

## The Beauties of Drink: An Essay · *Lee K. Abbott*

STRAIGHTAWAY, I TELL YOU, this essay is about intoxicating drink—arguably the misunderstood subject of our era—and starts with my first, when I was eleven. The occasion was a party with dual purposes: to celebrate my daddy’s fiftieth birthday and, a week earlier, his latest hole-in-one at the Mimbres Valley Country Club (in commemoration of which Ivy Martin, the club pro, had given him a gallon of Johnny Walker Red). For the record, the person who gave it to me was Mrs. Hal Thibodeaux, and what she said was this: “Scooter, what’re you looking at?” I was looking at booze, of course, those many decanters and bottles and crystal pitchers my mother had set up in the den near Daddy’s trophy case. It was near midnight, I suppose, and everybody was quite instinct (a word I picked up at UNM) with madness. Mr. Levisay, for example, had Mrs. Dalrhymple collapsed atop the ottoman and from the patio you heard a Fats Molydore harangue about pissants and such mossback peckerwoods as were tending toward Congress that year (1958).

“A.C.!” Mrs. Hal yelled for my daddy, “should I give this boy something to drink, or what? He says he’s thirsty.” I had been yanked out of sleep, I remember, by noises which are elsewhere described as those common to apocalypse. I heard the words “fernal” and “wayward,” plus a commotion in regard to games of chance, then my daddy, A.C. LeDuc, said, from a dark region in the direction of the utility room, to give his son any goddam thing he wanted; and so, while Judge Sanders was dancing the Cleveland Chicken with Ruby, our housekeeper, Mrs. H. poured me what I would now call three fingers of Redeye. “Well, squirt,” she said, heaving her bosom for effect, “here’s mud in your eye.”

How nice it would be to report, dozens of years from the event itself, that drinking whiskey had an impact on me as instantly profound and disruptive as war. It did not. Instead, mouth stinging and hot as fever, I sipped, sat on a cane barstool Mother had bought in Panama, and, like a spy, kept to myself. Across the way, Goonch Ilkin had a cocktail balanced on his forehead and kept referring to himself as one slick hombre, while behind him E. Terry Long was shifting his watery eyeballs in and out of focus. In the living room, I could see Alberta Turner showing Dottie

Hightower her garter belt; and behind them, slapped against the wall like Christ, stood Mr. Harvey Kinnebrew, whose face had the stricken, inflamed look of catastrophe. Beneath the music—which was Paul White-man and din itself—you heard voices, harsh as cigar smoke, on a thousand issues: Sherman Adams, the AFL-CIO and Elvis Presley; as well as opinions on where taxes ought to go (down), what ought to be done to Lucille Ball's red hair (burn it), and how to get rid of Chinese hordes and their evil ways (bomb 'em!). It, this party, was what I know now as life itself—a dreamland of ghosts and emotions and willy-nilly ideas—and, fixed on my stool, I had one thought: “Lord, I do like this.”

Everybody talks about the horrors, which are real enough, but not about drink's beauties. For one thing, time disappears. As I once said to the second of my three wives, Darlene, “Without drink, you're at the mercy of minutes.” We were in divorce court, I recall, almost within gavel-throwing range of Judge Sanders himself. “With it, you can be here one second, drink for a while, then wake up in another land, months apart from the person you were and the place he lived in.” You could wake to discover, I said, that you had missed any of a million terrors—including pestilence, drought, blight or cosmic decline. Drink enough, I insisted, and you could ease into another, mistier world, one composed around the soft depths of sleep.

For another thing, pain also disappears. Once, for example, on my way down here years ago to teach mathematics at the same high school (Deming, NM) where I had learned much, I, as possessed by drunkenness as the woebegone are nowadays clutched by God, flipped my VW off a highway overpass, flew maybe eighty yards—a six-pack of Buckhorn whizzing about my ears like grenades—crashed and tumbled to a crunching stop, doors crushed, interior a blizzard of clutter and clothes. The first to approach me, I am told, were two Buckeye tourists, who peeked in, saw the mess I was, and gasped (in a single voice, as I think of it), “Lordy, will you look at that?” I was upside down and facing backwards, everything of substance—cracked window, horizon, earth itself—running west and out of sight. I felt nothing, neither welt nor bruise nor open wound; and a time later I spilled out of that vehicle and lay next to it like a puddle. “Howdy,” I said, “my name's Albert LeDuc, Jr., but everybody calls me Scooter. What's yours?” Those good Ohioans were staring down at me as

if looking at a nightmare come to life. The man, particularly, seemed ready to bolt. "What's the matter?" I said, and the woman, perhaps someone's mother, pointed: "Your ear." Sure enough. What used to be ear was now merely a pulpy flap, no more sentient than dried fruit. I fingered it carefully, more stupefied than frightened, then asked the lady to sit down, here, next to me. "What for?" she wondered. I was looking at our vast desert sky and feeling right tolerant of those without it. "Well," I began, "I'd like to put my head in your lap." For a second, I was convinced she might spit or kick me a little; then she said, "Why?" I took a deep breath. "Comfort," I confessed. "I'm about to pass out."

That fall I took up the business of pedagogy, wore my hair long to hide my hearing-hole, and undertook in earnest fashion my higher calling to drink.

What you should know, now that this is being written, is that I am thirty-seven years old, no more debt-free than the majority of my fellow citizens, a regular voter, father of two (by the first wife, Jo Ann), and currently a resident of the Hot Springs Hotel in the scrub-covered hills just above Hatch, New Mexico. This is no hotel at all, really, but that place such addicted Americans as Betty Ford and Elizabeth Taylor might visit were they middle-class and not so camera-shy. I am here, I tell you, at my daddy's expense, in an effort, he said, to "dry fucking out," which means food, exercise and a Marine Corps approach to mental health. Mostly, my story is not one of high drama—me being that vulgar Protestant many are or aim for—but I will, as part of my therapy, show you the weal drink is and how, sometimes, it makes us a better tribe.

Once upon a time, for example, I had a student named Butch in my eleventh grade geometry class. This was during the Vietnam era and, of course, Butch was the sort of *West Side Story* hooligan who just couldn't wait to be eighteen and an Army Ranger so he could whip the be-jesus out of those foreign revolutionaries we were seeing on the Nightly News. He was as you are no doubt picturing him: slumped and bitter and artfully tattooed, as well as expert in auto mechanics and most disinclined to the charms of the isosceles triangle. The only times, in fact, I liked the sum-bitch was when I was drunk and then only because I saw him—and all of us, for that matter—for what he was: scared, weak and dumb. On the day I remember particularly, he was in the back row, making spit wads or arm

farts or intending to diddle Mary Lou Feeny beside him, not at all attentive to the story I was telling about Mr. Euclid, about volumes which are displaced, and about what a low-life species we'd be without the genius of Señor Pythagoras.

"Scooter?" Butch said, "what the hell are you talking about?" It was a moment common in many venues these days: old guy versus menacing version of himself. I was drunk, too, which helped. "Butch," I said, "c'mon up here a second." It was late afternoon, our sun epic as always, and I knew that in an hour or so I'd be home, saying hello to my wife (third) Ellen. By eight, I'd be Orphic; by ten, asleep in a beer-hall never-neverland. "Right on," Butch said and pulled himself out of a slouch to commence that rolling walk he was famous for. We all watched for a time: hip, slide, lurch, idle, slide anew. "Ladies and gentlemen," I told the class, "what you see crawling through the aisle is a bona fide, triple-A, government approved asshole." You could see the effect immediately: I could have been naked and roiling astride the busty Mary Lou Feeny. "Billy Jo DeMarco, also known as Butch, is what you might call your basic ignoramus." He was puzzled and not at all pleased; and I tried to watch his fists and lecture at the same time. "What we got here is an American teenage dingleberry who likes food he can eat with his hands." That classroom, I swear, was alive with fear; and you could hear, plain as gunfire, many adolescent glands at work. "But," I said, "he's gonna do us all a service soon, which is get cleaned up and be a hero." Butch was almost to me when I felt my last Coors kick in. "Of course, there is the outside chance that he might, uh, die." (Saying that word in front of teenagers is like saying pussy in church.) "And if he does, I want all of you to join me at his funeral and sob as you're inclined to." When he reached me, I threw an arm around his shoulders and gave him a brotherly hug. "That preacher, if he's the sort I imagine, is going to say some mighty unkind but true things. He's going to mention, for one, that Butch here was young and, as a young person, liable to slip any time into an outer, eternal darkness. Furthermore, he might say that ol' Butch was a virtually certifiable cretin. Maybe a nose-picker, too." I could see smiles, especially a wet one from MLF. "But I want everyone here to know" – doubtlessly, they expected me to cold-cock that boy – "that I love this youngster and do intend, on the occasion of his death, to weep abundantly and pitch myself into a pit of cold depression." A bell was clanging somewhere and in an-

other minute I'd have thirty more live ones in here to entertain. "Butch," I said, "pucker up." Whereupon, quick as a cat, I grabbed that boy by the cheeks and gave him a movie-worthy smooch—a gesture of affection impossible in an otherwise sober man.

Another time—and this was about a year ago, on a Saturday—I was in our new Piggly-Wiggly, shopping for myself (as Ellen had long before left me for another life up in Albuquerque). It was crowded, I remember, as if all our 6000 citizens were that day hunting food. I was in the cereals section, my basket laden with potato chips, Swanson's frozen meals, everything Nabisco makes as cookie or finger treat, and here and there I could see many known to me or to my parents. Mrs. Billy Newell was yonder, making a decision against Cocoa Puffs; elsewhere, I could hear Dr. Weems' oldest girl, Beth, holding forth on the virtues of Comet; and then, my mind occupied by a debate between lard and margarine, over the intercom burst Muzak which transported me beyond the current moment and back to a time when I used to sit with my mother and play records. I heard, filtered through the Scotch whiskey I'd consumed that morning, such songs as "Moonlight on the Ganges," "Carolina in the Morning," and a melody by the Platters, the principal part of which was an "Oooohhh-ooohhh-ooohhh" which sent me vaulting heavenward. My heart was lifted, indeed, much was tilted in neighboring organs, and I found myself, most light of foot, tippy-tipping toward the tissue like a ballerina, arms aflutter, my face aglow, the world grand enough to supper uppercase animals like me.

In Produce, between banana and lettuce, I frolicked, did a dip my mother would have fussed over, and ended with a flourish of footwork those in Cotillion could learn from. Beside me stood a woman, nearly my own age, her cart filled with food almost as forlorn-appearing as herself: Chicken-Stix, roughage, and a quart of vanilla ice cream. "May I?" I said, bowing a little. In her eyes were none of the happy lights you see in the blessed or the gorgeous or those with especially toothsome secrets; so I took her hand—startled though she was—and, gently as her lover, wrapped an arm around her waist. "You smell wonderful," I said, inhaling at her neck as if she were more flower than creature. And then, to the strings of "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles," we shoved off, gliding and turning as if on ice. She was, at first, partly reluctant, but—as I spoke of her grace and radiance and nimble toes—she relaxed, stopped mumbling

“Wh—? Wh—?” and let me lead her this way and that, our cheeks attached, her pelvis brought ardently to my own. “I am Scooter,” I said, “and I feel like a butterfly.” Nervously, she looked around, as if this were TV and she the butt of a New York wisenheimer’s lame joke. “Jane,” she said, “Jane Clute. You know my husband Mickey.” Mickey, you should know, was a guard on the high school football team I was a halfback for, but right then, while we swept into housewares, I was as far from that past as I was tight against her. I spoke of her throat, which was delicate, and her soul, which was brave; and then, my mind held aloft by sentiment from Tin Pan Alley (was it “Louisville Lou”?), I told her how special she was—to me and to the planet itself. I praised her modesty, celebrated her tact, urged her to avoid the wanton among us, and concluded, after several dizzying whirls, with language in reference to smut. “Jane Clute,” I said, setting her aright in frozen foods, “you are ever a bride. Be not disappointed in the dark things many do. Adios.” With nary a rearward glance, I was then skipping toward the exit, liberal with good cheer and cut free from the grave pull of gravity. Scarcely panting, I remained at the electric door. Shoppers were flabbergasted as infants. One checker was trying to say my name, and way off, up in his tiny manager’s office, was Chester Pomeroy, aghast. “God bless you all,” I announced, “and to all a good night!”

Another anecdote before we come to the big finish we’re here for.

This scene comes from what is ostensibly the blue-hearted half of drink and concerns riot and Little League baseball. When I was married (to Darlene, #2) but separated, I went out one August night to Perkins Park to watch my youngest, J.E., play a little centerfield and found myself, clad in Bermuda shorts and a ragged Lobo T-shirt (my legs a shade of land-lubber white), sitting on a lawnchair beyond the fence, in the company of those I am in continual sympathy with: pot-smokers, criminals of the mild sort, the lonely. It was a wine night, I remember, brisk winds, heat swept south to Mexico, the clouds wispy and miles high; and the conversation in the twilight was about the usual: moral concerns among the feckless, a lively discussion about taxes and who went where in the olden days of major league baseball. Then, almost from the first batter, a man in the stands behind home plate started hollering, his speech that bray reproduced in our funny pages as “%\$&\*#%\$!” According to him, what was happening on the field (and in the entire world!) was no less than *Blankety-blank*

with, for good measure, some *So-and-so* thrown in. The third time he spewed forth—Billingsgate, it was—a light flashed on in my soaked fore-brain and I felt the presence of that which stands for principle in a drunk, outrage. I considered the fellows beside me—whiskered and wistful, they were mottled and morose—then said, “I came here to watch a game, what about you?” You could see the idea catch them like a club on the chin, and when my nine-year-old took the field again, I called, “Hey, J.E., who’s that sapsucker yelling?” It took a second or two for him to find me in the shadows beyond the light standard. “Ah, crap, Daddy,” he said, “that’s Bobby Hover’s old man.”

That inning I heard bile and foment, both; by the fifth, the warmth was gone from my heart. You could see old man Hover up there, the meager mom-and-pop crowd having fled from him as it would from rabies. Standing or sitting, he waved and yattered and spit, once racing down to rattle the backstop screen like a zoo monkey. “Yamma-yamma” is what he screeched. “Fug, fug, fug.” By the next inning, I’d had enough. “Boys,” I said, “let’s mash that dipstick.” I was as brave on my Gallo Brothers diet as Charlie Atlas was on his regimen of iron and sweaty exertion; and righteous with anger, we non-paying sorts clambered over the chain-link and headed for the infield. Euphoric and motley a mob as has ever assembled, our number included a dropout named Spoon, an older gent we called The Senator, two redneck grits who’d been to La Tuna for stealing railroad ties and a guy who looked like cement on legs. “Daddy?” J.E. said as we charged past, “what’re you doing?” I brought my troops to a jerky halt and, calm as Rev. Tippit is when he sends his devoted flock to perdition, told him: “J.E., we’re going over there and rip that man’s liver out.”

We reached the screen together and, hooting and yelling, we tumbled over and crawled up the bleachers until I was well-nigh in Mr. Hover’s lap. He was built like Bluto. “Who the hell are you?” he said. Around us, it was X-mas eve, not even a mouse astir, and I felt as Hannibal must have when he and his beasts broke through the passes and found all of civilization lying meekly at his feet. “Mr. Hover,” I began, “may I introduce you to my colleagues.” I pointed. Over there, I said, dressed in a gritty sweat-shirt and in need of a shave, was Plague. Next to him, a being with dental problems, Venery. Behind him, and quick with a fist, Murrain. “These others,” I said, “I’m sure you already know.” They were, left to right, Sloth, Malice and Greed. “So what do you say?” I asked, “are you gonna

shut up or what?” For a second his eyes looked like coal which had lain for ten million years in darkness. You could almost hear him thinking it over, his brain fractured and flat as a dry lakebed. Then he rose, fat man’s belly last, and said that for all he cared I, and my confederates, could die. “You’re drunk,” he said, “get out of here.”

At this point, each of us had a moment alone with himself: Hover, for his part, was convincing himself I wouldn’t; I, for mine, was convinced I would. And hovering between us — as stark and painful as are all visions of our dreadfulness — was the picture of what, given the breed man is, we might become: a tussle of legs and arms, hissing and snorting and whaling on our respective stuffings. For an instant, I considered our heavens: it was a night worthy of *The Little Prince*. Then I spoke, trying to shape my words to express a thousand things — love, seriousness, resolve, etc. “Mr. Hover, sir, I am truly drunk — drunk enough to see the two of you — but what I saw and heard offended not only me but also them, these interested parents, our youth and” — I did not know, I admit, where this was going — “and, well, It.” He looked confused, suspicious: “It?” Around us, the no-account crowd was shocked and aiming to sneak away, and in the lights swarmed millions of insects. Yearning for just another sip of wine, I sought a gesture to include us, our ballpark, our town, our nation, the whole wide-spread world. “Yeah,” I said, “It.” The light came to his eyes, left again. “Oh,” he said, “right.”

What you have heard thus far is what my physician, Dr. Spellman, says is just quote tears, tears, tears unquote — the whole of it attending to the shared theme of booze. “Scooter,” he said the other day, “why don’t you tell them about what brought you here?” It was a good idea then and a better idea now, and so, folks, I ask you to hearken with me to a Sunday morning less than two weeks ago when my daddy, who’s aged but awfully damn spry, rang me up to say that he’d put a foursome together for that afternoon and did I care to play? I had one thought (which may have been unspeakable) and another which brought to mind linksplay and sabbath-inspired fellowship. “Shit, yes,” I said, “what time you want me there?”

Until one o’clock, our tee time, I drank Oso Negro (which is wetback rum and potent as TNT), polished my Spaldings to a high shine, and stood in the back of my Olive Street duplex, whanging a bucket of prac-

tice balls over Larry Aiken's house and onto the parking lot of Mr. Cruz's muffler shop. It felt good, I tell you, to be out in the sunshine and wearing an outfit you might find one day on Pinky Lee; and I was especially pleased to discover that, more often than not, I could still whack the ball with some authority and little grief. "Gentlemen," I said when I arrived at the first tee, "ain't life marvelous?" Coots every one, they were as depressing a bunch as I one day expect to find in hell. "Scooter," Billy Newell muttered, "you drunk, or just crazy?" I let them look at me for a second—my plaid slacks, my red NuTonics, my stained planter's chapeau with pheasant feather in the hatband—then said something about the bear and the woods, the Pope and Catholicism. "Let's play sport, boys," I hollered and soon enough we were at it, industrious as coolies.

By the fifth hole—and in accordance with our nassau—I was nearly fifteen dollars in debt. "Hold it," I said at the top of Ivy Martin's backswing, "let me figure this out." I had a pencil and piece of paper and tried, while Mr. Hightower screamed at me, to bring order to this business of money and competition. "Okay," I said at last, minutes later, "let's resume." (I have had the opportunity, you should know, to see that paper since, and what is on it is a sentence perhaps ninety words long, which begins in the arms of virtuous reason and ends, after several asides and trips to the hinterlands, in a heartening muddle of hope.)

At the turn—only a couple of holes, folks, before Ivy Martin started throwing his clubs and Mr. Newell started beating on my noggin—we went into the clubhouse for a sandwich and enough beer. I hadn't been to the club much in the last few years so I hurried about, in the bar and dining room, saying howdy. I told George Dalrhymple, for example, how much I liked his new Biscayne and could I drive it sometime, my old Ford being nearly unusable now on account of disinterest and weak credit. "I'll get the keys later," I said, "thank you." I saw Mrs. Chubb Feeny and reminded her how much I missed those spaghetti dinners we used to have at their place when I was in Junior High. I was arranging for a loan from Frank Papen, Jr. when my daddy creeped up on my flank, clapped his horny hand on my shoulder and, in a doom-filled whisper, said I should get my heiny out to the tenth tee, pronto.

It was on the twelfth hole, a par five whose tee is set back in what passes for woods in this desert, that Ivy Martin fell apart like a three-dollar tuxedo and I was set upon. I had stroked a beaut and, hearty as Santa

Claus, I told Mr. Martin, when he settled himself over his ball, to widen his stance a mite. "Pull that hand over, too," I added, "you look terrible." There was a sun worthy of Brother Homer himself and birds tweeting in the distance, and I just couldn't keep quiet. "Hold that head down, Ivy. I got great eyes." Drinking a Bloody Mary, I was trying to make contact with the soul of sport, which is perfection, and perhaps the soul of us as well. "Bend over," I told him, "take some spine out of it." What passed then was a silence as honest as death; and almost in slow-motion I saw Ivy snatch that club back, grit, and fly forward. The ball blasted away; then, in an arc agonizing to behold, it dived to the right, smack into the core of a thick, thorny mesquite bush. "Damn," I grumbled, "ain't that a bitch?"

Here it was then that Ivy, spitting like a pressure cooker and thrown over into the underhalf of his spirit, whirled his club around his gray head and flung it thither. I was dumbstruck, "Whoa, now," I said. But in two giant steps, Ivy Martin, sputtering and making inhuman noise, had emptied his bag and was hurling everything—clubs, balls, his umbrella, a towel—into the plant life. I remember I felt something let go in me—a muscle or comparable fiber. This was fury indeed, the sort—if it ends in carnage or conflagration—you read about for weeks; and what was opening in me, near the heart or companion vessel, was a great flood of kindness. I looked around. Nobody was moving. My daddy, a Chesterfield between his teeth, was as stiff as a fence post, nothing in his eyes about what a horror this was. Nearby, Mr. Hightower was picking at his thumbnail and maybe muttering to himself. And Mr. Newell, otherwise glorious in his orange sport clothes, had the abstract, hooded expression of a snake.

"Wait a jiffy here, Ivy," I said. He was now jumping on the bag itself, his voice part growl, part shriek. I tapped him on the shoulder, lightly, and he whirled around. "Jesus," I said. His face, normally blank and indifferent as sand, was crawling, patches on his cheeks red as sunset; so I tackled him. "It's all right," I said. I held that little man as you would a hysterical toddler, and tried to reach him as my mother had many times tried to reach me in a tantrum: "It's no big deal, Ivy." He smelled as all these codgers did—dusty and not a little fruity. Take the long view, I told him. What did golf—or anything—really matter? We were just ooze, anyway, smarter and able to move on our own. "Think about it this way," I said, then informed him of the billions we were—fat, skinny, slovenly, robust—all of us fat for a larger fire. I said a dozen words to

him—glee, mirth, salvation, etc.—trying to invest in each the entire weight of my person. “Ivy,” I whispered, “this ain’t so foul.” I encouraged him to think of all, besides this immediate disappointment, which had not claimed him. Slaughter, for instance. Assault. Earthquake. And, well, diphtheria.

To be true, he resisted some, scratching and slapping at me, trying once to gnaw on my neck. “Ivy B. Martin,” I said, “you ought to be ashamed.” From my high, drunken perch, I was seeing him as woefully sore-minded, a poor loser who runs home to stew and maybe take it out on his furniture. “You stop that now,” I ordered, shaking him as more than once my daddy had wobbled me. “Grow up, you hear? What are you anyways?” You could tell he was lost, adrift like a castaway in his own despair. “Aaaarrggghh,” he was crying, “eeeffff.” Big as I am, I held tighter and was reminded of times, mostly drunk-wrought, when I felt the world fall together as neatly as a deck of well-shuffled cards. “Well,” I said, “what is it now?” In his face, now less than an inch from mine, was textbook apoplexy: the bug eyes of a frog, flared nostrils, lips quivering in a frenzy. “Listen,” I began, “I want you to do something.” For a second—or a minute—I didn’t know what I thought, only that, warmed by vodka, I was as prepared as ever for the certain light of truth. “You get ahold of yourself right now, you hear?” We were on the ground now, him rocking in my lap. Then I made recommendations: Maybe he ought to fornicate more, I said, perhaps take up with one hefty as Mrs. Hightower. “Second,” I said, “get up a little later, you ain’t missing nothing.” He was keening, he was, moving toward the humble in himself. “Third,” I said, “throw off these expectations you have. Be firm in the present moment.” I had more to offer, but there was darkness somewhere and something, bitter with ferment, was seeking to pass from my innards upwards.

Then Mr. Newell, strong as a gorilla, clobbered me.

Two and a half hours later, Daddy and Sheriff Chuck Gribble came to fetch me; and, I’ll admit, I was ready for them. What I told Dr. Spellman was that, once Billy Newell started thrashing on me, my whole frame of reference creaked, teetered, fell over and I leapt up, angrily. “Okey-dokey, you old farts,” I said, “the hell with you.” And I stormed off, my stride purposeful as that seen at track meets.

I went straight home, you should know, pitched open my front door

and aimed for the icebox. In it was what I'd been living on: various pressed meats, processed cheese I couldn't toss out, greens to make my sleep easier, jelly I had a yen for, and liquor. My anger, I tell you, was largely gone (which is what happens when, at a brisk pace, you walk in a broiling desert town); what remained was a parched spot which needed drink as much as a bird needs song. Much song. I showered—no small achievement when you're barely upright and coherent as chaos—and changed into what is my finest outfit: undertaker's sportcoat, the shiny wingtips of a banker, and a Juarez, Mexico tie which suggested what women are here for on earth. At some level, I am convinced, I knew plans were being made in my behalf, and I intended to accept them as if they were wealth itself. Then, smelling like Jade East, I sat on the porch, a tumbler of vodka between my legs.

What I'm going to say now will probably make as little sense to you as it did to Daddy and Sheriff Chuck; in any case, what happened was this: sitting there, heavy-lidded and numb to larger noises, I had a four-alarm, wide-awake vision—one without fanfare or related trumpet-work from heaven. I saw, from my aluminum chair, a world of shimmering elements and dancing lights and, suspended in them like angels, all the people I had known: Mother, my daddy, my Aunt Dolly, uncles, kids I had been schooled with. I saw my wives—Ellen, Darlene, Jo Ann—and in rank beside them, my children. I saw, too, as if from a seam in our universe which happened to be on Art Monge's property, a file of strangers, each dressed for the big event of their lives. "Well, I'll be," I said, and there they were—butcher, baker, etc.—all lugging instruments of the loftiest kind: lyre, harp, flute. It was a goddam fashion show, that's what it was: formal wear and diaphanous gowns, arch headgear and glittery, dangling rocks.

A couple of times I looked around. "Hey, Art!" I yelled at my neighbor, "you see anything?" He was cussing his lawnmower and saying what havoc he'd like to wreak in this orb. "Look out in the street," I hollered, "tell me what's out there." He shook his head the way cops do over infractions of the mindless sort, then kicked his machine to life. I shook myself good then, closed my eyes and had a moment with myself. Okay, I thought. Relax. Think. What is this but another sort of Pink Elephant? I counted, as if playing hide-n-seek: one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi. I listened to my heart: lub-lub, lub-lub. I took the deep breath my mother used to say aired the brain, then returned to the real world. "Scooter," I

said, “when you open your eyes, ain’t going to be nothing in the street but sticky asphalt and your beat-up Fairlane.”

After a three-count, I popped open my eyes and, again, took in that tide of who’s-its and whatever that was flowing from its world into mine. “Holy moly!” I shouted, “isn’t this something?” I was thrilled as a poor man getting lucky; and in a second, as I knew I would, I spotted other familiar faces. I saw Butch, for example, now in the company of Mary Lou Feeny and a handful of grinning, pink offspring. I waved, they waved. A minute later, I saw Jane Clute — that woman I’d cha-cha-ed with in the supermarket — and she was as beautiful as any female thrown up by movie-land for us to ogle. She had hair I would now describe as whipped or spun and a posture which brought to mind the word “carriage.” Her smile twisted my heart on its root, and I said so. “Thank you,” she answered, “I am happy.” And off she floated — toward her husband Mickey, who, having dropped his guard’s scowl, was much improved as well. What was in me — in my very cockles — was that joy associated with triumph, an emotion dear enough to forgive that done without it. I saw, you should know, those Buckeyes, now loosened from the place in my past and moving in front of my door in a manner downright jaunty. “Hail, Ohio!” I shouted. “Hail, yourself,” they said and were gone. I took a drink. Light was everywhere now, being splashed about and showered like rain. I even saw Mr. Hover, his fury vanished, and saluted him as you would those heroes who march down your street. Important as a drum-major, he was leading kids, I tell you, and they were bound for a place more amusing than Disneyland. And then, about the time my daddy and Sheriff Chuck rolled up in the old man’s Continental, I saw that person nearest to me: Me. Indeed, I could see myself as clearly as I now see this wall or that narrow bed I dream on. Yes, there I was, shining and most benevolent, a bottle of booze in both hands, and a smile our white man’s Easter Bunny would be woozy for. “How-do,” I called from the porch; and, fetching as love itself, that me gleaming in the sunlight held open his arms and bade me enter. That Scooter LeDuc who was in the street was bosom and lap and cradle — all those things we are wont to fall into; and, in an instant, in what I know is the end of that part of my life, I struggled from my chair, as Daddy and his minion started up the walk, and exclaimed, “Virtue. Desire. Beauty. Splendor. Wisdom. Charity.” The words themselves had the

wonder of my bliss, and as I uttered them — even as I tumbled face-first into the arms of that which had partly spawned me — I felt my hope rise and spread and move toward perfection.