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Pertelote | Fall 1984

Jacksonville State University

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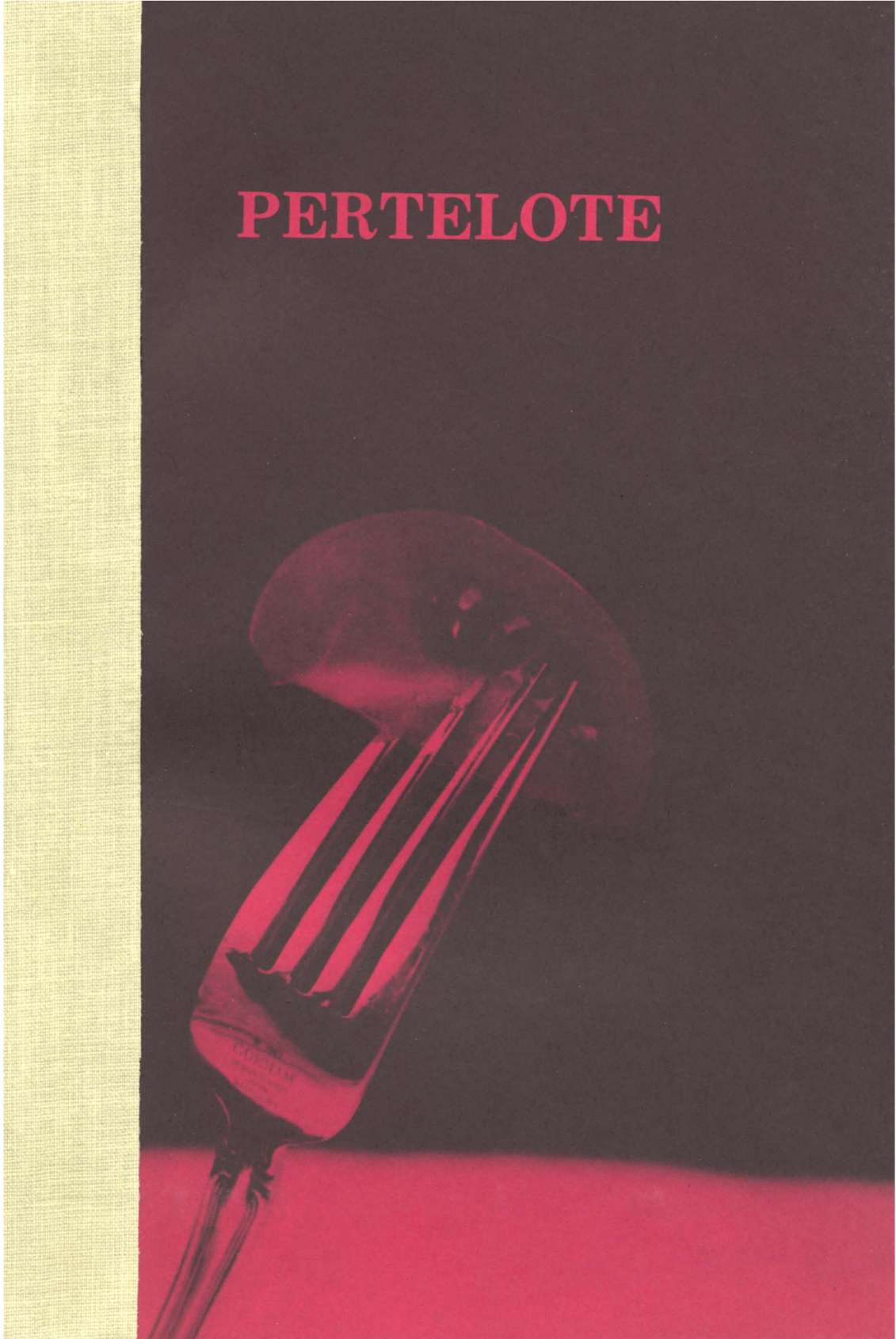
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PERTELOTE



PERTELOTE

Jacksonville State University

Literary Magazine

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Cover photo courtesy of Tim Dunlap

FALL 1984 ISSUE

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Fracture

At twelve, I was convinced
that the inside of my left arm
smelled like strawberries.

I hid it,
useless
against my side, carried it
lower than the right.

Yesterday I saw
my father, who complains
that one of my arms
is useless,
shorter than the other,
deformed.
"You should have known," he says,
"done something about it . . ."

Too late —
my father,
who knows pain so well,
but not the smell
of strawberries.

Lela Michelle

Reflections to the Heart

She flashes a toothless,
metallic smile.
My grip tightens
on smooth wood.

How clear it all seems,
reflected
in her silver-blue eyes.
The voice is sharp
and piercing . . .

"I am your consolation."

And silence
is sliced by laughter

as I sheathe her glinting smile.

John Riley Morris

Conversation With Santa Claus

It was December twenty-fifth, three in the morning and it finally felt a little like Christmas as the bus pulled out of Montgomery for the last leg to Mobile. The only reason for this feeling was I finally got a seat in the smoking section. The bus had been so crowded before, I was forced to sit with the non-smokers, but I was ready to smoke my lungs out as the crowd was now down to nine or ten passengers. There was only one problem. No matches. I was pondering this unfortunate circumstances when I first saw him. Santa Claus!

He wavered down the aisle, looking like an old hobo with his burly clothes, his ragged gray beard and his battered old bag. He took the seat directly opposite mine and sensing the chance at a light for my smoke, I popped the magic question.

"Got a light, Buddy?"

"Yeah, here you go, young feller," he said as he passed a Gold Zippo.

"Thanks."

"Want a drink? T'ain't nothing like a little cheer to warm the soul."

"Sure, why not," I said as I took the drink. "Not bad," I lied.

"Merry Christmas, young feller."

"To hell with Christmas," I mumbled under my breath.

"What's that?"

I said to hell with Christmas. Just another day to me."

"Just another day? Why, Christmas is . . . well . . . it's . . . it's, well, it's just Christmas!! Christmas is lights and trees, and grinning young-uns and snow and . . ."

"Snow! You see any snow?"

"Well, no, but . . ."

"Well, there you are! There ain't even any snow! Christmas's just another day to me."

"Sorry you feel that way, Bud." He took another drink from the bottle. "Christmas means a lot to me. Hell, Christmas is my whole life! It's all I've ever done. Why, I've been riding my sled and climbing down chimneys for years now. Getting a little old for those chimneys, though. Last year I fell and broke my leg. Liked to never finished my route."

"Hold it! Just hold it right there. You trying to tell me that you're Santa Claus?"

"Well, yeah. Some people call me by that name."

"You're off your rocker, man. You expect me to believe that you're Santa Claus? Do you think I'm nuts, or what? You better lay off that booze, mister."

"Well, believe what you will, see what you want. Want another drink?"

"Might as well. Enough of these and I might become Santa Claus myself," I said as I took the bottle.

"Laugh if you want to, but you know, son, you need to believe. If you don't believe, what about your children? How can I reach your son if you don't even believe?"

"Just leave my son out of it. He's twenty-five hundred miles away."

"But it's Christmas, and I'll need to pay him a visit tonight," he implored.

"Look, old man! You're crazy! You're berserk! I don't wanta hear no more about Christmas. You aren't Santa Claus. There ain't no Santa Claus and I ain't going to see my kid and I don't want to hear about it anymore. So shut up about it, alright?"

"Suit yourself."

We sat in silence for about ten minutes until the bus pulled over at some roadside town.

"Well, this is my stop," the old man said, as he rose to leave. "Have to meet my elves and reindeer." He started down the aisle, then turned and spoke again.

"Well, so long, son, and Merry Christmas." And then he was gone.

"Yeah, Merry Christmas, you old nut." I said to myself, as the bus pulled away. Damn, I thought, I

forgot to get another light from that fool. Then I saw it. It was lying on the arm of the old man's seat. The gold zippo. Engraved on the side were the letters "S. Claus."

As I lit my smoke, I looked out the window, thought about my son, it started to snow.

Lela Michelle

Words

Sterile needles

pierce the skin —
carefully,

so only a twinge
and a red trickle
give them away.

J. Nowaczyk

Vending Machines

Florescent-tubed gods in a room off the hall
where students commune . . . offerings in hand.
Willow girl, white purse clenched . . . drops
shiny coins in the slot . . . one . . . two . . . three.
Unacceptable offering — her coins refused.
Push the button.

Yellow cheese and crackers — coprolite in glassine.
Capricious gods vomit multi-colored cans
or withhold largesse . . . its all the same.
Later . . . the high priest of Pepsi arrives . . .
his god's name written above the heart.
Refillable god . . . never sated.

The sounds of worship rise like broken bells
chink . . . chink . . . chinking coins in dirty grey bags.
Twist the key, open the door.
The intimate sounds of god and priest . . .
the cool, soft hum of nearby refrigeration
dollar bills whispering together as they're counted
and a nickel, searching the maze, finally comes to
rest.

In the background, a man pats his pockets . . . first
right, then left looking for change.
Reflections of indecision as he views the array.
a line forms . . . acolytes await god's gifts.
As minutes pass, the room empties again — leaving
only the hum of the gods 'til the next mass.

Amy Bliss Mason

Shana

Summer sweat
collected on
merry —
go-rounds
and daisy
filled lots
has christened
your curls with their
perfume of play.

Summer' scent has settled
in your damp tresses —
Not wading pool, baths
nor even the dead
of winter, can take
the summer from your hair.

Cathy Adams

Turnstiles

A man sits alone in a crowd
cutting out pictures of Dylan Thomas
from battered, yellowed Rolling Stone magazines.
Watching birds fly overhead,
scorning old ladies with
blue hair and shopping bags.
They buy lemons and
romance novels,
walk home with quiet dogs.

We live to live to breathe to sigh.

There's no place
like the present
in movie theatres
with tight-lipped young girls,
bound in confused anxiety.
Nuns watch the clouds
arrest a Finch
and squeeze it till it breathes no more.

Check-out lines
and traffic lights
detain us
but we exercise,
read books
and wage war against
fatty thighs.

Move
on
in stilted progression.

A family with no father
walks through the park
at closing time.

Ice cream melts
on brown grass.
Lovers refuse to sever bonds
while squirrels resemble
split-second statues
then carry away paper cups
to use as laundry baskets.

Brace yourself
while the evening fizzles out
and leaves an illuminated
billboard of chicken wings
and Disneyland.

Jan Dickinson

On Kozo Paper

A quiet idea formed you. Gleaned by women whose pa-
tience Confucius praised; washed cleaner than
chemicals by an icy January mountain river. I hold
you in hushed awe, a supple square, a feathered
delicacy. A soft glaze of sunlight falls between your
pale fibers. Imprisoned, a new being, you must carry
those ideas on a weightless back, oh one with no spine.

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Dennis L. Bullard

Cheynahatchee

The creek bank
Washed away,
By the current.
Roots exposed
Like personalities
Fingers
Grasping for life.
Small pebbles sparkle the shallows,
As brown water
Caresses the ankles,
Passing deliberately.
Fish nibbling, leaving circles,
Subtle signs of life.
Little green leaves,
Truants of trees,
Whirlpools
At the bend,
Passengers of the creek,
Carried downstream.
Movement in silence,
Like passing thoughts . . .

Cathy Adams

Bathroom Ceremonial

I'm thinking to myself
if I sit here
staring at the mirror
long enough
if my face will'
turn into an angel's
or a dentist's.
Maybe this purple bathrobe
will sprout wings
permit me to fly around the bathroom.
But that would be hard
this is a very small bathroom
and my aviating ability is somewhat limited.
Although
I once jumped fifteen feet into the air
to get my cat off the roof.
That's not true
I can't lie to myself in the mirror.
Why do I keep seeing
little green ants marching
across the tile
in drill formation?
They're toting little toothpicks
on their shoulders and
singing a somewhat familiar
Latin protest song
which I can't actually understand
but their hostility is quite evident
so I think it's best
not to disturb them.
They probably have some noble task to attend to
like the birthright ceremony
of a cockroach
who was born'
into a higher middle-class family that
migrates around
various areas of the house
depending on the weather.

I'll bet
if I rolled that toilet paper
completely out
it would have
fifty-one blocks in it and
I could shellac it
build a paper circus right in the bathtub!
Or a Shakespearian playhouse
perform plays with my fingers about
boys whose dogs get run over by Toyota's
and they get so upset they can't handle life
so they start drinking heavily and become alcoholics
where they eventually end up in a gutter somewhere but a
nice little British lady takes them in and dries them
out and they get a job as a grocery clerk, a stock
broker, or a cartoon writer who keeps an herb garden
in his back yard.
His next pet is a parrot.
Regardless
of the thespian talents'
of my phalanges
I'll still be here staring at paint chipped cabinets
quoting passages from the phone book
wishing the walls were painted an obscure red
but who listens to someone
who writes poetry
sitting on a clothes hamper
in a five by seven bathroom
in the middle of the night?
All the various particles
of trash
on the floor
must have had its own individual unique time
in which it was to
fall off onto the floor
from someone's dirty pants
or from underneath a tennis shoe
with those dreaded grooves
that every mother hates.
If every piece of trash had a book to write
about all the places

it's been and
the troubles it's seen'
I'm sure it would be altogether
boring
utterly ridiculous
and the most insane thing anyone has ever heard of
because
trash can't write
groom a dog
or fill out an income tax form.
Little hairs and pieces of lint
have the same problem
and if this is disgusting to you
remember
this is not Romantic poetry.

Amy Bliss Mason

Is Everybody Happy?

Safe under the weeping willow I watched the
laughing geese nip at the young boys . . . I laughed
too.

The grass, laced white with feathers, I gathered a
few. Was it for luck — love or for the hell of it? I need-
ed something, maybe it was goose feathers.

Feeling somewhat attached to the hyena bird, I put
the feathers behind my ear and flew snickering to the
car.

Gordon McKinney

Mahalia's Legacy

I saw Mahalia Whitehorse for the first time in four years yesterday. I don't suppose that fact will mean anything to most of you, but that I saw her at all yesterday puzzles me.

I first met Mahalia about fifteen years ago when I was eight years old. My family had just moved back to Pine Hill, Alabama to try our hand at farming the old home place. Tricks, my city bred dog, got lost the first night. I had spent most of the next day looking for Tricks when, by accident, I happened upon Mahalia's house. It was a tumbled down mixture of log cabin and clapboard; with a porch across the front. The north end of the porch had a sag that made it appear to be on the verge of falling in. But it never did. The yard was full of chickens, making it a place where the squeamish dare not walk barefooted. There were always at least two old hounds in her yard: The hounds and the chickens had apparently worked out some sort of understanding, for they lived side by side and ignored each other.

She was sitting on the front porch in an old rocker. It didn't dawn on me, but I never told her my name or my problem. Mahalia simply said, "David, Tricks is in your back pasture tangled in the fence." Tricks was right where she said she'd be. I was so excited I didn't dwell on how I had come to find her.

I don't recall when I realized that Mahalia was different from other people. I remember becoming aware that other children were scared of her and would often sneak up to her house to hurl stones and cuss words in her direction. If she chose to make an appearance on her porch, they would scatter like quail.

I will say she did nothing to discourage their actions or the rumors that she was a witch. Even her appearance seemed to support the rumors. Her hair was a mass of thin, silver gray strands that seem to be in

perpetual tangles. She always wore a long flour sack dress with the same beads and trinkets around her thin neck. There was one piece of jewelry she never, to my knowledge, took off. It was an amber colored, flat stone about the size of a half dollar, just like one you could find on any river bank. It was suspended on a long silver chain. Sometimes, when she told me of wonderful things to come, she would caress it while she talked. As she rubbed that amber stone, her stooped frame would seem to straighten and her eyes would shine with life and energy.

Mahalia never stirred a bubbling cauldron, cast spells or made potions for good or evil. But she knew things about people. She knew things they had done, and the future was as open as the present. That scared people, as you can well imagine.

But to me she was always the kindly old lady that helped me find my dog. As I grew older, Mahalia would spend hours talking to me of great things to come. I never really understood all that she spoke of, I guess it even scared me at times, but I never felt she was a witch.

When I was eighteen I left for college and for many different reasons, I didn't see Mahalia during those college years. Yesterday, on my way home after graduation, I had a compulsion to stop by and see old Mahalia, even before I got home. It was a strange visit. She seemed as she always had, but all she spoke of was my forth coming powers and how important it was that I use these powers properly. As I said good-bye, she took the silver chain and flat amber stone from around her neck and placed it around my neck. I tried to give it back, but I just couldn't seem to take it off. Mahalia touched my shoulder and said, "That's alright." There was a feeling of strength and power within my body that seemed to come from that simple stone, I can't explain it, but it was there.

I was going to take the stone back today and explain to Mahalia why I couldn't accept it, but Mahalia died at midnight.

Bud Jackson will find her body at noon today, lying peacefully in her bed as if asleep.

La Shell Jahn-Keith

"Bertha was here
But now she's gone . . ."

Handwriting
On the restroom wall;
Unknown authors,
Colloquial vandals.

"Reality is For people
Who can't handle drugs."

"We are the people
Our parents warned us about."
Silent shouts of blatant rebellion —
Erased by coated paint.

Janet Sharp

**Thoughts beneath the colors of
an unfamiliar sky**

Driving past frames
of houses, squares of towns —
details blur into miles per hour
as thoughts drift over the highway—
shadows cast by sudden clouds —
grey, dark-grey, grey again,
moving too fast to be real.

Then clouds ascend,
absorbing the shadows.
Darkness dissolves into blue skies
and yellow fields, and sunlight
that glares from my windshield.
I turn towards home.
No rain has fallen.

Cathy Adams

For Decade

If Buffaloes could dance
and Neil Young were here
he'd laugh
at dancing Buffaloes.
I've considered sitting
at the edge of a deep, forbidden lake,
casting gold nuggets in its dead, silvery, waveless
waters

Hoping clouds would smile on obsurdness
out of love for Beauty.
Sit back and abhor taxi cabs and insurance policies
Tis' better to die from a falling elm
Than a speeding Datsun,
carrying unpatriotic eight year olds to
soccer practice.

I saw a man walk by me on the road today.
He had no identity
Oh, it could have been in his pocket.
I didn't ask.
He was carrying a dancing bear and a gas-mask

Margaret Beard

Soap

Once you were pure and white —
perfectly proportioned.
Letters, painstakingly carved
upon your back.

Mute — you lay on your flawless,
bed of white marble,
staring . . .

Now passed from one hand
to another,
Over and over till the letters are
obscure and you've shrunk

And finally slipped slowly
Away . . .

M. Paige Lindsay

No longer will your
fingers
caress me
like butterfly kisses
Your embrace
only a memory
fading —
Yet stuck somehow —
Caught in the grasp
of my heart.
The talons
refuse to let go.

Amy Bliss Mason

Good-bye to Birdman

I give you until
the count of five —
you used it.

I gave you yesterday
like a Whitman's sampler —
you ate it.

I gave you freedom —
you built a cage.

I gave you love
like a dandelion —
you picked the petals.

I'm giving you
good-bye —
take it
like a man.

DLB

Without Me

I sat atop a green grassy nob
Overlooking coral beaches
In Okinawa, Japan.
And watched spots,
Etched upon the blue pacific horizon,
Headed home . . .

I smoked a yellow cigarette,
Paranoid
Of the little people,
Below me.
The wind
Blew in waves
Across the green grass.
The spots disappeared
With home,
Across the horizon.
While I floated like an empty can,
Atop that green grassy nob.

Lela Michelle

Harmony

Immersed in music —
her movements
flow across the stage.

She darts playfully
closer, then scurries —
like waves
dancing over themselves
to reach calmer seas.

A speechless serenade —
subsiding only
as the curtain falls.

Janet Sharpe

Once, I Blew Soap — Bubble Dreams

Once, I blew soap-bubble dreams
and watched while they disappeared
in soundless explosion,
shattered against your cheek,
impaled by an eyelash.
Now, you stand in my darker doorway,
dripping careless words,
dark stains
that soap bubbles
can never remove.

Cathy Adams

The Monarch

The butterfly
jams under
my windshield-wiper.
His long, black torso
writhes against wind
that tears at orange and yellow.
Legs scramble aimlessly.

Hopeless . . .
He lets out
a little bug shriek of defeat,
holds up his white handkerchief
and surrenders
to the wind
and a speeding Buick.

LaShell Jahn-Keith

A deserted pathway leads to a hillside of sculptured rock. An air of secrecy and desolation draws the traveler to a solitary gravestone. Covered with weeds and briars, the traveler fights the strangling brush to read its words. Though worn by time, the letters are clear. The epitaph — "Remember me."

Amy Bliss Mason

Piranha

More than your shiny shellacked scales, taxidermied ever so neatly. More than your touched up tinted green and yellow hues, I see the smile.

The toothy smile — the vote for me smile — the sharp hungry grin that could rip away a heart.

Those lips had kissed my neck, concealing those razor fangs the entire time. Nibbling away at me, making me fish food.

Steven Howse

Three Minute Egg

There must be
A three minute egg.
There are so many eggs—
They all look alike.
I've cracked them,
In random order—
All hard boiled or
Not boiled at all.
I cast them aside
Ignoring the mess
Of fractured shell
And oozing insides.

Twice I've stopped
To taste—
One tasted of vanilla
The other
Chocolate.
I wanted pineapple—
So I tasted
Disappointment

Once —
I think I held
A three minute egg
Fragrant, soft, gentle.
A music box,
A crystal goblet
dropped on granite
It shattered —
There must be
Another

