

May 25, 1971
editor/Robert Sickels

TUESDAY

Try To Make It Real

a short story by Clayton Hardiman

The way he felt went past most of what he had heard. It was beyond that initial lightheadedness children feel against park benches with open wine bottles in their laps. It even went past that almost casual religion sophisticates play with at social gatherings or those nappy headed paragons of guilt sleeping it off on the cinders down behind the tracks. It made almost no sense. There was nothing to compare it with.

It was actual numbness. It could have been a lie. He told himself that, staring at himself in the mirror sucking his lip. Holding himself between his legs as if he had really just finished pissing. As if he had really missed a little and dampened the floor. It could have been one of those lies. He should have been cold. There should have been pain somewhere. He didn't even wrinkle his nose at the very real smell of human shit. He didn't even care that the floor was rugged cement. His face was that calm. He knew he wasn't going to stay here until a cop came in and found him drunk and weeping against one of the commodes. It could have been a myth.

It was a weight much too heavy to play with. He pushed out of the latrine and made his way back past the crowded bar to his own empty booth. He pushed back into it, out of everybody's sight, wanting to believe he could bury himself in the leather cushion. He knew he was being childish but he finally realized that childish was exactly what he wanted to be. He had to make himself remember that what he was feeling now wasn't childishness. It was numbness and, remembering that, he didn't want to think. He did anyway. About what he would be years later. About old frozen bodies he had seen from time to time crumpled on someone's front steps.

He hated thinking these sick thoughts. He could sense it already. The whole bar smelled of what he was thinking. Of age and dead life. He surveyed the bar, thinking that no one in the building could have been very close to death. They were all his contemporaries even if only in the sense of having been born, by chance, at the same time but he was as foreign to them as he was invisible. Some of them belonged in churches, furtively sleeping on their knees behind numbered pews and it was only thru their own confusion or maybe an excess of communion wine that they were sitting in this bar now.

And some of them had to be the dark half shadows he saw passing on the street in early morning when he stood at his open door driven up out of sleep by his own hazy thoughts. It infuriated him, thinking about these people and their ignorant attempts to save their own lives. Some recited prayers. Some committed crimes. None of them could have known he was there. He flopped back against the cushions and glowered at whatever was directly in front of him.

And he knew all of them thought of themselves as god in one capacity or another. Poets and criminals, Christians and winos, they were all going to get roaring drunk beyond the point of vomit and make new rules for the destruction of the world. They would all be shaken by whatever it is enrages people and would react with screams in various language.

He sensed that later he would have to laugh at this. At these people giggling effeminately at each other. Although as people they were never completely useless. That is, each one of them could have claimed something. To have succeeded somewhere, to have been something. To have lived. To have made it, perhaps, with a preacher's daughter in the grass behind a statue on one of the traffic islands downtown. All of them must have had some standard worth, some redeeming factor. They were, after all, unique



people in that context. Two Greek mechanics nonchalantly moving their stools and predictably near the end of the bar closest to the door. The old wasted niggers, some scattered carelessly along the bar and others clumped together in various booths, all of them managing somehow to chew their whiskey. High class whores, hair pulled into tight buns and cheeks scrubbed, wives of tired helpless businessmen engrossed in their hackneyed ulcers. The proprietors hustling behind the bar and scowling specifically his way, needing his booth or wanting his money or watching him smile lewdly at his fingers.

And he himself was, after all, a human being. It was enough that he could look at and recognize people without being recognized himself. He knew that he was unimpressive, that to anyone looking he was lost in his huge ugly grey suit. That he was small and bug eyed and seemed to have lost control of himself, slobbering elegantly down the front of his shirt. That he was very evidently drunk and the transparency itself was ridiculous. He knew someone must have thought he was a cop in horribly plain clothes. Hell, it wasn't actually him sitting there almost curled with anguish in a corner of the booth. He was sure no one would have recognized him.

He glanced up and saw the proprietor with what must have been the bill in his hand coming toward him, dressed in a suspiciously clean apron and long baggy pants, still scowling, a clear intimidation, but he was hoping the proprietor would see how stupid and useless an act it was. He supposed it was meant to frighten him into paying and quickly moving his melancholy ass somewhere else but in a happier mood it wouldn't even have made him want to smile. The proprietor silently placed the bill on the table and stalked off, the bill turning out to be no bill but an envelope with his name written across the front.

His face was in one hand staring senselessly at the table and everything on it as if it would be, in the end, somebody's messed over life. If the night were left for him to interpret, he had been dragged in from the street for the more nonsensical reasons that lonely people use their empty lives thinking of. No one wanted to feed him or save his soul. He concentrated his stare on the envelope, wanting to believe that he didn't have the slightest desire to know what this was about. Who had sent it. The simple why.

He took away the hand holding his face.

Slapped it hard against the table and the sound was louder than he had wanted. He watched the people at the bar turn around and stare, shyly amused smiles plaguing their drunken faces. Some nodded at him possibly out of embarrassment. Out of forgiveness to him for shattering the concentration they had cultivated and directed toward their drinks. When he glanced up again he saw a young woman out of some other time or bed staring at him from under her mass of red unnatural hair. Sad lewd grin barely touched him. He was half-afraid she would beckon to him and wreck his mood.

"Just sit there," he said but not very loud. "Just spread your thighs over the hardness of that stool. Find your face in that glass. Don't try to involve yourself with me."

He was smiling and she had been watching his face. She laughed, knowing he must have said something amusing and empty. He saw that she wanted to close the space between them.

No, I'm not horny or even desperate. I'm just sitting.

She pointed in his general direction. His hand floated instinctively between his legs until he realized she referred to the envelope. His eyes were on her, then on the envelope and he ripped it open. A welcome back card. "Glad to see you back" and her name scribbled over the last lines of print inside.

And he sat there puzzled at whatever it was had just died in him on that fifteen cent card until he looked up at that really vulgar smile she had on her face. It must have been her drunken evaluation of what she thought she saw when she looked at him. And looking at her, he finally placed her and came from some time that was already dead in his life. And understood what that smile meant.

He said something just loud enough for her to hear, just unreasonable enough to understand. It was too heavy to play with, but he wasn't sure that he wouldn't remember this later and try, at least, to laugh about it. He opened his lighter and set the envelope on fire. Holding it above the table and making her see it. Fanning the smoke toward the bar.

People turned back around without their smiles this time, some of them still clutching their drinks and looking very ready to dash out if the place was really on fire and the proprietor was

(continued on the back)

The Art of Inmates

Editor's note: This critique of inmate art exhibit now on display in The Kellogg Center was done by William S. Gamble, associate professor of art. Gamble has served since 1962 as consultant to the art program for inmates at The State Prison of Southern Michigan in Jackson. Although some of the art works that Gamble mentions are not shown here, his observations capture the style and temper of the artist.

BY WILLIAM S. GAMBLE
Associate Professor of Art

Imagine yourself, if you can, as having been convicted of a crime. You are incarcerated in a state prison and enrolled in an art program that is within the prison's school. Now, what would you paint? Chances are, these circumstances would involve you in a conscious or unconscious attempt to express yourself and to find yourself — to establish your identity as an individual of worth and dignity.

You have a past to live down, expiate (even to the point of desperation). Depending on your personal or psychological disposition and the progress of your rehabilitation, you think of yourself as having been unlucky or guilty. You see a lot of your fellow inmates, the prison guards, staff, but far too little of your family or friends.

This could be your first real attempt to express the strong complex of emotions that have been seething inside you, for you find that in art these things find expression more easily and fully than in any other way. Though prison has heightened your bitterness, the artwork which reflects your rancor is more readily accepted than if you had put your feelings into words.

If you happened to be black, your search for identity would be involved with the social - educational - economic problems of your minority group, compounded problems which exist in a



The Spirit Looks at the Creation of God from the Sea
Jackson

fluid society.

If you were in these circumstances, what would you paint? That is the question to ask yourself when looking at IA9: Inmates' Art Ninth Annual Exhibition, now hanging in the south corridor of Kellogg Center. These works, by inmates at the State Prison of Southern Michigan in Jackson, will remain until June 18.

The quest for identity is certainly visible. It is seriously intense, subjectively involved, varied, and to a large extent concerned with black themes. With this perspective, it is surprising to observe what has been painted and how it has been painted.

Little of this art is escapist. You will not find the common prison-art themes:

pretty girls by untrained artists, religious folk-art or romantic landscapes.

What you do find is much more sophisticated. Take the two pieces that relate to landscape. John Woods' "Song of Earth" is a paean of color and movement, like Mahler's symphony. Aaron Gilleylen's "Reaching for the Sun," actually a group of four small pieces, also uses a somewhat similar approach.

Johnnie Jackson's small oil called "City Scape" is so rich in glowing night lights and a dramatic fountain of fire that it is primarily a tension of mood rather than a depiction of city. Does it symbolize the welling-up of the Detroit riots? The fire fountain certainly can be seen as an awesome and fearful thing in the midst of the city. Edward McLaughlin's "Peace & Black Realization" more specifically details the turmoil of blacks in the city.

Vernon Maxey's "Untitled" silkscreen print has the structured beat of color and form that also is based on his involvement with jazz. His "Sacrifice to Ogun (God of Iron)" uses the window contained within squares to present an African theme. Jackson also uses African subjects for two of his paintings, "Walking and Weaving" and "The Spirit Looks at the Creation of God from the Sea." This latter painting has most unusual imagery that is myth-oriented.

Jackson's water color, "The Book of Life and Knowledge" uses a striking near-symmetrical design, an "X" that divides the picture: above, the book toward which a hand points and a head looks; below, a crouching figure blows a conch horn; left, a suckling child; right, Wilt Chamberlain looks toward the center where a figure is inferred by placing a red eye on a pair of legs, and a cross on top the eye. All the figures are slate black.



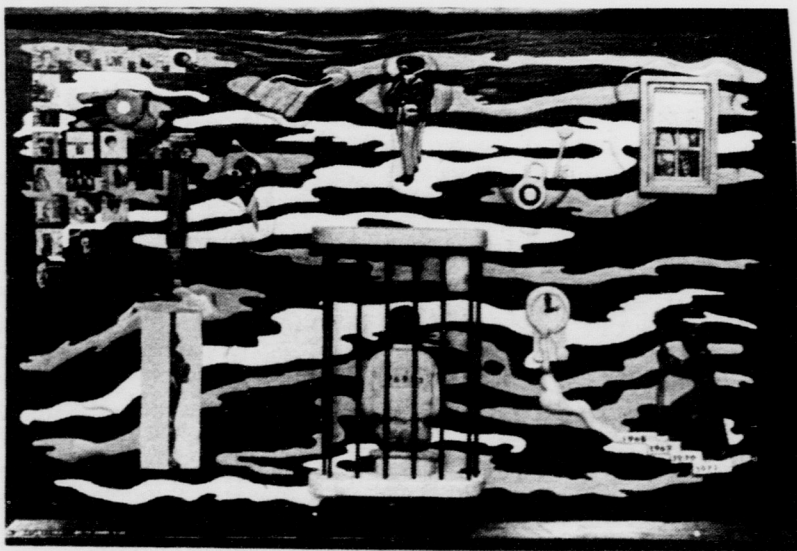
Kipendo Cheusi

Coker



Book of Life and Knowledge

Jackson



Reflections

Carl Smith

Another striking black piece is Carl Smith's relief-sculpture "Reflection." Constructed of painted wood with some collage, it is unusually well-crafted. On a black, grey and white background one sees the back of inmate 96953 in a central cage. To the right a black-hooded figure, death or time, climbs the steps of years; to the left a brown Eve holds an apple. Above this are other symbols ranging from jazz on the left to a view through a window at the right. The only other piece directly concerned with prison life is Gilleylen's "Roach Walk," which pictures a cell.

The broader conflicts of society are featured in two other works. McLaughlin's "War" is a collage that mingles starving Biafrans with victims of war in Indochina. Lafarrel Furlough's "Rebirth of the Azul Eagle" shows two eagles fighting. The one in chains is shackled to columns symbolizing the "Establishment." One chain is broken. This is the American eagle in double image. The "hawk" eagle and "dove" eagle, two parts of the same thing, battle each other - most unusual imagery.

The enigma of personal identity seems to be behind Gregory Harvey's "Inner Man," a water color featuring a seated figure holding a large eye. Several other works vary the enigma theme. Larry Sim's "The Puzzled Image" uses puzzle-like pieces fitted loosely together to configure a large figure against a black background. William Cocker's "Kipendo Cheusi" uses black line to inseparably entwine two figures in a double-image.

Finally, two pieces have written messages. Gilleylen's "Black Anthem" reads as follows:

Lift every voice till earth and heaven ring -
ring with the harmonies of liberty.

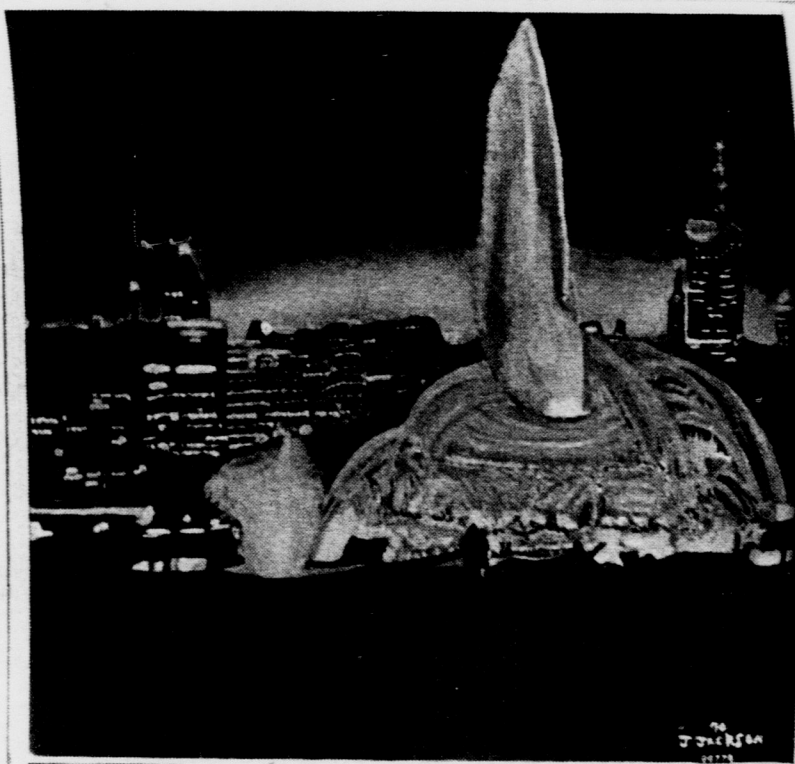
Stony the road we trod,
bitter the chastening rod -
felt in the days when hope unborn had died.

Yet with steady beat
have not our weary feet
come to the place for which our fathers sighed?

We have come a way
that with tears has been watered
we have come, treading our path
through the blood of the slaughtered.

Avery Evans' "History" shows the head of Sonto Monqund against an open book with chained hands below. On the left page is "His-story" and on the right "Our-story." The text of these two pages is given in this order:

When we look with unclouded vision on the
bloody shadows of the American past, we will



Cityscape

Jackson

recognize for the first time that the Afro-American who is so often second in freedom was also second in slavery.

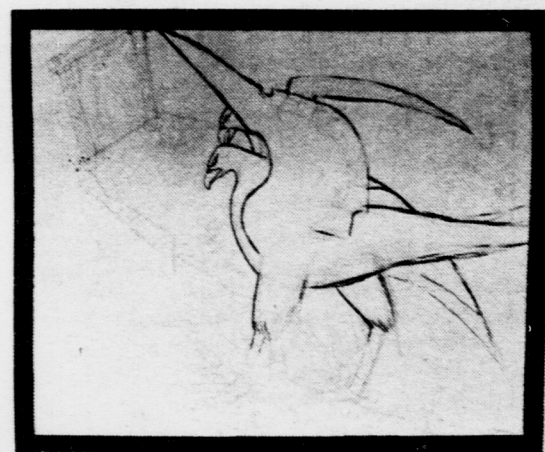
In 1617 the white man created a system of white slavery that lasted over two hundred years, as they sold their own like cattle. The white slaves who were property of a master were branded like other livestock. 1692-1700, the black bondsman become numerous on the plantation. 1668, the blackman was bred with the white woman to get big and stronger slaves, mostly Irish girls were used. This started in Jamaica in 1668. It was not rare for the colonial savants who near the end of the period were sometimes driven from place to place to be sold to the best advantages . . .

The text on the right reads:

Masters given to flogging often did not care whether their victims were black or white. Cheap labor to tend tobacco's immediate requirement of the struggling American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries and the system of procuring and employing such labor was perfected with the white man indentures before it was imposed on the black man. This is a letter of the past, who to say what I am but us. Whatever it takes to get my freedom, then I do it. I once thought that the whites hated me because of my blackness, but I

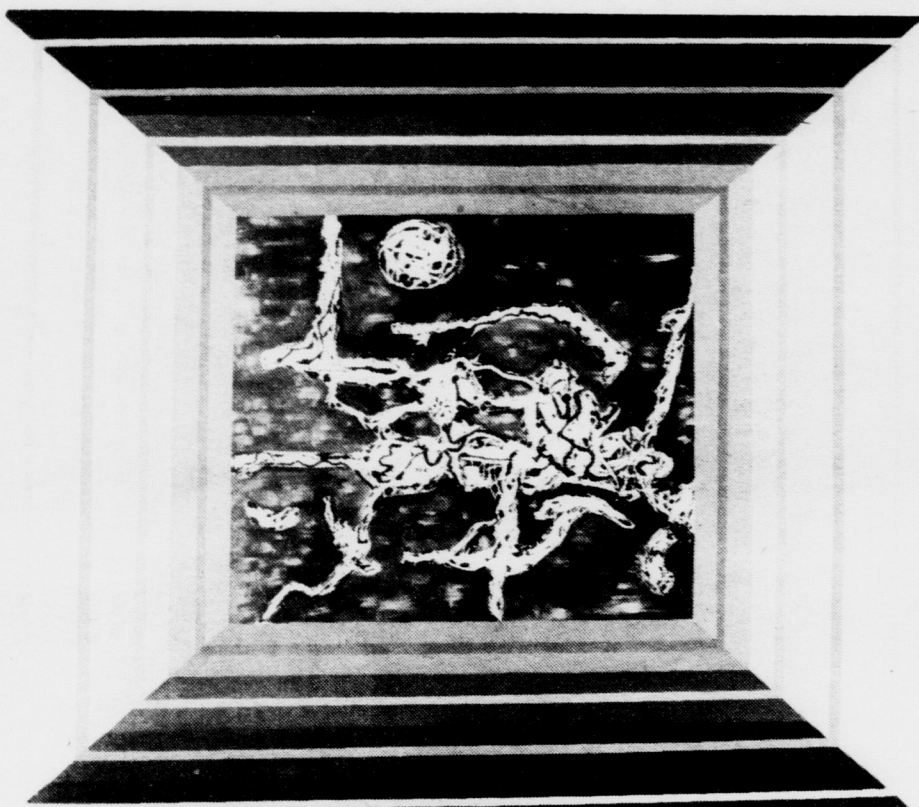
know now because of what I might find out. For this story is me, our story, not his story. I think Malcolm X, King, and the two Black Panthers who gave their lives for us, Mark Clark and Fred Hampton. For I know who I am.

- Sonto Monqund



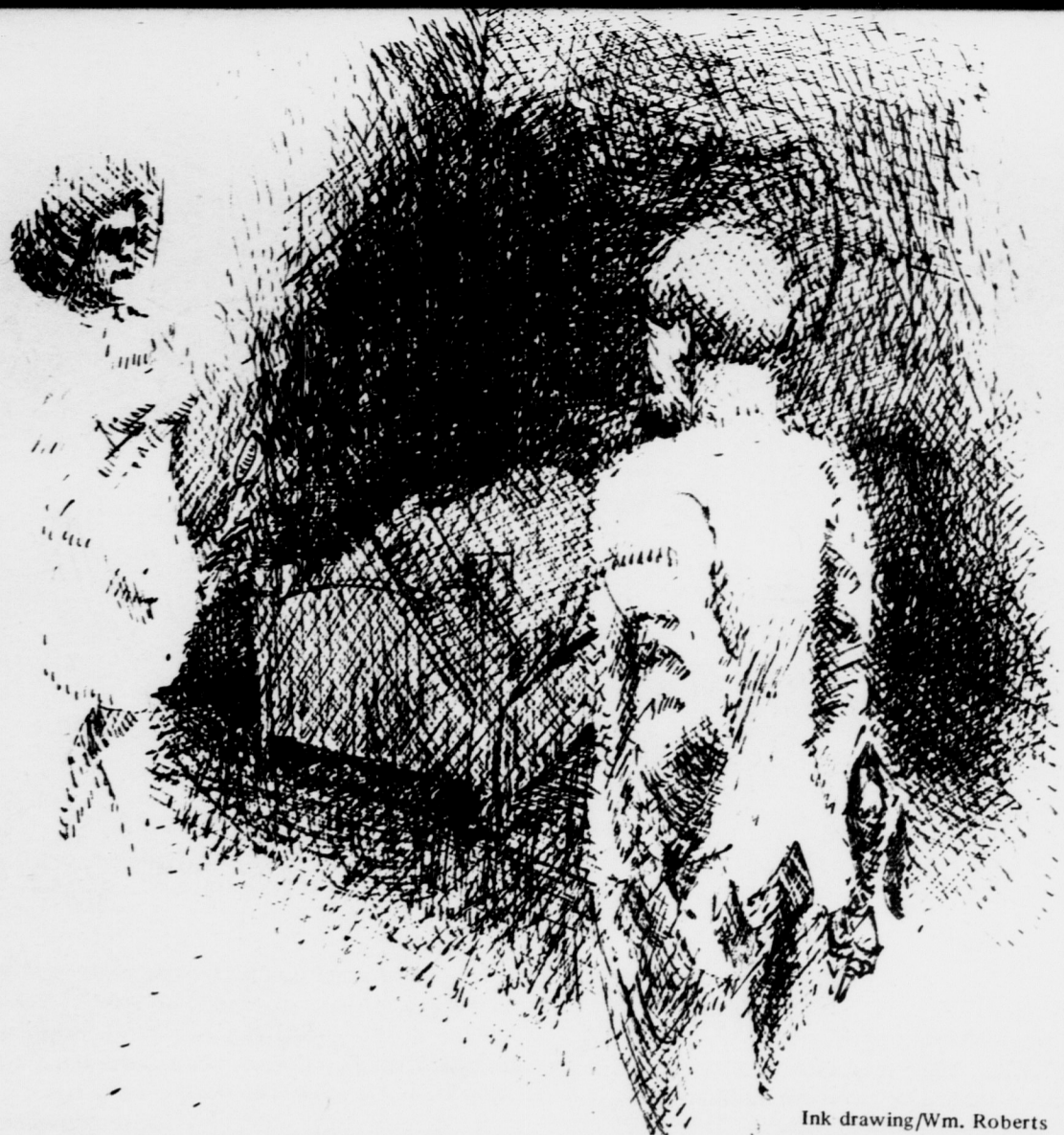
Rebirth of the Azul Eagle

Furlough



Sacrifice to Ogun - God of Iron

Maxey



Ink drawing/Wm. Roberts

(continued from the front)

screaming something about dammit are you trying to set me on fire and shithead put that thing out and the young woman's smile was almost clear enough to reveal some of the fear she must have been feeling.

Until finally he stood and moved past all of them and into the restroom. Just when it would have reached his fingers he shoved the fire awkwardly thru the seat of the commode into the water. The smoke hit him full in the face and he straightened, wiping his hands across the seat of his pants. His thoughts were turned toward the shithead the raging redfaced proprietor had called him. He moved first toward the door but realized that the proprietor could probably break his face, since he had never won a fight in his life and avoided that certain beating whenever he could. He looked around, his eye catching the mirror. He crossed to it and slammed his whole arm into it, twice, cracking it beneath his fist and elbow.

He didn't know whether he was bleeding or not when he came back out. He consciously avoided looking at his arm but there must have been something. People followed him with their eyes. Someone, drunker than he was, stretched out an arm and almost touched him.

He sat down quietly in his booth to finish his drink. The proprietor watched him warily and may have vaguely gestured for him to leave but he didn't see it and wouldn't pretend he had. He took the glass into his hand and held it between both hands like a child, thinking that most of what was happening to him could have been a lie.

* * *

One hundred forty odd lbs. he estimated, of flesh and blood (but not bones. Bones are hard and cutting. They have no place in this profession. They are useless in comfort. They have nothing to do with love, vicarious or otherwise. Ask any osteologist). She had always carried the weight well. He would know immediately when he saw her if she had changed at all.

The wind rose crazily, (nature evidently) in that purposeful mood that wipes out lives by thousands and spoils picnics. His hand stung sharply. The pain was more than he would have ever anticipated. He wondered at what he had undertaken in the bar. He knew he was weak. It wasn't even in character. He shook his hand thru the air and decided he wasn't going to think about it. It was all he could do not to run into thousand-year-old niggers all over the street, shocked into rare soberness by cold dirty air. He stepped off the curb and walked in the street for a while.

When he got there he stared from the top step down into the half-open basement door and knew that she couldn't be there because she, with her ungodly greed for heat, would never

leave the door open on a cold-assed night like this. He smiled, he hoped, sentimentally because he knew cold-assed was the way she would have described this particular night. He had thought it would be funny and it was. He was consciously trying to think as he thought she would.

It was in his mind that this was the one place in the world he could claim to have known. He wasn't going to wait. He stumbled down those broken steps and shouldered his way inside without knocking. Whatever was going on, he wanted to see it.

She glanced up at him out of the dark little corner where she stood against her electric stove. "Hey baby" she said calmly and caught a drop of something rolling down the side of the pot with her finger. She hadn't changed, he was sure, her eyes coquettishly large and obscene and her finger in her mouth. She said don't when he closed the door behind himself. "Trying to air this miserable place out."

He ignored that and asked whose smell she was trying to get rid of. She looked directly into his eyes but he wouldn't look away. It wasn't until her eyes darted off into another part of the room that he followed them and saw what she must have wanted him to see all the time. A dirty aged nigger sitting up and tangled naked in the sheets of her bed, looking for all the world like a faded Mohandas Gandhi.

He said shit as viciously as he could. It was like that. That pain. An instant of wet heat that had its own dubious strength in its odor. He touched his injured hand with the other. It was so sick. He was plagued with the simplest needs. It had to be logical. There was pain, there had to be blood. His hand came away red and he had that sensation of having something torn out of his flesh.

"Who is he?" he said finally. His voice sounded strange. Thru the course of things he realized he had expected that hoarseness wronged lovers always develop when they find out they've been wronged. He was sensitive now. It was as if none of the things in the bar had happened. He smelled the misery she had referred to, felt the pain in his hand. Heard his own dull voice saying, "Who is he? Where did he come from?"

"Come on now," she said tenderly and put down the pot. Moved across the room easily and put her hand to his face. Actual flesh there. Actual pressure. "You don't know him. He doesn't know you, does he?" she called suddenly to the old nigger and without waiting for an answer turned back around. "Come on, what difference could it make?" He couldn't believe it.

He wheeled away from her and threw up his hands, the act trying to convey as much of this fitful helplessness as he thought was possible. "For Christ's sake. An old man. For Christ's sake."

She watched him in silence. Then finally, "Don't be so young, dammit. What's the matter with you?"

"For Christ's sake. This is an old man. This old nigger, this old broken wino. Pinch faced snuff nosed wreck. Why for Christ's sake? You bitch, you whore" — he remembered years before telling her she smiled like a whore. She had fallen across the bed and cried. It had shocked him. It seemed too long ago to have anything to do with this.

Now she just smiled crookedly. "You know better than that. You know." It took a meaningful tone. As meaningful as hurt. As injury. As her face, darker than he remembered and slick with sweat. It was drama, she was making it happen. He wasn't going to be able to stop it. He knew it. It was in their breathing, their smells.

"Does he know something nobody else does? What does he do to you?" This had to be meaningful too. "Did he pay you?"

"No," she said. She was standing in front of him. "I paid him. He's better than you ever were."

He hit her with the flat of his hand. She took a step backward. The figure on the bed may have rustled a little. His hand throbbed powerfully. For an instant he saw nothing. He was leaning against the wall without knowing how he got there.

She was laughing at him outright. He saw it, he couldn't see how he had ever missed it. She knew he was feeling pain. There was no way she couldn't know it.

I paid him. He's better than you. Ever.

"You can say that? Knowing who I am, you can stand there and say that? Your face soft and your smile crooked and gas rumbling thru your belly and you can say? This nigger is old, baby, he's not long in this world. How much strength can he have? He ain't for you, baby he's dead already."

"Don't do that. That kind of talk won't help. It won't change anything. Do you know how much like a simple bitch you sound? I thought you knew something."

"I do know something. You drag in some old derelict, the smell of piss all over him. I know something. How much can he mean to anybody? You tell me, how much is he worth?" He saw her shake her head. Slick disgust. Everything he was doing, everything he said would turn to screams. He was going to hurt her, if he could, without turning hysterical but in the end it wouldn't matter. "I'll tell you. He ain't worth shit. What does that make you?"

She went to the stove and threw the mess she had been cooking into the trash can. She put the pot into a badly stained sink and turned to face him. Her hand was above her eyes. Shielding them possibly or stroking away the ache she felt. Her belly bulged thru her clothes with hurts and sounds. Her dress was clinging in the places a whore's dress will cling. Her whole face puckered and he thought she would cry but she started laughing almost too softly. No, I paid him. He's better.

"You beggar, you freak, what a piss poor trick you try to play on people. Damn what it makes me," she said and her laughs got louder. "What does it make you, stud?"

I paid him. I paid. I paid.

Her voice was wild and rasping. It horrified him. He wet his lips and started protesting. She was laughing too loud, she wouldn't listen. He screamed at her to shut up. He screamed his whole image at her and everything he had thought before at the bar. Age and death and god in all capacities, only words now instead of ideas. Words that screamed at everything. Liar. Whore. What about me? I paid. I paid. I paid. Screaming beyond any sense. He had been right, it didn't matter. Only she was still laughing and he hit her with all his might. His hand throbbed. He hit her again. And again. He was paying.

"Okay that's enough," the old man said to him from the bed.

He turned around clutching his hand against his stomach. He eyed the skinny bearded little nigger who was out of the sheets and tugging a pair of filthy jeans up over his ankles. He made his voice disparaging and said, "You want some too?"

His hand was worse now, he wasn't going to be able to do anything. He stared at thin naked steel and backed away from the bed. A short sob burst out that didn't even sound like his. Then he realized he didn't have to cry. He said okay and backed to the door, then turned and dashed out up the steps, leaving the old man on the bed and the girl huddled silent on the floor.

He was hung up in the aesthetics of the thing. His hand was unbearable now but knowing it would get worse gave it a weird kind of beauty. He had no idea where he was going and didn't care. He wasn't going back to the bar and there was no place he could think of to go without ultimately lying to himself. He knew only that he was walking in the street avoiding thousand-year-old niggers and the old man's voice was still in his ears.