The Massachusetts Review, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Summer, 1992), pp. 221-257

Blanche Cooney

In My Own Sweet Time

My parents, two young immigrants, met on New York City's Lower East Side, the Eastern European Jews' ghetto. My mother, Betty, was born in Romania. My father, Joe, in Russia. They had to overcome old tribal antagonism (Russians are crude and earthy; Romanians are subtle and sensitive) and their very different ideas of a track out of the ghetto. For Betty it was Education, the arts; truth, Democracy, Equal Rights. Joe's track was well marked and yes crude and earthy: Money, and everything that followed in this land of limitless possibility.

I was their first born. Growing up in New York City, within the marriage of amoral Joe and idealistic Betty, I had to submit to childhood, that helpless condition. I was always in training, in earliest memory I was an apprentice adult. It was not unusual for children to be included, or overlooked, among grown-ups, so there I was, in innocent disguise, picking up signals, deciphering inflections, interpreting hints and allusions.

When I was six, Joe and Betty's last child was born; now I had a brother and a sister. The family was complete, and falling apart. The more prosperous Joe, the more unhappy Betty. By the time I was fifteen I was a seasoned traveler in the burrows and byways of New York, on my own, wearing the shield of a wise city child.

I DIDN'T HAVE A CHANCE to use my key to our apartment on the twelfth floor of the old building on 92nd Street, my brother heard the elevator and had the door open. "It's good you got here," Paul whispered. "Mother's all wound up, the Slug and the Thug are coming." He was excited, he tried to look serious but his eyes were shining: tonight he would be in touching distance of the underworld, yet safe in his own home. I slipped out of my coat, made a stern face, and said, "Then behave, little brother!" He was my loving follower, my co-conspirator, keeper of the selective secrets I confided. "Is that you, Blanche?" my mother called. I followed her voice to the kitchen. She was intently arranging canapés on a tray. She

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

surveyed the effect, wiped her hands on a tea towel, and to the maid, Alice, she said, "Put the dinner plates in the warming oven, please." Her voice lowered. "I'm glad you're home at last. What kept you?" She didn't wait for an answer, she wouldn't believe me anyway. "Dad's bringing Lepke Buchalter. Aunt Magda is here, she's staying to dinner. Oh, and that man who's always with him—." "Jake Shapiro." "Yes. So there will be eight, will you check the table, Alice is new, I must light the candles"—all this in her Friday night voice of tight control. "I'll change," I said.

But first, Aunt Magda. She was in the living room, no womanly congress in kitchens for her. She sat in the big wing chair, smoking one of her Sobranie cigarettes, always held between thumb and forefinger; composed, erect, a large woman with gold gleaming hair and a Titan's face. She did not need distractions, she sat alone, thinking, smoking, probably reviewing her stories for a new audience. Aunt Magda had many talents, but the one I thought most impressive was her eloquence as a story teller. And her tenacity. She could sense the receptive ear in an assembly of guests. She would then sit patiently, let the sounds of small talk go on about her while she imitated interest, listening for a phrase, an idea, that she could pull out of the air and attach to a tale she had ready. If she said "Let me tell you a story," she didn't really mean "Will you allow me." No one could stop her. She wove such a tangle of Hasidic tales, gnomic sayings, Talmudic parables, and shtetl folklore, slipped so imperceptibly from one to the next, that her innocent listener, at first hypnotically held, sat on helplessly, eyes glazing. I thought to tell Aunt Magda there would be no receptive ear tonight. She had never met Lepke.

"Blanche darling," she greeted me in her Eastern European accent, affection and approval in the timbre of her voice, in her ageless dark eyes. I kissed her cheek. Aunt Magda had a faint herbal aura, her embrace to the few she allowed the intimacy of closeness. One more way she held herself distinct from the aunts and great aunts who were given to easy touching and hugging. "I've missed you," I said. I loved her. "Oh, I have been here. Two or three times this week—but you were never home." If there was reproach it was merely formal, an echo caught from my mother. Aunt Magda and I were in unspoken sympathy: for independence, against domesticity; for the life of the mind, for

This content downloaded from 192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ranging the universe. Even when I was very young, she did not condescend. I sat by her side, she talked to me gravely; she seemed always to have time. "You are someone special," she said that once, and I never forgot it. She had such authority. Tonight she adorned the room, Aunt Magda did, and it complemented her, with its rich subdued colors and silk upholstery and oriental rugs. She made her clothes, mysteriously simple coverings for her ample body, in fabrics that seemed to be woven for her alone, background for her gold and diamond antique jewels. My mother told me that not long ago, for a great occasion, Aunt Magda cut a length from a bolt of mosaically intricate brocade, wound it round her body, secured it with pins in strategic places, and sailed triumphantly out for the evening.

My mother needed her Aunt Magda, her calm detachment provided a net when my mother's balance was perilous, when she wanted to shriek, tear her hair, run away. They spoke Romanian in these bad times, my mother's voice broken, weeping. Aunt Magda was stern, but she didn't know all my father's excesses. My mother had too much respect for Aunt Magda, she couldn't bring herself to talk of the bold women, oh, there was more than one; morality, fidelity, true love, had no meaning for them. They would destroy a woman's life, ruin a family. She was silent. She knew Aunt Magda's disapproval of women who aired private pain. "He's a successful business man, a good provider, a good father," she would remind my mother. "You lack for nothing, you have a beautiful home, a maid," and, irrefutably, she would say, "he's a *man*."

I heard the elevator door roll on its track. "Here they are, Aunt Magda. I promised to help—." My father and his friends were in the door, heavy, deliberate bodies shrugging out of heavy dark overcoats. My mother welcoming, quiet, smiling; tense, tense. My father brushed her cheek, presented the weekly ritual purple tin of Sherry's chocolates. He didn't look at her, and her graciousness was wasted on the visitors. Lepke said, "Glad I could come," but there was no gladness in that man. He was the Slug. Colorless, and concealing venom. Jake simply followed his master.

I never saw my father during the week though he came home every night. Another anomaly, like his faithful appearance for this Sabbath dinner. He came home at all hours in the morning, and he was asleep when I left for school. Something between

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

us had changed. I was no longer afraid of him. I thought he was waiting for me to surprise him, beyond his indulgence I imagined wariness. I kissed my father, I kept my distance in greeting the visitors: I would not shake those hands. I went on to my room and closed the door. My room, a haven in this oppressive place. It was bare and functional. There was a bay window across the east wall with a wide deep-silled window seat, a studio couch covered in black and white, a black lacquer chest. My books and prints, my drafting table. Everything in my room was an intentional statement: the bourgeois accretion in the rest of the apartment had nothing to do with me. I was seventeen, I couldn't wait to leave. I changed quickly. I replaced the framed charcoal portrait of Lenin my mother took off my wall each morning after I left for art school. Ridiculous routine.

My mother said her prayer over the Sabbath candles with only my brother, our younger sister, and myself sitting silently by. On this night, while Aunt Magda and the men were engaged in their talk and their apéritifs, my mother brought the heavy silver candlesticks from the sideboard to the table. She stood above them, bowed her head, and covered her face with her hands. She seemed to gather all her hope for the transformation of her life in the silence. I caught her lips move, just a tremor, in her private address to the Lord. Did she recite only the Sabbath prayer, or did she add more, a cry for help? The candles shed their beneficent glow equally on the festive table, on the despair of her supplicating figure, and on the faces of her children watching her. When her prayer was over, she took her hands from her face and raised her eyes and looked at us as though she had been away. She whispered "Gut Shabbas" and we answered in subdued chorus "Gut Shabbas."

The guests were summoned and dinner was served. Aunt Magda took her place at my father's right. A sense of queenly ceremony attended even her ordinary movement; a wise queen, who suffered her subjects' foolishness with patience. She liked my father. She regretted his crudeness, but that after all was an essential part of his vitality. And he, he couldn't say why, sought her good opinion. In some hidden place, beneath his braggadocio, he may even have feared her. He softened his dark eyes for her, unfurrowed his brow; his voice sounded rare deference. He carved for her the first choice cut of roast beef. He filled her glass, he attentively passed her favorite dishes.

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Opposite my father, the long table between them, my mother sat with a straight back and an amiable mask: a handsome matron in costly clothes. Who could see the poetic Romany beauty that was surely dying within her? She maintained a discreet vigilance over the table; it was a splendid table, the silver heavy, the glasses thin. She rang the bell for Alice between courses, encouraged her with a smile. She turned her attention to her guests. She did her best, but I could see that after friendly inquiry about his wife's health and his son's schooling, and no help from the laconic Lepke, she retreated. Jake was hopeless, restricted to monosyllables, he ate steadily and rarely raised his eyes from his plate. Uneasy with these men at her table, she avoided thinking about their connection with my father. She trusted him not to jeopardize the family. It must be all right. But why did Lepke travel with a bodyguard? A cousin who knew the Buchalters twenty years ago on the Lower East Side told her Lepke's mother was a decent widow, orthodox, and strict with her children. They were a credit to her: one son was a dentist, a daughter taught school.

Lepke was undoubtedly successful, a very rich man with a fortune in Swiss banks. He lived on Central Park West in the Majestic apartments, his office was on Fifth Avenue. He was always driven in a long black gleaming limousine. His suits and shoes and shirts were custom made, he was impeccably barbered. He took the waters in Carlsbad, the pure air in Sun Valley; a taste of Latin vice in Batista's Havana. He was even tempered, soft-spoken, sober, and so imperturbable he was known as The Judge. No one was sure if Lepke was a racketeer, a gambler, or a gangster. Once when I was alone with my father I thought I might surprise the truth. My father told me Lepke was a business executive, that the newspapers lied as usual when they named his enterprises Murder Incorporated. "Lepke never held a gun, he never killed anyone. All lies. It is not in his nature to be violent." "What *is* his business?" My father, who was usually direct, who prided himself on his bluntness, was evasive. "Manufacturers' Protective Association." Silence. I waited. When he spoke again his voice was low. "We go way back—." They were boys on the East Side. Boys on the East Side, where, the newspapers said, Lepke twisted the arms of push-cart peddlers who would not pay him "protection" against the pilfering bands of boys who were also organized by Lepke.

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Evil had greater horror in a domestic setting. Lepke, seated at our family table, bland, almost colorless, was more menacing than a fanged monster in a Gothic castle. Why was he in my father's life? My father wouldn't tell me. He defended Lepke against the "lies," but beneath his defense I heard: I'm sorry I got into this. I wish I could get out. When the syndicate Lepke organized had seized control of trucking and shipping, and moved into the garment industry, it was useful for Lepke to have an old friend among the manufacturers. A legitimate business man. My father could persuade the other men in the industry to pay the protection tithe demanded by the syndicate. There were many marginal, first generation, undercapitalized "bosses" engaged in the struggle to increase profits and keep down wages. They would gain protection from the unions, and their threat of costly strikes. How did my father describe the penalty for noncompliance? Would he say "These guys play rough. Save yourself a lot of grief—." If a recalcitrant businessman said "No! I won't pay those scum," would he remind him sadly of what happened to Schonberg? Two men with hard faces, walking fast, pushed through the crowds on Seventh Avenue and Thirty Eighth Street, and reached Schonberg as he was about to step into the taxi waiting to take him home. One man held him, the other threw acid in his face. Schonberg screamed, convulsively covered his eyes, and pitched forward into the cab, blinded for a moment, and blinded for life. The men disappeared into the crowd and returned to Detroit that night.

The syndicate's monthly levy on a business was only the first part of the equation. If a man paid for protection, he needed to be made regularly aware of its value. A union official, on the syndicate payroll, would warn the manufacturer that the members of Local 12, the Local his workers belonged to, were restless, dissatisfied, threatening to strike. The union official might be able to dissuade them. Doubtful, but he would try. For fifty thousand dollars he would try. This, he pointed out, would be far cheaper than the loss his business would suffer in a walkout, just at the height of the season. The pressure was firm, the manufacturer capitulated. The syndicate's coffers swelled. But the unions were growing strong and aggressive, "upstarts" did not trust the leadership, "hotheads" agitated. They were "too smart for their own good" and then "too dumb to live." Reprisal was swift. The police were never able to find who left a bruised and broken body in a doorway near the union hall.

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Betty, Joe, and Blanche, Manhattan, 1920

Blanche and Betty, Manhattan, 1921

Jimmy, Woodstock, 1935

Blanche and Jimmy, West Whately, 1945

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

I could think my father's sin was venial, his role insignificant, a courier perhaps. And my father could say that Lepke's methods were only different in degree from the uses of power anywhere. But my father was cynical, and he was a "boss," the natural adversary of the working man. Lepke couldn't really corrupt him. The assault on the unions was different. We contributed, my friends and I, to strike funds. We marched in the May Day parade with the Artists Union. The support of labor unions was basic. A just society would honor its workers. It was hard to imagine the depravity of a man like Lepke who would use workers' organizations for criminal ends. Last year our elevator men went out on strike. In sympathy I used the stairs for the twelve flight climb, I wouldn't ride with scabs. My father was impatient with my innocence. "Do you know who runs the Building Services Union?" "No." "George Scalise." I knew he was one of Lepke's men. "And do you know who supplies the scab labor?" I was not too innocent to guess.

Radical journals, even the conventional press, ran exposés on organized crime. I pooled my findings with my brother, he contributed his clues gleaned from time he reluctantly spent with Lepke's son. Harold was a solitary, a pale boy with weak eyes. His idea of swank was to call the head barber in the shop at the Waldorf by name, seat himself with the assurance of a regular patron, and order shampoo, massage, hot towels, manicure. He did not yet need to be shaved, to his sorrow. My brother offered me a piece for our puzzle. "Harold says Muggsy's in town." Harold longed to interest us. "Muggsy?" Sounds like one of Snow White's dwarfs. It wasn't funny. Muggsy was probably a Kansas City "torpedo," here to fill a "contract" put on a rival in the syndicate's territory. We watched the newspapers for reports of a body found in the river, or in the trunk of an abandoned car. Lepke himself was never involved. He steered clear of narcotics. And Internal Revenue violations. If he was brought in for questioning, his tough resourceful lawyers and political connections allowed him to walk nonchalantly away from the District Attorney's office. "We don't run for office. We own the politicians." My brother overheard that after one failed attempt to link Lepke to a bloody vendetta. And "All investigations collapse when no witnesses are around."

Aunt Magda was uninterested in the conversation. What did

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

she care about the relative merits of Twenty One and The Hickory House or the odds on the heavyweight fight at Madison Square Garden. She wanted to impose herself on this man of dark repute. Aunt Magda looked at Lepke in her calm, steady gaze; she fixed her eye on his receding hairline. She said, "You know, Mr. Buchalter, I think you are too young, and too handsome a man to lose your hair." "Not so young. I won't see forty again." He was complacent, his vanity was elsewhere, but he awarded her a faint smile. He was certainly not handsome, Aunt Magda was not above a casual lure to change the focus of the company. She persisted. She was genuinely distressed by the sight of a balding man. In her hotel apartment she had improvised a tiny laboratory. There she concocted, from unmentionable ingredients some said, fabulous hair lotions, face creams, eye unguents; she was on the verge of developing a cure for cancer. "I have a preparation I make, Mr. Buchalter," she told Lepke in her deep assured voice, "that will not only stop your hair from falling out, it will grow new hair." She had his attention, there was the barest flicker in his cold eyes. He glanced at my father. Was she to be taken seriously? "It's true, Louis." In this occult area of Aunt Magda 's potions, my father, a reluctant believer, earnestly used Lepke's anglicized name. "We had a Polish maid—Helen. Not a hair on her head. Wore a wig." He evoked the departed Helen and her dreadful wig: auburn, coarse hair, stitched down the center, bun in back. "She worked in a watch factory over in Jersey. Got radium poisoning, lost all her hair. Her husband left her." He surprised me. I didn't know he was sorry for Helen. "She took a job with us. Then Magda gave her some of that hair lotion"—he rapped the table—"and the damn stuff worked!"

I knew my mother would not, could not, resist this opening. The guests at the table, and my father the genial host, made her brave, assured her "safe conduct." "Yes," she said, "and her husband came back to her." She was deaf to my silent "Mother! Stop." She addressed Lepke, averted her eyes from my father, ignored the warning glance from Aunt Magda. "He begged her to forgive him. She told me he is as attentive now as when he first courted her." My father sighed. He asked me to pass the salad.

My mother heard the sigh. In that breath expelled he told her she had grown tiresome. Ineffective. Embarrassing. Where

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

was her pride, I thought. Why did she collaborate in this charade of family life. "What can I do—I have three small children—." Ever since words had meaning for me, when I loved her without reservation, I heard that cry. When her eyes were still lustrous, and she could laugh, and they had fervent reconciliations. Now I could neither witness nor help. I would not be drawn in, I wanted to get far away from their struggle.

Some years later an ambitious New York district attorney indicted and secured the ultimate conviction for Lepke Buchalter. Sentenced to be electrocuted, he was held in a Federal Detention Center before being sent to Sing Sing. The poet Robert Lowell, a WWII conscientious objector, was also held there. "What are you in for?" Lepke asked Lowell. "I refused to kill. I refused to join the army," answered Lowell. Lepke shook his head, "I'm here for killing, and you're here because you won't—hell of a thing—." And Lowell wrote a poem, "Memories of West Street and Lepke." There was a line that brought back the evening with Aunt Magda : ". . . Flabby, bald . . . he drifted in a sheepish calm."

That was my last Sabbath dinner with the family, the night Aunt Magda the Alchemist met Lepke, Czar of the Underworld.

I met Jimmy in the thirties when he lived in Greenwich Village. He was twenty-seven, an Irish American writer whose first novel had just been accepted by Vanguard on the recommendation of James Farrell. A lapsed Catholic, expelled from the Communist Party for anarchist "tendencies," he was the stranger I didn't know I was looking for. I was seventeen, a radical, an art student, a Russian-Roumanian first generation precociously chic New Yorker, poised to fly my bourgeois Jewish family. We married and I left New York forever. In Woodstock we lived in one of Hervey White's studios, Hervey White a founder of the art colony in upstate New York. Hervey was our landlord who never collected rent; Hervey was our unique patron, an old man who offered no criticism, no advice. With the maelstrom of war and dictatorship growing in the world around us, we decided we must get out of the path of the storm, gather in small agrarian communities in valleys or on hilltops, live in uncompromising pacifism, remote from authority. The rallying point for emigres from a world gone mad would be a quarterly, we would call it The Phoenix*: literary, eclectic, international. Hervey gave us his hand press*

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and type, taught us rudimentary printing, staked us to paper, and The Phoenix *was announced.*

From 1937-40 the messianic fervor of Jimmy's editorials attracted correspondents and contributors in the U.S. and Europe, among them writers with some sympathy but more opportunism, like Henry Miller. He became the European editor and brought Anaïs Nin in with him.

SO MUCH MAIL WAS GENERATED from the announcement of *The Phoenix,* so many manuscripts. The drum beat in the forest was heard in the provinces, in the towns, and in the cities, across the sea; so many ambitious unpublished souls behind every bush, bound to be heard. So many poets! There was enough encouragement, two dollar bills for subscriptions with notes of support, to let Jimmy know there was a readership out there to whom he had a responsibility. And of course he must deal with those manuscripts, writing as honestly as he could, telling the truth, in longhand and helpfully, to cushion rejection. Letters of acceptance were more than that: with praise came an invitation to visit "anytime, we can put you up"; if we had had a telephone he would have called instantly.

He would have called Paris. In Paris, Henry Miller, scanning the heavens for signs useful to him, came on *The Phoenix* announcement. "No doubt the first number is already set up" he wrote. "But if not, if in this first issue you would care to have something from me about Lawrence, I should be glad to contribute. As you have probably never heard of me, I enclose a few leaflets gotten out by my fool publisher in France. All my three books are banned in America and England—."

So began the association with Miller. After a chapter from his Lawrence book was accepted for the first issue of *The Phoenix,* the lead piece, we heard from Miller in every mail. Engaging, irreverent, a sophisticated and disarming hustler: "This morning I am full of oats. I have everything to give and I don't give a fuck about receiving money for it. I want you to have a good time with your magazine and start a little rumpus, set in motion a few air currents, cause an earthquake if possible. Only start something soon! We need you. The program of your magazine sounds good to me."—thus Miller casually salutes *The Phoenix* credo. "I have plenty of material along the lines suggested. That is precisely my forte. And I have at least four staunch and stalwart friends who will feed you incessantly."

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Spread the word, anything to spread the word. Miller's correspondence was prodigious: he followed every lead to the rich, the influential: editors, publishers, critics, in the avant garde or the academy, in Europe or the United States. In his pursuit of patronage and publication even the unfledged *Phoenix* might further his career. To further his career, *The Phoenix* must fly, and so Miller, in Paris, acted not only as conduit for the writings of his "staunch and stalwart" friends, he also sent lists, "certified fertile," of possible subscribers. "And above all," he wrote, "keep in touch with the censor, Mr. Huntington Cairns. He has become a good friend of mine and will help you in many ways. It is not his fault that my books are banned. The law needs to be changed and it may be before long. This is confidential." Jimmy, not the overt opportunist Miller was, nevertheless realized the potential publicity for *The Phoenix* if banned Miller were banned again, and Miller became our European editor.

Who was the trickster, who was using whom: Miller, the wily confidence man in Paris, ready to go through any back door to U.S. publication, or Jimmy with his urgent vision of community, wanting a link with Miller's network in Europe before the world exploded? It was droll, their association. It pleased Miller to believe Jimmy was a cowboy, or roustabout, a Natural; God's fool. He couldn't figure out the drive behind Jimmy's passion, his assurance, his naivete; I knew he didn't really care. But I detected a note of relief when he wrote, in December 1937: "I want to congratulate you on the fine appearance of the prospectus—is that your press? Paper and type excellent. And the contents too. You are doing things in style—I could use a few hundred of these leaflets." No doubt he had braced himself for crude newsprint sprinkled with typos.

Only the press was powered, and only Jimmy ran it. All the work in the print shop that led to the climax of the press run was manual, handmaidenly labor; each step important but without the tension and triumph of the crucial process. I learned to set type in the composing stick, one letter at a time, as fast and as accurately as I could, taking artful care in the spacing between words, even between letters; avoiding widows (an incomplete line at the top of a page) and rivers (a visible trail of white to mar the solid pattern of type). We read galley proofs meticulously, no "happy accidents" for us.

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The print shop was a gathering place, a club house, a forum. The press hums in a golden hive, pollen gathered far away from the Maverick; the baby sleeps in her basket, lulled by the rhythm. Hervey brings visitors to look in, friends appear for an afternoon, a weekend; poets, short story writers: contributors eager to see the source of their first published work. It's so enticing, almost everyone asks "Can I help?" There's the smell of ink, coffee's always on, soup simmers on a hot plate; we're camping in the shop now. Not just anyone can help, we're selective even though it's free and volunteer labor; we learn to weed the casual from the committed, and among the committed, the careless from the precise.

High on a stool by the window, in front of my typestand, I keep an eye on the baby in her pen outdoors. She is warm in her cap and sweater, she is content with her wooden peg toy. I tap the window, wave, she flips her mittened hand, dimples her incredibly rosy cheeks, assured I am close by. I am never not close by. Momentarily I lose my place in the manuscript, I find it, finish the sentence, the last in the type stick, secure it with a lead and remove a third of a page of precariously held type from the stick into the galley tray. Pied type is a hazard but I am a seasoned hand now, supervisor of novices. Take a break, the mail is due; brew another pot of coffee. The baby needs to be fed, and changed, and put to nap.

Somewhere in the day or night I wash baby clothes with water fetched from the well. A bed must be found for a couple up from the city. A table must be cleared for the painter Joseph Pollet to examine the Jean Giono manuscript he may help translate from the French. *Refusal to Obey* it's called, the title itself in the spirit of *The Phoenix*. Joe's daughter Elizabeth, an English major on holiday from Bryn Mawr, sets type at the other stand. A faithful and diligent worker, who will later publish a novel, marry the poet Delmore Schwartz, she adorns the shop with her pale quiet beauty.

Hermes, herald and messenger, was at work. Tidings from France, England, Babylon, the Orient: exciting, wondrous. There is a packet from Anaïs addressed in her unmistakable elegant angular handwriting. The first among Miller's "staunch and stalwart" friends, we had accepted excerpts from her diary, *Mon Journal,* there were reported to be more than fifty volumes so far!, and an essay in appreciation, "Un Etre Étoilique," by

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Miller. In this essay Miller does not mince words: "It is a mythological voyage toward the source and fountainhead of life—I might say an astrologic voyage of metamorphosis . . . a monumental confession which when given to the world will take its place beside the revelations of St. Augustine, Petronius, Abelard, Rousseau, Proust, and others."

Jimmy opened the large manila envelope: photographs, at last. One of Anaïs in Spanish dancer's costume, on a spiral stairway, when long ago she flashed a smiling eighteen-year-old's coquetry, lighting the dark sepia print. Another, a leaner, older Anaïs, her pale oval face framed in dark hair formally coiffed, serious eyes looking straight into the camera. Wearing a long draped gown she stands in the walled garden of her house in Louveciennes: the Banker's wife. On the deck of her houseboat, Peniche la Belle Amour, she is still another Anaïs, anchored off the Quai des Tuileries on the Seine in her serious artist's life. The photographs are passed around the shop; after Jimmy, I'm next, then the others: friends, workers, visitors, no one is excluded from the daily event of the mail. At last a glimpse of the Spanish princess, Miller's lover and patron, whose career he promotes as she promotes his. Less aggressive than Miller in her pursuit of publication and fame, her writing is elaborately erotic, vaguely mystical; her professions of clairvoyance, intuition, all aspects of the extraordinary, grow finally too much. "I smell the incense," Jimmy said. But her letters to us are different: direct, warm, even practical. "How can I help?" and she too sends names of potential subscribers, donors, contributors, "check these names against Miller's lists, there may be duplicates." She is tender in her concern for our struggle to put out the magazine, and as our correspondence progresses, she finds she loves us, dreams of us.

Jimmy unwraps the large package from the engravers: the score of a string quartet by Frederick Hunt, a composer on the Maverick. Jimmy will print it all, almost twelve pages of musical notation incomprehensible to most readers, and an expensive symbol. I saw the engraver's bill. But Jimmy wants music, the highest of the arts, to have a place in *The Phoenix*; I must admit when I see the issue complete that it adds an air to earth and water. Miller in Paris approves. "Music? Fine. I almost became a musician you know."

There is a letter from Michael Fraenkel. A Jew of Russian

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

extraction, more nervously attuned to the sounds of war than his friends, he is the first of the staunch friends in Miller's Paris circle to return to the U.S. Fraenkel is an essayist, he's the polemicist, the heavyweight in that group. He also has money, prudently invested. Taken with Miller's exuberance, Miller's proclamations of himself as unregenerate outlaw, leaving wives and children in the tradition of the driven artist, Gauguin, Sherwood Anderson, Fraenkel has cautiously become Miller's patron. In Paris, in the Villa Seurat, a building Fraenkel owns, Miller lives rent free; Miller, as European editor of *The Phoenix,* obligingly sponsors Fraenkel's philosophical essays. Now, Fraenkel writes, he would like to see this little magazine get off the ground, he wants to help. He is pleased with the first issue of *The Phoenix,* content as well as appearance. "I am sending copies to Jung, Keyserling, Brill, and others interested in my work, so you see the magazine will be going to important people in many countries—."

Fraenkel's mind, his intellectual adroitness, his analytic hair-splitting, was fascinating to me; he was cast off from Talmudic studies but remained somehow the Jewish scholar. His theme was Death, the Death of Western thought, the Death of bourgeois morality. Two of his books were printed in Belgium under Fraenkel's own imprimatur, distributed in Paris to avant-garde bookshops, sent for review to serious journals in England and the U.S., but he remained obscure. While Miller could take Fraenkel's ideas, add bits of Dada, and the surreal, add scenes from his Brooklyn boyhood, sensations from the Paris streets, and toss them in the air, juggle, dance with them, and easily find readers to shock and please. Setting Miller's manuscripts in type was an acid test; I knew the entertaining self-inflated nihilist would not need the pages of *The Phoenix* for long. Besides, Fraenkel, old Miller friend that he was, told us how Miller in the Villa Seurat laughed his head off at Jimmy's long letters from Woodstock. "He just doesn't understand you, Jim," wrote Fraenkel. Jimmy's letters to Miller, his European editor, were frequent and detailed; they recounted the woes and setbacks of the week: ". . . the electricity was turned off until we could find the money to pay the delinquent bill. Without power, I had to use the foot pedal on the press for each of the 750 impressions, and on the return, print the verso again 750 times. And that to achieve only one signature!" And after the printing

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the endless collating, the folding, the sewing and binding. These were not complaints, Jimmy was merely sharing with Miller the problems of putting out a little magazine without funds; he really thought Miller wanted to know. Miller jollied him, man to man, "Don't work so hard, old cock." He'd like to help but he didn't have a bean.

"I need a laugh," wrote Durrell in Corfu to Miller in Paris, "send me news of the body mystical etc. in Woodstock—." At the same time Lawrence Durrell wrote to Jimmy: "I wish I could express my admiration for the superhuman effort you have made on behalf of *The Phoenix*. It only goes to show that when a man has fire in his guts he cannot be pinned down by the world, however it tries. *Phoenix* is surely the most fertile effort in the direction of literature for some time now. I can see that you are the kind of man who does not need conventional good luck wishes . . . If I am ever any good as a writer, or in a position to be of any service to you or your paper, I hereby assure you that you will not have to ask anything of me twice."

In 1940, on her return from Europe, Anaïs came to Woodstock with her husband Hugh Guiler to stay with us for a few days. She wanted to meet her first American publisher, we wanted to meet the fabled Etre Etoilique. A great pleasure to look at, she moved like the dancer she was, a fluid supple line in a dress of purple wool. Or folded into our one armchair she was still, and attentive; composed in color and form, composed in spirit. Voicing in her Spanish-French accented English her appreciation of the food I served, our family, the print shop, any bare comfort she could find to praise, she was as warm and loving as her letters. More real. Not a hint of incense. Hugo, Anaïs called him Hugo and he said we were also to call him Hugo, was the banker. An international banker. A tall lean Scotsman, gentle, handsome, he deferred to Anaïs, his adored one, his indulged one. No whim, no quirk, no passion or bizarre appetite would he deny her: Yes to a houseboat on the Seine, Yes to the Miller connection, to a fling with a woman, an English poet, a Peruvian Indian. Yes. But every now and then what started as a chuckle in the civilized Hugo would become a giggle and rise out of control. The banker was a paradox in another way he was too modest to mention. Hugo, Anaïs said, will be studying engraving with Stanley Hayter at the New School, Hugo had a definite talent; he will do the covers and illustrations

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

for her books, she said; they will find a printer and publish privately. "My text and Hugo's decorations," Anaïs smiled into Hugo's eyes with intimate secret reference. The visit went well, no explosions, no denunciations, but Anaïs dismayed Jimmy by the quite definite way she answered, "No, Jimmy, I do not think we will get beyond war. I think there are waves, cycles, now a flowering, now a dark age."

The dark age was now, and now *The Phoenix* was militantly pacifist. Miller was dropped from the masthead, supplanted by Derek Savage, a poet and conscientious objector in England. Comradely connections were made with peace groups, notices posted in each issue, free printing offered. Although no one in the print shop was paid, neither workers nor contributors—and they were often the same—we barely made it from issue to issue. *The Phoenix* work was put aside to do job printing: small editions of poetry, a book by a Woodstock herablist, letterheads, billheads, Jimmy would tackle anything. The main thing was to get out the next issue, seize the attention of a benefactor with land to give away, and get the message to poets and artists who would join us on that land.

How did we live? We lived on loving friendships, and rousing fights and fervid correspondence: intensities. With none of the trappings of family life or domesticity, we were lovers who had a child, girding ourselves for pioneer adventure. Having no money for the superfluous, owning no encumbering possessions, was a badge of integrity, not hardship. A tank of gas for necessary errands in the old car; meals of basic sustenance punctuated by impromptu feasts: dry crusts and champagne.

So, in this dark age, it was a measure of Jimmy's power to persuade that I agreed to a second child, another companion on our desert island out there somewhere, a friend for our Deirdre growing among adults as an only child.

Michael was born on a blustery March afternoon in the Kingston Hospital. Named Michael for the Archangel, Defender in time of battle, Thomas was his middle name.

As soon as my mother received the telegram from Jimmy, she packed a bag: "I must go to her—." "I don't care what you do," my father said, but before he went out the door he peeled off two big bills from the roll he always carried in his pocket, "Here. Give her this." She taxied to Grand Central, took the

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

first train upstate, an iron monster breathing steam, wailing round the bend, each revolution of the wheels inexorable, reminding her that she was forty-five years old, her life was over, her marriage a torment, her children turned away. In Kingston, a city cold and strange, comfortless, she found a room at an inn near the hospital.

Timing her visits to avoid Jimmy, civil if she encountered him, she resisted his careful overtures. For two days she came and sat beside my bed; in a suit, and a brimmed hat she did not remove, she was formal and somber. There was a bleakness in her dark circled eyes that she could not hide. She struggled; she managed to tell me she loved me, to tell me of her relief that I had come through, that the child was healthy, and comely. She must not cry: Will you be spawning baby after baby until you are spent? Your youth exhausted? Will you live in primitive places, far from me, where I can never see you? Never see the children?

But if she said nothing else it was her duty as a Jewish mother to raise the question of circumcision. She must talk about that, it must be done within a week of the baby's birth. "No, Mother. Jimmy feels very strongly. We will not do it." "It's routine now, Christians circumcise their boy babies, modern medicine approves, ask your doctor. For the baby's sake—." Trying every persuasion, she had failed again. She was not prepared to do battle on an issue so highly charged with emotion, tribalism, symbolism. Leave it, let my baby be; leave me out of it, Mother Father Jimmy. Released, unconfined, free to be myself again; the occupant for nine months was born, in the world now, waiting to be recognized. I had other things to think about. I couldn't wait to get out of the hospital. "Stay as long as you can, get a good rest," my anxious mother urged. I couldn't wait to get away from sanitary institutional kindness, back to Jimmy, my darling Deirdre, back to work in my real life.

Jimmy, more militantly nonviolent as World War II grew inevitable, accepted Hervey's offer of the farm on his Point Peter property. In 1940, with our two babies and all our possessions, we moved to backwoods Georgia. The Phoenix *suspended publication, the nucleus of community was stillborn. Jimmy worked, slowly, disheartened, on his second novel. He fished the Saint Mary's River that ran by our door,*

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

we had two eggs a day from our two kindly hens, and I wished our babies could quickly talk to me polysyllabically. This was the loneliest time of our lives.

We escaped, in 1941 to a tent in South Deerfield, Massachusetts. We bought a farm in Ashfield, a "blighted" place, but then found our Ultima Thule, two hundred acres in West Whately, Mass.

MRS. BROWN, WIELDING HER GUN, brought my father back into my life. It piqued his interest, carried a whiff of lawlessness and mayhem, good guys and bad guys. Our struggle with Mrs. Brown brought him out of New York City to Bug Hill Road in Ashfield, Massachusetts; he drove his big Cadillac into the farmyard for his first neutral encounter with Jimmy.

He paced back and forth in his city haberdashery, glanced in the barns; careful of his shoes he walked the edge of the pasture; he came into the kitchen, accepted a glass of cool spring water, and looked critically around the house. He saw enough to make his quick and firm assessment: A poor place, it had always been a poor place, it had never prospered and never would.

"Sell it," he said. "I'll give you $3,000. Get a farm you can make a living on."

He might think he was impressing me now with his largesse and superior judgment, his all-around man-of-the-world view of our deplorable condition, but I knew he wanted something. Something had changed. It was not that he ceased to despise my choice of a primitive life; not only could he not fathom such a choice, but it was an insult, it made nothing of his hard scramble from immigrant poverty to American success. Yet he was trying, I could see, to still the wolf, the ruthless trader, and show us another face: He's not such a bastard, he has come forward to do this considerable thing. Although in the six years since my marriage to Jimmy I had been too proud to beg, and my father too proud to unbend, our bond was there, the mystery of blood and seed. Something had dissolved his cold disgust; he wanted, he needed, our connection.

Surprising Jimmy helped him. The Russian bull and the Irish bull, both capable of roaring, spoke in soft and civil tones. My father, in one stroke, could move us from the marginal Ashfield farm and instantly erase years of struggle, naturally Jimmy would be grateful for that. Joe, Jimmy calls him Joe, offers

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Jimmy an Upmann cigar from his Dunhill case. Jimmy, who dislikes cigars, accepts; before my father can flick his silver cigarette lighter Jimmy strikes a wooden kitchen match. He holds it for my father, they light up, they draw and puff. My father sees now not the lay-about-Bohemian-bum I had thrown my life away for but the strong hard-working fearless Jimmy who adores his children and loves me forever. That's what I think. I think also how reconciliation of outraged father and outcast daughter, stone of hostility displaced by balm of benevolence, dramatically pleases Jimmy. But apart from that, Jimmy and my father meet in an incommunicable realm: in a field of tribal bullishness an understanding takes place between the providers and protectors of women and children.

After two hours my father is ready to leave, he can't wait to leave. Jimmy and I thank him for his visit, and his offer; Jimmy assures my father that with the $3,000 from him, and the proceeds of the sale of this Ashfield farm, we should be able to make a down payment on a really substantial place.

"We'll let you know as soon as we find the farm, Joe, I hope you'll come—."

My father cut him short. "I want the deed in Blanche's name," he tempered that peremptory order with "in case anything happens to you she'll be protected."

"Sure." Jimmy said he understood. He understood too that no mention of community, subsistence farm, reverence-for-the-land agrarian philosophy would be prudent.

Michael traces the line of chrome on the Cadillac's hood, Deirdre holds Jimmy's hand, ready for the farewell. About to open his car door my father's eye lights on the children. He's awkward, clumsy, wary with children. But these children are set apart, his grandchildren; he is not sure what is expected. Jingling coins in his pocket he drew out a handful.

"Here," he urged, "the biggest for the boy, and the shiniest for the girl." Michael and Deirdre, puzzled by this overture, looked at us. I called him their grandfather, I said "Go on. Choose one."

When my father put his arms around me and kissed me goodbye, it might appear to be his seal of relief, hostilities at an end, but there was something more.

There *was* something more. I learned the sober, unhappy, real reason for my father's visit when my mother telephoned that night.

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

"Tell me," she said, her voice tense, "How was he?" She didn't wait for my answer. "Did he give you anything?"

"Yes," I told her he made the generous offer, "he was—friendly."

Silence. Did she hear me?

Then she said, her voice flat, "Daddy's moving to California. He wants a divorce."

After all these years, twenty-five years, a divorce? "Why?"

"He wants to marry his—" she faltered, "his mistress."

"Oh Mother," I can't speak. But I say "Why? Why marriage?"

"He says he deserves his happiness," now she can't keep the bitterness out.

So that's what he was doing. Retiring from business, he only 48 years old, to a sybaritic life of perpetual holiday with his Christian blonde wife (cocktail lounge hostess? barmaid?), he was tidying his affairs, discharging his responsibility, closing accounts.

"He's giving me little enough, but he has a duty to you. Take it, whatever you can get. She," the unnameable she, "can't have it all."

Because my mother must be silent about the crushing end of her womanly life, she talks about money. Money is the only tie that remains to pull him to attention, to attach him to her, to their children. She is soiled, shamed, reduced; the romantic girl he married is a hard woman now, determined he would not "get off scot free."

Eduardo* returned from the city in time for dinner. The children were asleep. The three of us, Jimmy, Eduardo, and I, sat up late, through the steeple clock's midnight striking and beyond, talking about my father's visit, and my mother's call. "Guilt," said Eduardo of my father's gift. "Remorse," said Jimmy. "I think Eduardo's right," I said. "It is guilt. He's not capable of remorse."

Whatever the prompting, guilt or remorse, my father left a high charge in the air of the old Ashfield farmstead. We can't wait to get started, to comb the hill towns for our new place. Jimmy and Eduardo list essential requirements: pasture, tillage,

*Eduardo had been living with us for the past year. Anaïs' cousin, Cuban-Danish, elegant, scholarly, homosexual, and independently rich, Eduardo wanted a family and chose us.

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The farm in Ashfield, 1941

Eduardo, Ashfield, 1941

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Blanche, West Whately, 1945

Hervey, Deirdre and Michael, Ashfield, 1941

Jimmy in the tobacco field, West Whately, 1946

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

barns; a good house; accessible road, and privacy; a view. A setting both wild and cultivated. But really only the sky's the limit. "School," I say, "near a school bus," to show I am paying attention, but I can't stop thinking of my mother.

What will she do? How will she bear it. Divorce is rare. It must be the first in her family, in my father's family, or among their friends for that matter. A subtle disgrace: the woman can't hold her man, the man can't curb his desire. No one talks about it in front of children.

When at last we turn down the oil lamp and blow out the diminished flame and go to bed, I say to Jimmy, "It's too late for her." Jimmy's almost asleep, "She could marry again—." He has drifted off. Never. She would never marry again. She never opened herself to another man. She's a one-man woman, like the Blues songs. All her phrases, her cries through my childhood, sound in the night. She kept hoping for revelation: One day "the scales would fall from his eyes, he would recognize the pure loving heart he had so bruised, always beside him, through thick and thin, hard times and good times." He would say "What a fool I've been!" and, turning from his dissolute life, see her at last.

Before Eduardo and Jimmy went off in the morning to follow real estate leads, Jimmy stopped to write a note to my mother. Just a line, "Dear Betty, I hope you will come and stay with us, Love, Jimmy." Jimmy is all sympathy; forgotten, her early hostility when we married and she said "Blanche is dead" or "My daughter committed suicide"; forgotten her uneasiness and suspicion of him now: "Do you go to Church on Sunday?" she asks when we are alone. She is my mother, his children's grandmother. He wants to help her, he thinks he can. He can't imagine how lost she would be in the country, how exiled she would feel; he doesn't know what a city woman she is.

Guarding against disappointment, braced for catastrophe, ready for bliss: my balancing act in life with Jimmy. Driving over Nash Hill from Williamsburg I was in the back seat with Eduardo and Deirdre and Michael, Jimmy sat in front with the driver, Silas Snow. A perfect name for a Yankee farmer who produces maple syrup, keeps a few cows, and sells real estate part time. Nash Hill is a gravel road, narrow, wooded, and dark; we didn't meet another car. Out of the forest suddenly, over an iron

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

bridge, and we were in a clearing, a changed landscape. On that fine late summer day in 1943, a great expanse of almost cloudless blue sky arched over green fields rising out of the hollow: a curtain going up, an eye opening wide. I was all attention.

"We're in West Whately," said Silas Snow, "a little hamlet, a crossroads. Five roads meet here." And we climb the one that goes up the steep hill that leads to the farm Silas has taken us to see. The cluster of houses, four or five modest 18th and 19th century structures, thins out; the dirt road goes up, up, a series of thank-you-marms. Silas Snow names them, "rests for the horses pulling carriages or wagons," the respite for teams, cut into the old roads: up a grade, level out, rest, "thank-you-marm," and then up again. At the top we appear to have reached another hamlet, there are so many buildings; dominant is a large Georgian Colonial with a tower on top, facing the long view to the east.

"The house needs paint," Silas says, "it's too bad, this was a show place" conjuring a lost time, "a famous farm. Gone downhill since Victor Bardwell's widow died—."

Downhill was lucky for us, we could never have touched it in its heyday. He would like, he tells us, to see this farm flourish again.He doesn't so much want to make a sale as effect a rescue. Uniquely private, this two hundred acre tract is the end of the road; the road goes on through the woods, becomes impassable; discontinued by the town of Whately it has reverted to the farm. There is a barway across the road that goes on up out of the farmyard to make that clear.

To the east the fields stretched, dropped to a ravine, rose to a forest on densely covered hills. Beyond was the valley, and the Connecticut River, the University of Massachusetts, the Hadley church steeple: "on a clear day you can tell the time on the clock in the Hadley church steeple," and in the far distance the blue range of mountains.

There are so many buildings. In the farmyard alone, the hay barn and the dairy barn; a separate milk house, garage, horse stalls, blacksmith shop. Jimmy and I and Eduardo and the children follow Silas Snow through the barway, up the road, past the ice house, past tobacco barns: how many? each as long as a railroad train it seemed to me. Silas does not condescend to the novices he shepherds, he is straightforward, low-keyed. When he says "They grew fine onion crops in this upper field"

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and "Tobacco was always high quality," he is believable.

"Let's go up as far as the pond," says Silas, "it's a spring-fed pond, big enough to paddle a canoe," perfect for swimming, useful for cutting ice in winter. Skating.

I keep glancing back at the house down the road, the Georgian Colonial in the farmyard. I don't want to be overwhelmed, it can't be as big as it looks. When we finally get to tour the house it *is* as big as it looks. Seventeen rooms; grand for a farmhouse, with its classic proportions and crown of a cupola. Impressive for a farmhouse off the beaten track, with electricity, central heating, steam radiators in every room; hot and cold running water plumbed to the kitchen downstairs and the bathroom upstairs.

Far from being overwhelmed, Jimmy was excited. He forced himself to ask sensible farmer-like questions of Silas Snow, but I knew this was it: at the end of a dirt road, miles from the main arteries; a principality, our own country.

"This is the place we've been looking for, Silas," said Jimmy. No games, no bargaining.

Silas Snow, the rugged, white-haired man with a clear direct gaze, matched Jimmy's honesty and said, "I believe you are the people who are right for this farm," giving us his confidence in a way that had nothing to do with a real estate transaction.

Silas Snow drove us back to Williamsburg where we had left our car. The Snows' Colonial brick house was elegant, not in detail but in atmosphere. There was Silas Snow's wife, for one thing. Frances Clary Snow was a tall, spare woman with fine bones; composed yet shy, her speculative glance could kindle to surprising warmth. She was literate, cultivated, her family had links to the Concord Transcendentalists.

"I always thought," she said to me, "the Victor Bardwell farm a most felicitous place."

"I don't know what I will do with such a big house."

Mrs. Snow asked me to consider paying guests. "It would be your cash crop," a small contribution to the daunting prospect before us.

I thought about it. "How do you do 'Guests,' Mrs. Snow?" Is there a policy? A protocol?

"I have only one rule, Blanche," she replied serenely, "the guest is always right. I am flexible—breakfast in bed, pack a picnic for lunch." Breakfast in bed? We don't even own a tray.

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

"Still," she added, "it is not always easy to know if it has been a success. Last summer, for instance, Wystan Auden and Chester Kallman spent a month with us. Auden had been visiting professor at Smith for a semester and he had grown fond of the area. I thought their stay with us went very well, we all became friends. Auden sent me his last book of poems and there was a line: 'the summer/was worse than we expected,'" and she smiled her baffled amusement.

My mother telephones from New York, she longs to see me, the children. ". . . only for a few days, I must get back, some business to attend . . ." I know there is no business, nothing and nobody needs her; I see her seated at her "escritoire," one of the few pieces she saved from her nine-room apartment to console her in the lonely decency of the residence hotel. I give her the reassurance she won't ask for, "This is a good time, mother, please come. You could take the train at Grand Central," I tell her, "get a ticket for Northampton—." "No," Jimmy calls, "South Deerfield. Closer." I didn't argue. There was a real railway station in Northampton: a waiting room, benches, rest rooms. Late to meet the train as Jimmy always was, nothing at the whistle-stop in South Deerfield could give her comfort, no place under cover she could wait if it rained. Jimmy's thinking of the six miles to South Deerfield instead of the twelve to Northampton; Jimmy's thinking gas rationing; the time he must take from haying, the rain that might come and ruin it; I know, I know. "South Deerfield, mother. Jimmy will meet you." The children go with him; it makes it easier for Jimmy, bearable for my mother. She is the only passenger to get off the northbound train, a conspicuous city person at the country railroad crossing; Jimmy greets her "How was the trip, Betty" and reaches for her bags. Both carefully avoid the sham of embrace.

In the kitchen, in her city clothes, my mother sat at the table watching me, her eyes filled with worry and question. She watched me wrestle with the Medusa head of the milking machine, inserting the long-handled brush into each black hose. Standing at the black slate sink, in blue jeans and a man's shirt, slaving away in this old-fashioned kitchen: her daughter. A farmer's wife. I scrub the milk buckets and scald them, we must keep the bacteria count down; up-end the buckets on the

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

rack in the shed, ready for evening milking. In the shed off the kitchen there is also an icebox, filled with blocks cut from our pond in winter. You need a refrigerator, she says sadly. Oh, this is an improved icebox, I say cheerfully, no pan to empty, a pipe carries the water to a hole in the floor and empties under the house. She is not amused. She sees the paint that's needed, the furniture we don't have; what didn't I need? We make small talk on the run, I must keep going. My mother can't help, I can't stop. I run upstairs, gather bed linen, children's clothes, bring the heaped basket to the sink, the black slate sink I praise (one more puzzle for my mother), fetch the scrub board from the shed. This task must be done daily, in the morning, after breakfast, after the milking machine, after I make the beds; before I prepare lunch for the children, then the paying guests. My mother watches in disbelief. I who never washed the smallest garment at home; everything sent out: sheets and towels to the commercial laundry, shirts and blouses and delicate lingerie to the neighborhood French hand laundry. I now tell her, filling the silence of her disapproval, how wonderful not to have to heat water, to have hot water always on tap. "Do you have a good hand cream? I could leave you mine, don't neglect yourself, hot water and rough work are terrible for the skin, you'll be old before your time." I know better than to tell her how scrubbing and wringing strengthens my wrists, makes supple my hands; how hanging clothes on the line is my art form. Sometimes in color, sometimes in shape; punctuate with socks, stretch it out with sheets. Walk away. Go into the garden. View it from a distance.

A gulf separates us. The gulf widens when Jimmy appears. The Irish Catholic, working in barns, with dumb beasts; ploughing the fields, tramping into the house, bringing dirt on his heavy work shoes for her daughter to sweep up. What did she care about the impassioned speeches she heard in this house, the richness and life-giving etceteras of life on the land. She closed her ears to laments for the suffering, jeremiads against the powerful.

For relief she turns to the children; blameless and beautiful, they touch her heart. She is careful with her claims: "Come, kiss your grandmother," but the children are generous. Deirdre moves into the circle of my mother's arms, admires her scarf, her blouse, her rings; Deirdre is so feminine, how my mother

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

wished she could show her off to her friends, her family; that thick dark hair and high color and gray green eyes, she could be a child model. Michael, fair in contrast, still underground, waits for his sister to take the lead. He's shy. My mother is gently attentive, draws him out; she tries not to be partial to the little girl. But in an unguarded moment when we are alone she says, "It's not his fault that he is not circumcised, that his Christian father did this to spite me, to make sure he would grow up on their side," and I say only, "No, nothing to do with you." How can she think that, spite is not in him.

Still, we manage to thread our way through the visit. Jimmy is considerate, circumspect; she can't help but see what is between us, she can't help opening herself to the children. I store the anthropological nugget: children of mixed marriages have a special beauty. When she leaves, after a few days, she pauses in the doorway and looks out over the hills. A mist lies in the valley. Her eyes are filled, she says "Write to him," there is only one "him" for her. "I know he wants to hear from you, maybe he'll help—." It was the only time in her visit that she said anything about my father.

In her next letter she wrote: "I don't really think he married that woman. I'm sure he'll come back." And she wrote: "I get up early every morning, I look out of the window on 86th Street to see what kind of day it is. I take a bath, I dress, I take two hours to dress, carefully. And then there is nowhere to go. This is not self-pity—."

And then she was dead, at 53, of a heart attack, sudden. I never stop thinking of how I might have held her, consoled her, helped her find again a way to be alive. Useless, impossible thought; her heart was really broken. Like the blues songs.

In the fifties the farm failed; we lost the dairy herd, the bottom dropped out of the tobacco market. We struggled to meet mortgage payments, tuition payments, notes falling due. Jimmy was willing to go into the marketplace and sell anything, take any job, that was not respectable and did not lead to gray security. Selling bibles door to door, storm windows, franchises for convenience stores. He was a great salesman, his pride was not involved in these low level jobs. What he would not do was compromise his thought and vision. All through the years of farming, of begging and borrowing and scheming, the ferment

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

of protest went on. Our friends and their friends, and then our children and our children's friends: there was always someone there, sitting around the table in the kitchen of our big 1820 farmhouse, someone to be challenged, to be stirred, to be insulted, or delighted.

I left the hill, my world for so long, and each morning went down in the valley to work in a college library. I was engaged in consolidating my freedom, in constructing a track parallel to Jimmy's on which I could run without collision, without damage to our children, or our marriage. Of course Jimmy hated it, "working for an institution," and it was a battle, but I never expected that a regular small check, "gray security," would confer such wonderful freedom. Faculty friends and student friends, they came to the farm for the mix of passion and indignation and laughter that was so magnetic. Every Sunday we met in Northampton, standing in vigil against the Vietnam War, and against the draft board. In this growing ferment, Jimmy decided that he would find a way to publish The Phoenix *again. and he did.**

FEBRUARY 11, 1981. I drove home, out of Northampton, up through the hills, on the back roads, past the reservoir: my track from the library at Smith College where I work. The night is black, the roads are icy, after the final steep climb I am relieved to be back at the farm where my real life is. Carrying my books, my bag, the champagne for our small celebration of Gabriel's 34th birthday, I make my way up the walk. Why is Elizabeth at the door?

"Jimmy had a stroke," she says in a rush, her voice urgent, careful, it holds me. "Gabriel found him on the floor."

I move faster, "When?"

"About ten minutes ago."

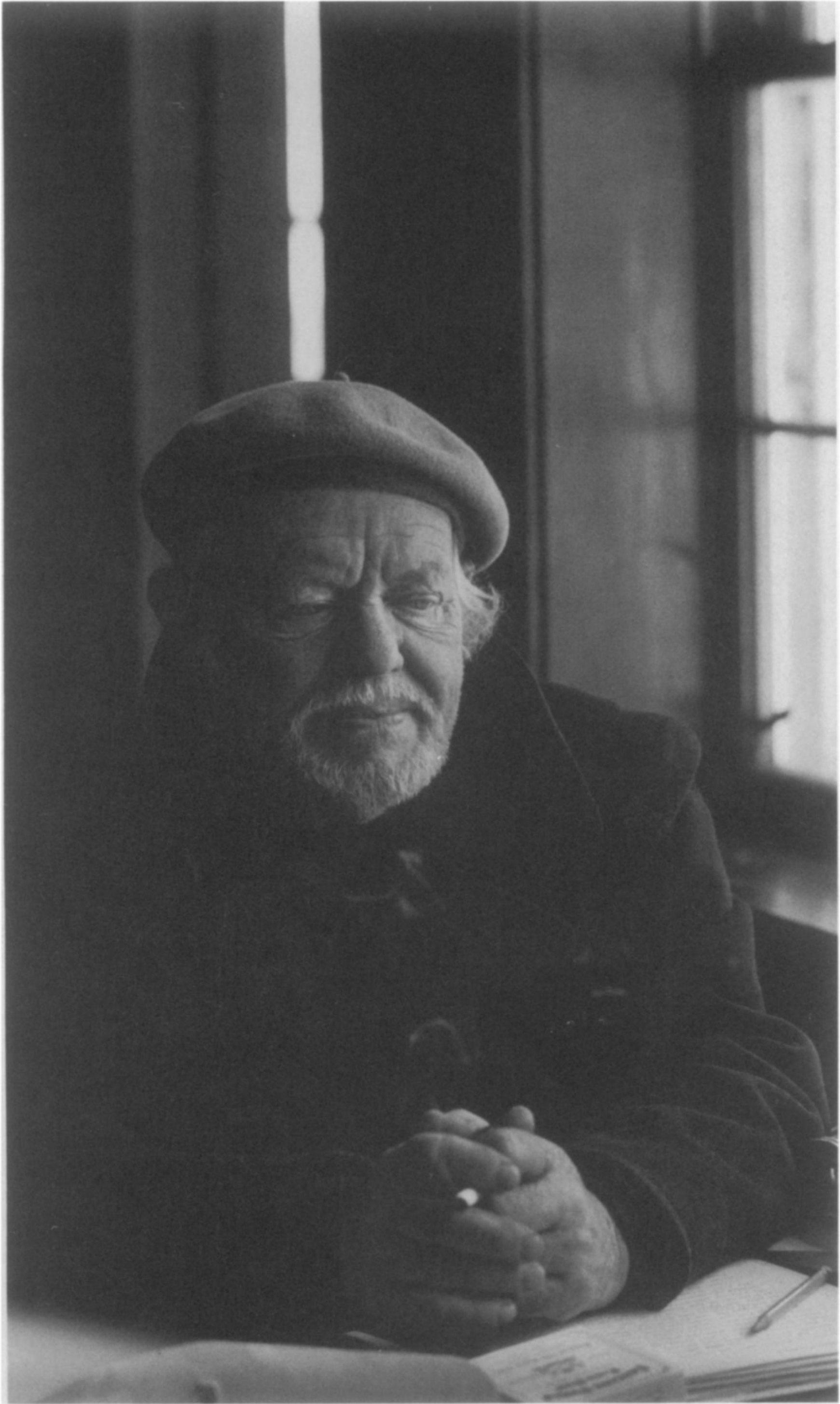
"How do you know it is a stroke?"

"He can't speak. He can't move."

They've covered him with a blanket; I kneel beside him, he looks at me, a look of consternation and amazement. No sound. We call a doctor friend, I say "Jimmy would hate the hospital, can you come?" "This is the 20th century, Blanche. Call an ambulance. Get him to the hospital, right away."

**The Phoenix* 1st series (1938-40), v. I: 1,2,3; II: 1,2,3,4. 2nd series (1970-84), v. III: 1,2-3,4; IV: 1,2-3,4; V: 1-2,3-4; VI: 1-2,3-4; VII: 1-2, 3-4; VIII: 1-2,3-4; IX: 1-2,3-4.

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms



James Cooney, West Whately, 1981 (photograph by Gabriel Cooney)

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Morning, noon, and evening; I stop at the hospital on my way to the library, I take my lunch in Jimmy's room, I stop again on my way home. The Hospital, grand central of healing and dying and birth, is my world now. Holy and blessed are the doctors and nurses, the people who sweep, who do the laundry, prepare the food, keep the records. Although the work here is at the very edge, the extreme edge of existence; I meet with nothing but kindness and patience. I help Jimmy with his meals; I bring him messages from friends, drawings from the grandchildren; the family is constantly in and out.

Soon there is a voice, sepulchral, from the cave; a word, a phrase incomprehensible. Soon he can be assisted to a chair. Soon he will be ready for physical therapy, speech therapy.

No one who knew Jimmy failed to see the irony, the pathos, the cruel punishment for a man whose tongue was so fluent, so outrageous, to be suddenly silenced. For a man so physical to be immobilized. No one knew as I did how cruel irony was compounded: that his weapon, silence, inflicted on me through the years as punishment, was finally turned on himself.

I meet with the speech therapist.

Aphasia, the Greeks named it. The therapist tells me there are several kinds of aphasia; there is no way to know how much speech Jimmy may recover. Could I tell her anything about Mr. Cooney that might be helpful? And she shows me the wide ruled paper, the large kindergarten printing, the primer words. "I supply a simple word, and the patient completes the sentence."

I too am in the hands of strangers. I absolve myself of treachery. I say, carefully, not to offend, or belittle her trained technique: "Try priming him with family names." Our children: Michael and Deirdre, Gabriel and Eliza; our grandchildren: Margarita, John, and Annabel and Caleb and Isabel and Emily and Thomas and Nicholas. The stuff of his life. Music and writing and gardening, printing and protest.

> At first he is at sea: Emily . . . likes potatoes
> Next week . . . the potatoes will be cooking
> I like to plant . . . potatoes

What's all this about potatoes?

But soon the therapist is leaving notes for me "a fantastic day" and on the wide ruled paper, in her careful printing,

> The hospital is . . . a useful being
> The farm is . . . a castle

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Writing . . . deserves pristine precision
Being sick . . . is like being possessed
Communication . . . is authority
When I get home . . . I will resume a statement
I wish . . . to be alone

With those last words he told the therapist he was tired of the necessary game.

Homecoming

Although the air is sharp the sun warms the late March morning. There is no wind. In the doorway, and on the terrace of the house that stands alone on top of Poplar Hill, the bud and blossom, the fruit and flower, the fragrance and substance of Jimmy's life await his return. The grandchildren on either side of the terrace, eight of them, range from infant to youth; solemn or smiling all are quiet, it is an important occasion. They know that. When Jimmy arrives he will see them first.

The car comes up the hill; Michael is driving, Jimmy sits beside him, Gabriel is in the back seat. Jimmy raises his eyes as the car turns, he looks toward the valley, and away. When they stop in front of the house he doesn't look at us, he is gathering himself for the re-entry. Michael opens the car door, Gabriel sets the walker before Jimmy, who turns in his seat, grasps the walker, pulls himself erect. Michael and Gabriel, on either side, support without touching their father as they make their way up the walk slowly, slowly. Jimmy's right leg drags along. He is once again in his familiar black beret and black corduroys but his hair is suddenly very white. In the slow procession to the waiting family Jimmy knows we're there, but he keeps his eyes fixed on his task: to move from the road to the house without faltering.

I watch from the window; I want to be the last to greet him at the end of his passage. It is so moving: Tiresias, Oedipus at Colonus; the fallen father supported by his son, carried home; ceremonial, mythic, heartbreaking. He pauses there, on the terrace, to gaze at the grandchildren; his eyes pale, transparent, taking in the remarkable tableau. They call to him softly, they're shy of this different Jimmy; "Jimmy, hi," "Jimmy, I'm here"; he is silent, a slight twitch of a muscle near his mouth may be a smile; he resumes his careful deliberate entrance. The assembly

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

in the doorway parts to receive him.

The sick old man is my dependent, my charge. He must depend on me for food, for comfort; sleeping or waking he must accept all my arrangements. He must accept and I must assert. I am his history; because he knows every inflection in my voice, every thought reflected in my eyes, I must be careful. This house is his history; even where the spider webs and the dust drifts it is rich, warm; it pleases us, every corner speaks.

I sleep lightly; set on Alert, I listen. In my room upstairs, my bedroom, study, retreat, I listen for the sound of the walker setting down, the dragging leg, I'm ready to spring up if there is a thump or a cry. I am the front line of emergency; in the wing in the north end of the house is my witness and essential help: the family who with me absorbs the inexorable dailiness of this new life with Jimmy. Elizabeth and Gabriel back me up, help me forgive myself when I lose balance. At bedtime their little girls lovingly kiss Jimmy and he with his good left hand holds them as they lean against him. Between Gabriel and his father, so often antagonists, a symbiosis takes place. Gabriel gives, and his father in his paralyzed silence accepts the help of bathing and shaving and combing and clipping and dressing. Tenderness and courtesy from son to father; from father to son silent cooperation. When Gabriel helps you out of the tub and carefully wraps your aged body in the bath sheet, when he holds the shaving mirror at just the right angle for your direction or approval, say "Thank you." Say it! Only now do I realize Jimmy has never expressed a spoken thanks to me, or to our children; just as he would do anything for us, we of course would do anything for him, and for each other. The family, one body, extended parts; would you thank your arm for bringing the cup to your lip?

Our children, grown men and women with children of their own, each seek the Jimmy they knew. The magic man of their early childhood, the impossible, arbitrary man who made their growing up so arduous, so strenuous, in his uncompromising demands. Judged, scrutinized, criticized; everything in their lives, from the clothes they wore to the friends they brought home; the books they read, or didn't read when they should have, the music that surrounded them, or the music despised and banished; in their turn they accepted or resisted or resented or

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

rebelled but never stopped loving him. Now they were here whenever they could be: vulnerable and generous men and women, facing the unthinkable. Jimmy, indomitable Jimmy, in this state. Autonomy, authority, power; all brought down.

Wait. Not altogether, not just yet.

"When I get home," Jimmy said in one of the hospital speech therapist's exercises, "I will resume a statement."

And he did. What could he use, what was left, what was lost; where were the boundaries? He could hear, he could see; his body was crippled, speech eluded him, his brain had faulty connections. But what could not be measured or seen or touched was intact, was indeed stronger, and fiercer. I'll call it courage. He assembled material from his files; his files, they were all over the house, attic and closet, desk drawer and trunk, but the main repository was an ancient metal double filing cabinet in his study. It stood about five feet tall, dark brown-green; the drawers were balky on their runners. Within these crowded drawers there was surprising order: manila folders marked, alphabet and chronology observed; from these overflowing papers Jimmy found material for the last issues of *The Phoenix*. Using his walker, propping himself against his desk as he sorted through papers with his one useful hand, Jimmy would not ask for and I would not offer help. The effort and the triumph were important; unless he was really thwarted I kept my watchful distance. In 1982, it was a year after his stroke, Jimmy cannily chose Miller's letters to us, 1937-40: a special Henry Miller issue. In 1983, and 1984, one each year: trophies of Jimmy's tenacity. Some of the contents were odd, and why not? Let it go, I tell Dan, our young printer friend who now ran our Heidelberg press in a shop of his own; I edit only glaring blunders. Jimmy taught himself to type with his left hand, he typed all the mailing labels for the 1,000 subscribers, stuffed all the envelopes; slowly, carefully, deliberately, he resumed his statement.

The little magazine had an unusual history, a small but international circulation received the opinions and editorial choices of stubborn and passionate Jimmy from 1938 to 1940, volumes 1 and 2 of the literary quarterly, handset and printed in our letter press shop in Woodstock, New York. After a thirty-year gap, in 1970 the still stubborn and passionate Jimmy assembled a print shop again here on the farm in West Whately, and

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

with volume 3, picked up where he had left off, with the same format, the same editor, even continuing a serialized journal and novel from the last issue in 1940. Walter Grossman, director of U.Mass. Boston library, proposed to mount an exhibit of the history of *The Phoenix*. His swan song, Walter called it, he was retiring from the post he had distinguished for so long.

On the fifth floor of the Joseph P. Healy Library of the University of Massachusetts in Boston, early in April 1984, Jimmy sat in an armchair, his hands resting on his cane; in his black beret and black corduroys, his trimmed white beard, he had a natural distinction. The light, the view of the Harbor, the assembly of strangers and friends and family who traveled distances to honor Jimmy; they sipped wine and nibbled cheese and each one approached the man whose singular determination was manifest here. He acknowledged their words with a nod, a murmur; to a hand offered he gave his still obedient good left hand, warm and firm. I watched him move slowly around the exhibit on his cane, from case to case, around the five double cases of the chronologically arranged and carefully labeled artifacts of his life, and I thought, for the indelibly Catholic Jimmy, it was a rite of confirmation.

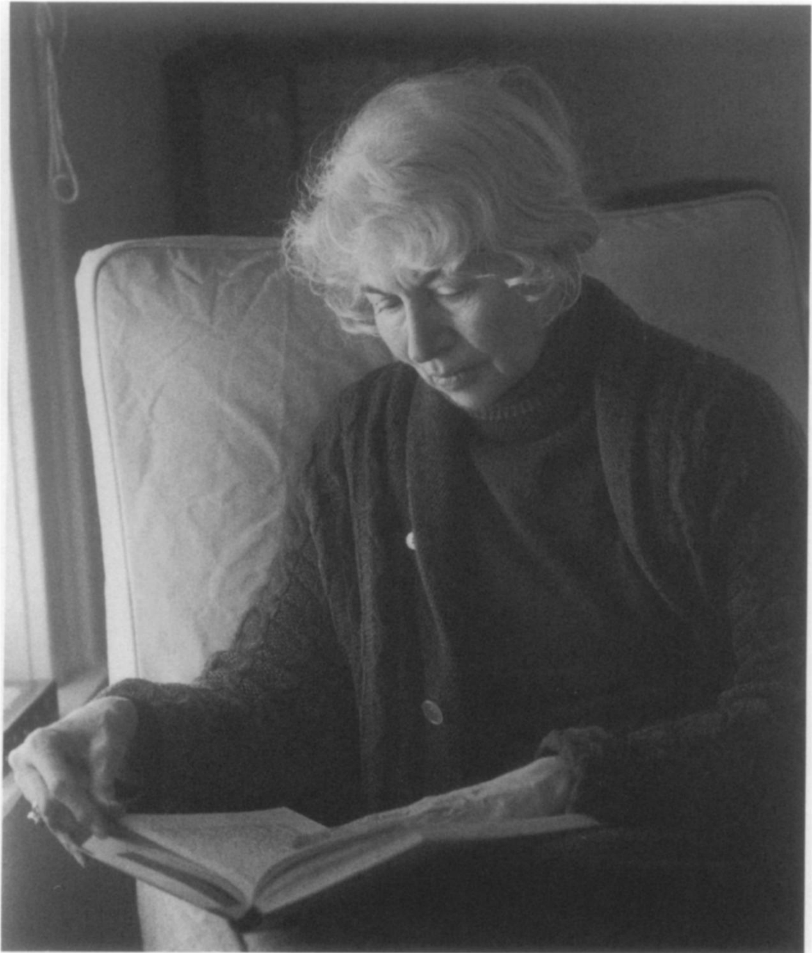
What's going on, as he sits in his silence; gazing out of the window in the mornings, sitting at his chosen place at the table, does he see the birds at the feeders Gabriel faithfully keeps filled? Sitting in the wing chair before the television at night, sometimes alone in the living room, sometimes I sit beside him, he closes his eyes when the picture is on, or stares at the blank screen turned off. What is passing through him, what is the process of letting go. How is he doing it? Because he is doing it. Relinquishing life, he so tenacious, so stubborn; leaving the world he fought to change, leaving his loves he sought to possess. Opening his hand, clenched for so long, letting it spill away.

Now

I am alone, I am not alone; I share the house on the hill with Gabriel, his wife Elizabeth, and their daughters Isabel and Emily. The house is large, there are two kitchens, three bathrooms, I can live as separately as I choose; the lines I draw

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

are respected. Since I came to live in this place on the top of Poplar Hill in West Whately, in 1943, it has changed, it has remained the same. They want it to remain the same. Who are they? The people who grew up here, the people who came here when they were young; it feels like home, they say. No matter how long their absence, in the room upstairs facing east they sleep profoundly. No one forgets the fights, the arguments and insults, the passion; no one wants to. Jimmy is dead.



Blanche Cooney, West Whately, 1978 (photograph by Gabriel Cooney)

This content downloaded from
192.80.65.116 on Sun, 21 Jun 2020 17:21:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms