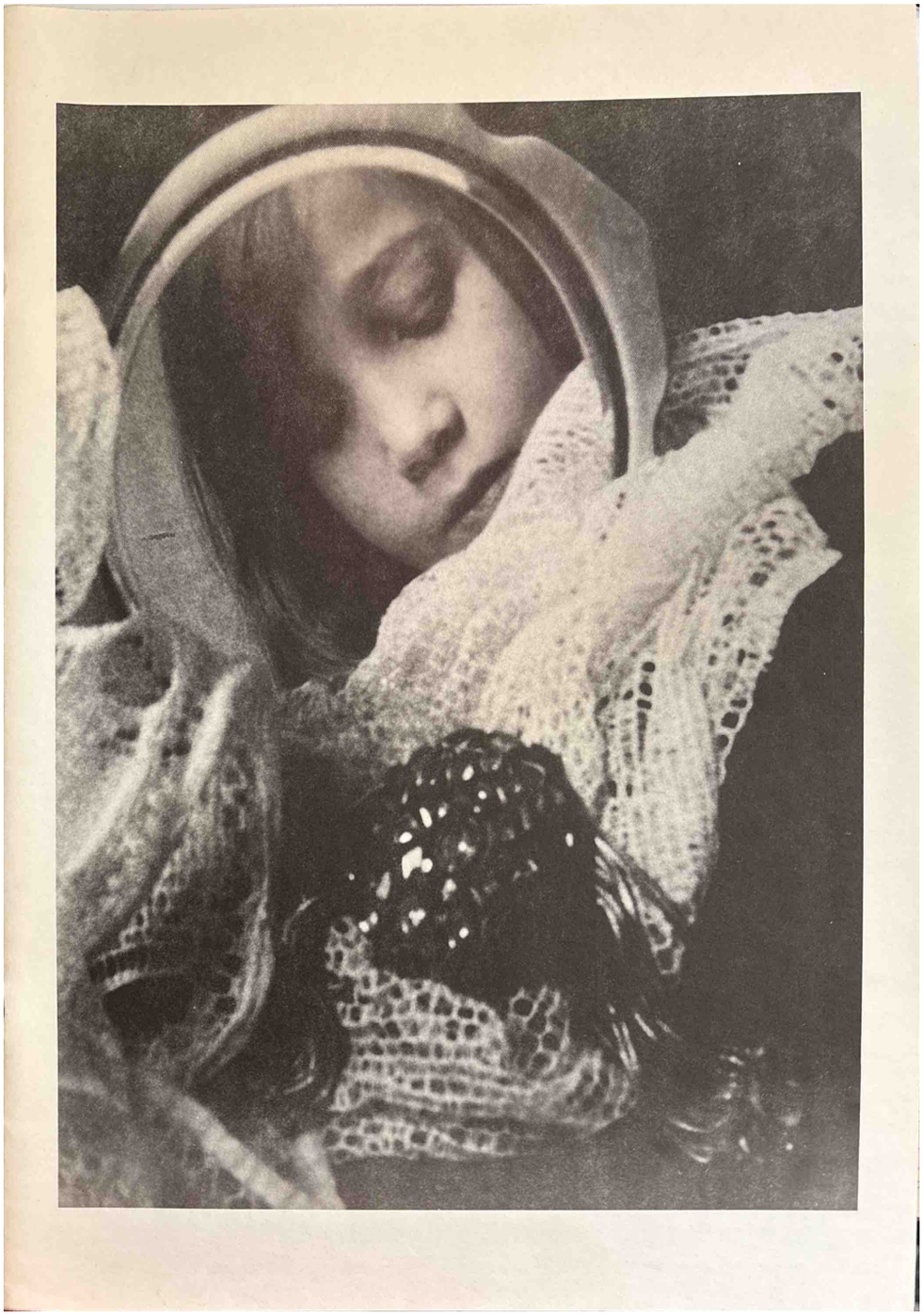


Volume 7, Issue 3
December 1987

Editor-in-Chief	Beth Medley
Editors	Greg Armstead, Carolyn Baird, Ann Garcia, Kat Sterchele, Chris Taylor, Karen Totten
Assisting	Angie Domingo, Carol Ellis, Andrea Wood
Business Manager	Michael Bellar
Faculty Advisor	Diane Sautter

Cardinal Sins is the literary magazine of Saginaw Valley State University. All SVSU students, faculty, and staff are invited to submit poetry, short fiction, essays, 2D art, and black and white photography for consideration at 319 Wickes Hall (790-4248).

Cardinal Sins
all from the tree of knowledge

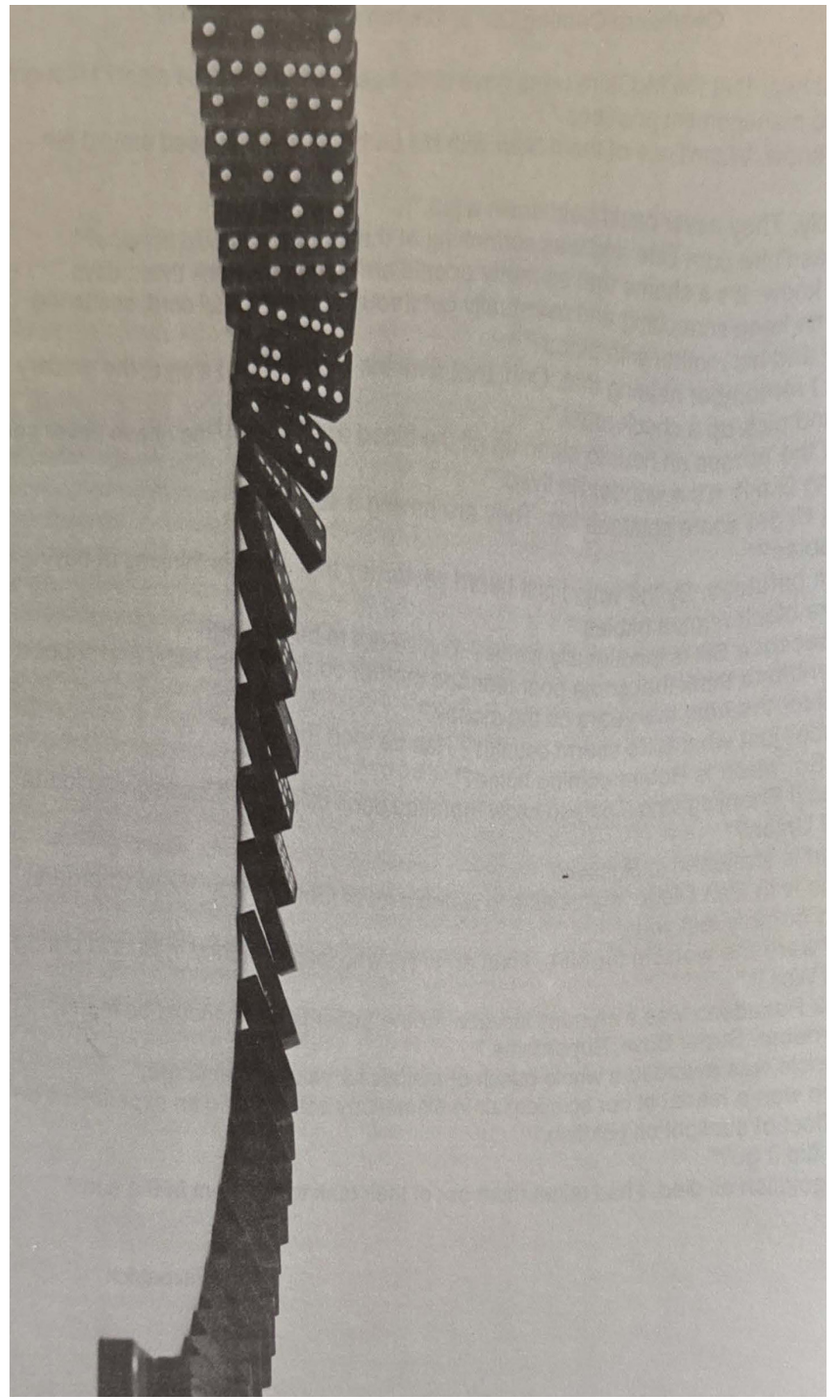
"Of prostituted muse and hireling bard!"
--Lord Byron

"They got little Timmy."
--from *Attack of*
the Killer Tomatoes

Overheard Coming Out of Church One Sunny Sunday

"Did you hear that the McGuire twins have both been laid off from the plant? I thought they had management positions."
"I don't know. Wasn't one of them born with his umbilical cord wrapped around his neck?"
"Probably. They never could hold down a job."
"And wasn't he born blue and was scratching at the cord so he could breathe?"
"I don't know. It's a shame that so many people are losing their jobs these days."
"Didn't he keep scratching and eventually cut through the umbilical cord, spattering himself and his mother with blood?"
"I think I remember hearing that. Ooh, that reminds me, I have to stop at the grocery store and pick up a chuck roast."
"It took the nurses an hour to clean up all the blood and they say they have never seen anything like it. It's a wonder he lived."
"I think I'll get some potatoes too. They are having a sale."
"On babies?"
"No, on potatoes. By the way, I just heard yesterday that Janet is thinking of buying one of those black market babies."
"Just because Bill is functionally sterile? You've got to be kidding!"
"It's terrible to think that some poor teenage mother could sell her baby and support herself for the next five years off the money."
"I wonder just what Bill's sperm count is? Has he tried therapy?"
"Yes. So, when is Robert coming home?"
"Not until Thanksgiving. Did you know that they don't celebrate Thanksgiving in the Soviet Union?"
"Robert is stationed in Russia?"
"No, he is in San Diego, and is able to watch a lot of football. Boy, those Chargers played horribly last year."
"They were the worst in the NFL. I had an uncle who was stationed in Russia during World War II."
"I think Pasadena was a crummy location for the Super Bowl. It should be in the Superdome. Super Bowl, Superdome."
"My uncle was awarded a whole bunch of medals for valor and courage."
"I once won a medal at our science fair in elementary school. I did an experiment on the effect of sunlight on goldfish."
"How did it go?"
"The goldfish all died. I had taken them out of their tank to get them in the sun."

--K. T. Fitzpatrick



Reply

On Monday:
Dick and Jane meet in the check-out line
He's wearing his ethynol cologne,
buying toilet paper and deodorant
She's in her neon dress
looking through *The Enquirer*

Dick smiles at Jane
Jane smiles at Dick

Not long after that:
She looks up from her horoscope and
remembers how they met
She wonders what went wrong
and tries to read Dick's mind

That last night:
their bed is sticky ...
but it looks so much like a crib,
and
Jane is sleeping ...
but she looks so much like a baby
that Dick has to laugh

Then:
still giggling,
he turns and walks away

--Ron Sielinski

ACROSS TIME ZONES

Water throws itself upon the shore.

The sand drinks it in.

Seagulls aren't screaming "Why?"

Sandpipers are busy sketching all of the answers with tan precision on warm sand.

We both sit in the cold on opposite shores wondering why the sun doesn't feel so warm anymore.

-Linda Haag-Hipel

The Sleep

Sleep is a series of one-night stands,
You can be late,
But you can never miss an appointment.

Sleep is a seducer.
A drug.

Sleep is the confessor.

Sleep is the prison and the release.
Eyelids are gates,
Locking you out of the world.
Bound, gagged and blindfolded,
You can only wait.

But the mind is grateful.
A chance for repose
Stretch out the bumps
Fill in the potholes,
For a smoother ride tomorrow.

Sleep is the actor.
Sleep only pretends ...
To be asleep.
But the eyes give it away.

--Jason Lichen

GRANDMA PAULINE

I don't see my grandmother very often. In fact, the only time I do see her is on holidays and special occasions when all of my relatives gather. When we do get together, she is usually placed in a rocker out of everyone's way. You see, Grandma Pauline is very talkative; so rambling that people lose interest in her and she finishes her conversations by herself. Grandma Pauline lives in the past.

Despite her bad case of osteoporosis, she never visits a doctor claiming they don't know anything nowadays and they make their patients take medicine to hide their ignorance. According to her, the first cure for cancer was found in the twenties and she can't understand why the doctors don't use it now. It was a tonic, and "When the doctor rubbed it on my skin, I could see the black cancers crawl right out before my eyes."

It wasn't until the day I spent alone with her that she became interesting to me. She had called me on the telephone and asked if I could spend a couple hours at her place to do some work. Some work was right! I mowed four lawns; one hers and three of her rental houses which are all on the same block, trimmed her hedges, and thinned out a few young walnut trees growing along her fenceline. A pile built up on the curb larger than my car. I was plenty tired when lunchtime came around and looked forward to a rest from the hot sun.

While climbing the cement steps to the front porch on Grandma's house, I noticed four cats. One cooling in the shade in the middle of an old wicker chair and the other three clung to my ankles in an attempt to enter the house. Opening the door just enough so I could slip through while blocking the cats off, I heard the most beautiful chimes you could imagine. The house was dark except for sunbeams which shone through half-drawn window shades and the lights at the end of a long dark hallway.

I could hear ice cubes colliding with each other as they fell along the sides of the glass and theliquid being poured over them. Slowly, I journeyed down the hallway stopping only to study a chalkboard which read:

Evil Returns to The
Sender
Readings $5.00

This really didn’t surprise me as Grandma Pauline is a Reverend of a Spiritualist church.

Entering the kitchen, I saw a large glassful of cold lemonade and drank it down quickly. Grandma told me to open the icebox and fetch the pitcher of lemonade

and pour another glass for myself. Enjoying my second refreshing glass, we sparked up a conversation which lasted for most of the afternoon.

She had been reading a craft magazine before I came in the kitchen and she said, "I think I'll take up crocheting when I get old and can't walk very·well." Grandma was born in 1900 and the family helped her celebrate her 87th birthday this year. She thinks she is young.

After a time, Grandma mentioned her husband, an original McCoy of the feuding McCoy-Hatfield families. He died of electrocution while working on a Consumer line. I asked her if she had any kids besides my Mom and at one time she said she did. His name was Billy. Before he died in an automobile accidant at age 19, he traveled in a circus. In fact, Grandma's whole family traveled in a circus: Grandma Pauline was a trapeze artist along with Billy. "Your mother was a bareback rider who worked nothing but the biggest shows in this part of the country." I was intrigued by this portion of information and before the pitcher of lemonade was finished got to know my grandmother and some of our family well.

At this time in our conversation, the trouble began. She was telling me about the great flood of St. Louis and the people she knew from there that were caught up in it.

"Gee, Grandma," I said, "I don't remember hearing anything on the news about that. When did this happen?"

"Oh," she answered, "about nineteen ... twenty ... seven I believe."

"Oh," I said. Thinking to myself: my God! What on earth is she talking about? Just then we heard a knock at the door, and Grandma Pauline slowly headed toward the door with one hand on the wall for balance.

Sitting there, I glanced down and noticed a drawer on the side of the kitchen table. Inside wrapped in a purple towel was a round glass ball about the size of a small orange and lightly tinted purple. At last! Here was the crystal ball that my father and brothers always joke about. She really does do "readings!" Every year the newspaper features an article about her predictions but our family has never believed in her ability to see into the future.

Staring into the crystal ball I studied to see if I had the gift of prophecy that Grandma believes she has. The longer I looked the more it began to look like a plain old glass ball.

The door opened and in walked Eloise, Grandma Paulina's best friend. Eloise takes care of her ... All the way home I wondered and thought Grandma and what it would have been like to live in the early 1900's, I tried to imagine what her son and husband looked like and how it would be to travel in a circus.

All the way home I wondered and thought Grandma and what it would have been like to live in the early 1900's, I tried to imagine what her son and husband looked like and how it would be to travel in a circus.

Most of all, what other things about Grandma lay hidden waiting to be discovered? Does she really predict the future? Who is Grandma Pauline?

-JoAnne Ford

TRUE BLUE

When a good man falls
and forgets his worth
what should his loving wife do?
It's hard to forgive
and divine to forget
feeling like a worn-out shoe.
But it's never the end
just a far-out trend
and a test of time for his mate
for she gave and she tried
then she broke and she wept
and she saw she was no saint.
So the good man fell
and shattered his pride
while climbing an empty wall
but the wise wife waits
and whispers his name
as he passes on down to his fall.

--Alicia Robinson

REFUNDS AND EXCHANGES

I'm wearing your ring tonight.

In the morning a jeweler will fix it.

You gave it to me a little bent.

Tomorrow it will look nearly new.

I'll have to get a little box and a stamp, so I can send it back to you.

In a few days you'll pull it out of your mail box.

Just a simple ring. (No note or explanation.)

Just a simple ring, round and ready for the next fool.

-Linda Haag-Hipel

Dear Dad

Dear Dad I'm so happy these days even when the worst
happens. My truck blew up, sort of, and I didn't.

Michael exploded when the T.V. gave out, and I found the patience
to comfort him.

We had our first frozen night and discovered our furnace on
strike, I merely called the repair man.

Michaels' car desperately requires four new tires and our savings
account is dwindling, but I'm as bright as a new set of halogens.

Dad, I get the feeling this happiness is short lived so I will
say goodbye until I have more good news to share.

--Cheryl Romantz

Changes

Plus ca change
Plus c'est la meme chose

The World Book Encyclopedia has this to say about war: "Wars have always caused great suffering and hardship. Most people hate war .... " Tom Anderson was like most people. He hated war.

But what that edition of *The World Book Encydopedia* forgets to mention about war is that during one, people are supposed to be blood and guts patriots. During a war, invasions and battles are good. War protects us. Our boys are protecting us. During a war people don't hate war, they thank God they're Americans!

During this war Tom's patriotism wasn't acting like it should. Being a priest had nothing to do with it, though. He just felt war was wrong--or at least not right. It was that simple, just a feeling. He certainly never did anything foolish like go to secret meetings or read subversive propaganda. And because what Tom felt was so simple, it hardly ever bothered him. But if other people had known how he felt, it would have caused him all sorts of trouble. During this was draft dodgers, political activists and even casual pacifists were very unpopular people. That was the hard part: not telling anyone--not even the other priests. It was a secret that would've ended his career.

Tom's eyes were what fooled most people; he had the soft grey eyes of a Husky puppy. Simply by looking people in the eyes, Tom was given the warmth and trust that, normally, are only given to "man's best friend." And besides his eyes, he had an honest face, the kind of face that look like it'd have Norman Rockwell's signature hidden somewhere on the cheek. Tom so desperately wanted people's respect, he did what he could to highlight his innocence: he had the hair style of a man twice his age; he wore the same kind of wire frame glasses as his father; and even though it was no longer required, Tom always wore the customary black.

When the older priests looked at Tom, he wanted them to see a man dressed in the same, conservative fashion of thirty years ago. No doubt, thirty years ago was a magical time--it was a time of morality and dignity. (Ineptitude and skepticism were products of the younger generations.) It was a time when religion still had its place in society, and it was a time when a priest was someone respected. This magical time, Tom knew, was easy for them to remember; it was when they had been young like him. In a way, he was the stone they used to sculpt their memories. And like the plain stone that somehow becomes more beautiful--their innocence somehow became his. So when they looked al him, they saw more than his naked self, they saw an age purified of its faults and evils, an age perfect in its state of nostalgia.

Right now, Tom was with Bishop Algardi. "Tom," the bishop said to him, "say'a da prayer." The bishop was obviously surprised. His old, thick eyebrows were arched like the wings of a cartoon bird in flight. For seven years Tom had listened to the bishop as if his every word were divinely sanctioned, and now, suddenly, the young priest wanted to challenge him. For no real reason it seemed.

Tom needed to explain himself, but "no real reason" is hard to explain to a man like the bishop. Tom frantically searched for something to say, something that would both maintain his image and get him out of saying the prayer. But his mind was like an overloaded electrical circuit. His thoughts kept tripping over themselves. They

They ran wildly, jumping without discretion from one side of his brain to the next. Then his stomach took up the rhythm. It jumped around like Tom had swallowed a pair of angry squirrels. His body just wasn't used to this kind of tension. Finally he offered, "This simply isn't the kind of thing I want to say to that boy's family."

The bishop told him, "Dat's not'a good enough." Tom knew it wouldn't be. The bishop had always been a man of absolutes; things were up or down, black or white, good or bad, alpha or omega. A thing you wouldn't have guessed by looking at him. You see, in the last few years his elderly body had taken a less than absolute shape. Wrinkles had collapsed the smooth dignity of his face. Grey, as well, had overtaken the light brown in his hair, and his weight had grown close to two hundred pounds.

Still, Tom felt like a child when he was in the same room as the bishop. It was a feeling the bishop's dark and wooden office intensified. The bishop was sitting behind his desk, shaking his head at Tom's answer. It was the impassive and dominating pose that most upwardly mobile executives would sell their souls for. And the way the sunlight was shining on the bookshelf behind him, he seemed to wear a bright halo of knowledge. For a brief moment Bishop Algardi could've been mistaken for the Socratic ideal of authority.

But then he clicked his dentures into place. Tom's skin crawled. In the same way that some people bite their nails or rub their eyebrows when they talk, Bishop Algardi would unconsciously push his dentures with his thumb. Tom found the habit very peculair, very noticeable and very annoying. Spittle squirting between Bishop Algardi's gums and false teeth was like someone dragging his fingernails across a chalkboard. But every man has habits, and his dentures was only one of the bishop's. Another was his accent. Always, the bishop spoke with an Italian accent when he wanted to exercise his authority.

Bishop Algardi was using that accent now. He said, "Dis is'a important for one'a simple reaon: so much'a publicity has'a gone into his'a funeral. Dat boy is'a da first war hero from 'round'a here. My God'a, people are so caught up'a in'a da war right now, dey're even flying da flags at halfa-mast."

"Sure," Tom said, "but why can't.. .. " Try again, he thought. "I think a religious ceremony would be more appropriate."

"You'a already know why, Tom. Because'a da First Amendment. Everybody's gonna' be listening to'a what'a we have to say about'a his'a death." The bishop was talking about the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. It says, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion ...."

Just before the was started, a group of atheists had protested that the words "In God We Trust" on America's money infringed upon their constitutional rights. They didn't believe in God so they shouldn't have to carry money that said they trusted in him; the Constitution said so. The Supreme Court agreed. The church fought the case fiercely, and in the end, walked away with a lot of bitter feelings. Since then, people treated the church much like they would an old ball player, one who hangs on to his career too long.

When the bishop was silent Tom tried a different approach, "I'd rather talk about Heaven or why God took his life." Tom's voice was precise, sharp, and quick. It seemed metallic, more like a tape recording than his real voice. But he was nervous, and everything seemed unreal--like he wasn't a part of what was happening.

Then the bishop was silent, painfully silent. In that brief moment, Tom could feel every cell of blood rushing through his body. Millions of tiny red cells echoing through his head with the pressure and urgency of end-of-the-day traffic. One by one they pushed through him carrying the energy of his anticipation. Partly to release that tension,

and partly to know what the bishop was thinking, he tested, "Bishop?"

In his accent the bishop simply said, "Read'a it."

Tom's energy collapsed on his body. His shoulders sagged, his stomach dropped, and his face fell. Tom had never thought the talk with Bishop Algradi would go so badly. Sure he was nervous, but it should still work--if only because he was trying. Through his disappointment Tom made several other suggestions: I can say it in my own words, I can paraphrase your sermon, I can say it without that prayer, and others. But each time, Bishop Algardi's reply was the same: "Read'a it."

Tom left the office wondering what went wrong. He sat in his car thinking: Why had Bishop Algardi been so resolute? How could he make me look so ridiculous? Does he think I'm anti-American? Out came his pack of cigarettes. Already he felt that he was playing church politics.

He felt bad that he needed to smoke. He'd been planning to give up smoking, but he needed something to take away the ache his adrenaline had left behind. At least he didn't crave a drink. For the last six or seven weeks he'd been hitting the alcohol pretty hard. It was never much, a drink or two at night--but it had been every night. And sometimes it was three or four. At first it was no big deal, then came the fear, am I addicted? am I an alcoholic? So despite this afternoon's stress, he was going to avoid alcohol. Besides, his bottle of Scotch was empty.

He took a long drag off his cigarette, then started the engine of the old parish car. Grudgingly, he merged with the busy traffic.

The Townhouse was a simple bar, but it had character: it was the oldest building in town. Other than that, the only interesting thing about the bar was that around the turn of the century, it wad frequented by a little-known and unpublished poet. His name was Jeffrey Morrow. *The World Book Encyclopedia* has nothing to say about Jeffrey Morrow. That mans the most exciting thing about the Townhouse was its character.

The bar was full of character. It hadn’t changed much during its hundred years or so. The booths were still massive things, dark wooden seats that curled up and around the patrons. The walls had once been white-washed, but through the years posters, beer displays, front pages of newspapers, photographs, hunting trophies, even one of Jeffrey Morrow’s poems had all gathered to cover the walls, making the place look like it’d been done by Andy Warhol before he discovered Campbell’s soup labels. Tom didn’t go to the bar for its atmosphere, though; to him it wasn’t important. Usually, he went there to meet a friend and enjoy a little conversation. Tonight he was there for just one drink and to forget how badly this day was going.

The owner of the Townhouse, Mike, was the one getting his drink. He was a heavy-set man who moved a little too slowly for Tom. No matter how busy the Townhouse was, Mike always seemed to plod from one end to the other like a bored dog.

So while Tom waited for his drink he turned his attention to the people in the bar. Like a kid reading a cereal box in the morning, Tom tried passing the time by watching the other customers. The Townhouse wasn’t a bar for back-slapping drinkers or people who wanted to be noticed. If people had drinks in their hands, they blended with the rest of the bar’s trimmings.

In one booth was a man and a woman. Their heads were bowed over the

table and their voices were soft and low like a humming fan. It was their apparent secrecy that piqued Tom's curiosity. He imagined they were characters from an Updike novel. An affair in this small town would have been so like Updike. He wondered how Updike would have described them. And what they had to go through to meet. How they chose this time and place. What they told their spouses. Tom imagined the couple trying to hold hands under the table and burning to kiss one another. And beneath these thoughts, Tom could feel a strange sense of envy tunneling its way around.

Across the room two young men were shooting pool. They looked just old enough to be in the bar, and the way they leaned on their cue sticks and the way they held their beer glasses showed how proud they were to be there. It was likely that they were just as drunk on the bar's atmosphere as the alcohol. College students Tom Guessed. And they were laughing in a happy, I've-got-life-licked laugh. From such a distance Tom could only guess at their joke: they were probably recalling their professor's half-baked interpretation of *Catcher in the Rye.* Tom envied them too. He couldn't guess why: their youth, their joy, or mayb etheir companionship. But suddenly, the two looked up and saw him staring at them. He was intruding.

Ashamed at being so obvious, he turned away. And his drink still wasn't ready. So Tom went to pick up the day's paper--anything to be less conspicuous. He knew he could get one. For years there had been a vending machine filled with *The Tri-City Times* next to the Townhouse's front door.

Tom felt close to *The Times*. Not because it was the only paper in town, but because it had always been a part of his life. His scrap book was filled with clippings from *The Times:* his high school graduation, his ordination, his father's obituary, the war.

Tom pulled the change out of his pocket and poked through it. As he did so, one coin made a “chink” distinct from the others. It was making that unique sound an old coin makes, the sound of an older, purer alloy. He found the coin, a quarter. Washington's profile was worn to nothing more than a silhouette and the notches around its perimeter were almost gone. Although it was almost illegible, the coin still had the “In God We Trust” logo. That meant the coin was from a happier time, a time before this lousy war and all the problems it had brought. Tom looked at date. At first it seemed strange that a coin so young could be so worn; it had been minted the same year Tom was born. That was only thirty-five years ago.

He got his paper, and then it sunk in. Thirty-five years. Three and a half decades. Almost half his life.

He needed his drink. Tom went back to the bar where Mike stood holding his drink. “Thanks,” Tom said and dropped some money in front of him. When his change was handed back to him, Tom asked, “See this paper, Mike?”

Mike pursed his big lips and nodded.

“You know, the first money I earned was peddling *The Times*.” Tom tried to remember what his life was like before this war, before he was troubled by decisions. He took a long drink. “I was fourteen. Papers were still a dime back then. God, I don’t know how I ever made any money at it. Sometimes I wonder why I ever did it.”

He looked into the glass of liquor. “Maybe it was because it made me feel important. Carrying papers makes a kid feel important, you know. People count on you. I mean adults, they count on you to have their paper there every day.”

He took another drink. "But it makes a kid feel small too. Carrying that big bag door-to-door.... Sundays drink were the worst. I must have looked like something out of a comic book lugging all those folded newspapers.

Tom looked up from his drink. He looked at Mike's face and saw the same patient expression that people wore to his church on Sundays. It made Tom feel like he was giving a homily. He ordered another Scotch to shake the feeling. Talking was making him feel better, and he wanted an interested audience.

"I gave it up when I was seventeen," he said when Mike began moving. "I must have been the oldest paperboy ever. But I didn't hit puberty till seventeen. God, that was an awkward time" This last he said to the bartender's back. Mike was facing the huge mirrirs that hung over the bar, taking the Scotch from the long line of bottles. "Everyone I knew had already gone through it, so I was all alone. There wasn't anyone I could talk to. Everything was a terrible secret back then: the curly hair, the deep voice, the quick desire. But I was so proud; I wasn't a boy anymore--I was a man."

Mike handed Tom the fresh drink and took away the empty glass.

Again to Mike's back, Tom asked "You know what I did to prove it? I mean that I was a man. This is funny--1 mean really funny: I got mail. Every day I'd walk down from my parents' apartment to the mailbox in the lobby. Those four flights of stairs were my daily rite of passage." Mike immersed Tom's dirty glas in a sink of dishwater. After a few swirls, he pulled the dripping glass out and began wiping it dry. He turned and listened to Tom, screwing a white cloth into the glass's bottom. Tom said, "I proved I was a man every time I received mail. Like my father, and my grandfather, and God knows who else, I was someone important because I was someone with an address, someone receiving mail.

"And this is the really funny part: to make sure there would be mail for me, to make sure there would be proof of my manhood, I mailed away for everything: brochures, catalogs, coupons and all sorts of free samples--no matter how useless. I gave my mother more little bottles of fabric softener than she could ever use. All that was important was that I got something in the mail."

Three businessmen came in and stood at the bar. They were dressed in suits, but their ties had been loosened and their jackets removed.

"To climb four flights of stairs with a thick stack of mail made me a feast for all eyes," Tom went on. Sarcasm blotched his memory like graffiti. "I walked up the stairs two at a time for chrissake. No one would have guessed I was seventeen: I was too skinny and my arms were too long on these really square shoulders. I probably looked more like a puppy that's still growing into its feet, or maybe a half-stuffed, gangling scarecrow. I tried to look important carrying the mail, but it was more like comic book pride." Tom snorted at the image, "More cartoons--funny, isn't it. This freshly shaved chin stuck way out." Tom tried to show Mike just how funny it was by sticking out his chin.

But Mike was giving him a smile that looked like it'd come out of his back pocket. At the same time he glanced over to where the businessmen had gathered around a bowl of peanuts. Mike's expression was his I've-got-work-to-do smile. So Tom looked down into his glass, and Mike went over to the men.

Without his audience Tom had nothing to do but listen to what the businessmen were saying. At first it was just bar talk: gas mileage, baseball standings, and golf scores. But after they got their drinks, their conversation soon drifted on to their

work, an account whose name they never mentioned. The one doing most of the talking had a thick moustache. He drank his beer in big gulps, and foam kept getting caught on the whiskers.

By then Tom's forehead was beginning to feel warm with Scotch, and his thoughts were just beginning to trip over otherwise easy mental connections. As if to compensate, other ideas started going together for no apparent reason. When the man with the moustache spoke, his voice was bloated with concentration and his throat constricted with intensity. He reminded Tom of Bishop Algardi. While Tom watched him speak, the words seemed to come from his moustache rather than his mouth. Then they were coming from the bowels of America, from a great tradition of whiskers and beer. It was like watching a dead president speak. Tom remembered Algardi's dentures in the same way.

Tom shook the image from his mind and tried to put the day into perspective. It was like taking a Rorschach test. At first it was just a black blotch of events, then slowly everything started to make sense.

There was a reason he had been so stubborn with the bishop, a reason his memories seemed so empty: he was thirty-five years old and he hadn't done anything significant with his life. The dreams he had as a seminarian were beginning to seem out of reach. He remembered wanting to leave his mark on the diocese, wanting to be someone whom people would remember. He didn't want to some day look back at his life and realize he did nothing but play church politics. As a seminarian, this was reasonable, if not expected. But things had changed. Days go by, weeks go by, so do months and years. And then suddely you're well past thrity and nothing's been accomplished.

Now was the perfect opportunity to prove that he could still do something with his life. Maybe standing up to the bishop was an unconscious effort to live up to his old ideal. He didn't believe in this war, at least he didn't feel comfortable endorsing it. Besides that prayer really did border on sacrilegious.

Yes, he thought, that's it.

Slowly, his self-worth returned. He'd done things like this before: stood firm against peer pressure, said "no" to his parents, and refused to pay for bad service. Compared to this, though, they were candles to a sixty-watt bulb. This challenge had major social and political repercussions. He looked at the people in the bar again. The secretive couple, the laughing students, and the intense businessmen all, no doubt, had their problems. But none of theirs could be as important as his was. Finally, he was more than a weaselly thirty-five-year-old. He was special. Just sitting there was like being on stage for a second encore. In a fit of quixotic heroism Tom felt a problem this big should be worked out alone. So he paid Mike for a fifth of Scotch and left.

With one quick motion, he philosophically spun the cap off the brown bottle. Scotch poured into his glass, the color of rust-tinted water, the color of Nietzsche-stained thought. He took a drink before he replaced the cap. For a moment his eyes closed. Then he reopened the bottle and shook out the last few drops. He held the bottle in the palm of his hand. Perhaps yesterday he would have called the empty bottle "a dead soldier."

Not today. Not now.

He went over to the phone, and dialed the number. Through the lines he heard the phone ringing, then the sound of dentures smacking. It was the bishop. "Tom," he said, "I'm glad you called. I tried to get hold of you earlier, but you weren't home. There was no sign of the old man's accent. "Now I know it's late, but would you like to come over for dinner? Sister Margaret wouldn't cook the roast until it thawed, and it's too big for just the two of

us."

But Tom wasn't listening to the bishop; only the sound of his voice came through. Granted, it was a pleasant voice, especially without the bad accent. It was the wrinkled voice of a man wizened with age. But, suddenly, it was a wisdom for which Tom held no regard, a wisdom in which he had no interest. The voice aggravated him; the bishop's stale pleasantries were delaying him. Already the phone was slippery in his hand. All evening he'd been preparing to stand up to the bishop. He'd rehearsed what he'd say and exactly how he'd put it, his reputation be damned.

The speech was dynamic and effervescent in his mind, but when Tom spoke, only its echo came out. What he said was flat and incomplete, "I can't give your sermon."

The bishop clicked his dentures into place a second time. He said with an obvious patience, "I see. I'm'a sorry to hear'a dat, Tom. Still, you'll'a have to'a read'a it. Dere's no'a oder way."

Tom hung up. This wasn't working. Tom had expected Bishop Algardi to see how important this was to him. He thought the bishop would see it as an importnat step in Tom's becoming a strong spiritual leader. On reasoning like this, Tom had built himself up to the point where he couldn't accept Algradi's flat denial.

The phone began to ring. As he listened to the first, second, then fifth and ninth rings, Tom knew he hadn't answered the question by hanging up on the bishop. It wasn't going to leave him that easily: should he read the bishop's sermon at the funeral--and especially that prayer? He glanced over the homily. Tom knew for whom the bishop's prayers were really intended. He tried to guess how the boy's family would he react. Would they be victims too? Emotional martyrs of the church?

The sermon began nobly enough.

General MacArthur wrote this prayer during World War II:

Build me a son, O Lord, who will be strong enough to know when he is weak and brave enough to face himself when he is afraid; one who will be proud and unbending in honest defeat, and humble and gentle in vidory.

Build me a son whose wishes will not take the place of deeds; a son who will know Thee-and that to know himself is the foundation stone of knowledge.

Lead him, I pray, not in the path of ease and comfort, but under the stress and spur of difficulties and challenge. Here let him learn to stand up in the storm; here let him team compassion for those who fall.

Build me a son whose heart will be clear, whose goal will be high, a son who will master himself before he seeks to master other men, one who will reach into the future, yet never forget the past.

And after all these things are his, add, I pray, enough of a sense of humor, so that he may always be serious, yet never take himself too serious. Give him humility, so that he may always remember the simplicity of true greatness, the open mind of true wisdom, and the meekness of true strength.

Then I, his father, will dare to whisper, “I have not lived in vain.”

MacArthur’s prayer is one for this boy’s parents. They have not lived in vain .... The Good Lord built them a son. A son, like MacArthur asks, who did not let

his personal desires “take the place of deeds.” He served his country when it called him.

The homily continued with talk about establishing justice, insuring domestic tranquility, promoting the general welfare, and securing the blessings of liberty. About heroes and patriots. About Christians. And finally about how all these things were one in the death of a boy.

The phone began ringing again.

Tom was putting off the decision. He began to realize that. He also knew the longer he waited, the more likely his pride and ego would be replaced by his desire to keep the bishop happy.

It was pointless. He’d just say the... No he wouldn’t. That was just giving to him. Maybe he should take a stand and say his own sermon. Sure, vicious words would fly the next morning, but after a week or two the whole thing would be loose change in their memories.

But if it’s so easily forgotten, why fight the bishop? Was this really all that important? What would he be sacrificing?

The smell of his cologne was getting to Tom. He’d been wearing Old Spice for years, but at the moment, it really disgusted him. It was time for another cigarette. And like the burning tobacco, his self-resped drifted slowly away. It circulated through the room, seeped into the furniture, found its way into Tom’s clothes; it even stained his flesh. Tomorrow morning he would reek of stale cigarettes and forced humility. Politics, he thought.

-Ron Sielinski