

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

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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

lost all resemblance to a duck's head), swirling sluggishly around with the motion of the pipe. His memory swept back though four satisfying camp-filled summers and encompassed in one swift nostalgic impression the summer of his ninth year—the last year he had been kept at home during school vacation. He felt again the idle sense of peaceful security of that summer—the hot hard pavement on the soles of his feet. He remembered the suffocating city smell of hot tea mingled with cloying fragrance of honeysuckle, the saccharine taste of the lukewarm lemonade which he sold only to his family since all the other kids had lemonade stands, too—and he remembered the dull heat-laden afternoons which so sapped the strength and interests of himself and his gang that they could think of nothing more inspiring than to imprison the heavy droning bees in the depths of the white and pink hollyhocks. As a last resort they would watch the girls making chains out of the white and purple clover growing in each yard. Alice, the girl across the alley had made such a long chain one day that they had stretched it across the street and watched gleefully as a passing car snapped it in two Alice, a vague unhappy feeling brought Neil to the present. He and Alice had known an uncomplicated friendliness, the thought of which sickened him now. Then the sight of her thick dark hair and quick brown eyes had not awakened in him that excited suspenseful feeling in the pit of his stomach which goaded and shamed him, too!

The soap in the water had practically melted—Neil slipped gratefully back to that ninth summer. One afternoon every-

one in the neighborhood sat in a circle in his back yard and tried blowing bubbles. First they merely placed their pipes in the bowls of water and blew a froth of marble-like bubbles which soon rose high in the bowls and pressed against their faces popping silently and coolly against their cheeks. They had a contest to see who could blow the biggest bubble and it had been strangely exciting to see the shimmering iridescent bubbles floating on the still, hot air. As it turned out, Neil had blown the biggest bubble—it was so big that he could see through its spun walls the strangely distorted faces of his comrades.

On impulse Neil filled the clay pipe with the thick, slippery water—he moved too quickly and the pipe overturned spilling the water on his trousers—he filled the pipe again and blew carefully and deliberately. The last rays of the afternoon sun shone on the bubble (which grew larger and still larger), imparting to its glistening surface a pale pink orchid and green design which resembled window panes and, as the bubble grew larger, elongated Chinese pagodas. The bubble grew and glistened; soon it would be as big as the one he had made once long before—he could almost see the incredulous faces of _____. The cold fall wind, too strong, ruthlessly swept the crystal ball.

The ground was too hard and the wind swooping around the tree and down over damp knees caused the boy to shiver. He wanted to sob wildly or dash the clay pipe frenziedly against the tree trunk . . . he sat motionless holding the pipe in his hand—empty.