

Senior year

I will go now, when the campus light is dim,
In the fresh fall wind of September,
I will go now and remove the writing from the wall,
Remove the chatter inscribed upon the wall
Three Septembers ago.
Erase all that is left of that which drew me here,
That surging hope of sightless years,
The challenge that flowed around me, and was gone,
Like the rush of tears,
And I will write in its place what I have learned—
 To form a face for any time, any place,
 The shaping of a smile to cordially beguile
 defenseless minds,
 A haughty air,
 A sure defense in arrogance,
I will write this up and leave it,
Write it up in dim light,
In the sorrowed blue-mood night.
And now what will be my fare?
What is it that I must bear—
 A voice that is mute in a silent valley,
 A song like the rattle of a paper sack
 Echoed down an empty alley.



The old timer

JOE FISCHER'S car backed away from the gate at the end of the Kennedy barnyard and went up the hill. Clayton and Johnnie sat in the toolshed throwing cobs at each other and watched to see what their old man was going to do. He came back from the gate after he had talked to Joe Fischer, and the look on his face was absorbed and knotted. The boys knew he was going to get the car.

They stopped throwing the soft, silky, red cobs and walked along with him to where the car was parked beneath the big cottonwood behind the toolshed.

"Can we go 'long, Pa?" Clayton asked.

"If Ma says so," Kennedy said, without thinking. It was the automatic answer he always gave them when they asked that question.

Clayton looked vacantly and hopelessly towards the house. Ma wasn't anywhere in sight.

"It's all right," Johnnie said, quickly.

They got into the car. Pa drove out the lane and Johnnie had to open and close the gate, furtively lest Ma see him. Kennedy drove up the hill and down again on the dusty road. Where there had been fall plowing in the fields, the road was a darker, richer color alongside it, from the dust that had blown from the fields. The leaves lay thick in the little hollows of the country road, down where the plumbrush was tangled and naked. Clayton and Johnnie sat in the front seat, watching the road, sitting far forward in the seat and clutching the dash.

Kennedy slowed down and turned in a lane bordering a weed-ridden fence. The weeds were dead and ragged now in the fall. They passed up a little knoll and down through a hollow and then they saw the cluster of three or four cars and the men among the cars, talking and looking down to the valley below at Ed Tracy's shack and outbuilding. They couldn't see the buildings but Clayton and Johnnie had been down there many times messing around when they knew Ed was gone walking to Martinsburg or was in the field of his "fohrtty," as Ed called it.

The car coughed to a stop behind the others along the hilltop. The men turned to watch them and then fell back to their talking. "Hello, Gus," someone said to Kennedy. They looked with annoyance and a little hostility at Clayton and Johnnie as they walked up. The boys dropped behind Pa and were silent, looking at the men and the men looking at them.

Clayton pointed out the sheriff to Johnnie, and they watched him as he leaned against his blue Nash, nonchalant and at ease, smoking a cigarette. They wondered where his gun was; they couldn't see it under his suitcoat. The boys were disappointed in him with his soft-looking white face and rimless glasses.

"So old Ed ain't gonna let go," Kennedy said to no one in particular.

"Don't look that way," Frank Walsh said, "George there just got a shot from Ed's 47/70 coming his way." George was Frank Walsh's son and was eighteen.

"God, I guess," George broke in eagerly. He rubbed his bare arms and looked with a grin around at the men. "I just walked down the hill a ways and says, 'Ed, come on out, and bang, the dust was flying not more'n a few feet from me. Boy, I took out of there. I don't want to be messin' with old Ed no more.'" He laughed, and the men laughed with him.

"There ain't been a sound from down there for almost a half hour," Frank said.

"Wonder what he's doin'," Joe Fischer said.

The men shuffled uneasily and looked down toward the buildings. The tops of the two were just visible, the roof of the gray little shack of a house and the adjacent little box of an outbuilding which was always locked. There was nothing moving down there, and it was very quiet. The shacks blended with the dryness and the brownness of the land. Far off, a flushed pheasant drummed the air and honked into silence again. The men drifted over towards the sheriff, who still leaned against his car. They lit up cigarettes or pipes, looking at the sheriff or at the ground.

"Do you suppose he'll come out?" George O'Brien asked the sheriff.

"Nope, not for awhile, not old Ed," Joe Fischer put in.

"You know, I thought Ed really owned this place," O'Brien said. "The way he talked about his 'fohrtty' you'd think he owned all of this and then some." He repeated "fohrtty" over again and the men all laughed.

"I guess the damn loan company needs some more money," Gus Kennedy said. He motioned towards the car sitting behind the sheriff's. A young, suited fellow sat in the car, listening to the radio. The men could hear some of the details of a football game from where they stood. Every once in awhile the loan company man would pick up a briefcase and riffle through the papers in it, as though he might have made some mistake in coming here, and then he would replace the briefcase on the seat beside him. He did not look at the men watching him.

"Old Ed always struck me as sort of odd. but I didn't

think he'd ever go this far, to shoot at the sheriff and people," John Burns said, shaking his head. The young men laughed suddenly and idiotically, remembering the shots, and were silent again.

"He really thought a lot of this piece," Gus Kennedy said, nodding towards the land. The men nodded agreement. Gus leaned comfortably back against the sheriff's car and looked down across the valley. "He was one of the real oldtimers. I remember he was here, farming this land when I came here in 1909."

"Been a long time," one of the young men said.

"He was one of the real old-timers," Gus said.

"Ya," Joe Fischer said, swaying his head, remembering.

"He always came up to our place for water," Gus said. "Every other day he'd come up to our place luggin' that rusty old cream can, talking to hisself."

"Helluva ways for an old guy," George O'Brien said.

"Ya, he used to come every other day. Hasn't come for three, four days now. Thought might be he's sick or in trouble," Gus Kennedy said.

"He used to go to Mortenson's for water, didn't he?" John Burns said, "before old lady Mortenson threw a pot of potato water on him. Roy wasn't home. Old Ed must have scared her."

"Ah, she was an old devil anyway," Joe Fischer said.

"Old Ed came over to our place the day afterwards. Borrowed a cultivator. I remember his face was all red, and some of his skin was peeling off," Gus said.

"At least he got washed once," John Burns said, laughing. The young men laughed with him. Then they stopped and were silent again and looked at the ground, scraping their feet in intricate circles.

"Old Ed used to borrow lots of stuff," John Burns went on. "My boy, Jim, saw our missing double-bitted axe in his toolshed, but the shed was locked."

"I bet he's got our baseball bat we lost this summer," Clayton said loudly.

"Probably has, sonny," John Burns said. "He's a regular packrat." He laughed again.

"Shut up," Johnnie said to Clayton. He doubled his fist. They scuffled, kicking up the dust. They were afraid to hit

each other, for fear the other would get mad. Finally they sat down and watched the men.

"I wonder what's going to happen to his old plugs," Guss said, motioning down toward the two horses drooped beside a fence at the far end of the pasture. "Those two horses were real old-timers too. Jesus, they must be fourteen, fifteen years old. Do you know, Joe?" he asked Joe Fischer.

Joe scratched his forehead, lifting his blue, striped cap. "I think he got them in '29 or '30. Ya, they're real old plugs."

"Ya, they're old-timers, all right. You and me and Ed and them two old plugs are the only old-timers left," Gus said to Joe, and they nodded together, puffing solemnly on their pipes.

"Christ, I remember how my boy, Dennis, used to scare old Ed," George O'Brien said interrupting their thoughts. "He'd drive down the road real quiet behind Ed and then he'd blow his horn and, whup, old Ed would hit for the ditch, and he'd come up cussing a blue streak and blowing the dust." He emphasized Ed's movements with windmill gestures, and everybody laughed, looking at him, and thinking of Ed hitting the dirt.

"We strung a whole row of firecrackers around his shack one Halloween," a young man said, laughing in fits. "Boy, did they make a racket."

"Could of got yourself killed," Joe Fischer said. "If he was like he is today." Some of these old-timers are pretty good shots yet, even in the dark."

"You remember that 'Long Tom' I used to have?" Gus asked him.

They began to talk of guns.

The sheriff moved away from the car and through the men to look down into the valley at the silent gray buildings, and the men were suddenly silent again, watching the sheriff. The sheriff studied the buildings for a long while. Gus Kennedy knelt to pluck a dead weed and break its brittle length into measured pieces. As if by command, the other men knelt to finger the weeds or dirt, all watching the sheriff. Finally the sheriff turned away.

"Hell, we can't sit here all day," the sheriff said. He moved back to the group of men, his lips pursed. "Somebody cut down the hollow," he said. "Max, you go," he said to

the deputy. "I'll go down the hill here and get his attention and keep it."

The deputy moved up the hill at a slow walk. He turned and cut down the hollow, trotting easily now, protected from the cabin by a dense row clustered with weeds and a little hill. The men turned to watch him go. His suit-coated back disappeared for a moment in the tangle of a ditch and then reappeared moving up the hill away from the shack.

"Do you think they'll kill him?" Clayton asked his father. Gus didn't say anything. He was watching the deputy. He picked up another weed and broke it into pieces.

Clayton slid over to Johnnie. "I bet they're goin' to kill him," he said.

"Naw."

"I betcha. They're gonna come in the back window and shoot Ed in the head."

"They ain't gonna shoot Ed. He's gonna shoot them first."

"I betcha."

"I betcha."

Clayton slid back to where his father was, and watched the deputy.

The deputy dodged down a ditch and followed it toward the shack. He was between the toolshack and the house. The men stood up again, watching the deputy slip down the ditch toward the buildings.

"I bet Ed's gonna be surprised," a young man with an old boy's voice said. He looked around to see what the men would say. They said nothing.

The sheriff moved away from the cars and down the hill a ways. "Come on out, Ed," he said. "We'll have a talk." He stopped. The deputy was a blip, like a shadow, when he crossed from the toolshack to the house. "Come on out, Ed," the sheriff yelled again.

The men were very quiet, watching intently, holding their breathing.

There was a shriek and the door was suddenly pushed open and Ed came out. His right arm was twisted behind him and the deputy was pushing him and the old man was screaming and blubbering and the tears were running down his cheeks. The men heard the old man screaming, but they looked at the ground, hoping the deputy would let the old

man go. The deputy pushed Ed up the hill ahead of him and he screamed all the way, his eyes shut and the tears running out of them and his face was gray, like cob ashes, deep gray.

"Jesus Christ, do something," Gus Kennedy said to the sheriff.

"Let him go," the sheriff said finally.

Ed's arm dropped and he stood there, loosely, his face like ashes and his mouth still open, silent now and drooling spittle into his beard, and there was a bubble of saliva in his mouth. He stood looking at the sheriff with hate in his eyes. You could tell he hated the sheriff.

The sheriff took his arm and led him up to the car. The loan company man was standing by the car, watching, holding his brown alligator briefcase.

"Ed," Gus Kennedy said.

Ed and the sheriff stopped. Gus held out his hand to him. They shook hands, there by the car. Ed looked at Gus. His mouth came open and closed again without speaking.

"You want to take some of your land with you?" Gus asked him. He knelt and dug up a handful of the dry yellow dirt and handed it to Ed. Ed took it and very carefully pushed it down inside his shoe behind his bare foot. He turned away then.

The sheriff pushed him in the back seat of his car with the deputy. His head dropped down between his knees and the sheriff must have thought he had thrown up and he jerked him up hard, but Ed had only not wanted to look out. The sheriff let him go then and his head dropped again. The sheriff got into the car and they drove off.

The loan company man still stood there. He looked at the men and then at the ground, clutching his brief case. The men stared at him coldly. The loan company man backed off a few steps and turned and headed for his car. He drove off in a whirl of dust.

The farmers were now alone, together. John Burns slapped his hands together. "Really took it hard," he said.

"Ya," Gus Kennedy said. "He's an oldtimer. Been on this land for 40 years. Christ, you been around that long, you're bound to take it hard."

John Burns looked around at the men. He hitched up his overalls. "Well, I've got an axe here," he said. "May as well get it before the loan company does."

The men looked at each other and slowly drifted down towards the shack.

"I guess I'll be goin' home," Joe Fischer said. He went to his car.

The door of the toolshack was still locked. They broke it open and went in. An axe was there and a few pieces of harness and a flynet and a rusty harrow. The lost baseball bat wasn't there. At one end of the shack some oats were piled. The men took the harness and the flynet. They went to see what was in the house and then walked up the hill, talking to each other of the coming corn crop and how much Ed's "fohrtty" was worth.

Gus Kennedy hung around the shed.

"What they gonna do with Ed, Pa," Clayton asked his father.

"Put him in the poorhouse, I suppose," Gus said, shortly. He took the wooden basket, that hung from a fencepost and filled it with oats and carried it out to where the two old plugs stood at the fence.

"Couple more old-timers," Gus said. The horses' heads came up and they fed at the basket. The horses were very old and they ate slowly, the little hollows above their eyes filling and depressing with each bite. Gus threw the rest of the oats in a pile on the ground in front of the horses.

"Eat up," he said. He hung the basket on a fencepost. The boys went back up the hill to the car.

"We left the door open," Johnnie said, pointing to the shack.

"Leave it."

"Pa, why didn't old Ed come out in the first place?" Clayton asked. "They were gonna get him anyway. What'd he fight for?"

"When you're an old-timer, you can't let go," Gus said. "The land's in you and you can't let go."

They stopped at the car. The father blew his nose, holding first one nostril and then the other. He wiped his nose and his eyes.

"There ain't a helluva lot an old-timer needs. They could have let him live here till he died," old man Kennedy said. He started the car and turned it around and headed back up the hill. Clayton looked back. "Should we come and feed the horses tomorrow?" he asked.

