

FAINT ECHOES

By George Bascom

MOST WANTED

We shuffled toward the postal clerks
like Thursday cattle at the sale barn,
fenced, gated, and dispirited.
A notice calling for suggestions
mocked us from behinds its glass.
A sheet of T.S. Elliots looked glumly up
from the display of stamps imposed on us.
Then, needing to exercise a little
of my own small gift for orneriness,
I stepped out of line to check the posters
of our most wanted criminals.
People shuffled on, but Lionel Metts, 25,
Wt. 195, Ht. 5'11", black, wanted
for armed robbery in Atlanta, smiled
back at me engagingly and full of fun.
His was the only happy face I saw
in all that law abiding place

EDGAR REDFERN

Edgar Redfern, fifty-five
man of action, fat, alive,
felt a dull substernal pain
and swore it would not come again.
Edgar, faithful to that vow,
once his doctor told him how,
moved with vigor, force, and speed
to do what medicine decreed.
Weight came off, pressure fell,
breakfast went from eggs to hell.
Edgar jogged, abstained from wine
and died in health at fifty-nine.

MELVIN

Why, Melvin?

When the scrips ran out, why
the hell did you just stop your digitalis and your
thyroid pills? And why
did you wait a week to come in with
a bellyache and sick as hell?

Damn it, Melvin, we put on
quite a show for you. We
found the gallstones, documented myxedema,
cultured bugs from your neglected blood,
scratched out heads and picked a prudent
time for surgery — soon enough but not too
soon, time enough to buff things up.

Then, damn it!, only hours pre-op
You started to cave in. The settling
ground escaped our notice for awhile.
Then, all at once
everything was sliding out of reach —
kidneys, liver, lungs, heart —
a general rout.

We were so careful and so clever, Melvin.
Why, then —
did you die?

MASSIVE TRAUMA

The tractor tipped, pinned
the powerful young farmer,
crushed his pelvis, tore
unseen arteries and veins
that instantly began to spill
his thundering and waning blood.
We snatched him from a screaming ambulance —
torn and dirt-stained overalls, IV's everywhere —
and bounced him into OR 2
on a frantic, rattling littler.

As we heaved his pale, loose bulk,
dirt and all, over to the table,
he fibrillated.
Pulses racing, scared, we tried to get him back,
shocked, squeezed his heart,
poured in blood, opened
his belly, packed his bleeders.
Then we waited, having done our job,
joked a little, watched the blood pour in.

When the EKG went flat, stayed flat,
we sighed and said our thanks, stripped off
our gowns and gloves, pulled off our masks,
and then against the broken
wailing of his wife
walked unprotected down the corridor
to what we had been hiding from.

ANATOMY

Two nurses wept —
willow, slender, one of them,
the other, fuller bodied.
Breasted, both of them,
thighs smooth beneath thin cotton,
hips, buttocks, curved and comely,
womanly — in honest tears,
reminding me the most important
feature of the female body
is the heart.

BEING THERE

Unhurried, easy in his chair, John H. Hennessey,
reflected without heat on changes in the way
we practice medicine today. Hennessey said

“You expected to take care of people
in the old days. If they couldn’t pay,
well, hell, you wrote it off. It was
understood... you charged what you thought
people could pay. I only gave
a bill to a bill collector once. He collected it
and then ran off with all the money.”

Hennessey laughed. Across the table Homer Skinner grinned.
He knew. He practiced in Carroll for –

God, about a hundred years! In his forties
it came to him he’d never become a professor, write
important papers, or teach a dozen worried residents.
He felt pretty inconspicuous in Carroll.
But a Lutheran minister’s son ruptured his spleen, and
a sharp old doc down south of Carroll
Called him in. Homer took out his spleen
and saved his life.

Oh he knew
any surgeon worth his salt could have
done it, too. But he was the one who was there,
and he, Homer Skinner did it, no matter others
could have. That’s the point.

They brought him a basket of orchids that Christmas. But
The splenectomy that night was Homer’s turning point.
From then on, Homer was satisfied to be the surgeon
who was there.