, for that matter. It's just that he's so . . . so damned affectionate. If he just wouldn't want to stay so close to me."

He placed one hand, fingers outstretched, around Roderick's arched breast, but the bird shuddered and clamped his toes tightly on the bony ridge of Theo's shoulder.

"You see? Don't ever let a chicken fall in love with you." He stroked Lee-Anna's closed eyelids with his fingertips. "I'm afraid, dear heart, that Roderick is expendable."

"So nice," she whispered, and stirred slightly. "So nice."

"But it's the eyes more than anything else that really get to me."

He withdrew his hand and pointed at Roderick who had again laid his reptilian head against Theo's cheek and seemed to be peering intently into his left eye. With a sudden impatient upward thrust of his hand Theo swept the bantam from its perch and placed him, squawking and wildly fluttering his good wing, on the inverted v-shaped hollow at the base of Lee-Anna's throat. Penrod, alarmed at Lee-Anna's sudden squeal and the quick upward thrust of her body, scrambled from beneath the sofa-bed and barked hysterically as Lee-Anna tossed

Roderick high in the air. The cock descended slowly, with loud cries and frantic flappings, to land, like a sky-diver miraculously falling into a mountain of foam rubber, on the massed curls of Penrod's back. In one swift action the dog swung his head, jaws snapping, missing the screaming rooster by a fraction of an inch.

Lee-Anna leaped from the sofa-bed. "Bad dog," she cried. Roderick had fluttered to the floor where he lay in a heap of feathers, one leg extended grotesquely, the yellow toes rigid.

"Brutal creature!" Theo added, and aimed an angry barefooted kick at Penrod. Tail between his legs and massive head lowered, the dog limped hastily from the room and with a sorrowful groan collapsed on the kitchen floor.

"What in God's name is going on in there?" Horatio's voice, from the bedroom, was feeble and querulous, sounding as though it had been filtered through miles of contaminated water.

"Nothing, lamb-a-baum," Lee-Anna replied quickly. "It's just Roderick and Penrod. That's all." She leaned over and cupped the rooster in both hands; it gazed at her silently, and stretched out one leg, then the other, before experimentally flapping his good wing. Lee-Anna placed Roderick on the floor gently and clapped her hands in delight as the cock rose unsteadily to his feet, lifted his head, and crowed feebly.

"Good boy, Roderick!" Theo's voice was jubilant as he raised the bantam to his shoulder, shuddering only slightly as the fowl again laid his head against his cheek.

"That was a mean thing to do, Theo," Lee-Anna said, rubbing her throat. "Why did you do that, Theo?"

She was interrupted by the sound of Horatio's footsteps, quickening as he approached the bathroom. The door slammed; they both pretended to ignore the gagging sounds behind it. Finally, in the ensuing quiet, the door opened slowly and Horatio, eyes half closed, felt his way warily into the living room. He squinted at them nearsightedly, swaying slightly, tall and naked except for a too-large pair of seer-sucker shorts which had slipped down to expose the painfully bony angularities of his hips. Except for his flushed and mottled face, curiously aged for a man in his middle twenties and beaded with drops of perspiration, his skin was as white as milk.

He looked at Lee-Anna and Theo without speaking, moving his lips silently.

"How are you, poor baby?" Lee-Anna, who had deftly rearranged

her halter as the sounds of flushing had gurgled away in the bathroom, slipped her arm through the crook of one of Horatio's elbows and firmly steered him to the sofa.

"Lie down, lamb-a-baum," she said, and stroked his caved-in appearing temples with deft fingertips.

Again Horatio's lips moved.

"I came like water, and like wind I go," he said weakly, and closed his eyes.

"Why don't you go mix us all some more Bloody Marys, Theo? And be sure to put lots of Worcestershire in them. You know that lamb-a-baum likes plenty of Worcestershire."

"It will be my pleasure," Theo said as he walked into the tiny kitchen. Penrod, who had retreated beneath the table, lifted his head and groaned uneasily before limping wearily from the kitchen.

"He flees from me," Theo thought as he poured vodka and tomato juice into a large pitcher. "I who loved him, I who have done him no harm." He mixed the drinks expertly, shaking in the Worcestershire only after he had blended salt, pepper, and lemon juice with the vodka and tomato juice, and returned to the living room. Ray still lay motionless on the sofa-bed, one pale blue-veined hand resting on Penrod's eyeless-appearing head, while Lee-Anna continued to massage his temples. Theo placed the tray on the coffee-table, poured the scarlet drinks into ice-filled glasses, and sat down on the sofa beside Lee-Anna. Penrod stirred uneasily and turned his face from Theo; he snuggled closer to the sofa and placed one great paw on his new master's frail shoulder.

"Well, let's drink to joy," Theo said after a pause.

"To joy," Lee-Anna replied, and touched the rim of her glass against his.

They waited for a response from Horatio, but the poet remained motionless except for his slow exploration of Penrod's head.

"To joy," Theo repeated, more loudly.

Ray made no answer, but his fingers tightened on his glass. Theo frowned at the recumbent figure on the sofa.

"To joy, dammit," he repeated, and took a swallow of his Bloody Mary before setting the glass on the table so abruptly that the blood-like liquid spilled over the rim and trickled slowly down the sides. "What's bugging you, old boy?" he asked after the silence had become uncomfortable.

"Please, lamb-a-baum." Lee Anna's voice was as gentle as spring

rain. "Don't be sullen, Horatio, please. You know how it upsets me when you're sullen."

The poet continued to gaze at the ceiling before removing Lee-Anna's hand from his forehead. Slowly he raised his glass to his pale lips. He opened his mouth with difficulty, and then drank greedily, his large Adam's apple bobbing like a kite on a windy day. When he had drained the glass he again closed his eyes and sighed heavily. Without opening his eyes or turning his head, he extended the empty glass in Theo's direction.

"More," he said, and again sighed a long, asthmatic sigh.

After glancing at Lee-Anna, Theo refilled Horatio's glass and extended it towards the large bony hand which enveloped it in a lover's embrace. Again Horatio drank thirstily and competently before returning the emptied glass to the coffee table. Except for Penrod's labored breathing and the occasional rustling of Roderick's feathers as he twitched uneasily on Theo's shoulder, the room was quiet. In the silence, Theo reached out and patted Lee-Anna's shoulder.

"More," Horatio muttered, extending his hand toward the coffee table. His glass partially refilled, he struggled to a half-sitting position and gazed at Lee-Anna.

"My guitar," he commanded.

"Oh come off it, Ray," Theo said; "don't order Lee-Anna around that way."

"You hush," Lee-Anna said, and smiled at Horatio who continued to stare at the wall a few inches above her head. "Of course, dear heart."

She rose gracefully, automatically pulling up the straps of her halter, and took the instrument from the litter of books, dog-eared magazines, a collapsed bagpipe, and a pair of rusting ice skates in one corner of the room. She placed the instrument in her husband's outstretched arms. Head cocked quizzically to one side like a robin listening for worms, he struck a few preliminary chords.

"Ugh," he said, and frowned. His right-hand fingers fluttered up and down the offending strings; very carefully he turned the keys.

"I have composed a song," he said, finally satisfied. Exhausted, he carefully placed the instrument at the side of the sofa and fell back upon the rumpled bedding.

"Do sing it, dear heart." Lee-Anna clapped her hands and drained her glass.

"Very good," Theo cried. "Capital! Capital!"

Horatio stared at him coldly for several moments before struggling to a sitting position. Breathing heavily he retrieved the guitar, and gazed into space.

"It's called 'Bulge at the Belly, Nelly'," he announced. He lifted his head, plucked the strings, and began to sing in a good but very shaky tenor.

*When I was a little girl
My mother said to me
Come and sit beside me, Nell,
And harken to my plea.
Beware of men who flatter you
And stroke you so fondly,
Or*

The poet's voice quavered and broke, and he glanced imperiously towards the pitcher of Bloody Marys. Lee-Anna poured a short drink into her own emptied glass and held it to Horatio's lips. After a long sip and a mirthless smile, he resumed.

*Or
You'll bulge at the belly, Nelly,
Bulge conspicuously.*

He closed his eyes and caressed the guitar.

*Yes, you'll bulge at the belly, Nelly,
Bulge irrevocably.*

He placed the guitar carefully on the floor and lapsed into silence.

"That's very good, Ray! Very fine indeed!" Theo walked to Horatio and patted his shoulder. "Really first-rate, old boy."

Horatio raised himself on one shaky elbow. He stared at Theo blankly.

"Go to hell," he said in a flat, metallic voice, and closed his eyes, and fell back. Roderick, suddenly awakened, uttered a hoarse cry, and the alarmed Penrod retreated once again beneath the bed, only his stub tail and deformed paw visible.

"Horatio!" Lee-Anna leaped to her feet, upsetting her depleted Bloody Mary. "What an ugly way to talk!"

"You're damned right," added Theo. "I don't know what's eating you. Don't start *that* stuff again, Ray!"

Horatio ignored him and squinted at Lee-Anna.

"You have too much makeup on," he said. He put his hands over his eyes and addressed the ceiling. "Why do you insist on going around looking like a small town B-girl?" He sighed heavily and turned his back to them.

"Knock it off, Ray," Theo said. He turned to Lee-Anna and patted her shoulder. "That's a stupid way to talk, Ray, I must say."

"Yes," Lee-Anna added from the depths of the maize slingchair to which she had retired. "Don't be defensive, darling. You know how you upset me when you're defensive."

"Okay, okay," Horatio said, continuing to address the ceiling. His voice was low, devoid of tone. "Just don't bug me, that's all."

"Knock it off, Ray," Theo said again. He raised a clenched fist in the air, but his voice was gentle. "Tell us a story, or sing or something. Let's not be ugly."

"Well," Ray began. He reached out his hand, fingers outstretched as though searching for the right words. "I recently had a dream."

Theo's clenched fist slowly opened. He lowered his arm, walked to the sofa slowly, and sat down beside the poet. He turned towards Lee-Anna and beckoned. She rose unsteadily, wiping the corners of her eyes, and sat down beside Theo, who put one arm around her shoulders and stroked her gently.

"Poor baby. Tell us." She reached out and placed her hand in Horatio's.

"Well," he continued, with a visible effort to control the shaking in his voice, but suddenly his face crumpled. He rose unsteadily and staggered into the bathroom. When he returned several minutes later, his face was gray and sweat covered his high, bony forehead. Lee-Anna wiped his brow with Kleenex, and she and Theo half-led, half-carried him to the bedroom.

"Rest, lamb-a-baum," she crooned. "Hush, hush, hush. Forget the dream, poor baby, and rest."

She pulled the sheet to his chin, patted his forehead once again, and together she and Theo tiptoed from the room. Theo bowed slightly toward the closed door and crossed his hands over his chest.

"Surely," he quoted, "I think the wild beasts fear your white bones/
Even though you lie there dying, brave Horatio!/Your valor great
Pelion know, and mighty Ossa,/ And the wind-swept lonely ways of
high Kithairon."

"I REALLY FEEL uncomfortably like Judas Iscariot," Theo confided to Lee-Anna as they slowly descended the rickety steps. "It is awful to betray my luv," he grimaced and pointed to Roderick who was clinging to his shoulder. As the morning had waned, the bantam's condition had deteriorated. His once fierce eyes were glazed, his drooping feathers had become even more bedraggled and were flaked with what appeared to be an incurable case of dandruff.

"Poor Roderick," Lee-Anna said. "Somehow he knows that we have decided to get rid of him. But don't fret, Theo," she added hastily, alarmed at the sudden frown which darkened his face. "You, certainly, are not solely responsible. This is a group action! Unanimous!"

Beneath her more than usually heavy makeup her heart-shaped face, dramatic beneath an ash-colored shoulder-length wig, was flushed with drink and excitement. She wore her best pale yellow jersey which accentuated her small breasts—you look like a daffodil, Theo had said, a regular Robert Herrick type daffo-down-dilly—and walked daintily on dizzily high spikes, her neat little buttocks beneath the avocado-hued stretchpants soaring and dipping like a pair of swallows in flight.

"Yes," Theo agreed readily, his face lightening. "It is for the best. We will find a home for the foundling, where he will make friends of his own, where he can scream at dusk amidst his fellows, and even, perhaps, eventually find himself a mate."

"Besides," groaned Horatio, somewhat refreshed from his recent nap but shockingly pallid, "this action has been forced upon us."

He paused, breathing heavily, and set down the styrofoam ice chest. Penrod, limping behind him, sat down awkwardly and rested his shapeless muzzle at Horatio's feet. The poet's long face suddenly wrinkled, grew unbearably tense, and he threw back his balding head and sneezed.

"I have always been allergic to chicken feathers."

"True," Theo acquiesced. He reached toward his shoulder and stroked the bantam's beak. Roderick struggled to rise, and crowed weakly. "In all the excitement last night, we betrayed you, Ray. Forgive our thoughtlessness. As a matter of fact," he added, "it just occurs to me that birds or fowl of any sort are not permitted in faculty housing. So," he concluded, beaming, "none of us is guilty. Come! Come, good friends, it is time for us to depart."

He strode to the car and held the door gallantly for Lee-Anna before assisting Horatio who had momentarily disappeared behind the car. "All passion spent," the poet muttered as he sank upon the bumpy

rear seat. Theo half-pushed, half-lifted, the limp body of Penrod who lay panting on the floor, too exhausted to do more than lick Horatio's sandalled feet. With a wave of his hand, Theo climbed in beside Lee-Anna who eased the old tired Valiant out of the gravelled driveway and onto the chuckholed road, carefully avoiding the litter of shabby tricycles, dented sand pails, and a sled left over from the late April snow of the preceding month.

"Up, up, and away!" Theo cried, as they drove slowly from the compound to the winding blacktop road which led to Highway 63 where rolling bottom lands stretched fat and fallow along the banks of the Missouri River. "And now, dear friends, it will soon be time to wet our jolly whistles."

He fumbled for the styrofoam chest which he had carefully stocked with limes, lemons, cracked ice, dry soda, and light rum.

"Who's for Terrible Theo's special version of fishhouse punch?" he chuckled, his spirits rising as the blueish dome of the Administration Building receded in the distance.

"Where's the chest, little sweetie?" He patted Lee-Anna's rounded knee fondly.

"It was here a little bit ago," she answered, and leaned from the window to wave gaily at a small boy on a bicycle. "Children shouldn't ride bikes on the highway," she added absently. "Dangerous."

"Where? What's that?" asked Theo with an edge of irritation in his voice.

"They shouldn't ride bikes on the highway."

"What's that got to do with the chest, honey babe?"

"The chest? What chest?"

"The chest with the mixin's. What chest did you think I meant?"

"Oh, the chest. Isn't it in the back with Ray?"

He turned around awkwardly, dislodging Roderick who tumbled to the seat between them. He glared at Ray who had fallen asleep, one bony hand resting on Penrod's head.

"Where's the chest, Ray?"

He shook Horatio's shoulder, pushing Penrod's head aside as the dog swung his shaggy head in his direction. The poet opened his eyes slowly, muttered "the cave with no exit," and again closed his eyes.

"Oh, God in Heaven," Theo cried, carefully scanning the back seat and floor. "The idiot has forgotten the ice chest! Stop the car, Lee-Anna."

As the Valiant lurched to a stop, Horatio opened his eyes.

"Can't you all be quiet?" His voice was high and querulous. "Can't you see I'm trying to sleep? And keep your hands off Lee-Anna, Theo."

"That's a hell of a way to talk, Ray. Get with it, man, where is the chest? In the name of Heaven, what have you done with it?"

"Isn't it up there with you?"

Again Theo searched the front seat.

"No, it isn't here. Good God!"

"Perhaps you put it in the trunk, lamb-a-baum." Lee-Anna's voice was conciliatory.

"Why don't you check it out, Ray?"

"I'm far too weak to check it out, Theo. Far too weak. Why don't you check it out yourself?" Horatio closed his eyes and snuggled close to Penrod who had struggled from the floor to the seat. "I know," he added in a sepulchral voice, "I expect I left it back at the house."

"That just about tears it," Theo growled. "Let's call the whole thing off. The day's just about ruined, as far as I'm concerned. And stop that damned snuffling, Penrod!"

"You are both impossible!" Lee-Anna folded her arms on the steering wheel, and placed her head in the crook of them, and wept. Penrod raised his head and uttered a low, dismal howl.

"Shut up, Penrod!" Theo leaned over the back of the seat and shook a menacing finger. "Be quiet, sir!"

"Don't tell my dog to shut up, Theo! I suggest you be quiet yourself." Horatio slowly sank back into the inexpensive pillows which Lee-Anna had artfully arranged to cover the worn spots in the upholstery.

Lee-Anna straightened up and frowned at Theo and then at Horatio.

"You are both awful," she said, and fumbled in her straw and leather shoulder bag. She withdrew a small linen handkerchief, dabbed at the corners of her eyes, and switched on the ignition and slowly eased the car back onto the highway. They drove in silence, the atmosphere heavy with tension and gloom. Penrod lay motionless except for occasional spasmodic twitchings of his bad leg and the flicker of an ear, coffee-dark against the oat-colored curls of his head, and Roderick made no effort to return to his sanctuary on Theo's shoulder but lay grotesquely on the seat beside Lee-Anna.

"Honey babe," Theo said gently after several minutes had passed. "I'm sorry, honey babe."

She did not answer, but stared straight ahead, rigidly confined within an iron maiden of unhappiness. He tentatively patted her thigh, but she made no response but continued to drive slowly along the

curving road, oblivious of the clumps of pale green poplars and the gaunt outcroppings of limestone, and the rolling bottomlands which stretched lushly down to the river. He withdrew his hand and grimly lighted a cigarette.

"Oh, Theo," she spoke suddenly, and pulled off the road and turned off the engine. Without speaking she turned to him and put her arms around his neck and kissed him on the mouth, oblivious of Roderick's protesting squawk. They sat very still for several minutes, her small head on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, honey babe," Theo said again. "I don't know why we do this."

"I remember!" Horatio struggled to a sitting position on the cluttered back seat. "I did put the chest in the trunk! Give me the key, Lee-Anna."

He struggled to the door, disturbing Penrod who sighed in his sleep, and stumbled from the car. Outside, before going to unlock the trunk, he paused and turned toward Lee-Anna and Theo who, separated, were watching him intently.

"And keep your pickin' hands off Lee-Anna, Theo," he said, and slowly walked to the back of the car and leaned over the trunk with the key in his hand.

IN THE LATE AFTERNOON the sky was sherry-colored, and spice-scented with the breath of hawthorne and apple blossoms. A brown dove perched on the sagging line strung between grayed and weather-aged telephone poles was a talisman of joy, an emblem of hope, a signature for all who had eyes to read—so Theo had exclaimed between long, long draughts from the moisture-beaded mason jar. Horatio, completely incapacitated by his most recent retching, snored gloomily, his head half-buried in Penrod's mane while Roderick, drugged by the warmth and the rhythmic bouncing of the Valiant, dozed uneasily, his toes pressed against Lee-Anna's leg. She had slipped off her shoes; occasionally Theo stroked her crooked little feet, the deformed victims of her penchant for high heels, pausing experimentally to tap the bone-like nail of her third toe.

"A good way to go." He reached for a cigarette and a kitchen match, and expertly flicked the head with his thumbnail. There was a puff of smoke and a tongue of flame as the head, suddenly snapped from the matchstick, arched through the air to land on the leg of his trousers.

"They don't make kitchen matches the way they used to," he said hastily slapping out the widening, fire-rimmed circle.

"You kill me," Lee-Anna said, and suddenly they both burst into unrestrained laughter. Quietly he withdrew the tail of her jersey; they laughed again, like children, and he withdrew his hands and retrieved the mason jar and held it for her to drink. They continued to drive slowly, and Lee-Anna hummed the lines from Horatio's song, *Yes, you'll bulge at the bel, Nel, bulge at the bel.*

As they rounded a turn, they saw a dingy one-story frame house, a quarter of a mile or so off the road.

"There's a likely-looking home for our princeling." Theo put the mason jar on the floor. "Surely they must keep chickens."

"If only Andrew Wyeth were here to paint this." Lee-Anna's hand described an arc which included the pale white petals of the stunted hawthorne trees alongside the gravel road, the sparse maples which surrounded the house, and the decrepit, sway-backed outbuildings.

"How about Grandma Moses?" he replied, and took another drink from the jar. "Be of good cheer, Usher, all will be well." He cupped the cock in one hand, its body dry as dust, and trickled a few drops of the spring-well cold liquid into Roderick's half-opened beak. "I shall return," he said to Lee-Anna and stepped from the car. It was farther to the house than he had anticipated, and the stubbled grass was less inviting than it had appeared; he found himself stumbling and once, after recovering his balance, lost sight of the house.

"Turn around," Lee-Anna called from the car; "you're going in the wrong direction."

She started to descend but he waved her away with his free hand.

"No problem," he called hoarsely. "No problem at all, honey babe."

He began the long trek confidently, Roderick clutched firmly in his left hand. The air smelled of scallions; scanning the ground, he noticed the myraids of tubelike dark green. Ugh, he thought, and plowed ahead.

At the door, finally, he turned and waved reassuringly in the direction of the car, turned again and knocked, a firm, committed knock. Behind the screendoor, he caught a confused glimpse of an overstuffed sofa and a television set with some kind of brightly painted plaster-of-paris collie dog. Friendly, good people, he thought; terrible taste, but good solid animal lovers. Then he heard shuffling footsteps, and he was staring through the blurred screen at a woman in a cheap Sears-Roebuck housedress, hair like iron filings, and a squint.

She stared at him, neither hostile nor friendly, the blank stare of a heifer.

"Yes?" she said, finally.

"Good evening, ma'am." Theo's voice was rich, rum-illuminated, reassuring. "Excuse my intruding like this, but I have a favor to ask of you." He exhaled ingratiatingly, and the woman took a hasty backward step. "Or, rather, ma'am, I have a gift for you."

"Uh?"

"Yes, dear friend, a gift." He pointed to Roderick, motionless in the crook of his left arm, and tried to ignore the look of confusion and hostility which was slowly spreading over the pasty countenance behind the screen.

"Do you, ma'am, keep chickens?" With a slight bow he pointed to the drooping figure of the cock.

Without speaking the woman turned and disappeared into the shadows of the house. Theo waited patiently, and hummed the stirring rhythms of the *Hymn to Joy*. How fortunate, he thought, leaning against the door jamb, that woman is. Here she is, buried in the country—he peered mistily at the scrubby grass, the still leafless pin oaks, and browned out cedars—with very few advantages and suddenly out of the blue, as it were, a talented stranger—he straightened his slumping shoulders and threw back his head—knocks at the door and offers a bounty. A prize cock who may bring them a little extra money—he flicked Roderick's limp comb with his forefinger—and, indeed, a companionship she has never before experienced.

He heard heavy footsteps: a man stood before him, a pale, lean man dressed in overalls, with pale, lean eyes and a slight tic at the corner of his mouth.

Obviously spastic, Theo thought. With an effort he pushed himself free of the wall of the house and bowed in the direction of the lean man.

"Good day, sir!" How rich and warm my voice sounds, he thought. "Here is the cock, sir, about which I recently spoke to your wife. Yours for the taking, sir. Give him a good home; he richly deserves it, and will amply repay your kindness."

He inclined his head toward Roderick, consciously straining until the two blurred bantam heads merged into one.

"The hour of parting has come, old friend." He tightened his hand around the thin chest and extended his arm in the direction of the thin man.

"Here, sir," he began, slowly and with a very real effort trying to focus his eyes.

The sagging porch was vacant. Theo stood uncertainly, Roderick's limp and lusterless tail feathers drooping and spilling between the fingers of his outstretched hand. Theo found himself counting the paint-flecked, uneven floorboards when again he was aware of the sound of heavy footsteps. Painfully he raised his head: he was looking up at the barrel of a shotgun. Slowly, inexorably, the steel cylinder descended until Theo found himself staring into the empty blue eye of the muzzle.

"No!" he cried. He turned quickly, Roderick tumbling from his hand. With ineffable dignity he stooped to retrieve the limp body. Only then, slowly and majestically, did he retreat from the porch to stumble across the field toward the car. Lee-Anna, breathless and bare-footed, her shoulders shaking with unrelieved laughter, gingerly picked her way across the stubble to meet him.

"I AM A-WEARY of all this good Samaritan jazz, darling," Theo sighed. "The days of gracious gift-giving and gift-receiving are past." He lay resignedly on the coarse oat-colored Mexican blanket which Lee-Anna had spread out on a slightly rising grass-covered bank a few feet from the Valiant; he traced with a drooping forefinger the pyramid-shaped designs of gray, green, and black, before reaching out for Lee-Anna's hand. In the west, great scarlet fingers of cloud probed the lemon-colored sky; somewhere behind a clump of cottonwoods a cow lowed mournfully, and the scent of new green growth from the fields hovered in the still air like the recollection of a child's hasty kiss. In the cramped back seat of the car Horatio turned uneasily in his sleep, half-raised his head from Penrod's curly shoulder. "The cave with no exit, the cave with no exit," he muttered, and slumped back into disturbed dreams.

Lee-Anna withdrew a cigarette from her jewelled case and leaned over Theo's reclining body.

"We have done the best we can," she said, glancing at the limp body of Roderick beside Theo, motionless except for an occasional spasmodic shudder.

Theo nodded, and extended a lighted match. She cupped his hand in both of hers and raised the flame toward her mouth like a bishop bearing a chalice to some high altar. She drew deeply, and exhaled gratefully.

"You are a darling," she said, and sank down beside him. They lay very quietly for several minutes while the firm outline of the scarlet fingers blurred and dissolved into a pink and lavender haze above the dark fringe of earth; a chill crept into the air and a slight mist rose from the hollows.

Theo ran his fingers lightly around Lee-Anna's throat.

"Let's have one more drink, and then go home."

He returned to the car and sipped the remains of the rum and soda over the diminished ice in the mason jar. Swirling the mixture gently, listening to the lap-lap-lap of the fragrant drink against the sides of the jar, he suddenly felt at peace with the world; without thinking, he leaned over the seat and placed his hand on Horatio's shoulder, who stirred uneasily before resuming the heavy, labored breathing of the asthmatic. He was raising the mason jar to his lips when he heard the cry from Lee-Anna.

"Theo," she called. "Theo, hurry, something terrible is happening."

The mason jar slipped from between his hands, the punch drenching the crotch of his rumpled trousers, and trickling coldly down his leg. He ran from the car and knelt beside Lee-Anna. Roderick lay on his back, his egg-yolk toes slowly contracting and expanding; in the thinning light they looked like the plastic feet of the artificial Easter chickens in the dime stores. His pale dented beak was agape, his eyes coated with a scummy film. As Theo reached over to touch the scrawny body, Roderick shuddered and uttered a hoarse, feeble cry; he made one convulsive effort to regain his feet, and fluttered his wings and fell back. Theo touched his hand to Lee-Anna's head and walked back to the car and sat down in the front seat where Penrod had crawled to the floorboards and was thirstily lapping the muddied remains of the fishhouse punch.

"Roderick's dead," Theo said to Horatio, who did not hear him. He withdrew the plastic half-pint flask of whiskey he always kept in the glove compartment of the Valiant, and took a short swallow. Then he returned to Lee-Anna who was sitting on the blanket, and sat down beside her without speaking. She had placed Roderick's body in her lap and was looking at the last faint gray smudges of the sunset. He removed one of her hands from her lap, and placed it in his own. She made no effort to remove it, and he stroked her palm gently with his fingertips, and clumsily put his arm around her shoulder; her flesh was cold beneath his touch. He took off his rumpled jacket and draped it around her shoulders, and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

They sat quietly for a few minutes, the coolness rising in the dusk like water. Finally, he touched her elbow, and she half rose and lifted Roderick's body from her lap and placed it on the ground beside the coarse fringes of the Mexican blanket. He squatted alongside the blanket and with his heel and some sticks and a sharp pointed stone dug a shallow grave and placed the body in it. When he had covered it with dirt and pebbles, he rose and stretched. His knees were stiff and the calves of his legs ached. He folded the blanket carefully and returned to the car and opened the trunk and put the blanket away. He returned to Lee-Anna, and put his arm around her waist and together they walked back to the car and sat down on the uncomfortable front seat. He offered her the whiskey flask, but she shook her head.

Horatio slowly opened his eyes and patted Penrod's head; the dog lay on the seat beside him, his beard damp from the remains of the fishhouse punch.

"It's time to go back," Theo said, and turned the ignition key.

"Okay," Horatio said, and closed his eyes.

"Roderick's dead," Lee-Anna said.

"Dead?"

"He died, and Theo buried him."

"Poor little chap." Horatio closed his eyes and lay back.

They drove home slowly. The car was again quiet except for Horatio's breathing and an occasional hiccup from Penrod. When, finally, they turned onto Ashland Gravel Road and could see the glowing banks of light from the Medical Center and the pale luminescent spires of the Union Building, Lee-Anna placed her hand in Theo's lap. He drove with extreme caution as they approached the faculty compound where children were still playing on the two-by-four lawns of the crackerbox houses. Three little girls were singing "London Bridge is Falling Down," their untrained voices clear and fragile and pure in the darkness. Theo turned the Valiant into Horatio and Lee-Anna's driveway, and stopped the car; she withdrew her hand, and placed it gently on his knee. Then, together, they helped Horatio and Penrod from the car and up the rickety steps and through the living room where on the sides and rims of the Bloody Mary glasses the flecks of tomato juice had darkened into cement-like flecks and blotches and the smell of stale cigarette smoke still lingered in the air, and into the bedroom. They deposited Horatio on the bed, and Theo gently removed his shoes and loosened his tie while Lee-Anna washed his hands and face with a dampened washrag. They pulled the

light blanket up to his chin and lowered the shade and switched on the nightlight on the wall beside the bed. Then they tiptoed out of the room, gingerly stepping over the snoring mass of Penrod's limp body, and closed the flimsy door behind them. Theo mixed a pair of whiskeys and water while Lee-Anna brewed a pot of coffee. They sat down together on the sofa-bed, and sipped their coffee and drank their whiskeys, and smoked.

"It's been a long day," Lee-Anna said, and turned her face to him and kissed him.

"It's been a good day," he said. She laid her mouth against his and they sat quietly together, without speaking or moving, while outside the sounds of the children diminished and then faded away completely, and the sky blackened over the blurred mass of the university buildings.

✻ The author of widely publicized *The American Short Story; Front Line in the National Defense of Literature*, a critical history published by Houghton Mifflin in 1964, WILLIAM PEDEN has had his work appear in *Story*, *University Quarterly*, *NMQ* and other periodicals. He is also represented in *Best American Short Stories*, 1961. Many publications such as the *Saturday Review* and the *New York Times* have published his criticism and book reviews. He is now a professor of English at the University of Missouri, Columbia.