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### Opus: Autumn 1981

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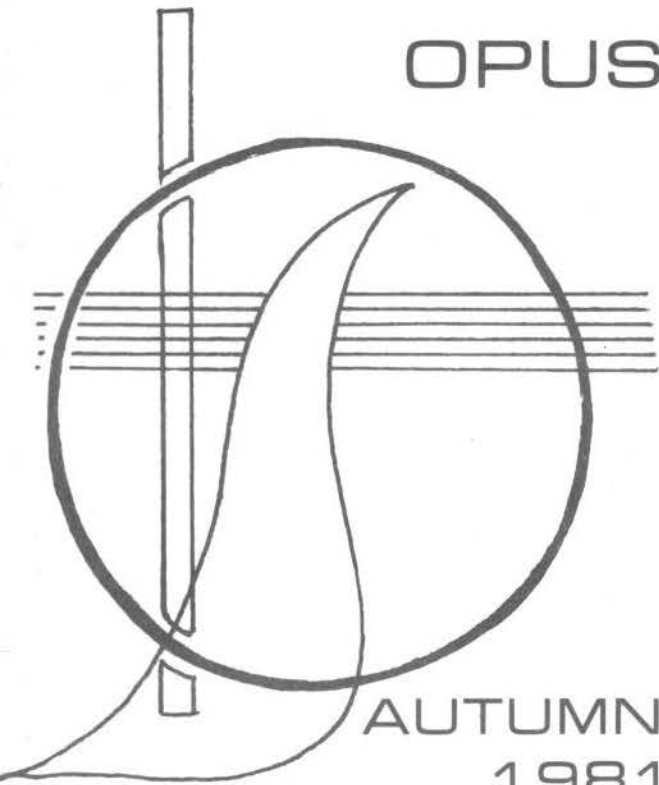
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OPUS

AUTUMN  
1981



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## GUITAR PRACTICE

As her guitar thrums in quiet harmony  
with the drizzle licking the porch,  
I can barely rescue her tune from the rain.  
I shut my eyes  
intent on scooping up the stray notes  
that edge around the corner  
and slip beneath the cracks of her closed door.  
Fragmented symphonies  
are composed in my ears  
like whispers that sometimes explode into words.  
The notes carry me  
like the first autumn leaves  
tossed into falling rainbows by the wind.  
I get lost somewhere worlds beyond her simple song  
plucked so carefully --  
with hopes that no one can hear.

Heather Uecker

## VICTORIA

"A time to get, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away." Eccl. 3:6

Boasting waves unbalance her dizzy  
casting her feet uneven along the beach.  
Trapped within a weekend sweater  
arm against arm  
she writhes, tangled  
to grasp the first stone.

Separately  
Chopin and tea beckon  
from the firelit room.

Hurling stones into the frantic grey  
she sees  
amid the waves  
the rock immovable.

Gwen Werner

## MOUNT VESUVIUS

Step lightly sightseers,  
walking  
among the toes  
of the sleeping giant;  
staring,  
awed  
by the dormant mass  
towering  
above this stilled city.  
Be carefull not to tickle  
his toes;  
he might someday awaken  
and bury  
the city once more.

Kristine Ann Barnes

Stone-cold oatmeal  
including lumps  
and Mom's gone

Last week it was  
hotcakes and bacon  
and Mom was here.

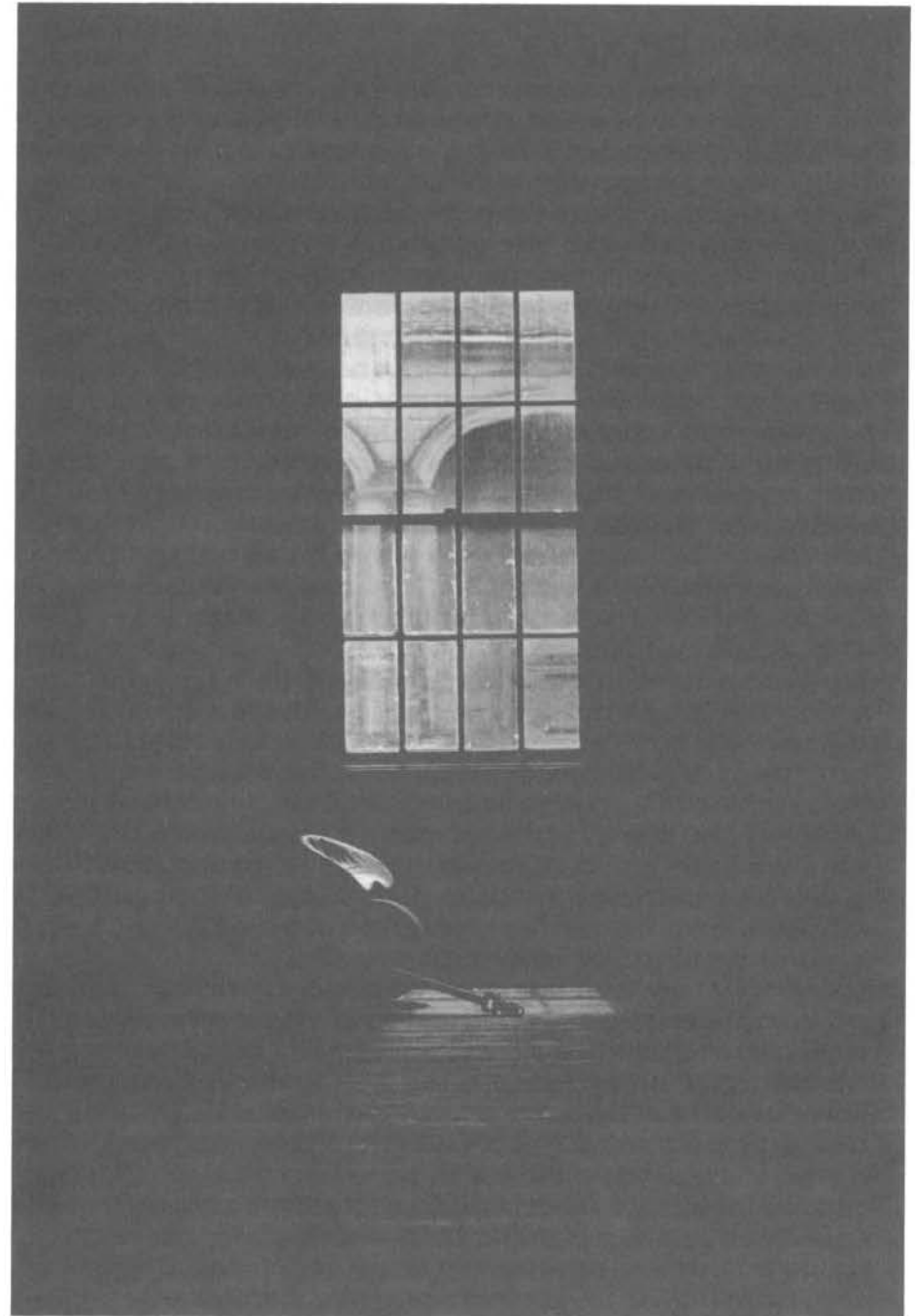
Dad's specialty (oatmeal)  
just isn't special today  
How could she forget  
to tell Dad  
that hotcakes are best  
for breakfast?  
and Mom's gone.

The oatmeal thickens  
alone  
next to the syrup  
lumpy and cold  
in a cracked cereal bowl.

No one said she was sick  
and Mom's gone.

Robin Tavernier

tape the front door shut  
my friends are  
on the porch, but don't  
have  
their hats on : all of  
Them are raining, we don't  
need any more floods.  
Have many times  
rung the bell and their  
waiting is on the door,  
their looking has  
already begun to seep  
Wendy Hanson



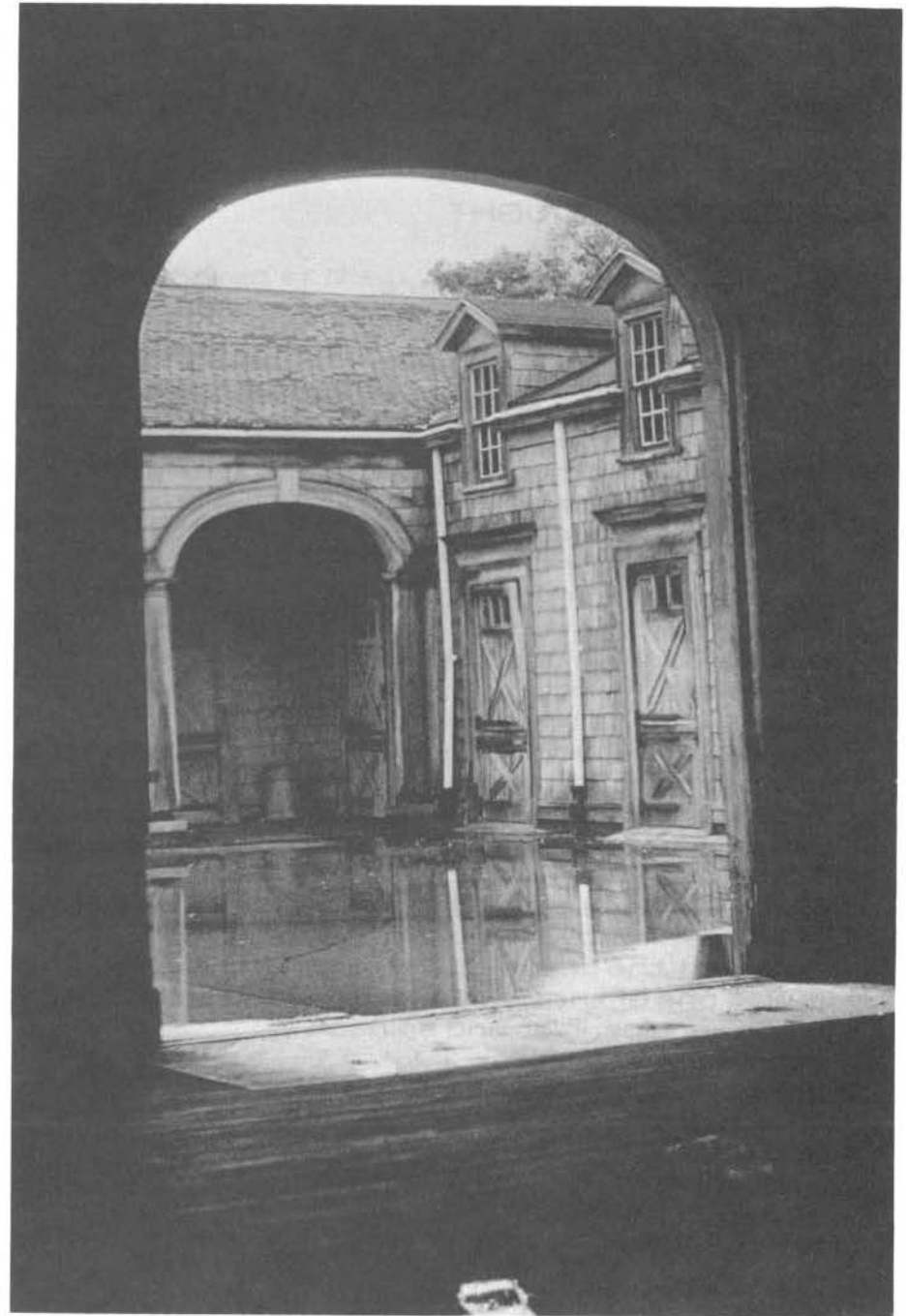
## A PARTING OF WAYS

The boxes filled with linens, dishes, pans,  
And suitcases overflowing with clothes  
Sat awkwardly about her girlhood room.  
She's leaving, I thought, I wanted to cry,  
But I helped her pack the life she had known  
And silently recalled the reasons why.  
"I remember the first day I saw you.  
Remember? Sixth grade, knee socks and plaid skirts?"  
She took a drag on her cigarette and  
Turned to me with her short, wooden laugh,  
"Yeah, I remember, and everyone stared.  
They wanted to know the new girl in school;  
Just like all the guys on the army base  
Want to see me, to see Jerry's new bride."  
I said nothing, just folded another shirt.  
"Joe never called to say good-bye," she said.  
"Dear, sweet Pam won't let him talk to me."  
No, Les, I thought, he just doesn't want to.  
"And J.D. is prob'ly celebrating;  
He never could pass up a chance to drink.  
Remember the time we found him so drunk  
And carried him home and through the back door?  
Some people just never know when to stop.  
Me, I learned." And she lit a cigarette.  
I recalled the dark nights, bottles and smoke.  
Yeah, we learned, but what did that matter now?  
We gave up our childhoods, wasn't that enough?  
"Hey Les, remember learning how to ski?  
Remember sledding down at the Big D?"  
"Somehow I always seemed to get frostbite.  
You know Jerry says it's hot down there now;  
I'm glad our trailer is air-conditioned."  
She blew out smoke and grabbed a pair of socks.  
"Remember all the puzzles we did, and  
The big ones that took us weeks?" I asked her.  
"My mother always yelled at us when she  
Tripped over the board or found a lost piece."  
"You were always better at puzzles than me."  
I stopped to pet her big, old gray cat.  
"Sam costs twenty-one dollars on the plane."  
She watched me and the cat on the bed.  
"She's gotten big," I said, meaning the cat.

Les smiled and sat on a suitcase trying  
To get it to close. I looked around me.  
Around at this room, at Leslie and me,  
Wondering what would become of it now.  
All the incense burners, the stacks of books,  
Her pile of records, and the tall, stalky  
Weeds we had chopped down last summer and saved.  
We found them at the Big D and marvelled  
At their height, brought them home, sprayed them  
with hair spray,  
And there they had stood ever since that day.  
She watched my eyes and listened to my thoughts.  
"I wonder how well they burn," she said and  
Held her lighter to the weeds' fluffy tops.  
They burned, but they stayed there on their stalks,  
Just black, delicate skeletons of weeds.  
She breathed on them, and they scattered in the air.  
"Do you still have your bouquet from the wedding?"  
She asked as she watched the black weeds float down.  
"In the refrigerator - it's still fresh."  
I pictured the flowers in the bag with  
The condensation wetting the plastic.  
I thought of the morning she was wed,  
And the two of us dressing in this room—  
She in her pure, white satin dress (it was  
A lie), and I in maid of honor blues.  
A halo of roses and baby's breath  
Perched in her hair which I was too nervous  
To pin so she had to do it herself.  
I kissed her at the top of the stairs and  
Made my descent down to the living room  
Where Jerry and Alan waited for us:  
Matching Tuxes, judge, people and all that,  
And Leslie right behind me going down  
To meet her father (he stepped on her train).  
The strange, old man spoke a few words, rings were  
Exchanged, there was a lot of kissing, I  
Had to sign a paper next to Alan's name,  
And I really felt like crying, but I smiled  
Pretty for all the pictures. We got in the car  
And drove away beeping for all we were worth.  
And now I was helping her pack her things  
Knowing I might never see her again.  
The conversation turned to trivia,  
Day to day things, the army and school.

She had graduated a half year early,  
I still had a few months to go, and  
Then I'd be off to college and studies;  
She'd be cooking and cleaning every day.  
I remembered something I had said  
On that morning just before she was wed,  
"Les," I began, "I feel like we're just kids  
Dressing up to play a game of wedding."  
She had reached for another cigarette  
Replying, "Then I'm going to play house."  
I turned away to conceal my sigh.  
I watched her fold some more of her shirts and  
Began to fill another suitcase for her.  
Then it was time for me to take my leave.  
I went down the stairs as I had that day,  
And Les followed behind just like before.  
We stood there as awkwardly as all the  
Boxes were standing upstairs in her room.  
It was the very spot where her father  
Had stepped on her train just a month ago.  
I didn't know what to say to her then,  
It was the only time we had ever  
Been at a loss for words. There were no tears,  
Though I could feel them brimming in my eyes.  
She picked up her cat. "Make sure Sam doesn't  
Get out when you open the door. If she  
Does, she won't be back before I have to  
Leave tomorrow morning to catch my plane."  
"Well," I said hesitatingly, "Take care."  
"Yeah, you too, take it easy. Be sure to write."  
"I will." We hugged each other, cat and all  
And kissed each other on the cheek. "Good-bye."  
I opened the door and said all in one breath  
"Have a good trip . . . Good luck . . . Bye." And I closed  
The door quick so the cat wouldn't escape.  
"Good-bye, Les." I turned and walked away.  
The stars were shining, and the breeze was warm.  
I walked the beaten road from her house to mine  
Just as I had a million times before.  
Parting is such sweet sorrow, I thought as  
I was changing for bed, but I need my sleep,  
I'll think about all of that tomorrow.

Susan Marks



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Lying on a waffle  
counting graham crackers  
so I could sleep  
I thought, How strange is life!  
Awake, I combed berries from my hair,  
brushed muffin crumbs off of me,  
washed with milk,  
and annointed myself with a cherry.  
The orange was just rising  
off a piece of toast  
when I hopped into  
my 5-speed 'Ham-on-Rye'  
and drove down chocolate roads  
over lemonsaide pools to school.  
I learned nothing.  
Then I went to the shore  
to watch the wine splash  
against the cookies.  
A sausage was sailing across the edge  
where pink cotton candy engulfed it.  
The orange had set.  
Black coffee and hot chocolate were in the sky,  
No marshmallows would shine tonight,  
not even the crescent banana hung in the night.  
It was one of those Hungarian Goulash nights  
when turnips, liver and spinach  
roamed the streets.  
It was late: half past peppermint,  
when I got home, but safe,  
and fell,  
contently,  
asleep,  
on my waffle.

David A. Stegink

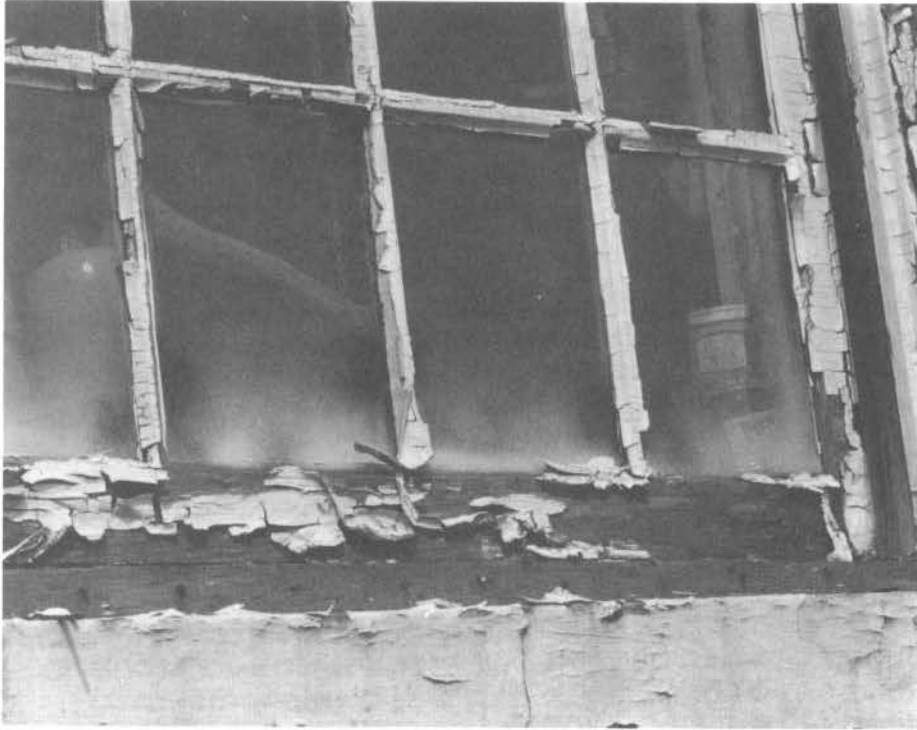
## LIBRARY

my art  
teacher looked at the  
fat crooked tree and strolling  
valley i had painted, and  
he said "abstract it" well  
i thought not but anyway called  
The tree out  
it stepped over the frame by  
the roots - grew fast, too,  
climbed to the roof. i  
asked the grass to be more contained, and  
it flowed out in bristles,  
packed itself close like  
velvet and the valley: well, he  
dropped out of nowhere, i  
thought i was going to die

All the tables and  
books were at the  
bottom, art and i crawled  
out of them all that he said was  
"very nice"

Wendy Hanson





You're getting married in August.  
My mind keeps weaving magical attics  
filled with forgotten old memories  
like furniture preserving sentiment  
in its guise of chipped paint and worn cushion  
But most of all,  
I remember one night standing by the garage  
and quickly and awkwardly  
you kissed me.  
Then you smiled and rode away on your bike.  
I just stood there  
watching your pedal reflectors  
fade down the street and disappear into the blackness.

All night long  
each car headlight that danced across my ceiling  
kept reminding me of those pedal reflectors.

That kiss went unreturned all these years. . .  
and you're getting married in August.

Heather Uecker

## THE FALL

It was in the fuzzy, comfortable days of their childhood that it happened -- a time now remembered only dimly, with a pervasive and unexpected sorrow at finding a worn baseball in the attic, or a doll in a long-forgotten trunk, or with a brief wave of emotion at seeing a face resembling another face, whose features have long since faded out of conscious memory. Childhood was a time for exploring and building and dreaming; the boy would grow up to study medicine, but for now he was a pirate and his sister was a pirate's mate, and they spent their days in a rickety tree house which sailed on air; rations were cookies when they could get them. They argued over everything -- what to name their ship, when to sail, whether or not to take in a homeless frog. The ship was finally christened the Sky Queen, and they were Skipper and first mate.

They were in the ship the day the stranger moved in. It was nearly autumn; the tree's leaves would soon turn all shades of rust and gold, and fall gently, one by one, to the ground. The boy sighed when he heard his mom holler, "Roy! Tracy! Come in here!"

"What's she want, Skipper?" the girl asked. At 11, the boy was two years older and wiser than she, and she fully assumed that he would spend his life protecting her from whatever evil lurked around the corner. At the moment, evil included a mother who called them in two hours before dinner was usually ready.

"Don't know," he admitted. He was always slightly ashamed to let her see that he was less than omniscient. "I guess she wants us in."

Shoot, and there was a sub comin' toward us -- mid-air."

"Don't know if that would be a sub, kid."

"Don't call me kid."

"Okay, kid."

She glared at him. He grinned, and swung down from the low, thick branch on the east side of the oak. She followed.

"Children, this is your Uncle Jerry." The Skipper shot his mother a quizzical look; he had never had an Uncle Jerry before. His sister extended her hand shyly to the loose-jointed, dark-haired man. His eyes looked sad, she thought. His larger hand, accepting hers awkwardly, was warm and bony. He fit into his clothes with room to spare; though his limbs were hidden by simple, well-worn clothes, that his entire frame was as lean and jagged as his face was apparent when he moved forward to pat the boy's head. Skipper's face made it clear that he did not appreciate the condescension.

"What a lovely -- ah -- set of youngsters," the man said uncomfortably, half to their mother and half to them. He tugged at his collar nervously. "Tracy -- Roy -- I'm going to be staying with your -- ah -- little family here for awhile. We'll get along jus' fine now, won't we?" His speech and mannerisms were those of one perhaps twenty years beyond the age implied in his jet-black, though thinning, hair and the yet-youthful folding of skin around his angular features. Still, there

was something terribly old and weary about him, and what their mother called laugh lines on her eyes hung darkly and weightily below his, as though refusing to allow them to close, fearing that once they did they might not open again.

"Where'd he come from, dad?" the boy asked his father in the elder's study later that evening. They were alone.

"He's a friend, Skipper," the father said quietly, his face stern and inscrutable.

"Not our uncle though?"

"Not legally -- not by blood, no. Blood may be thicker than water, but there are principles thicker than blood."

"Principles?" the boy responded blankly, his face betraying an utter lack of comprehension over his efforts to relate to his father as an equal.

"Sometimes -- sometimes there are things that matter more than -- than..." He stood up. "Listen, you, if all the secrets of the world are revealed to you when you're eleven, what fun will it be to turn twelve? Go on, now."

Another battle lost. No matter how close he could come, to the very brink of being recognized as an intelligent being, there always followed the cruel and sudden return to split-level relations, the continual reaffirmation of his youth and attendant lack of understanding. He left the room and was accosted by his first mate.

"What're you up to now?" she asked.

"None of your business," he replied, more out of habit than an unwillingness to tell her. There would be time for that, and for long talks and crab apples and a few more shared cruises before they would find themselves thrust into that maturity which the Skipper now feigned, and not very well at that.

Every day at breakfast he was there, and every day at dinner, pulling nervously at his shirt collar and eating little. For lunch it was every man for himself; their mother had set down this and three or four other minor rules when she had taken a part-time job at the local library six months previously. The name "Uncle Jerry," though erroneous, had stuck, though it was seldom used in the beginning. The children and the man stayed conveniently out of each other's way for the first two weeks, each vaguely resenting the other's intrusion into his life. There came, however, the day when the parents were to attend the funeral of a friend, and the man was commissioned to take the children to the beach -- the last beach trip of the waning summer. The parents had gone by nine o'clock, leaving an apprehensive threesome; the prospect of a day at the beach did little to alleviate the children's uneasiness at being left with a man whose identity was still clouded.

He sat at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette, single and unapproachable. Since his arrival he had been surrounded by a nearly tangible aura of unhappiness; only the girl sensed, vaguely, the rea-

son, yet she was far too young and unscathed to consciously recognize the terrible loneliness, the hopelessness of being unreachable, walled off from all creation by bricks placed one upon another by one's own hands, for one's own protection, and solidified by time into a barrier which even its own architect could not have torn down, had he been inclined to -- and the day had long since passed when he might have entertained such a thought. While she could not understand, much less express, what seemed to her to be at worst a stomach-wrenching revulsion toward the man, and at best a budding and intensely shy attraction -- or, more likely, an inexplicable and paradoxical combination of the two -- it was there: the simultaneous desire to hold him and to run from him through the endless corridors of the age nine, with its implicit rights to carefree and utterly dependent and unthreatened happiness.

The children waited, full of the awareness of their rights to the promised day, but without the courage to approach the man. He sat, equally aware of his responsibility to fulfill his promise, to fend off for another day childhood's perennial cry of "nothing to do" -- a cry persisting through every maternally conceivable suggestion of "something to do," and representing childhood's pure and inexpressible recognition of the absence of meaningful activity worthy of the pain of existence.

At last he moved. In his nervous, uncomfortable way he tried to smile, and said, "Okay, kids, get your stuff and we'll go." One hand fingered the car keys, while the other snuffed out his cigarette. The children wordlessly got their suits and towels. This day lacked the joy of former beach days, and Skipper couldn't understand why. In the car, sitting next to the man while Tracy and the Styrofoam cooler occupied the back seat, he decided to get brave. He cleared his throat.

"Uncle Jerry?" he said hesitantly.

"Hm," came the gruff reply.

"Are you really our uncle?"

The man paused. "No," he said slowly, looking, ironically, somewhat less uneasy as he said it. "No, I'm not at all."

"Who are you then?"

At this he actually smiled, a genuine smile of amusement. "Nobody to speak of, kid."

That put an end to conversation for a few minutes; Skipper did not like to be called "kid." But his curiosity soon overcame his indignance, and he ventured to speak again:

"Why are you here?"

"Ask myself that all the time." He saw the boy's puzzled expression. "Hm. Okay -- your, ah, folks -- parents -- are doing me a favor, taking me in. You know."

"Don't you have a house?"

"Not any more." He spoke more quietly. "No house, no wife." His nervous manner returned as suddenly as it had disappeared, and he

was tugging at his collar again. "No more."

Skipper thought about this for a few minutes. Then he asked, "Are you happy?"

The man raised his eyebrows in surprise, then winced. "Big question for such a small boy." He paused; when he spoke his voice was much quieter, and he was less nervous again. "No, I don't suppose I am. Are you?"

"Sometimes." The boy was quiet now too.

"When's that?"

"I don't know. When I'm playing."

"With Tracy?"

"Uh-huh." Though Tracy, in the back seat, was silently absorbing the conversation, this was not a diplomatic affirmation; with no other boys his age in the neighborhood, Skipper had found his chief playmate to be his sister. They would sit in their tree house for hours, while their parents would try to imagine what could possibly be that interesting in there.

Suddenly a new idea struck the boy. "What makes adults happy?" he asked.

"What makes anybody happy?" the man replied. "Not much. Not as much as makes him unhappy."

"Are you unhappy?"

"Yep."

"When do you think you'll be happy again?"

"Well, now, that all depends."

"On what?"

"On your parents' little -- ah -- experiment. Listen, life is for unhappiness. Who's happy? Nobody. Not you, not I." Skipper didn't refute this assumption. "No one. It's an unhappy business." He said the words gently, kindly.

"Then why do you stand it?"

"I don't know. Why do you?" There was silence; the boy had no answer. Then he remembered something the man had said.

"What experiment?" Skipper almost whispered. His eyes grew wide at the word. Jerry sighed.

"We're going to see if I'm worth the trouble it takes me to stand it. We're going looking for buried treasure -- only if there's a nugget in me it's plenty buried."

Skipper lost track of his meaning for good. But he thought now that maybe he had misjudged the man.

"You're not so bad," he said, half to himself, unwittingly saying exactly what Jerry most needed to hear.

Tracy was jealous the day that Skipper showed Uncle Jerry the Sky Queen. Yet she wasn't sure of whom she was more jealous -- her brother or Jerry. The two had developed a sort of camaraderie which didn't exclude her, yet it didn't include her, either. It existed on its own level, intangibly, regardless of her pres-

ence or absence. They had even gone to a ball game together -- a real, professional one -- and she had not been invited to go along. Still, the man had obviously grown fond of her. He cared for her now as a boy cares for a puppy, watching over her and taking care of her when Skipper wasn't around to do it. For a while they were a trio, three strangely interdependent people.

Meanwhile, summer turned decisively to fall; school began, and the wind took a bitter edge. They spent less time in the tree house now; it was cooler, and there was less time. Also, they were reluctant to bring Jerry up into it often; they were uncertain whether it would hold up with the added weight. Sure enough, the third or fourth time he was in it, in early October, they noticed several boards creaking under his weight, and on his way back down, as he set his foot down on one of the boards nailed to the tree in a series as a sort of ladder, the board cracked off entirely. He regained his footing easily and got safely to the ground, but since the missing step was near the top, the children had to jump from the Sky Queen into Uncle Jerry's arms to ensure a safe landing.

The Skipper approached his father that night about the tree house.

"You've got to fix it right away, Dad!" he pleaded.

"I'll get to it as soon as I can, kiddo," his father replied.

"Hey, how about teaching me and I could do it?"

His father smiled. "I'll get to it this week," he said. "I really will."

It was no use arguing. It was the same old dilemma. How could he make his father believe that he was not too young to understand simple hammer-and-nail carpentry? That was the nice thing about Uncle Jerry; he didn't seem to know that kids were supposed to be treated as if they couldn't understand anything but the simplest ideas. He treated you as though you had ideas, too.

So the boy went to him next.

"You know anything about building?"

"Ah -- hm, used to. Sure. You mean that board, I suppose?"

"Well, yeah -- we can't get up there till it's fixed."

"Yeah -- I suppose not."

"If you showed me how, I could do it. Honest."

"Tell you what, Skipper. We can do it together. Saturday afternoon. Sound good?" He brought his jagged face close to the boy's and winked. His breath smelled funny. Skipper smiled.

The next day was Thursday. Skipper was watching television when Tracy came in.

"Yo mate," he bellowed. "Sky Queen'll be ready to sail Saturday."

"Oh, yeah? Dad fixin' the step?"

"Nope," he said proudly. "I am. Well -- me'n Uncle Jerry."

Her face dimmed for a moment, then lit up again. "Will you go up with me when it's fixed? Saturday afternoon? We could sail to a desert island!" It seemed like so long since just the two of them had been in it

together.

"Sure I will."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Skipper wanted to talk to Jerry that night to make sure they would fix the board early in the afternoon on Saturday, so that he and his sister could have time to sail, but Jerry was not to be found. This seemed odd, since he was almost always around, but Skipper didn't ask his parents; they seemed quiet tonight, and he had learned to beware of their moods.

The next day had a funny feel to it. Things moved too slowly, like a record played at the wrong speed. The boy couldn't tell exactly what it was, but it was something. Usually when things got that funny feel to them it meant that something had happened, but that he wasn't likely to find out what. His parents would figure he was too young to understand. So this time he just put it out of his mind, and after supper he asked Jerry, "Is it okay if we fix it early tomorrow afternoon? Like right after lunch?"

"Huh? Ah -- yeah, sure." He acted as if only his ears had paid attention. He needed a shave.

"One o'clock?" Skipper persisted.

"Fine," he said, a little more loudly than was necessary. He looked down and fiddled with his shirt collar. He seemed nervous, like the first time Skipper had seen him.

"Okay. It's just that I promised Tracy, and, you know -- I can't let her down."

"I'll be there," the man said in a soft, restrained voice. "You've got my word."

The next day at one o'clock Skipper was ready. He retrieved the cracked board and took his father's hammer and a small box of nails out to the oak, where he sat in the shade and waited. He waited for what seemed like a very long time before he started to worry. He wouldn't have minded waiting, but he knew that his sister was waiting, too -- waiting for him to come and tell her that the ship was ready to sail. She was counting on him; she needed to be able to lean on him, to be sure of him. He knew that. So he sighed and picked up the hammer and the board and decided to try it himself. It couldn't be too difficult, he reasoned. Two nails ought to do it. He climbed up until he was two steps below the spot where the missing board belonged, then he sat down with his knees crooked behind a step, straddling the tree, and went to work.

It was nearly two-thirty when Skipper entered the living room, where his sister was watching television.

"All set, mate."

"Really? You got it fixed?"

"Absolutely," he said. He grinned widely.

"Uncle Jerry help?" she asked.

"Nope. Didn't even show. Did it all myself."

"You sure it's okay?"

"Of course it is. Trust me. I always take care of you okay, don't I?"

She had to admit this was true. So they walked out to the ancient, tired oak together, and she glanced first at her brother, then at the Sky Queen. He still bore that silly, proud grin. The Sky Queen waited; she began to climb. Skipper was preparing to follow when he heard a crack, a shout; then time shifted into slow motion as he watched his sister drop, as slowly and gently as a leaf, a thousand times in one second. Then she was on the ground and he was running toward the house and yelling.

It was the first time that Skipper had ever been inside a hospital, at least that he could remember. It was her leg, but that would heal. That wasn't the biggest wound.

"You know what Mom and Dad say, don't you?" Skipper said to her in the car on the way home.

"No, what?" she said.

"We can't go in the Sky Queen any more. They said it's too old, and it isn't safe. Plus you wrecked part of it when you fell."

Tracy looked down at her fat white foot.

"Tracy, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It's my fault. And now they're taking it down and that's my fault, too.

"It's all right. It's all right," she said, and smiled at him a little, and she looked like she meant it.

It had been probably the longest day of Skipper's life, and he was glad to go to bed. But just as he was about to fall asleep, his father came into the room.

"You awake, Skipper?" he whispered.

"Yeah. C'mon in."

His father turned on a dim desk light, which threw crazy shadows onto the ceiling. Skipper knew the shadows and their contours well; they were like friends to him. His father sat on the side of the bed, facing him.

"You know Tracy doesn't blame you, don't you?"

"Yeah. She told me."

"Good. Now I need to explain something to you. Uncle Jerry won't be around any more, at least for a while. He left."

The boy stared, and was silent. His father paused, then gently continued. "He has a problem -- a bad habit -- that he needs to overcome. He slipped; that's why he wasn't there to help you this afternoon." He watched his son's eyes carefully. "He tried to do something, and he failed. But that doesn't mean he will always fail." The room was orange in the dim light, the color of autumn and falling leaves -- of fallen attempts and broken promises, and of man's shared and inescapable imperfection.

There was a question in the man's eyes; his son answered it.  
"I understand," he said softly.

Betty Buikema