

Abstract

MARY ALICE KESSLER

FOUR stripes of no-color books, two pieces of dust, an old gray head, a bloated cactus flung into a frame of big library in big city in big world. This is the portrait, the scalding drop of life—the story behind the story behind the story, the unuttered idea behind the gesture.

It was unusually cold for October. He hadn't ever remembered such a cold October. It hadn't been this cold before October was called October. But now it was cold and he wanted to know more about the cereus cactus.

The library was long and gray and fifty-three steps led to its silent glass doors. He knew there were fifty-three steps puddled with foot marks because he had been counting them for such a long time. He passed through the silent door, removing a mildewy gray cap. He moved to the striped walls of books, scratched his bare bony chest (for his collarless, green shirt was unbuttoned) and sniffed four times.

"Travel books, travel books, yes, travel, travel, travel—here they are. Travel—beautiful sun-blistered, moon-blistered travel. Alaska, Argentina, Arabia, Afghanistan, Arizona, Albuquerque. This is it . . . cactus country where the cereus cacti grow like long, green balloons, and sometimes like gangrenous fingers in the green moon shadows. Or often they are frozen silver comets and blood splotches dried on a dying sky. Cactus at infinity with the finite. Re-incarnation of the weird little men: Spinoza, Wagner, Goethe, Wilde, Proust . . . the men with knife-edged souls."

He pulled a gray, soiled map from his torn coat pocket and spread it out carefully on the polished wood table. His hands trembled with the winds of Age and his slow, low whisper pressed the pseudo-silent air.

"Now, here is the cactus country . . . in Arizona and New Mexico. Here they grow and prick the horizon, and the stars hang on them at night."

He wrote a few short words in a thumbled note pad. 100 species, 70 feet high, night blooming, fragrance. The letters were very large — child-like, they were pressed into the paper like small rivers of static lead. And he sat, squinting, trembling, softly whispering, with something of the fanatic monk in his ashen vitality. When dissected from the over-all fungi, when brought into microscopic view, made single from plural, he seemed to gain reality.

There was something about him—some hard pushing knob of pain had made him leave the small house in the Ghetto to walk to the fifty-three steps. There was something that pushed that gray head of flowing, uncombed gray hair ahead of the bent shoulders into a hushed room of books. The dirty hands fingered the straggling goatee, the red-rimmed faded blue eyes moved along the musty pages because they were pushed by words and ideas, and he was filled with an insatiable wondering. Taste was bred into the long, palsied fingers; beneath the cracked nail, the ridge of dirt, was taste. Intellect was carved into the long forehead, the thin lips, and buried under the physiography of face, hands, was that undeniable glow and hunger of those who want to know.

A piece of mediocre poetry—a word in a piece of sullen verse had led him to other words . . . cereus cactus, and out of space and shadow he had come to look, to examine this thing and to know in small words on a thumbled note pad.

What of the early days—the mother's black-blue hair, the staleness of a school-roomful of chairs and colorless faces, the damp papers clutched under an aching arm, the first tinge of passion, the greasy window pane at the restaurant, the giving

up to death and poverty, but never to not knowing, the intricate piling up of insatiable wonder?

What of this, and what does it matter! He is with Now, and a cactus blooms for him on a printer's page, a penciled pad, a map. And he must soon step out into the chill of weather and push against the exalted winds to a little paintless house below the stratum of Life. This is the portrait, the scalding drop of life—the story behind the story behind the story.

Beforemath

KAROLYN GOULD

NEIL placed the clay pipe between his lips assuming what he imagined was a casual pose—the pipe slipped lop-sidedly to the corner of his mouth and he tasted a few bitter perfumed drops of soap water which had remained in its stem. He removed the pipe from his mouth with a quick gesture and glanced over the high hedge to the yard next door. It was all right. The high school classes were not dismissed as early as those of the grade schools and Neil was glad, for once, that his being in the eighth grade brought him home before Phil. Phil was his pal. He had always lived next door, but since he had gone to high school he was different. He had adopted expressions and mannerisms which held for Neil a certain awe and fascination. Neil had seen him yesterday pull out the fifty-cent pipe he had bought and clamp it accurately and confidently between his teeth. Phil

had "dates" now too, and had begun mildly swearing—Neil knew, he had stood in front of his mirror and tried unsuccessfully, to say "damn" as forcefully and meaningfully as Phil did. Besides, he should have realized that Phil would probably have stopped in the drugstore to joke with his new older friends who alternately played the juke box or covertly watched the casually sweated, shiny-haired girls who sauntered in self awareness in and out of the store.

The late autumn afternoon was still sunny. Neil had wheeled his bike in the yard and leaned it in its accustomed place against the tree when he saw the bowl of grimy soapy water and the clay pipe which his younger sister had undoubtedly abandoned there for some new novelty earlier in the day. He sprawled down at the foot of the tree forgetting his mother's warning admonition concerning the care of his trousers and idly stirred the water made thick by the slowly diminishing piece of softened pink soap (which had long since