

the West. Pigafetta, traveling with Magellan, reported that the King of Borneo dropped his pants and showed him two as large as goose eggs. The pearl is a Christian symbol of salvation and a particle of the consecrated eucharist wafer, a Chinese charm against fire, a Moslem condition of the hereafter: the faithful endure forever, encapsulated in pearls, each with his own exquisite virgin, Allah's wages to the orthodox. The Chinese in the sixth century also believed it rained pearls when dragons fought in the sky, but some beliefs are not true. We now know in fact that such storms are more often triggered by sudden eclipses in the erogenous zones of quasars. . . .

The Gift: Bihar, India

Charles Poverman

On the palm mat Catherine was lying just as she had fallen asleep. Her glasses, still on above her closed eyes, were like empty shells abandoned by the sea. On mats and tables and rope beds, the villagers slept about her, their bodies twisted and open, each lying as the day had left him. In sixes and eights their bare feet dangled from the shadows of the porch. The village men lay in groups, touching, their family and village and caste instinct keeping them together as if even in sleep they feared to be alone.

When she sighed, reaching up to touch her eye, David knew she was awake. She was looking up at the constellations where they were brightest and most unweakened by the waning moon. David listened to the dogs growling at each other and pacing through the shadows. Occasionally he sensed one silently pass close to his head.

Her face was pale in the moonlight. Soft. He would whisper over to her in the time it took to draw a breath. Out beyond the huts the foxes were calling, their voices peopling the night. They crouched in the dust, their eyes gleaming. The moon tugged at their throats.

Now she was getting up. Picking up her missal. And flashlight.

She stepped into her sandals and picked her way into the shadows beyond the hut. David saw the flashlight go on. He stared over at the deserted mat. Someone sighed near him. Behind his closed eyelids the foxes were calling.

She was reading her missal.

The sky flowed pale blue overhead. He felt a quick sense of fear because the day had come while he slept. Like dropped mercury the sun was shattered by a cluster of palm fronds; it had just cleared the horizon. He heard babies crying and women squabbling. He shook out his shoes for scorpions and pulling them on walked toward the open porch. It extended from one side of the mudhouse—a sloping roof covered with earthen tiles and supported by several beams and braces made of palm trunks.

She was always awake a few minutes before him. She stood up from the kerosene stove. It was a silent greeting, a smile. She gave him a bucket from the corner of the porch. He nodded and started for the well. Behind the emptied food and milk crates piled on the mud walls she was pinning up her braids.

He walked toward the well. Under the tree the women from the other villages had already started to gather, shuffling in slowly, almost dreamily, as if in a daze, carrying the rolled mats on their heads. They wove the mats from dried palm fronds and exchanged them for laps of grain, surrendering their thumbs to the ink pad. The trays of the scale rose and fell gently on the chains as they settled in the wind. When the grain was measured out, the women and old men would hold it to them and, leading their naked, wild-haired children, shuffle away quickly like released birds, one thin hand clutching the lump of seeds at their waist as if someone—whatever—were to change his mind and take them back.

David looked at them, squatting, elbows on knees and arms straight out, bangles gathered at their thin wrists. Bemused and brooding, dazed, as he knew himself to be, they were waiting. At nightfall, they would still be there beneath the tree, they and the shadows having shifted in time with each other, their goats wandering about them and their children stoning worried dogs. It took a long time to weigh out the grain.

They turned their eyes on him. He walked more quickly; not that it was his fault that the rains had failed for two years—that their rice paddies had dried up and hardened and slowly turned from brown mud to dust—that now ungoverned and mocking the dust wandered about on the West wind like the hungry spirits of their dead children and cattle, covering them, clinging to their hair and throats and nostrils, sifting with the white sunlight through the staved thatch of their shadowy huts, sifting with a soft swish when the wind lulled. And then again rattling against the brittle thatch. The thatch for their new roofs was still unrisen from the dark ground as the rain was still in the sky. And this was the second year. No, not that it was his fault, but he walked more quickly when the villagers looked at him.

Brown people they were—hands and feet and eyes—brown as they squatted close to the ground. When they died, the eldest son poured ghee on their pyres, and the smoke and ashes released them to the wind to become.

They watched him as he passed on his way to the well, he though sun darkened, still white—a white man. He walked across the land, and as nothing

else grew or was alive about him, he felt himself to be huge. He felt both tall and exposed on the land.

■

"It's boiled," she said of the water as she handed him the canteen.

"Thanks. You catch what you're going to catch, though." Still, he was glad she had remembered. Suddenly he wanted to reach out and touch her face, her skin. She seemed to smile faintly, distantly. Eyes grey blue and skin pale white. Not for sun like this, but for north and dew and pastures. Strange how her skin hardly flushed. And her green pants, the one to the Punjabis. She slept in them and dried her hands on them. How could she wear them in this heat? But then, the village women would never let her legs be uncovered, even though it was she who made certain the milk came to them. He looked at the loosed Indian shirt—*curta*—hanging to her knees like a maternity blouse. How could she stand all that cloth?

She was unlike all of the girls he had met and slept with so easily in his travels. She seemed to have no human needs, to be a perfection almost like the famine itself. Before he came, she had already been here alone for six months with a Catholic volunteer organization. He, just another world traveller, two weeks in India, and already thinking ahead to the whores of the Orient—Bangkok and Singapore and Hong Kong—had been riding on a train down to Calcutta when he'd gotten out at a station on the line for a cup of tea.

An upper caste Indian, fat, sweating, his teeth stained red with betel, had approached. He wore a bright fountain pen conspicuously clipped into the breast pocket of his white shirt. The man wanted to try out his English. Impress this strange white man. From which country are you coming? America. Oh, a very rich country. Certainly not like our poor India. "In our country millions are dying. You see station sign?" He pointed at the sign in Hindi and English, *Gaya*. "In this area alone, people are starving in the crores." He waved his hand, fluttered his fingers, an almost feminine gesture, as though he were shaking so much dirt from his fingers. His watch crystal caught the sunlight. "But no matter. It is better letting these people die. There is nothing to be done for them. Here in India, we accept such things." The man was close now, very confidential.

They had entered the compartment together. Oh yes, old friends by now. From outside through the windows came the soft clack of the small clay tea vessels breaking on the platform as people dropped them and hopped back on the train. The whistles of the ticket collectors blew. A sudden darkening of doorways—people running. The train started to slowly roll out of the station. Suddenly, David grabbed his pack. Ran to the open door of the train. The vendors, hawkers, and crowds were sliding past. Behind him the Indian called, "Now what are you doing . . . ?" Heaving his pack out onto the platform, David jumped. Staggered as he landed. The Indian was growing smaller as he stood peering back out of the door. The train clattered out of the station. Gone. Silence. Then, the low drone of the crowds on the open, fly-ridden platform, eating, sleeping, squatting, staring at him.

From there, he had found out about the famine relief center—the ashram.

A school for holy meditation. In the cathedral silence and airless shadows immense burlap bags of grain were stacked up to the ceiling. Crates of powdered milk. Food. In the silence, the scuttle of rat feet.

He'd been out with her in the village for two months now. And always she was the same. A perfect island of serenity. Like the circle of blue at the apex of the sky in the brown dust at midday. She was never warm toward him. Never cold. Like and of the famine itself—just there. He sweated. He lost his temper. He cursed at the villagers. At himself. At the man on the train with the gold watch flashing in the sun. He lost twenty pounds. And all the time, Catherine never seemed to lose flesh or change. Her cheeks remained full. Her face at the threshold of flushing. Just the hint of fine perspiration at her hairline. That was all.

The closest they had come to touching was her cutting his hair. Yet he stayed. Because of her? No, because of the original sense of inarticulate outrage he'd felt on the train. He could leave anytime. Each morning, he rose and thought, this morning will be the last. Then she would bring him tea in an old Skippy peanut butter jar. He would sip at the tea. And stay. Just one more day. He couldn't bring himself to say to her, "I'm leaving." Each day, he hoped to find a way to reach her through her perfections. Catherine. So self-sustaining. She had her missal against the scorched land. And he? Nothing. Yet each morning he stayed. So it was this morning, when she handed him the canteen of water.

"I'd better get moving before the sun gets hotter." He soaked a towel in water and wrapped it around his head. Taking the handlebars of the bicycle, he again found himself looking at her cheek and long braids.

"Do you have anything you want me to wash for you while you're over there, some shirts or . . . ?"

"Why do you always want to wash my clothes . . . boil my water . . . and nothing else? Do you think that what I want is for you to wash my dirty clothes?"

In her soft way, she didn't answer.

He swung up on the bicycle, the canteen thumping against the bone of his hip, and picked up the track of the road.

■

He could see a long way across the land—close clusters of brown huts or a distant tree, and angle-pelvised water buffalo or dolphin-nosed goats looking for a blade of green. But the sun and the cattle and the goats and the villagers themselves through a passivity bred of sun and rain and gods, invaders and a few men with money and generations which went all the way back to those very gods, they had returned the land to brown and nothing green remained but the dust-covered fronds of the tall *todi* palms and a few twisted trees, their lower leaves long ago stripped as high as the cattle had been able to stretch their wet, curling tongues.

Turning, he followed the road beside the sandwhite riverbed. Farther along he passed a small village. The children ran naked in the dust, calling after him. The white man. They ran a short distance and trailed away. At the last hut an old man walked toward him stiffly, a stick—*lathi*—in one hand. The folds of a

greyed *dhoti* hung about his hips and covered his legs. As he walked toward David he pulled up the cloth and pointed to an open sore on his calf. He began to whine. David yelled in Hindi, "No doctor, no have medicine. Nothing," and added in English, "Damn you." He held out an empty hand to show the man he had nothing. He felt the man's eyes on his back as he rode away.

He knew she wouldn't have cursed like that. She was much calmer. Perhaps it was not just her, but the way all women were. Or perhaps she drew the calm from her missal—a mass for every day of the year. David rode on, wondering about her. He felt uneasy and empty when he thought of her getting up last night with her missal and moving off alone to somehow draw sustenance from a hidden source in the dead of night, something almost unfair about it, her in the shadow behind the hut thinking everyone asleep, the print like black flames burning on those pages beneath the yellow flashlight. And she reading the language of the dead, the Latin and prayers which belonged to echoing damp caverns and death.

Her. Women. They seemed to grow fatter or stay just as full at times when men were reduced to skin and . . . like that man back there. Women. Maybe it was their metabolism, childbearing. All of that power used on themselves when not holding a child. No, that wasn't true. The village women were thin, too. The fullness seemed to be true only of her. That slow, steady power. He thought of her reading her missal in the shadows.

Behind him the sun was higher, yet the real heat was still to come. The bones pressed up through his taut burned skin as if the flesh were slowly being boiled away, surfacing through the amorphousness of his fats and juices. The sky was wide and empty, blinding blue as it had been for months, the sun yet to go forth, the day, too, an endless going forth, a compression of shadow and brightening of light and leaping up of heat, endless . . . until at a certain moment in the afternoon, the shadows changed almost imperceptibly. Then they slowly began to flow from the sun toward night like water coming back to the river. When that happened he knew he would make it for another day and would let down and allow himself to think ahead to evening and the stars and soft breeze which would dissolve this prison now soundlessly rising about him.

He swung away from the riverbed and followed the path cutting through the ridges of the paddies. The wheels rolled smoothly except when they reached the end of one terrace, and the track bumped through the ridge separating it from the next.

This land. This dust. This heat. Catherine liked them. She had said so one morning. "They remind me of my home. The desert. The Mojave." And she had stood with her hands in her pockets, a faint smile upon her face, and stared at the horizon and thought about home.

She had told him something about it once, about how her father had been many things, a pilot and a mechanic, and how they had moved here and there. When he died, they had owned the gas station in the desert. She and her mother had been left to run it by themselves. She, the oldest, had taken care of the younger children—eight of them.

Eight of them. Nine, including herself. Because they were Catholic, he had wondered. No. Because they—Father and Mother—had known he was going to

die, and they had wanted as many children as possible, she had said simply.

Children. Nine of them. From one man and one woman. And when her father had died, "I couldn't believe he was dead." She had told him about it one evening as they sat quietly before the hut, about them, the cries and naked footfalls of the village children rising from the shadows. "When he died, I couldn't feel anything at first. I just didn't understand. I was fifteen. He was gone."

She had sat beside him on an empty food crate, her head resting against the still-warm mud wall of the hut, her face in the shadow of the overhanging roof. She sat next to him, but not touching, sitting as she always did, a little apart from him. "I couldn't believe he was dead, but I acted as though I did. Together Mother and I dressed the children. And then we all went down to the funeral home. And there was Father. At the front of the room.

"I went up there. To see him. I know I shouldn't have done that. I looked in the casket. Suddenly I had this feeling. I had to touch him." She paused, remembering. "I reached out. My hand seemed to move by itself. And I did touch him. His hands were placed next to one another, flat on his chest. And I touched him, just one of his fingers . . . like this." She reached over in the shadow and touched David's finger. "When I touched him, his finger, it was then that I really knew that he was dead." As she touched his own finger, David suddenly felt a chill and imagined himself, eyes closed, hands folded across his chest, lying in the casket.

They were silent. One of the small boys had come up to David's side and put his head in his lap. David put his hand about the boy's shoulder, and the boy was still and content.

Then she spoke again. "I thought of becoming a nun for a while. . . . I mean, afterward."

Again he felt a chill.

They fell silent. Then she continued. "One of my sisters went into the convent for two years. She withdrew before she took her final vows, though. I don't know. Sometimes I think. . . ." She stopped abruptly. "You know, I don't think of Father as dead when I think of him. Not the way he was in the casket. I remember him . . .

"The gas station was just so far from everything. A diner next door was all. They didn't even have lights on the highway then. That was too bad when they put them in because I used to sleep in this old sailboat out in the desert. But after the lights were in I couldn't sleep out there because they would shine in my eyes. Anyway. One day a gang of guys came through the desert on cycles. They started cruising around the station and through the pumps. Kicking over oilcans. Wild." She hesitated. "I think Father might have been the same way when he was a kid—wild like that. But those machines . . . I was petrified.

"Father just picked up a wrench. He put it in his back pocket and walked outside. He was big—tall. I was behind him in the office. He stood there in the doorway, and I could see through the doorway around him. And the window . . . after a few minutes they quieted down with him standing there. And then they left." She became quiet, remembering. "Just stood there."

And at the time, sitting by her, he had been able to imagine the man, the

desert about him, and the empty road turning back to scrub on the other side. The blueing desert shadows. And then the silence after.

■

Ahead, David could see village women squatting in front of the huts. One of the Indian boys—come out to help—was standing among them, dipping the measuring cup into the kettle of milk and pouring it out, white and shiny, into the small earthen pots and brass *lotas* of the women. They squatted close to the ground, holding up their vessels but staying low and turning their faces, expectantly. They squatted as if reluctant or afraid to rise too far from the ground.

Bharatbha came to the shadow of the hut door, and as the sun silvered his unshaven whiskers and deepened his child-brown eyes, he smiled and pressed together his palms before his chest.

“Namasta.”

The two of them went into the hut. Bharatbha waited while David rested, giving him tea and massaging his legs. Then they went out to look at the wells.

They wandered through the paddy fields, stopping and peering down into the clawed earth, down into the wells, the village men following them, holding their hands a half-span apart to show how much water at the bottom or shaking their heads when there wasn't any yet, or holding up a chunk of rotten rock to tell what it was like down there, that they could not dig deeper without chisels and sledge hammers or dynamite from the block development officer. They wandered through the paddies to the mounds where the dirt had piled up and crusted, deserted because the man digging had suddenly felt the earth pressing about him and the water too far below and had pulled himself up into the sunlight and simply sat down to stare at the dried horizon. And in some wells a face peered up from the shadows. Then the man's back glistened as he bent over and swung his pick.

■

It was when he was again resting inside the hut that he first noticed the child. He was naked and holding a grey rag in the cradle of his neck and shoulder, staring quietly and intently at David. He was outside, in the sun. The child looked familiar. Perhaps it was something in his quiet gaze—very steady and sad and old. On his last visit two days before, David remembered seeing this same boy. And holding on to the grey rag.

David rose from the grain sacks and walked to the doorway. His shadow was almost directly beneath him. He felt the heat as soon as he stepped out of the hut. The boy didn't back away or hold out his hands for food or coins the way many of the children did. He stood still and looked up and didn't retreat even when David took the cloth between his fingers. Slowly, he peeled the rag back. As the light hit the eyes of the baby beneath, they closed.

The sunlight suddenly seemed to be heavy and sonorous, ringing, rising in pitch, becoming higher and shriller. David felt himself sway, his body formed a sound, apart and separate from himself.

The baby's lips and nostrils were covered with flies. Black, they rubbed their

hind legs together. The baby blinked and wrinkled up his nose and blinked again. And slowly, very slowly, he opened his small mouth. No sound rose from his throat. After a moment David realized the baby was crying.

He picked the rag away from the child and held him out at arm's length. He cradled him in the palm of one hand and let the rag drop. Holding the child in both hands before him, David looked at his tiny eyelashes and his almost transparent ears. His oversized head was bald and scabbed, and a keyhole shaped place on top was like an airview of a buried ancient ruin, a small shadow where the skull had started to cave in. He held the baby up. Dangling like vestigial organs, his legs were those of a creature caught out of his medium in some uncertain stage of evolution. His tiny brown buttocks had shriveled, the underside of spoiled fruit neglected in a bowl. David felt the child's ribcage, his tiny breath pressing against his palms, and the frail soft chord of his backbone.

He held this tiny fragment of flesh between his fingers and wondered whose son he was and whom he belonged to and if he could possibly have a name. How old was he? And could he see David? Did he know he was being held? David wondered what this person had done to deserve all this and if he could even be called a person at all and then he found himself wondering about the child in the Hindu way—whether the child suffered this because of the sins of the child's father in the father's present life or if they were sins of the previous soul in his past life or lives which had brought him back to experience the world in this shriveled body. Life in all vehicles—stone, leaf, fish, dog, woman, man, all transformations of the same blind essence trying to come back . . . and this which he held in his hands?

Bharatbhia came out, and the two stood quietly gazing at the baby. The child stared off at the horizon as Bharatbhia bent down and spoke to him. Finally the boy left, and Bharatbhia and David continued to stand looking at the baby in David's hands, thinking each his thoughts as the baby opened and closed his mouth, crying without tears or sound, until the boy returned, coming from a distant group of huts and leading a thin man who was neither as old or as weak as he first appeared, he—like Bharatbhia—silver whiskered and lined about the eyes. Except for the sacred strands—the life cord—hanging from the cowlick, his grey hair was cropped short. A little smaller than her brother, a naked girl trailed behind him.

The father answered Bharatbhia's questions with the villagers' reluctance to speak and perhaps dislike or distrust or disbelief in anything spoken. He pointed at the sun and his fields and leaned on his stick. As Bharatbhia replied, he touched the baby. The father squinted as he listened.

When he spoke he was difficult to understand—for David because of the Hindi, for Bharatbhia because the man himself didn't seem to comprehend what had happened and explained uncertainly. It seemed that the mother had died, and the baby had not been getting any milk. Perhaps another woman . . . ?

Including the father and his three children in the circling of his hand, David pointed over in the direction of the village he had just come from, saying the name. Then the Hindi words for medicine and milk and let's go. The father shook his head.

How could he refuse? What was here? What choice . . . suddenly David felt desperate. Pointing in the direction of the distant village, he forgot about the baby. They had to go. That was all. He didn't know enough Hindi to explain about the girl and how she could take care of the baby, how she could watch him and give him the medicine, and do—exactly what, he wasn't certain—except that she was there, and in a way that was almost enough in itself, that she was there.

It was noon when the father agreed, but by now they would have to wait until late afternoon when the heat slackened. And the West wind, the *Loo*, had already started. The palm fronds clacked and clattered. The horizon churned a dirty sun color in all directions up to where the sky blued in a pale circle overhead. The dust filtered through the thatched roof and silvered the becalmed sunlight inside the hut.

They started when the shadows were lengthening, though the wind was still hot and heavy. Walking stiff-legged, his bare feet cracked and calloused at the heels, the father led the way, followed by the little girl. Wildhaired and bright-eyed, she stepped quickly, trying to keep up. Before setting out, the father had bent down and very carefully and tenderly held out a pair of red shorts for her. Standing on one leg, balancing a hand on her father's wrinkled shoulder, she had stepped into one leg, then the other. She wore the shorts now. Her brother followed, holding the grey rag about the baby, who blinked and wrinkled his face—almost bemused—against the flies. David followed, wheeling the bicycle, occasionally forced to lift it up over a terrace ridge.

It was a long way for the children, but they kept up, the little girl now and then hopping between steps. They rested in the shade of a small tree by the riverbed. When they started again, David covered the baby's head with the rag and pointed at the sun. The small boy understood.

Now, through an earthen haze, he could see the village, about it palms bending to the wind. And then, Catherine. She was standing outside. He waved, and she waved back. He looked at the baby under the rag, suddenly afraid, but he was still alive. He began to feel his heart beat. His throat closed, and he became aware of how dry his lips were. He licked them but his tongue was dry, too. He looked at the naked face, a fly in the nostril, and he felt a strange anxiousness, almost a pride, as if the brother were bringing her a gift—his, David's.

She was as he thought she would be. When he took the baby from the brother and held it out for her, she took him with none of the repugnance he had felt. She held him up in her cool hands and looked at his sores. She smiled. "I suppose he's got a little of everything."

She was boiling water to wash him when the father came up to David and touched his arm. The man held out his hand. "*Kona*."

Turning up his empty palms, David replied, "No have food. *Kona Nahi*. Work for food." He was vexed to find himself reduced to speaking a kind of baby talk. He led the man a stone's throw from the hut and drew a circle in the dust. He made digging motions and told him in Hindi, "Dig one foot, give you two kilos grain."

The man shook his head, no.

"Damn you, what do you mean, 'No'? No dig, no eat. You're not special."

Suddenly he realized he was yelling in English—and in that baby talk. He stared at the father who neither met his eyes, nor looked away from them. He seemed to be wearing a veil, through which he could see, but through which anything David did or said could not penetrate. Something quietly angry about this small wrinkled man subdued David. He asked in Hindi, “How much grain for one foot dig? *Kitna?*” The man held up three fingers.

That they were starving, that the food wasn’t from their soil, that their own countrymen would let them die—as the man wearing the expensive wristwatch in the railroad station had said in precise, proud English, “. . . better to let these villagers die,”—and that they would die if it wasn’t for . . . Maybe better to let them die. And that they should bargain with him for the grain as if it were his to give and as if he were sitting on a fat grainbag trying to keep the food from them, for himself. Two kilos, one foot, that’s what he’d been told. Yet he could see in the man’s eye he would not dig unless he were given three kilos. And if it were his to give? But the baby. David held up three fingers.

When he returned with pick and shovel, the father was squatting by the circle. He threw down the tools and made digging motions. The father stood up and held out his hand.

“*Qua hey?*” David pointed at the circle. “*Galdi Caro*. Do it quickly.” David looked at the cracked palm. “Damn you, dig first, eat after.” As if the father understood, he pointed at his little girl who was picking up stones between her toes and throwing them at dogs and crows. His child. David walked away.

When he returned, the shadows had lengthened and the wind had dropped. By the circle of dust the pick and shovel lay deserted. The father was squatting in the same place, motionless. Without breaking his stride, David went into the house and bagged a kilo of grain. He threw it at the father’s feet. “Dig.” The man was already rising. He gave the food to his children. Empty handed he walked toward the circle. He took the pick in his hands, raised it and sunk it into the earth.

■

She broke the pill into four pieces, again crushing those pieces. She held out a teaspoonful of milk and placed a piece of the pill between the baby’s lips. “All right, guy, let’s see if you can eat,” she said softly. She poked the pill until it disappeared, tipping the spoon up against his lips. She held the back of his head. The baby blinked, almost puzzled. The pill and milk ran down his chin. She wiped his face and put the pill back into his mouth. Again it bubbled out. She did this until several pieces of the pill had been swallowed. She gently pressed his swollen brown belly. It was firm. When his bowels ran, she cradled his back and picked up his legs, holding him out above the ground the way the village women held their babies. She poured water over his shrivelled buttocks and handed him back to his brother.

■

The sun had dropped into the shores of dust, and a single star was out when the father brought David the stick. Taking it, he felt it press between the fingers of

his two hands, the stick a kind of perfection, a distillation of the same force in himself and the father. Without going back to the hole to measure for himself, David entered the hut, smelling burned buffalo dung and sweet grain and dust. He ran his fingers through the cool grain. A rat scuttled in the darkness and ran over his foot. He kicked where it had been. Outside, he poured the grain into the corner of the man's upheld *dhoti*—loincloth. The man sacked the grain with his hand and walked away into the darkness.

■

The water tugged at the bucket. A darker shadow, the wooden boom rose over his head toward the stars. The bucket lightened as it came up the black shaft of the well. He could hear water spilling and splashing below. The rope slid through his hands, faster and faster as the mud-weight at the opposite end of the boom—*lat*—dropped closer to the earth and gathered strength. As the bucket heaved, he spread his legs, and bracing his bare feet in the palm logs laid over the hole, he swung it toward her. Catherine poured the water into another bucket.

"Want me to throw it over you?" she asked.

He could see a star rippling down below in the water. Now that it was less hot, he could feel the air fill him. He took off his shirt.

"Yes. Pour it over me . . . slowly." Eased now by the water, he began to speak. "You know, that old man wouldn't work until he made sure his two children got something to eat . . . I mean, not until he put it right in their hands, himself." He pulled the rope against the stars.

"I know." He could feel her near him. "I would have done the same," she said softly.

The bucket hung, swaying, faintly gleaming below. He could hear water splashing and echoing. He was staring off at the low stars, the rope and the boom overhead and his arms taut. "I, too." And then quietly, as if he'd been waiting, he asked, "How's the baby?"

"All right . . . maybe."

He started pulling on the rope again. She had just finished pouring water over him, when he felt her hand on his back. He became still. She ran her hand over his wet skin, then splashed a little water over his shoulders.

"There was some soap still on."

"Thank you," he said quietly.

They said nothing as they walked across the dark open back toward the hut.

■

By late afternoon when the father started again, the morning's earth was up to his thin chest and piled about him in a ring as if he were digging in for a siege. His grey head came up, followed by a shovelful of earth. Then his wet back, vulnerable and blind, bent. He groped in the shadows of the hole and came up with another shovelful of dirt. He stopped when the first star appeared.

■

Every day the father dug. Every night they met at the well in silence. She washed him in the darkness, running her cool hand over his shoulder and saying

a word about the baby. Her hand sliding over his shoulder emptied his mind, and all he knew was his feet in the mud and his wet shorts clinging to him and the sound of the water dripping and her hand cool and smooth on his shoulder in the dark starlight.

On the fifth day, he returned from a distant village shortly before the wind dropped in the afternoon. He leaned his bicycle against the hut and entered. The hut was empty and dark. He drank some water from the clay pot in the corner. Outside, none of the old women and children who usually sheltered themselves in the shadows seemed to be around. A single scrawny dog covered with sores limped across the clearing before the hut.

He walked out to the ditch, carrying a can of water in his hand. He picked his way through the crusted excretions and, finding a spot, he squatted down. He could hear a pig grunting nearby. He felt a sharp pain in his stomach and then lower, penetrating somewhere deep in him, and then it lightened and passed. He poured water over himself, waiting for the cleft to dry. He stood up and looked down at the blood and mucous glistening in the strange deposit. A kind of daily internal molting. And strange the way nothing wrong shows on the outside. He held his arm up and looked at the smooth brown skin and golden hairs which so fascinated the children. Nothing. Not a trace. He wondered what he should do about the blood if it went on much longer. Nothing. Nothing he could do. He climbed up out of the ditch. The pig's grunting became louder as he floundered into the ditch and began to gobble. David walked away, trying not to hear.

He looked over at the hole. The father's head didn't appear. Nor his shovel. When David came closer, he kicked at the ring of dirt; it was brittle and sun-crusted under the toe of his sandal. He could see the father had not dug that day. The palm fronds clattered in the hot wind. David squeezed his eyes and mouth shut and held his hand over his nose, waiting for the dust to pass.

■

When the stars came out, he went to the deserted well alone and hauled up a bucket of water, the wooden boom creaking in the stillness, the water splashing below. He sloshed the water over himself, and then squatted the way the villagers did. He sat balanced, very still, the smell of his wet body and the mud in his nostrils. Frogs flopped here and there. The stars. In their same places. Cool. The dusk purpling up to night overhead, already deep in the east. He didn't think of anything. He was lowering the bucket again when he heard her behind him. She started to speak.

"The well . . . it won't be finished. The father took the baby to be cremated this morning."

He was glad she couldn't see his face in the darkness. He'd known the baby would die. His heart was beating, and he felt nauseous as the bucket came up. She reached for it; he didn't bend forward as she poured the water slowly over him, but stood straight. She reached out and put her hand on his shoulder. His skin ached where she touched him. He knew she was waiting for his hand. He bent down and picked up the bucket. Started back toward the hut.

The foxes were calling at the waning moon. Slowly, the constellations were revolving over the dial of his iris, about the black vortex of his pupil. He blinked.

She was lying near him, covered by the sari against the faint bloodless chill which came in the dead time somewhere between moon and sunrise, a dead time in the night or body when the chill came no matter.

For an instant when she took his hand, he felt a sudden warmth, a warmth of flesh and blood dark beneath. And then his fingers chilled. He took back his hand and stood up on the mat. He knew she was watching him as he walked away beneath the waning moon.

The palms were starred, the stars brightening as the dust settled. The air smelled faintly of cow dung and ashes. David went to the unfinished well, deeply shadowed. He kicked a little dirt into the empty pit. It clopped softly as it hit the bottom. He held his cold hand and looked out across the empty land at the dark horizon. His hand had been warm for a moment. He shivered by the empty, unfinished well.

Tomorrow, he would leave.

America the Beautiful

Charles Aukema

When the primary clear light seen at the moment of death implodes beyond the inner eye, you must begin meditation in this fashion: **DEAR HELOISE. . .** Think about the free human body you were given, and then think about the many ways you have wasted this difficult-to-obtain, free, and endowed body. When the thumb starts to squeeze the trigger, do you know what happens? Forget Princess Anne. You must think about this human body, and you must meditate upon this irreligious and worldly death.

Say a few words about Nick Piantanida.

Take a look at Lake Erie.

And Heloise?

Observe the masses of pubic hair growing over her whole body. Such a lovely body. Can you see Miss America down there? Notice all the MIGS and Phantoms. Can you see the shadows on the corn fields? Dear Heloise, it looks