

A Poem

by Martha Moldt

Listen . . . God?
All this business
Of gold streets,
Silver linings,
And eternal
Unadulterated joy
Doesn't really
Sound all that great.

If you wouldn't
Mind,
I'd rather have the chance
To sing, and learn, and
Be astonished
Forever.

The Salvation of Elliot Walker

by Martha Moldt

The day was bright and mild for mid-autumn. Sunshine poured in warm mellow sheets over the grey city, its light flowing through the branches of a maple tree set in four square feet of dirt at the edge of a sidewalk in one of the westside slum areas. The maple's half-green, half-gold leaves glowed in the sunlight in a semblance of stained glass, and they danced and shimmered on the limbs in the autumn breeze, until the facets and depths of light and shadow made the maple seem alive with leaping yellow flames, like a huge topaz.

The boy shuffling along the dirty, rough pavement under the tree did not seem to notice this display. His shoulders, under a light jacket, were hunched against the wind, and the late afternoon sun did not appear to warm him at all. He lugged several school books

under his left arm, his right hand jammed tensely into his pants pocket. His eyes were focused on his scuffed shoes that he scraped, kicked, and dragged sullenly along the pavement.

The concrete beneath his gaze turned to brick as he moved slowly up the dingy steps of the crumbling brownstone apartment where he lived with his grandmother.

"Ell-ii-Et!" Gran's harsh voice cut across the stale air of the kitchen. "Elliot, that yo'?" The strident tones dipped in pitch, then rose sharply to hang quivering in the air like an exposed nerve. "Y'all come out heah right now!" Elliot hunched inside his jacket, but it gave him no more protection from the raw-voiced demand than it had against the wind.

He stood a moment, eyes glazed and dreamy, while his school books slipped to the floor. His grandmother's voice slid higher, the impatience in it became sharper, more cutting. Elliot put a hand to his head as if it hurt, stepped over his fallen books, and made his way to the "front room," where his grandmother was washing windows.

Five nights a week, Gran made part of her living by cleaning executive offices in the gleaming glass and steel headquarters of a nationally known firm of industrial design. Gran enjoyed her night job immensely. Her senses reveled in the claret and sapphire emblazoned carpets, the softness of indirect lighting, and above all, the thick rich silence of the place. She came home rested and renewed. To Elliot, the mornings were good times, cradled in his grandmother's unhurried warmth and hot starchy breakfasts, accompanied by her thin high-pitched crooning as she moved about the creaky floor of the old kitchen.

Three days a week, Gran "did for" private homes in the wealthier parts of the city, in addition to her full-time night job. To other week days she labored to keep her own home as presentable as the constant accumulation of soot and filth in the immediate slum area allowed. By mid-afternoon of most days she was exhausted and quarrelsome. Today, as Elliot entered the front room which served as a parlor as well as Gran's bedroom, she was scouring the windows. As usual, the grime did not come off completely, but left a smeary grey, swirled layer of greasy industrial soot behind on the cleaned part of the pane.

As Gran's high thin voice bombarded him, Elliot stood quietly . . . watching her broad back and thick upper arms move in a weary, automatically rhythmic pattern.

"Elliot, yo' got homework?" she demanded.

"Yes'm," he answered absently . . . watching the pattern of grease and soot that followed the wash rag's circles.

"Well yo' betteh sit yo'self down an' do it, but fust I gotta' chore fer yo' t'run fo' me."

"Yes'm"

"Y'all run ovah Mist' Clements sto' an' tell him Ah needs some grits. Yo' tell Ah'll pay him Thursday when Ah gets ovah theah mahself. Ah'll pay him then fo' shoah."

"Yes'm." . . . watching the street outside the window with its passing people threaded through the the left-behind strings of grey and grime.

"If they's greens left from Satiddy, yo' get some o' them, too, y'heah? . . . Elliot, you *heah* me?"

"Yes'm."

"You git right back now. No dawdlin'—'specially don' pestah t'Revren' Fathah. You be *shoah* an' tell Mist' Clements. . ."

Elliot slipped out the front door. He paused at the top of the steps, drew a deep breath, and surveyed the block carefully, marking its hazards and choosing his path as if the street were mined. There was a cat fight in progress. Farther on, a garbage heap lay spilled into the street (nothing worth going through, it looked like). The usual group of late-adolescent boys hung around on the corner (Ronnie's gang—they belonged to this block, they wouldn't bother him).

In the next block a vacant lot had been converted into a pocket park. The walls of the buildings that enclosed it on three sides had been painted in abstract murals of bright joyous color and tumbling rhythmic shapes. The weedy, junk-filled lot had been paved and equipped with modernistic fiberglass and poured concrete structures designed to be swung from, clambered over, crawled through.—amiable misshapen giants, meant to oblige any whim a child's imagination could demand of them.

Elliot swung like an ape through a jungle of fiberglass rods, and climbed onto the top of a hump-backed blob of a thing, where he perched, king of the hill, while two toddlers giggled their way in and out of the swiss-cheese holes punched in the concrete form under-neath him. He sat blinking in the warm sun and watched the gay streaks of color on the walls swirl and bump against each other as the late

afternoon shadows raced across them.

"Hello, Elliot."

The boy pivoted on his seat and looked directly into a pair of warm hazel eyes. His small brown face opened and crinkled into an elfish grin.

"Hi, Father Brennen!" he crowed joyously. "Hi!"

The priest smiled and extended his hand. "Feel like a walk?" he asked.

He was not tall or commanding, this sturdy grey-haired middle-aged man of the church, but he carried himself like royalty. As they walked, Elliot looked up at his friend. The simplicity of his robe, the austerity and discipline implicit in his gestures and speech belied the warmth that his eyes radiated, and Elliot felt light-footed and expansive.

"What were you doing?" Father asked.

"Well, I was playing like I was in my castle, and the *whole* playground belonged to me." As Elliot continued, face lit up and hands generously augmenting his description, the priest reflected that the boy's speech lacked the broad dialect that he heard from his grandmother—his words were unusually crisp and clear for a slum kid. Why did he persist in this when most local black boys his age already deliberately broadened and slurred their accents to convey toughness, manliness, pride in being black, and to emulate the older boys in the street gangs that patrolled the area?

"If you make like you're in the highest tower of this place, then you c'n see for miles. Ever'thing you see b'longs ta you an' ya c'n do what all you want with it. There ain't nobody gonna tell you want you *gotta* do with your own place."

Father Brennen smiled. "What would you do with it, Elliot?"

The boy's grin grew still wider. "First, I'd come down outta my castle. And I'd jes' walk aroun'." His right hand described a circular path. "Jes' walk aroun' . . . an' like . . . I'd look at all the trees. I'd feed the squirrels, too . . . an' the pigeons . . . they'd be my pigeons. They'd know me. They wouldn't fly away when I got there, they'd stay." Elliot laughed and flung his arms out to scatter a flock of the pesty birds which had settled on the pavement in front of him. "They'd stay 'cause they like me an' 'cause I'm their frien' an' they know that, too."

The two were in front of the local Catholic church by now, and Father Brennen turned to go up the stairs. Elliot, his grandmother's warning notwithstanding, followed the priest into the building with-

out hesitation.

The church interior was cool and dark. Its blackness enfolded Elliot like a hooded cloak. He loved it here. He would often come in and slip into a pew or settle into one of the dark chapel alcoves, and quietly watch the priests and parishioners move softly through the tender darkness, each one (it seemed to Elliot) enveloped in his own personal cloak of velvet reverence. The people would kneel and genuflect, light candles, bow their heads; sometimes they would weep. Later, outside the quiet sanctuary, a patient Father Brennen would try to answer the eager questions that Elliot had stored up from his observations.

Today, instead of entering the sanctuary, the priest suggested that they walk over to his study. Elliot readily agreed, since that place held a special fascination for him. Three years before, Elliot had entered the study for the first time and exclaimed in wonder, "What'cha want all them books for?" Never had he seen such a collection of books for one person's use. Oh, he'd been to the library with his kindergarten class, but those books were for a whole city of people. The volumes in Father Brennen's study belonged to him alone.

"These books are my friends," the priest had explained gravely. "They help me with problems, they keep me company, they tell me things I need to know. . . ." and he elaborated on the value of the written word until Elliot, then in first grade, became wide-eyed with disbelief.

"*Those* things!" he'd snorted. "They don' do all that. I know. I gotta read 'em in school, an' they stupid! They don' do *nuthin* like what you said!"

Father Elliot had grinned. "I'll just make you a bet," he'd said. "I'll bet you they do say those things, and you just give me a chance to prove it. Ok?"

Elliot had nodded, but skeptically.

"You be here next week, this same time," Father continued, "and I'll show you."

The next week, Elliot presented himself at Father Brennen's study door. "Sit down, son," his friend had invited. "I'm going to read to you." And so he did—whenever the boy could catch the priest alone in his study, the man would give half an hour to reading whatever book the two of them were currently exploring. In school, forced to wade through the inane conversations between Dick, Jane, and

Sally, Elliot would let his mind wander back to the church study and the intricate, marvelous worlds of Alice, and Pooh, and King Arthur, until his name was called sharply. The annoyed teacher would wait impatiently while he fumbled to find his place and her comments might even grow sarcastic as he struggled with words he did not think were worth the labor they caused. "Why don' thay read dis here good stuff in th' school?" he asked the priest.

He barely passed first grade, and was required to repeat second. The year that he repeated, Father Brennen took his total education in hand, and turned him over to one of the teaching sisters from the parish parochial school for extra tutoring. She drilled Elliot relentlessly, severely. These sessions replaced some of the story hours that were the delight of Elliot's soul, but he was promoted to third grade at the end of the year.

The sister scolded Father Brennen. "That child," she insisted, "is not worth the time he takes. He is a reluctant and slow learner at best. Why, at times he seems so distant that I could almost think he was in a trance. He is simply wasting your very valuable time!"

Father Brennen smiled at the agitated nun, and turned on his Irish charm. "Sister, I really think the boy has high intelligence, if only we can reach it. He is an unfortunate youngster. His mother bore him at our Saint Elizabeth's and left before she was supposed to, without the boy, and without leaving her name or address. Several days later, a woman who claimed to be his grandmother came for the baby. She's a good woman, but overworked and illiterate Hard shell fundamentalist, too," he added, knowing the good sister's private sore spots well.

"Humph!" said Sister

"I believe his mother is a streetwalker, and very probably a heroin addict. She rarely visits her son."

"Lots of these. . ." muttered Sister, but she had been won over, although Father Brennen knew she would never admit it. So Elliot, now nine years old and in third grade, still came grudgingly twice a week to the church to be drilled lovingly and pitilessly by the stern nun.

On this late autumn afternoon, Elliot stepped into the priest's study and again surveyed the loaded bookshelves that lined the room, floor to ceiling. He was especially hopeful that Father Brennen had asked him here to read. He felt unhappy and distracted today, and needed the escape and relaxation that their story hour together

provided. But the priest sat down at his desk without picking up the copy of *Treasure Island* that they had started the week before. "How's school going?" he asked.

Disappointment and tension rose, dusty and bitter, in Elliot's throat. His fists clenched, his body stiffened, he squeezed his eyes shut, and stood in the center of the study like a small stiff statute for a moment. Then, abruptly, he relaxed all over. Father Brennen caught the small body, limp as a rag doll's, and sat him in a chair.

"I got trouble," the boy mumbled. "Teach' wants I should give a note t' Gran, an' she caint read it anyways, but he say I gotta bring it back an' she gotta sign it so's he know she read it herself. I tried and tried t' read it myself, but it in writtin' an' I caint make that stuff out yit." His dark eyes were suddenly hurt and fierce. "I ain't *done* nuthin! What's he want t' git me in trouble fer? I ain't ben bad anywheres!"

"Do you have the note with you?"

"Naw, it's in my books."

"Would you like me to come home with you and read the note to your Gran?"

"Geez, she'd skin me, sure! I'm not s'pose t' bug you, and I'm s'pose t' go over t' Clement's an' git some grits." The boy looked at the priest pleadingly. She don' know I still come here, Father. Rev'ren' Mac down to Kingdom Mission, he said I go t' Hell if I keep talkin' with you, and him and Gran, they toll me t'stay away from here."

Father Brennen frowned. Gran had been friendly and grateful for his efforts to help Elliot over the past three years, and the priest had been unaware of her change of heart. He sighed. "Tell you what, son," he said slowly. "You go home and get someone to read that note to Gran. I'll talk to your teacher, too, and see if your problem, whatever it is, can't be straightened out." He smiled reassuringly at the small black worried face before him. "That way you'll have two sides going for you, ok?" The boy nodded mutely. "Now, if you've got a chore to run at Clement's, you'd better hop to before he closes."

Elliot nodded again and wiggled off his chair. He trudged to the door, took hold of the handle, and stood there for a moment, thinking. Then he turned and looked at the priest. "I ain't goin' t' no Hell," he said, "not for talkin' t' you Father. You the only real frien' I got, an' Rev'ren' Mac, he crazy anyhow. The things he say in church—man,

they *crazy*! He don' know what he say. He don' know *nuthin'*! . . . You still let me come, won' ya? You still my frien'?"

"I'll always be your friend, Elliot." The Father put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "You can come here any time."

It was suppertime when Elliot slipped cautiously in the back door of his home. His school books had been picked up and lay neatly stacked on the kitchen table. His Grandmother was busying herself at the outdated, temperamental stove.

"Well, boy," she said sharply, not turning around, "Yo' sho' took yo' sweet time 'bout gittin' them grits!"

"Ain' got no grits," said the boy sullenly.

Gran turned fuisously, and saw that indeed, he was empty-handed. "What yo' mean yo' ain' got no grits!" Her eyes rolled to heaven, her voice got shrill and high, as she poured out her words in a combination of accusation and prayer for deliverance. "Lord, I sends dis chile fo' a little thing an' he comes home *hours* later an' no grits—no *nuthin'*! Jesus! Ah ain' nevah seed such a boy! He ben dreamin' agin, tha's what! What he think we gorin t' eat now?"

Elliot, his body braced against her verbal onslaught, waited for the storm to subside.

"Rev'ren's right! Yo' gorin t' HELL, boy! Cain' get thoo school, cain' even 'membah *one* thing at th' stoah. An think mabe yo' teach' las' yeah, she right! She say yo' stupid . . . STUPID—like a ole mule. Las yeah, I say no—that boy, he jes need some help wid himself, an' he be aw right. But Ah tells yo', Ah *tells* yo' now, Ah think that teach', she right. Ah think maybe yo' is jes plain *stupid*, boy!"

Elliot's eyes blazed. "Mist' Clement, *he* say he cain' give yo' *no* grits 'cause yo' ain' paid *no* money on yo' bill fo' six months an' *he* says yo' ain' gorin pay none Thursday, neither!"—in his anger, he deliberately mocked the illiteracy of his grandmother's speech. She, taken aback, turned to the pot on the stove to gather her wits. She regretted her outburst, and now tried to modify it by expressing an interest in Elliot's affairs.

"Well, how'd school go fo' yo' t'day?" she asked.

Elliot threw her a wary glance, thinking that perhaps she had found his teacher's note and taken it to a neighbor's to be read, but her broad back was relaxed, and the tone of her voice remained mild and conciliatory.

"We got greens fo' supper, anyhow." she continued, not waiting

for an answer to her question. "Ah cooked 'em wif chittlin' bits so's they'd taste real good." . . . and Elliot, relieved that the subject of school had been dropped, allowed her to coax him into eating a good-sized heap of greens. Later, in the front room, after Gran had gone to her night job, he examined the note again, trying to puzzle out the unfamiliar script letters.

The note read:

Dear Mrs. Walker,

I would like your permission to have Elliot examined by our school doctor. Elliot seems to be a bright boy, but his attention span is poor, and he tends to daydream at unexpected and inappropriate times. I have reason to believe that all or some of his problems with schoolwork may have a medical cause, which, if properly diagnosed and treated, could possibly improve the quality of his working habits.

If you want him to have the examination, would you kindly sign the note and send it back with Elliot.

If you wish to talk with me, I am available in room 29 after school hours.

Sincerely,
Robert Miller

Elliot strained over the letters, tracing them, ignoring the words that were obviously too long for him to comprehend. After a while he sighed and gave up. He took a pencil and marked an X at the bottom of the note as he had seen his grandmother do on previous occasions. Father had promised to help him, he thought. To reassure himself, he struggled to recall the priest's words and smile, but the tight, drawn feeling in the pit of his stomach remained.

"... a possibility of brain damage," explained the boy's teacher to Father Brennen the next afternoon. "Sometimes he seems to slip in and out of a very mild cataleptic state so quickly, that he is hardly aware there has been a break in his conscious perception."

"Yes . . . yes that's possible." Father Brennen's thoughts went back to the limp figure that had slumped in his study chair the day before. "But you say his grandmother signed the note?"

"Well . . ." Bob Miller frowned. "It's signed with an X, but Elliot explained that she'd lost her glasses and had to have it read by a neighbor."

"Nonsense," grinned the priest. "His grandmother's illiterate, the boy just has his pride." He squinted at the note, considering. "Actually, I doubt that she's seen this at all. From what I know of her, I don't think she'd have agreed to it."

"Damn!" exclaimed Miller. "I can't get him to a doctor without his parents' permission." He ran his hand over his afro-styled hair worriedly. "That kid needs help now. It shouldn't be put off."

"Ok. . ." said Father Brennen slowly. "Ok then, we'll do it through the church."

Two weeks later he called Miller. "You were right, Bob. The kid has petit mal. We've got medication for it, the big problem is going to be explaining it to his grandmother. I'm on the outs over there, so I'd like to enlist your aid, if I can. . . . Yes, that's about what I had in mind. . . . Well I think she'll listen to you better anyway since you're Black. . . . Well, how about sending a message home with the boy and say we'll drop by tonight? . . . Good See you then. Thanks."

When Gran admitted them into the apartment that evening, Elliot was nowhere to be seen. She led them into the front room, which had been cleaned until it all but shone. Father Brennen entered after Bob Miller and stopped. His eyes narrowed, and a slight frown passed over his face, which then took on a bland, yet alert expression, as he seated himself at Gran's invitation.

Sitting on the sofa opposite the door was a tall ascetic-looking negro in his late forties. His face had a severe pinched nose and tightly compressed mouth. His skin was a warm cafe-au-lait tone, smooth and beautiful, but so tightly drawn over the bone structure of his face that it served to emphasize the ramrod stiffness of his spinal column, and the careful formality of his strained, folded hands. His protruding eyes were a bright sensual blue, startlingly out of place, yet the most lively component of all his features. He stared coldly at both the arrivals.

"Fath' Brennen, Mist' Millah, dis heah th' Rev'ren' Mac Donnel' down to Spiritual Healin' Kingdom Mission."—Gran indicated the man on her sofa, who nodded regally in response to the visitors' verbal acknowledgements.

It had been agreed that Bob Miller would explain the situation, and he carefully built up to the facts of Elliot's illness, citing the points he had put in the note that Gran had never read, stressing the

mildness of the problem, stressing that modern medicine could give Elliot a completely normal life, stressing the fact that Father Brennen had offered to cover medical expenses out of his own pocket so that neither Elliot nor Gran would be obligated to the Catholic church.

"Nonsense!" said the Reverend Mac Donald. His resonant bass voice rumbled through the room, leaving a startled silence in its wake. He turned to Gran, who looked at him half apprehensive, half accepting.

"Mrs. Walker," His carefully pronounced, softly persuasive tones were gentle and compassionate as if he were explaining sorrow to a child. "Mrs. Walker, these men want Elliot's soul, not his healthy body. They bring you advice and medication and pretend that they are doing it for kindness only. I warn you! It is a snare for your beloved grandson!" His voice swelled like that of an organ, cutting off Miller's protest, and covering the priest's exclamation of disgust. "Did they ask your permission to do this thing? Have you spoken to the doctors yourself? What will this medicine do? It will confuse the boy's mind! It will drug his brain and bend his willpower to that of the Roman Catholic church! His immortal soul must then burn in Hell! He will be lost to our Lord in heaven! There will be no escape for him! He. . ."

"JUST ONE MINUTE!"

Gran, who had been caught and held by the Reverend's voice and sternly flashing eyes as if she were a bird and he a snake, started. Shaken out of her near-trance by Father Brennen's enraged bellow, she looked to where he stood, smouldering and braced in anger, his fists clenched at his side, his feet planted stubbornly under him.

"No one's trying to snare anybody," he said firmly. "Elliot is sick—his *body* is sick. The medicine is to help the sickness. It won't do anything to his mind except help him to use it better because he won't have the sickness in it anymore." He turned almost pleadingly to Gran. "Have I ever hurt Elliot, or tried to turn him from you or your religion?" Gran shook her head, her eyes wide and anxious.

"You, sir, are an instrument of the devil! You are both evil in the disguise of goodness!" It was the first time Reverend Mac Donald had condescended to address the two intruders directly. He half chanted his accusations, as if to exorcise these devils who threatened the hold guidance and influence he held over his flock in the name of

the Almighty. He stood up and turned to Gran, towering over her, his blue eyes hypnotic in their intensity and fixation, his voice carefully modulated and calculated to weave a net around her fears and superstitions.

"Mrs. Walker, the Bible tells us, does it not, that it is easier for a camel to thread through the needle's eye than for a man to enter heaven! Strait is the way! Narrow is the path, Mrs. Walker! Your grandson has an affliction, does he not? Praise the Lord! He giveth and He taketh away. He chastiseth—He punisheth those whom He loves. We know He does, do we not, Mrs. Walker?" Gran nodded, close to tears. "Your Grandson is afflicted by *God*—all Praise to Him! He must bear this illness as a banner! The banner of Christ Jesus! Your grandson will triumph in the Lord because of this affliction which he bears in the *name* of Jesus!"

"Amen!" sobbed Gran.

The Reverend held his hands out-stretched over Gran's head in benediction and cried exultantly, "His will be done!" His tense posture relaxed for an instant. His face was beaded with sweat. Father Brennen, disgust written all over his face, started to put on his coat as the Reverend continued softly. "These men mean to be good, Mrs. Walker. They are good men trying to be helpful, but they do not have the *true* religion, and therefore the devil uses them as his tool, and they do not know any better. . ."

"My God, do something!" exclaimed Miller to Father Brennen who was now watching the scene intently, not moving or speaking, his eyes narrow and bitter, his shoulders hunched forward and tense.

"They take the Lord's name in vain!" The Reverend went on as if Miller had not spoken. "They mean well, but they will only lead your boy down the paths of Hell. His body they may cure. . ."

"Let's go," muttered Father Brennen. "We can't do any good this trip—not with this bastard Gabriel here."

Miller rose, and the two men said polite goodbys to Gran, but she only glanced at them with frightened eyes and turned immediately back to the Reverend Mac Donald who continued to intone his doctrine without taking any notice of them whatsoever.

"I don't believe it! I just don't *believe* it!" sputtered Bob Miller, as he and the priest walked down the steps of the brownstone. "I thought that kind of shit went out with the Middle Ages!"

"Hell, no!" exploded Father. "You get an illiterate woman like

that, raised on a religion that's half Bible, half voo-doo, and some self-styled Jeremiah like that bastard in there can play on her like a harp!" He felt a familiar wave of bitter exhaustion flow over him. "There's nothing we could say or do right now to convince her that her boy wouldn't be damned if she let us help him. I've seen it before. I knew we'd had it when we walked in and I saw that type sitting there. As far as he's concerned, we're no more than thieves trying to steal what he considers to be *his* property. He's just protecting his own. You don't waste time or energy on a bastard like that!"

"By God, I never saw anything like it!" wondered Miller. "I still can't believe it!" He thought for a while and added, "Can we still get to the kid?"

"Probably," said the priest heavily. "He sees through that character to begin with and he trusts me. Look, when you see him tomorrow, tell him to stop by my study after school."

But it was Bob Miller, not Elliot, who contacted Brennen the next day. His voice over the phone, sounded worried. "Look, Elliot wasn't in school today. None of the kids knew anything about whether he was sick or what. You think maybe something's up?"

"I don't know," said Father Brennen grimly, "but I'll try and find out. I've got some church members in that neighborhood. I'll see what they can find out."

However, none of his efforts yielded any information about Elliot for the next four days. It was Gran herself who came into his study at the end of that time and gave him his answer.

"Rev'ren' Fathah," she began haltingly, "Ah comes t' beg pardon fer what happen t'other day. Ah needs yo' help." She looked searchingly around the study. "Has yo' seen mah Elliot?"

Father Brennen just sat, his keen piercing eyes looking at Gran and yet through her, his mind trying to race ahead and outguess her stumbling speech.

She pleaded, "O please Fathah, Ah'll give mah boy th' medicine! Ah ain' gorin t' make him live in a sick body! Only jes' tell me, *please* . . . weah Elliot is?"

Brennen felt cold premonition prickle at the base of his skull. "What do you mean . . . 'where he is'?" he asked severely.

"Don' yo' have him? Din' he come heah couple days ago? . . . Ah mean, din' he come to yo'?"

"What happened, Mrs. Walker?"

She dabbed at her eyes with a ragged kleenex. "He theah when y'all come to th'house t'other night. He hidin' in de kitchen an' he hear the whole thing. . . ."

"Yes, go on."

"Well . . . well he . . . he real upset. Say he hate Rev'ren' Mac. Say th' Rev'ren' a phony. Say he ain' gorin listen t'me 'cause th' Rev'ren's got t' me, an' he say he hate me, too." Gran sobbed. Her big raw-boned body shook in rhythmic upheavals.

"Did he say he was coming here?" asked Brennen tensely.

"No suh No suh, he say yo' not his frien' 'cause yo' don' stan' up t' th' Rev'ren' fo' him, an' he throo wid all of us. . . . He say he gorin out t' fin' his mothah. He say . . . he say he know . . . his mothah be glad t' see him. Fathah, An don' know wheah his mothah at. . . . Ain' seen her fo' two—three yeahs. Don' even know if she in dis city any mo'. . . . That boy he ain' gorin' fin' her. She a whoah, Fathah—she navah did care 'bout mah Elliot!"

Gran became incoherent, and Father Brennen got up from behind his desk to come and pat her shoulder awkwardly

"Oh Father—oh God!" she cried. "He roll aroun' an' his eyes, they go all funny an' wild an' he bite his tongue 'til the blood run out Ah thought sure he gorin t' die!

'Ah calm him down an' Ah wash his po' lil face, he so limp and bloody, an' Ah carry him to his bed t'sleep, an' nex' mornin' he set off fo' school like nothin' evah happen—an' Ah ain' *seen* that chile since fo' days! . . . Ah thought mebbe he come t' see yo' an' yo' keep him heah."

"No," said Brennen heavily. "No, he's not here." He sat back down and put his head in his hands, leaning his elbows on his desk.

"Oh God," he cried silently. "Why did I leave? Why did I just give up? Why didn't I stay and fight that holy roller bastard on his own ground?"

Gran looked at the crushed man in front of her. "Why was Ah so 'fraid of dis good man?" she thought bitterly. "Why'd Ah have t' go an' bring in de Rev'ren' when Ah knew what he gorin t' do? Dis good man ben helpin' mah boy fo' yeahs an' nevah hurt him. Wheah de devil in his helpin' mah boy? Ain' no devil in dis good man! Jesus f'give me, ain' no devils heah. . . ."

"Mary, mother of grace," prayed the priest, "protect this child, Elliot. Heal the destruction that hate has wrought on him in the name

of thy son. Bring him home safe, oh God. God! Forgive my cowardice. . . .”

The unspoken prayers of the woman and the priest poured into the quiet study and mingled in a silent and useless kyrie. Swelling and filling the room, it spilled out over the threshold into the blood-grey city and the cold autumn twilight.

AND ONLY BLOOD WILL REMAIN

by Randy Moser

The winds blow and the trees fall;
No passer-by could hear the call
Of this woman whose death is drawing near.
For Death himself has found her here
At the home of her husband, children—and all;
And the winds blow and the trees fall,
And only blood will remain.

The winds blow and the trees dry;
To a yellow shade turns the sky.
In a yellow haze her man returned
To his wife destroyed, his children burned.
In grief and fear he decided to die;
And the winds blow and the trees dry,
And only blood will remain.

The winds blow and the trees are dead;
‘Tis a wonder now, no blood they’ve shed.
Mysterious Death has come along
To a family of love who did no wrong.
What happens tomorrow cannot be said;
And the winds blow and the trees are dead,
And only blood will remain.